

FROM THE COVER

WHAT THE ELECTION IS ABOUT *Immigration*

# Murky present for an issue that has a myth-filled past

By Sean Olender

Representative democracy works only if candidates clearly promise what they will do if elected and then do it. Mitt Romney suggested he would “get things done” with Congress, yet he has not revealed specific plans to voters. President Obama has not done many things he promised (close Guantanamo, prosecute mortgage bond fraud). Immigration policy is a microcosm of this disconnect between words and actions: What Americans think Republicans and Democrats do on immigration is different from what they in fact do. That’s why we need to know what the presidential candidates plan to do about immigration reform.

The public generally believes that Republicans seek to reduce both legal and illegal immigration and that Democrats seek to accommodate legal and illegal immigration.

What the parties have done is very different: For more than 30 years, Democratic presidents presided over ruthless curtailments of immigrants’ rights, and many Republicans accommodated huge increases in both legal and illegal immigration.

The illegal immigration problem started in 1976 when President Gerald Ford imposed per-country caps on Western Hemisphere immigration. The 20,000 per year quota hit Mexico hard, extending the wait to immigrate legally from months to years. The first attempt to fix the problem was President Ronald Reagan’s 1986 amnesty, which legalized about 2.7 million illegal immigrants. The backlog worsened, however, when many new immigrants petitioned for family members to join them. The amnesty also encouraged some illegal immigration by migrants who expected that there would be another amnesty.

But the parties continue the myth: During a visit to the Reagan Ranch Center and Museum in Santa Barbara, I noticed the conspicuous absence of Reagan’s historic amnesty. I asked a staffer why the silence. He quipped, “It wasn’t a big part of Reagan’s presidency” and “he was probably misinformed by some adviser.” That’s ridiculous. Reagan was the governor of California, the nation’s biggest farm state. Reagan knew growers wanted more migrant workers.

Democrat Leon Panetta, then a



Reed Saxon / Associated Press

**Immigrants attend an orientation seminar in Los Angeles, seeking to determine whether they qualify for work permits under the DACA program.**

member of Congress and now the secretary of defense, helped growers negotiate the Special Agricultural Worker provisions of the 1986 amnesty, which legalized more than 1 million undocumented workers and thus delivering low-wage farmworkers. Reagan’s amnesty wasn’t an oversight.

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush approved a 40 percent quota increase, from 290,000 to 421,000 per year (226,000 for family, 140,000 for employment and 55,000 for a bizarre green card lottery).

President Bill Clinton signed a law in 1996 that required a person who remains unlawfully in the United States

for a year to live outside the country for 10 years before seeking to enter legally, even those married to U.S. citizens, or with U.S. citizen parents or children. The law introduced unprecedented restrictions on appeal rights, penalties for criminal convictions and more. And it requires family immigrants to persuade a U.S. sponsor with sufficient income to make a legally enforceable pledge to support the immigrant, sometimes for life. Clinton also signed the welfare reform bill that barred immigrants from federal welfare benefits for the first five years of residence.

President George W. Bush supported the Dream Act and proposed a guest-

worker program to give temporary work authorization to millions of undocumented migrants. He signed a 2002 law allowing spouses of foreign executives and investors to work (but foreign students usually can’t work legally).

Romney has signaled vague support for increased skilled-worker immigration and family reunification and said he won’t revoke already issued Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, work authorizations, but he won’t specify a plan. Will he champion an amnesty as Reagan did in 1986? Will he try to increase the immigration quota like George H. W. Bush in 1990? Will he propose a guest-worker program for undocumented immigrants like George W. Bush? How is any of this consistent with the myth of Republican Party immigration policy?

Obama signed an executive order in June authorizing DACA. It would allow some foreign nationals brought to the United States unlawfully as children to remain for two years with temporary work permits. He also deported more people in one term than any other president in history. Democrats and Republicans ignore the deportations because it doesn’t fit their political narratives.

DACA is a temporary reprieve for young people who watched the Dream Act stall in Congress. The Dream Act offers a path to residency and then citizenship to young people whose parents unlawfully brought them into the country when they were children.

The question is: Will Romney (1) cancel DACA, (2) deport those who revealed themselves, (3) or continue the program until Congress enacts a version of the Dream Act? Romney should tell voters what he plans to do.

Obama should lay out a specific plan and explain why voters should believe him this time. (He campaigned on promises of immigration reform in 2008, but never acted on them.)

The absence of policy details turns American elections into “American Idol.” We need specific competing proposals that would allow Americans to vote meaningfully. Obama and Romney owe voters details, not fairy tales.

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