

April 2006

Virtue In Action

Immigration Debate Highlights American Principles of Opportunity and Respect for the Law

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



JUAN CARLOS, originally of Mexico, holds up the flag of Mexico and the flag of the United States during an immigration rally, before taking part in a march, in San Jose, Calif., Monday, April 10, 2006.

Over the past several weeks the issue of immigration has spurred demonstrations by millions of people across America. The issue of immigration has galvanized so much emotion and interest because it speaks to the character of our nation and the principles we value.

On the one hand, a majority of Americans believe that our nation should be a land of opportunity, offering immigrants the opportunity to improve their lives through work and education. This principle of granting others the opportunity to improve their lives is reflection of our **respect for others**, in that we acknowledge the dignity and value of all people striving for a better life.

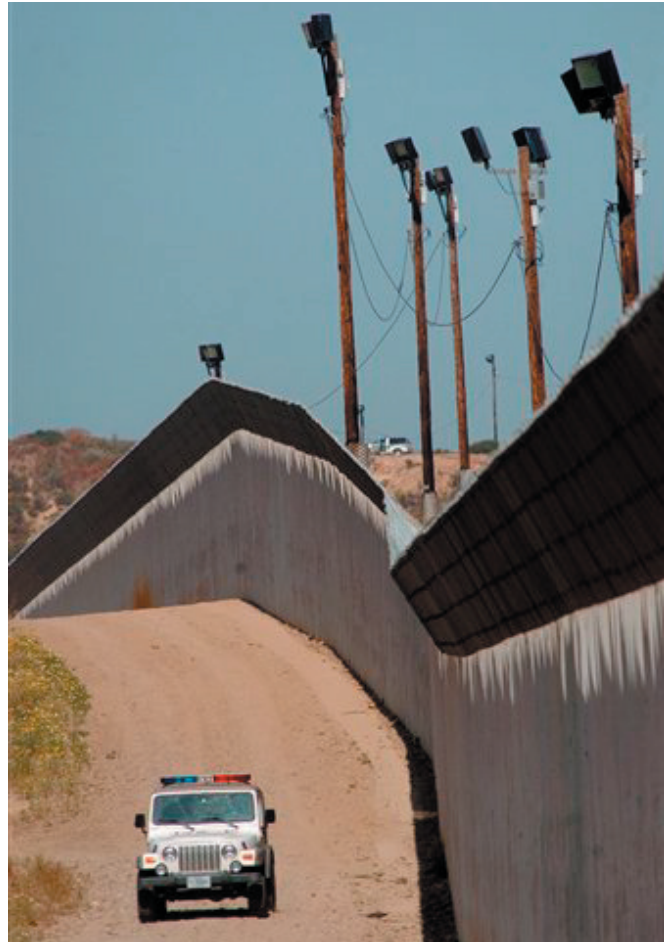
On the other hand, we also believe in the principle of **respect for the law**, laws that in this case attempt to regulate the immigration of those hoping to come to the U.S. Respect for our immigration laws is virtually non-existent, evidenced by the reality that nearly half a million immigrants enter our nation illegally every year and there are approximately 12 million illegal immigrants in America today.

Most observers agree that the majority of these immigrants are fulfilling the promise of America as a land of opportunity - improving their lives through hard work, paying taxes and contributing to our economy. Although others claim that the mass number of immigrants is lowering wages for the less skilled workers in our economy, and placing a high burden on the education and health care services of our communities.

Congress and the President are attempting to balance these principles in considering new immigration laws that will restore the principle of respect for the law, while also maintaining the principle of allowing immigrants the opportunity to improve their lives. In this lesson we will examine the reality of immigration today, the forces motivating people to come to America, and how legislative proposals speak to the virtues of respect for others, respect for the law and respect for our existing citizens.

