

Preface

America's immigration system is irrevocably broken, and it is getting progressively worse. The failure to pass *comprehensive* immigration reform—and by that I mean a system that stands by its commitment to families, helps US workers by creating new and better jobs, reduces the incentives for exploiting workers, chooses its immigrants in ways that help them and the communities in which they settle to succeed, and meets the US economy's ever-changing needs—has left the US divided and unable to keep up with game-changing shifts in the global economy. While a number of piecemeal tweaks have become law since the last two pieces of substantial legislation were passed almost three decades ago, the cumulative effect has been one of falling further behind, if not outright failure. The longer we wait to act in a systemic way, the farther we will drift away from an immigration system that reflects both our values and economic needs.

As this volume goes to the publisher, the prospects for reform have become—if anything—less clear and certainly less straightforward. The slow economic recovery with its accompanying jobs' crisis, the fever pitch to increase enforcement efforts (because politics, rather than policy, demands it) with no agreement on what “success” in this regard would look like, and the growing polarization in the US Congress are contributing to a playing field that is becoming, once again, toxic. Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, continues to show a dangerous indecision on immigration reform. The US—now nearer to passing large-scale reform than any time in the recent past—must work diligently to not waste this moment.

The consequences of inaction are important to understand. One byproduct of the federal government's failure to address immigration in a holistic manner has been states taking matters into their own hands. We have seen a cascade of state and local “solutions” that have been quite reactionary and dissonant with the country's constitution, values, and economic interests. Arizona's controversial SB 1070, for instance, required state and local police officers to inquire into the immigration status of anyone they stopped if they had “reasonable suspicion” they were here illegally, leading to claims of racial profiling. Other responses were much more generous, such as the establishment of “sanctuary” cities determined to welcome immigrants regardless of their legal status, yet still a symptom of the same larger problem. Many of these responses are dealt with in this volume.

Modernization Act in the summer of 2013. And we are quickly approaching the 2014 mid-term elections, which will further complicate the possibilities of reform.

In the meantime, President Obama's leadership on the issue has been intermittent if not outright negligent. While the White House staff has been playing a very important role (mostly) behind the scenes, the President's activities on this issue have focused on the Senate process and on keeping constituencies on board. One is left wondering what the President's approach is in engaging the House, where the fate of a comprehensive bill is hanging in the balance.

Despite this uncertainty, there is still a greater chance to achieve reform now than at any time in the past three decades. Before the momentum for immigration reform is lost, Congress must pass a bill that fixes the failings of the present system while building a new system that can respond to the economic, demographic, and labor force challenges already facing the US. And the immigration system that emerges from this reform must, above all, remain flexible to evolve with changing circumstances.

To that effect, this volume speaks to both the details and the big picture of reform. It presents concrete policy recommendations on various aspects of immigration (including legalization, a guest-worker program, changes to the visa program, and border security) and discusses how dynamics within Congress, various constituencies, and voter demographics have shaped, and will continue to impact, immigration reform. As immigration reform advances through the legislative process, these crucial issues will be discussed, debated, and hopefully resolved. This volume aims to contribute scholarly work and nuanced expertise to the dialogues about immigration reform in order to reach the delicate balance necessary for a sustainable solution to the country's immigration dilemmas.

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Undecided Nation

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