



Framing the Facts

Talking Immigration and Economics

When addressing immigration in the current economic climate, it is clear that advocates need to support arguments with facts. It's equally clear, however, that facts will only go so far. Research shows that people are often most motivated by their values – and if data don't support their deeply held beliefs, audiences will reject them. So we need to shape conversations with values, and then support our arguments with the best data available. This memo sets forth some ideas about how to do this when it comes to opportunity and inclusion for immigrants.

A Core Narrative:

Workable solutions that uphold our values and help us move forward together

We recommend structuring messages under a shared narrative, developed in concert with immigration advocates from around the country in 2008. This framework is based on recent public opinion research, insight from media monitoring and analysis, and the experience of a range of advocates. We suggest framing both data and anecdotal evidence such as individual stories under the following broad themes:

- **Emphasize workable solutions:** While immigration policy currently takes a backseat to anxieties about the economy, Americans generally agree that our immigration system needs fixing, and that it's unrealistic to deport 12 million people. We need to promote solutions that appeal to this commonsense acknowledgment, and that emphasize that economic recovery requires the input and participation of everyone here.

In the current economic climate, arguments that show how immigration reform is not only workable, but beneficial to us all, can be particularly compelling. For instance:

When it comes to the economy, it's clear that we're all in this together. We desperately need everyone's contributions to get us out of the mess we're in. But our outdated immigration system stands in the way of allowing the full participation of everyone here. To address the economy, it's clear that we need workable solutions to immigration that move us all forward together. Consider this: integration of undocumented would bring us \$66 billion in additional tax revenue, compared to the costly figure of deportation estimated to be \$202 billion, if deportation of 12 million immigrants were even possible.¹ Add to that the additional brainpower and hard work that immigrants bring, and we're headed in the right direction.

We need a workable solution to immigration issues. Too often, you'll only hear people talking about enforcing current laws, or border security. But our current laws aren't working. They make it nearly impossible for most undocumented immigrants to become legal and fully contribute to our society. And if we only concentrate on the border, we'll only continue to waste money that we could better spend on strengthening our communities in these tough times. Case in point: between 1993 and 2005, we tripled our spending on border security. Since about 40 percent of undocumented workers entered the country legally, but overstayed their visas, emphasizing border security is not only costly, but also doesn't get to the core of the problem.²



It's also important to use public opinion polling data to bolster our arguments:

Americans want real solutions to immigration. Two-thirds consistently support a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Americans of every political stripe recognize that fixing our broken system is in the country's interest, and that these immigrants are already our co-workers, our neighbors, and frequently our family members.

- **Emphasize Values:** Values are particularly persuasive when considering topics like due process and family reunification. Facts can help underscore what people already suspect or want to agree with because it aligns with their deeply-held values.

For generations, and today, America represents a promise of opportunity and immigrants continue to play a vital role in our communities, our culture and our economy. In fact, according to the Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity “forty-six in 10,000 immigrants started businesses in 2007, up from 37 in 10,000 in 2006 and compared to the overall rate of 30 per 10,000 adults. Immigrant-founded technology and engineering companies employed 450,000 workers in the U.S. and generated \$52 billion in revenue in 2006.”³

We need to uphold our respect for due process, a fair hearing, and access to a lawyer that are core American principles that we have to support. But there is such a backlog in the immigration courts that almost 90,000 people have waited for at least two years for their case to be heard after being accused of being here without documentation.⁴

- **Encourage moving forward together:** We should remind our audiences of shared values and common interests as well as solutions that expand opportunity for everyone—for example, combining an earned pathway to citizenship with enhanced civil rights enforcement, living wages, police accountability, and job training for communities experiencing job and financial insecurity.

Organized labor is among those who recognize the need for practical and just solutions to undocumented immigration. These groups realize that to protect American workers, uphold labor laws for all, and lift wages, we need to reform our immigration system. More than 7 million workers live in the shadows of a system that takes advantage of them because they are undocumented. All workers in the United States deserve labor law protections, minimum wage, health and safety laws, and humane treatment that is based on the law not on immigration status.⁵

Immigrants – both documented and those without status – are already part of the fabric of our society. They are contributing members of our communities; they are our neighbors, classmates, coworkers and friends. We need to make sure they can participate fully in our society and contribute fully to our economy – through work, in school, for public safety. When this happens, we all benefit. For instance, over \$400 billion will be put into the social security fund alone over the next 20 years by fully integrating immigrants into our society.⁶



Both immigrants and African Americans consistently list quality education and affordable health care among their highest priorities. Both groups' kids suffer when we allow our urban schools and hospitals to flounder, and both benefit, along with our country, when we invest in strong schools and quality health care, as well as living wages and decent working conditions. In recent polling, African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos all listed affordable health care for seniors, affordable housing, education, and job creation and agreed that these were important for everyone here, citizens or not.⁷

The Opportunity Agenda continues to research public opinion, media reporting, and best practices for communicating about immigrant opportunity. For more information, or to contribute your ideas, please visit us at www.opportunityagenda.org.

¹ *The Economics of Immigration Reform*. Immigration Policy Center (April, 2009).

² Amy Traub, *Principles for an Immigration Policy to Strengthen & Expand the American Middle Class*, Drum Major Institute, 2007, available at <http://www.drummajorinstitute.org/library/report.php?ID=21>

³ Robert W. Fairlie, *Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity, 1996-2007*, April 2008, available at http://www.tntechology.org/reports/Kauffman_Entrepreneurial_Activity_1996_2007.pdf

⁴ Brad Heath, *Immigration courts face huge backlog*, USA Today, March 29, 2009, available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-03-29-immigcourt_N.htm

⁵ "Labor's Support Strengthens Prospects for Immigration Reform," Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, Press statement (April, 2009).

⁶ *The Economics of Immigration Reform*. Immigration Policy Center (April, 2009).

⁷ *Presentation of Findings from Focus Groups and a Survey Around Race*, LCCR and Lake Research Partners, 2008