Forces Motivating Immigration

The primary force driving immigration to the U.S. is that Mexico and most Latin American nations are very poor, while next door the U.S. is the wealthiest nation in the world. People looking to provide their families with the basic necessities of housing, food, education and healthcare are drawn to come to the US-- either to work here and send part



A United States Border Patrol jeep drives alongside a secondary border wall with high intensity lights on poles at the border between San Diego and Tijuana.

of their earnings home to assist their families, or to come and stay hoping to begin a new life in America.

An example is Jesús Ramirez, profiled in a recent Christian Science Monitor article on March 29, 2006. Typical of most illegal immigrants, Jesus had a job in Mexico but his jobs paid no more than \$80 a week. In America he was able to work as a construction worker during the day and busing tables at night earning \$350 a week. He sends half of the money home to his parents, keeping what he can for trips back to Mexico over the holidays, and to pay the border smugglers. The



Immigration Today

The following points illustrate the status of illegal immigration in the U.S., and the industries most impacted by their work.

- Illegal immigrants in the U.S. 11.5 million --12 million
- 40 % (4.4 million) have arrived in the past five years
- 50 % from Mexico (6.2 million)
- 22% from the rest of Latin America
- 49% are adult males (5.4 million)
- 35% adult females (3.9 million)
- 16% children (1.8 million)
- 4.9 % of total civilian labor force are illegal immigrants
- 24 % of farm workers are illegal immigrants
- 17 % of cleaning and building maintenance
- 14 % construction jobs
- 12 % food preparation jobs

Source: Pew Hispanic Center <http://pewhispanic.org/>

People gather for an immigration rally Monday, April 10, 2006, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Oscar Hidalgo)

smugglers charge him \$1,000 per trip. The ability to earn four times his pay in Mexico is a powerful incentive for poor people from other countries to come and work in America.

There is also significant demand for low-skilled immigrant workers in the U.S.. In some cases employers can't find enough American workers to perform jobs that offer low wages and demand hard work, such as harvesting fruits and vegetables, food processing, digging out foundations, landscaping, and working in hotels and restaurants. According to a recent poll, two-thirds of Americans think illegal immigrants fill jobs that most Americans don't want.

However, critics of illegal immigration contend that many companies simply want to pay workers less, in order to maintain wider profit margins, or to keep their product costs down. These critics believe that if we limited the number of low-skilled workers entering into America, then employers would have to offer more pay for those jobs, which would then be filled by American workers. This is an important consideration as many American low-skilled workers have difficulty making enough to provide them and their families with a decent standard of living.

Some economists, however, warn that if American companies are forced to pay higher wages for low skilled workers, then

many low-skill manufacturing jobs will likely leave America because companies will move their plants to other countries offering lower wages. In the service industries that employ lower-skilled workers, some economists point out that a number of these jobs could simply be outsourced to workers in countries such as India. However, a number of jobs such as office building cleaners, waiters, and hotel workers can't be outsourced and would have to offer more pay if low-skilled immigration were limited. This would likely result in higher prices for consumers.

Legislative Proposals and the Principles they Reflect
The proposed immigration laws considered by the Senate and House reflect several principles. All of the proposals attempt to instill a greater sense of respect for the law by increasing security along the border in the attempt to prevent more illegal immigrants from entering the U.S. Although some experts point out that even if we add more law enforcement personnel and surveillance technology, the wide disparity of wealth between the US, Mexico and Latin America will compel people to find new ways to cross the border.

Another option for fostering respect for the law is to increase the penalties for those breaking the law. In a bill recently passed by the House of Representatives, illegal immigrants are declared to be **felons**. Some representatives and senators

believe that before we consider policy changes such as increasing the number of legal immigrants allowed and the conditions for them to become citizens, we need to establish border security and respect for the law.

Senator Frist, the Senate Majority Leader represents this view stating, “We are a nation of immigrants built upon the rule of law. And so many legal immigrants have played by the rules when coming to this country and making a life for themselves and their families. We should not break faith with those who played by the rules, so I will not support **amnesty** (to release a group from punishment). We respect the rule of law and those who made it here the right way, and are trying to make it here the right way, rather than reward those who came here the wrong way.”

