

## **Immigration – A System Matched to Societal and Economic Values**

### **The Challenge:**

The U.S. immigration system is outdated, overly complicated, and unjust. Paralysis in the system and in the political leadership that should carry out needed reform impedes the progress and development of our economy, our society, and our people.

This complex situation has been brought about by decades of government and corporate collusion that essentially condones the hypocrisy of “Help Wanted” signs being placed on the south side of the Mexican-U.S. border and injustice and a lack of empathy for millions of undocumented immigrants living on the north side of that same border.

Harsh immigration laws are selectively enforced against undocumented workers while the businesses that hire them operate under remarkably lax standards. This holds especially true for workers whose occupations require only unskilled or semi-skilled labor.

A 2005 Congressional Budget Office report, “The Role of Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Market,” indicated that one in seven workers were foreign born and that one in nineteen were undocumented. The rate is even higher in low-education jobs at construction sites and at restaurants. Recent reports estimate that between 50 and 70 percent of farm workers in the U.S. are undocumented. This amounts to 1.6 million employees.

Demographic data suggest the challenge will become greater. A 2011 Pew Hispanic Center report based on the 2010 U.S. census indicated that the median age of undocumented adults is 36 years old, compared with 46 for U.S. citizen adults. Sixty-three percent of the undocumented have lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years.

Rigid immigration laws do not provide any option for the vast majority of undocumented immigrants to legalize their status. For those who do qualify, long waiting lists are often the norm. The waiting lists for many Mexican nationals exceed 15 years. And again, most will not qualify.

U.S. companies in agriculture have constantly complained about the lack of available workers. Some economists have speculated that a policy of mass deportations or crackdowns against undocumented workers would devastate the entire agriculture industry and perhaps force it to relocate to other countries. Despite this, attempts to reform immigration laws to fit the needs of agriculture failed repeatedly during the last decade.

The immigration system has been changed various times to meet the needs of large corporations, particularly in high-tech industries. However, there is growing consensus that an outdated and rigid immigration system is harming the global competitiveness of the U.S.

### **The Record of the Democratic and Republican Parties:**

In 1996 during his campaign for reelection, President Bill Clinton signed an immigration law that imposed strict rules on undocumented immigrants: those who had been in the U.S. for between six months and a year would be prohibited from coming back to the U.S. for three years. Those who had been in the U.S. for more than a year without documents would be prohibited from coming back to the U.S. for ten years. An unintended consequence was that circular migration, the pattern of people going back and forth, slowed drastically. In a sense, undocumented immigrants got trapped in the U.S.

President George W. Bush had signaled interest in immigration reform, and in early September 2001, he met with Mexican President Vicente Fox. Both talked about an improved relationship between Mexico and the U.S. Immigration was part of the discussion. The U.S. response to September 11 included an end to action on reform.

In August 2001, Senator Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, proposed the DREAM Act, which would have provided a path to residence and citizenship for high-performing undocumented students. This also became a casualty of September 11. In addition, over several years, Senator Hatch abandoned his proposal and, obviously trying to please immigration opponents, became a fierce foe of even the most limited immigration reform.

In 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives, with Republican and some Democratic support (mostly by so-called Blue Dogs), passed enforcement-only style immigration reform that would have criminalized

undocumented status. The U.S. Senate passed a bill that would have provided more comprehensive immigration reform, including a path to legal residence for some undocumented immigrants, largely on the basis of their length of stay. The two styles of reform were incompatible, and they eventually failed as the two branches of Congress remained rigid in their particular approaches.

In 2007, Congress considered immigration reform. Republicans generally pushed for reforms that would address labor shortages in agriculture and other industries. Democrats pushed back because of a desire to protect organized labor. In contrast to the high expectations in 2005, few expected immigration reform to succeed in 2007. Predictably, reform failed.

In 2008, Presidential Candidate Barack Obama promised in two major speeches to push immigration reform in his first year if elected. He broke that promise.

In 2010, President Obama and Congressional Democrats pushed for passage of the DREAM Act. The DREAM Act passed the U.S. House, but in December 2010, it failed in the U.S. Senate. In the Senate, the DREAM Act got a majority of votes, but not the 60 percent needed for cloture to end a filibuster by Republicans.

Republicans in general have advocated mostly enforcement-only policies at the state level. Some, but not all Democrats, have defended against these policies. Largely, the discussion and various state actions have muddled the discussion concerning immigration, which is by law and logic a federal responsibility.

### **Rocky Anderson's Approach Toward Solutions:**

The United States must no longer be burdened with an outdated, economically unwise, and unwelcoming immigration system, where the laws do not match our nation's practices, and our practices do not match our laws. A nation that has grown and prospered as a result of immigration requires a compassionate, reasoned approach. Leadership is needed to forge through the division that this issue is unnecessarily causing.

Rocky Anderson has long addressed immigration reform. In 1997, he opposed deputizing Salt Lake City police officers as agents for INS. After

an immigration raid at the Salt Lake City International Airport by federal officials in 2001, Rocky Anderson, as Mayor of Salt Lake City, established the Family-to-Family program to address injustices suffered by immigrant families, to assist the families affected by the raids and subsequent deportation actions, and to increase understanding among the public about why immigrant families are in the U.S. and the challenges they face every day. He also sued and successfully challenged a state English-only law. He has consistently advocated for comprehensive immigration reform that would allow undocumented immigrants and families who have led otherwise law-abiding lives to stay in the U.S. to work and contribute.

In large part because of his efforts on immigration, Rocky Anderson received the first-ever Profile in Courage Award from the League of United Latin American Citizens (the largest Latino organization in the U.S.) and the Presidential Award from the National Association of Hispanic Publications.

Rocky Anderson's approach toward an immigration solution would put qualifying undocumented immigrants on a path to legal residence and eventually citizenship to let them seek what we all seek—to work, to provide for their families, and to live in peace.

Immigration processes should be streamlined so that waiting lists do not extend toward an indefinite future. In matching laws to practices and practices to laws, visa quotas for unskilled and semiskilled workers must be raised to meet the law of supply and demand. In addition, to enhance our nation's global competitive edge, the rules and regulations for highly skilled immigrant workers should be better tailored to U.S. economic needs.

Long-term immigration challenges cannot be solved unilaterally. The U.S. must develop stronger bi-national and multi-national relations with and among immigrant-sending countries to harness immigration for our economic and societal well being.

Integration of immigrants is critical at local, state, and national levels. The U.S. has long been a welcoming country for immigrants. Sadly, this reputation has suffered in recent years. Rocky Anderson will provide the strong leadership that forges through the gridlock, polishes the U.S. image, and builds on our history of integrating immigrants for the compassionate enrichment of our economy, society and culture.