

## Where They Stand on Immigration

by Sheela Murthy

The positions of the three U.S. presidential hopefuls are strikingly similar on the contentious issue of illegal immigration: Seal the borders, crack down on exploitative employers and allow illegal immigrants to earn citizenship in due course.

Photos: Agencies



**Contentious issue: The heavily policed U.S.-Mexico border (left) and protesting members of an anti-illegal immigration group in Los Angeles.**

Immigration policy is one of the most controversial issues in the 2008 American presidential election. To some degree, the debate has sparked xenophobic attitudes towards minorities in the U.S. The immigration issue is saturated with fear and emotion since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Senator John McCain says the immigration debate “enflames the passions of the American people.” This passion is one of the many obstacles in the immigration debate.

The failures of the immigration system transcend the partisan divide as thousands of people illegally cross the U.S. borders every year. Many others fall out of status by overstaying in the U.S. Not only does this problem create national security concerns, but approximately 12 million undocumented workers now live and work in the U.S. Employers may exploit these workers by paying less than minimum wage and denying them employer-paid benefits like healthcare. Smugglers attempt to transport the poorest under dangerous conditions. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) says that annual border crossing deaths have doubled since 1995. Why do people risk so much to come to the U.S.?

### Reasons for Migration

Most people believe that as a nation of immigrants we should welcome newcomers to America as an integral part of our heritage. Americans take pride in the idea of living in the land of opportunity. The “American dream” seems as quixotic as the chance of an unskilled worker to obtain the “green card” (permanent residence) is slim-to-none under existing law. Even for highly skilled workers, the process takes many years. Most Indian immigrants to the U.S. tend to enter legally as tourists, students, or H1B workers, the latter in high-paying jobs. On the other hand, most undocumented immigrants, largely from Mexico, work in unskilled or low-skilled jobs, but even that is better for them than the pay in their homeland, since they are able to send substantial sums to support their families back home.

All three presidential hopefuls offer similar solutions to the nation’s immigration woes: Comprehensive Immigration Reform. Interestingly, strong anti-immigrant presidential candidates dropped out of the elections, whether it was Republican Michael Huckabee or Republican Mitt Romney. Democrats generally

are more liberal towards immigrants. The current front-runners have a more generous attitude toward immigrants and their contributions than do rightwing hardliners, and their views seem to be symptomatic of public opinion in the U.S. on immigration.

Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee, along with Democratic candidates, Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, all voted for the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007 (CIRA). Although it did not pass, CIRA emphasises border security. On the employment side, CIRA also would have replaced the labour-certification system with a merit-based system by assigning “points” for various factors like education, experience, and employer sponsorship. CIRA’s most controversial initiative is a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants that includes hefty fines and a long wait (at least eight years) at the back of the immigration line. The bill’s demise occurred because of criticism emanating from all directions: Conservatives oppose a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants; liberals and many in the technology sector oppose CIRA for devaluing highly-skilled workers and for eliminating the labour certification system. Despite CIRA’s controversy, all three candidates support its basic approach to immigration; secure the border, crack down on exploitative employers, and allow illegal immigrants to earn a path to citizenship in due course.

Senator McCain has dealt with controversy over his own immigration status. Debate erupted over his candidacy since he was born on a military base in the Panama Canal. Critics questioned whether that could constitutionally prevent him from becoming president. That issue (and its irony) is now moot and McCain is the Republican nominee for the general election in November 2008.

### Softer Stance

Senator John McCain (R-AZ) supports the path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, but his position has inhibited his ability to rally support from staunchly conservative Republicans. Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor who dropped out of the presidential race, garnered conservative support in part because he proposed sending the 12 million illegal immigrants (it is impossible to know the exact count) back to their respective countries in one big exodus; a stark contrast to McCain’s position. McCain has defended his path to citizenship position against conservative attack by saying, “I’m not gonna call some soldier who’s fighting in Iraq... and tell him I’m gonna deport his mother.” McCain argues that the reason immigration reform has failed is because the American people have lost confidence in their government due to the unpopular Iraq war. Conservatives criticise McCain’s support for a path to citizenship as being synonymous with “amnesty,” an allegation to which he staunchly objects.

McCain takes a conservative stance on some immigration matters. He voted to make English the official language of the U.S., something Obama and Clinton voted against. McCain wants to “round... up” the roughly two million illegal workers with a criminal background in the U.S. and deport them. Despite obvious logistical problems, McCain contends there is no other solution.

Obama is the child of an immigrant, as his father was born in Kenya and he has cousins living in Kenya, so one would expect a more liberal view from him. But that is not necessarily the case. Senator Barack Obama (D-IL), another supporter of CIRA, has emphasised revamping the immigration bureaucracy to meet job demands, while at the same time accounting for illegal aliens by providing a path to citizenship. While Obama’s starting point is also border security, he is a proponent of more actively promoting economic development in Mexico to decrease the incentive of illegal migration to the U.S. Obama argues that raids on employers do not solve the problem and instead put the burden of a “dysfunctional immigration bureaucracy” on immigrant families. But Obama strongly supports a “crackdown on employers who are hiring [illegal immigrants]” in the form of more stringent penalties.

### Identical Position

Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY), also a CIRA supporter, subscribes to a virtually identical position as Obama and McCain; secure the border, crack down on exploitative employers, and allow illegal immigrants to earn a path to U.S. citizenship in due course. Unlike McCain, both Clinton and Obama have identified a need to simultaneously promote economic opportunity in Mexico to dissuade illegal migration.

The debate on the issue of universal healthcare between Obama and Clinton has raised issues in immigration policymaking; both candidates said they will not include the 12 million illegal immigrants in their respective health plan agendas. Senator Clinton has been quite successful in the primaries with the Hispanic vote, in part because of former President Bill Clinton's popularity within the Hispanic community. Her inherited support is pertinent in the immigration debate since most illegal immigrants in the U.S. are Hispanic.

Amid contention and emotional debate, the American public agrees that there is a problem with immigration in the U.S., but there is no consensus on how to execute meaningful reform. Clearly, it is in the best interest of the American people to have an efficient and fair immigration system. Immigrants, both legal and illegal, continue to make vital and daily contributions to the American economy and to society at large. The purpose of a comprehensive and legal immigration system is to prevent entry to those who would cause harm to the U.S., to regulate the demands of the American economy and provide resources to U.S. employers. Achieving this delicate balance will be difficult. U.S. immigration law has been criticised as being antiquated, convoluted, and inconsistent with the current demands of the American economy.

Undoubtedly, the next president to inherit a politically hot and divisive issue like immigration policy will have to muster considerable political goodwill across partisan lines to put forth a practical and fair method of accomplishing substantive immigration reforms. In the end, not everyone will be happy with any proposed solution, but at least if a majority is satisfied, then much will have been accomplished. Let us wait and see who wins and what will happen.

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