Other proposals in the Senate have addressed border security, but placed more focus on the principle of offering opportunity to those from other countries to improve their lives and contribute to our nation. Republican Senator McCain and Democratic Senator Kennedy propose legislation dramatically increasing the number of legal immigrants allowed into the country each year, and providing those who are already here illegally with ways to get legal status as “guest workers”, and eventually even citizenship. Most of the legal status proposals would demand that illegal immigrants pay a penalty, pay any back taxes owed and to become citizens hold jobs for a number of additional years, learn English and go through background checks. Supporters of this approach state that bringing the millions of illegal immigrants out of the shadows recognizes the reality that our nation won’t forcibly deport 12 million people, and many American industries need these workers.

Opponents of the McCain / Kennedy proposal point out that by offering a path to legalization and even citizenship to those who have broken the law, we would further lessen respect for the law, and encourage others to do so in the future. Advocates of giving legal status to illegal immigrants point out that the path to gaining legal status involves penalties for violating the law, so isn’t an amnesty. According to a recent AP-Ipsos poll, 56 % of Americans,

including large segments of both Democrats and Republicans, favor offering illegal immigrants some kind of legal status. Many Americans look favorably upon immigration, realizing that it is part of our nation’s heritage and strength. Senator McCain recently stated “There are over 11 million people in this country illegally. They harvest our crops, tend our gardens, work in our restaurants, care for our children, clean our homes. They came as others before them came, to grasp the lowest rung of the American ladder of opportunity, to work the jobs others won’t, and by virtue of their own industry and desire, to rise and build better lives for their families and a better America. That is our history. . . . we are not a tribe. We are not an ethnic conclave. We are a nation of immigrants, and that distinction has been essential to our greatness.”

As of the writing of this lesson, leaders from both parties are working to craft legislation to fulfill the goals of both those looking to enhance greater respect for the law and better control the flow of immigrants into America, and the principle of offering opportunity to those looking to improve their lives and contribute to our nation. In a democracy the process of reconciling various goals and principles is often messy – requiring time, patience, leadership and often compromise. Fortunately, in our democracy you can be a part of this process by learning about immigration and making your views known to our elected representatives.

Vocabulary

AMNESTY- to release a group from punishment

OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE ONE’S LIFE- A set of circumstance that make it possible to improve the quality of life for an individual and / or their family.

RESPECT FOR OTHERS - Showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by “the golden rule”: do unto others as you would want done unto you

GALVANIZE- to stimulate to action

Associated Press Photographs

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Land of Opportunity – Illegal Immigration in the U.S.

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Lesson Goals:

- Provide students with an understating of the status of illegal immigration in America today
- Provide an understanding of the forces motivating immigrants to come to America, and to empathize with both the plight of immigrants and the potential costs of immigration on others
- Help students to understand the economics of immigration
- Help students understand the principles of respect for the law and respect for others looking to improve their lives
- Educate students on the legislative process and how our government attempts to reflect the goals of various constituencies and principles.
- Inspire students to become involved in the legislative process by presenting their views to our elected representatives
- Catalyze interest within students in their own family's history
- Student analysis and discussion of how immigration affects their own communities

Highlighted Principles / Virtues

Opportunity to Improve One's Life - A set of circumstance that make it possible to improve the quality of life for an individual and / or their family.

Respect for Others - Showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by "the golden rule": do unto others as you would want done unto you

Discussion Question Options

1. What are the forces motivating immigrants to come to America?
What forces are driving demand for immigrants?

Let's discuss some of our own families' immigration stories. What nations did your parents or more distant ancestors come from, and why did they come? What principles and rights did the decision to come to America reflect?

2. If you were a poor citizen of Mexico and it was difficult, if not impossible to provide decent housing, food and education for your children, would you consider leaving your family to come to America to earn enough money to provide better opportunities for your children?

