



IMMIGRATION TOPS POLITICAL AGENDAS

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As the number of people slipping across the border into the United States continues to grow, President Bush and Congress have offered different plans to deal with the cost and security risk associated with illegal immigration.

America has often been conflicted in its dealings with immigrants.

Often the country has opened its arms to those seeking a better life, as illustrated by the poem at the base the Statue of Liberty that reads “From her beacon-hand Glows world-wide welcome; ... Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

But in the early 1900s, the nation banned immigration from parts of Asia due largely to anti-Chinese public sentiment.

Now, in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and with money for government services like health care and education stretched thin, Americans are approaching issues of immigration with a great deal of concern and caution.

The illegal immigration problem

Illegal immigrants, also known as undocumented aliens, most often cross the southern border with Mexico without the documents necessary to legally work or live in the United States.

Many immigrants work dangerous or unattractive jobs, such as picking fruit or construction, for less money than legal workers.

Their work makes certain products in the United States cheaper, but it also costs American taxpayers money because illegal immigrants don't have health insurance, and many of their children need special services at school, such as English as a second language programs.

Most hospitals will not turn away patients based on their immigration or insurance status and, in 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional to deny a public education to illegal-immigrant children living in the U.S.

In addition to the cost of illegal immigration, in the post-9/11 world, many officials worry that without better monitoring of the border, terrorists could sneak into the country as easily as those seeking work.

The president's plan

Some members of the House of Representatives have suggested radical solutions such as building a fence along the entire border, or rounding up the 11 million illegal immigrants and forcibly send them back where they came from.

Senators John McCain, a Republican from Arizona, and Edward Kennedy, a Democrat from Massachusetts, introduced a bill that works to tighten security at the borders, but also establishes a guest worker program that gives the worker a legal status within the U.S. and some hope of eventual citizenship.

In a recent speech in Arizona, President Bush outlined his plan that calls for tough measures like tighter border security, larger detention centers and tougher work place enforcement.

At the same time, the president offered a "temporary worker" program to try to encourage illegal immigrants to register to work in this country legally.

President Bush defended his plan, saying America is a "compassionate nation" that takes pride in our "immigrant heritage" and argued that, "[t]he American people should not have to choose between a welcoming society and a lawful society. We can have both at the same time."

Temporary worker programs

Temporary worker programs are not new. Currently there are two guest worker visa programs, one for agriculture workers and another for skilled workers (invented in 1990 in response to forecasts of labor shortages in the high tech industry.)

Unlike the plan President Bush has proposed, immigrants with a guest worker visa for skilled labor can eventually become U.S. citizens.

Under Mr. Bush's proposed plan, workers currently in the U.S. would first have to return to their home country and apply with an American employer.

President Bush's hope is that by providing an outlet for legal immigration, American business will have access to inexpensive labor and pressure on the border will decrease.

Critics of the temporary worker program, many from within President Bush's own party, contend that it amounts to an "amnesty" or pardon for those already in the country who arrived illegally.

In addition, the plan allows for temporary workers to stay in the country for just six years, long enough to have children who would be American citizens.

At the end of six years, these immigrants would face the tough choice of staying on as illegal immigrants unable to get a driver's license or job, or return to the country they had already left.

With pressure building to set stricter immigration rules, Congress and the president will have to balance very different forces in a country still struggling with how to best deal with immigration.

--Compiled by Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra

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