Would you do it if you knew you would be breaking U.S. immigration law?

3. If you were a low-skilled worker in America working in a service job such as office or hotel cleaning, and you couldn't make enough money to provide decently for your family in America, how do you think you would view immigration?

Do you think these tensions have always existed between low-skilled U.S. workers and immigrants - in the past immigrant groups such as the Italians, Irish and Poles?

Do you agree with the statement that most immigrants hold jobs that Americans don't want to work in? Or, do you agree with the critics of large immigration that if we restricted

immigration there are enough American workers who would accept these jobs that may then pay more?

4. How does the virtue of respect for others speak to both the situation of the poor Mexican family, and the low-skilled U.S. worker?
5. How do immigrants impact our local community, in jobs, education, social services, our culture?
6. What do you think defines respect for the law? (If needed, discussion tips: is the law followed, does it reflect a value held by the community, are there appropriate punishments if violated?)
7. What is the path to citizenship proposed by the McCain / Kennedy proposal? Do you think granting illegal immigrants in America today the opportunity to achieve legal status as a guest worker, and even citizenship through paying penalties and other requirements violates the principle of respect for the law? Or, are the penalties and other requirements enough to affirm respect for the law?
8. An important aspect of law is that a specific law reflects the values of a community. What values should our immigration law reflect?
9. A central and defining part of the American experience has been extending the opportunity to immigrants from around the world to come to America to improve their lives and contribute to our nation. Let's discuss whether going forward we should maintain this approach. How does immigration benefit



People gather for an immigration rally Monday, April 10, 2006, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Oscar Hidalgo)

our nation? (Please list on the board) What are the disadvantages? (Please list on the board)

Do you think we should continue to allow immigration, and if so what restrictions would you propose?

10. Walt Whitman once wrote, "Here is not merely a nation, but a teaming nation of nations." What do these words mean to us historically, and for our future?

Journal Writing Exercises

1. Ask students to research their own family immigration history by speaking with their parents, grandparents and other relatives familiar with their family history. Students should write a summary detailing which ancestors came to America, from which countries they came, and the reasons. Students may also ask neighbors or friends if their own family history isn't available.
2. Write out your recommended policy on immigration. Be sure to address issues such as border security, whether we should change the number of legal immigrants presently allowed, whether we should offer illegal immigrants already here legal status as guest workers and an opportunity for citizenship, and what penalties and other requirements should be demanded for legalized status.

Extended Activities

1. Divide the class into two teams asking them to review and make a presentation on the main points presented by advocacy groups promoting more legal immigration, and those against increasing legal immigration. Ask students to do a web search to identify the websites of the advocacy groups on both sides.

2. Send your recommended policy on immigration and any other points you would like to make on immigration to your House Representative and Senator.

<http://clerk.house.gov/members/index.html>

http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

3. Ask class teams to create a presentation on the history of immigration to America. Presentations should include maps outlining the countries and timing of significant waves of immigration to America, the forces motivating people to come to America, and the historical political movements against immigration.

<http://www.bergen.org/AAST/projects/Immigration/> -- American Immigration History

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAimmigration.htm> -- Various points in history of Immigration

<http://americanhistory.about.com/od/immigration/> -- Additional history links

4. Organize the class into teams, asking each team to analyze and present a summary of one of the following aspects of proposed Immigration bills: border control, increasing the number of legal immigrants and / or guest workers, proposals for dealing with illegal immigrants already in the U.S.

<http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c109:1:./temp/~c109e8SUr:e826> -- bill on controlling nation's borders

<http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c109:1:./temp/~c109UTdRk8:e14199> -- bill on securing America and orderly Immigration act

5. Invite members of your community involved with immigration to come and speak to your class about immigration. Potential guests may be business owners that employ immigrants, labor leaders such as union managers, your district's congressional representative.