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Illegal aliens: Democrats stumped

By Froma Harrop

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Hillary gets it. Hillary Clinton says she's against illegal immigration. And she would fine employers who hire illegal aliens.

Pundits say the Democratic senator from New York is using this hot-button issue to position herself for the 2008 presidential election. It's a way to hit Republicans from the right. Polls show huge majorities of both Republicans and Democrats oppose illegal immigration - and are frustrated that President Bush won't do a thing to stop it.

But this issue does not belong to the right. Or it shouldn't. Illegal immigration hurts most liberal causes. It depresses wages, crushes unions, and kills all hope for universal health coverage. Progressives have to understand that there can be little social justice in an unregulated labor market.

"Liberals are so confused on this issue," says Vernon Briggs, a labor economist at Cornell University and self-described liberal. "Immigration policy has got to be held accountable for its economic consequences."

Many Democrats used to get it. In 1964, President Johnson abolished the Bracero program, which brought in "temporary" farm workers from Mexico. Its demise let Cesar Chavez organize US farm workers. His union won some battles early on, but a new wave of illegal immigrants in the mid-1970s reversed that progress. The union barely exists today.

It's long been a felony offense for a foreign national to enter the United States illegally. And until 1952, it was also a felony to harbor an illegal alien. That's when farm interests had the law changed to take employers off the hook: Employing an illegal alien no longer constituted "harboring" one. This came to be known as the "Texas Proviso."

As factory jobs vanished and illegal immigration swelled in the 1970s, Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, sensed a growing crisis. Then came the flood of refugees from Cuba and Haiti - most claiming political asylum. Carter refused to give blanket amnesty. The refugees were taken care of in 1986, when Republican Ronald Reagan granted a blanket amnesty for 3 million illegal immigrants.

President Carter also tried to repeal the Texas Proviso. Congress stalled and instead set up a commission to study the matter. It was chaired by the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, then president of the University of Notre Dame.

US immigration policy was "out of control," the panel announced. It minced no words: "The commission has rejected the argument of many economists, ethnic groups and religious leaders for a great expansion in number of immigrants and refugees."

Shortly thereafter, Carter lost his bid for reelection. Reagan became too busy cutting taxes for the rich to bother with the commission's recommendations. (Besides, isn't cheap labor another kind of tax cut?)

The cause was taken up by Sen. Alan Simpson (R) of Wyoming and Rep. Romano Mazzoli (D) of Kentucky. In 1986, they pushed through legislation that repealed the Texas Proviso. It established fines for employers who knowingly hire illegals. But there was a huge loophole: Employers did not have to check whether the documents presented by job applicants were valid or fake.

By 1991, America was in a recession. The economy had lost a million jobs. That year, the current president's father, George H.W. Bush, signed a law that raised annual legal immigration by 35 percent to 700,000. And it did nothing about illegal entrants.

Congress in 1990 had established another commission to study the problem. This one was headed by Barbara Jordan, a Democrat who had represented Texas in the House of Representatives. The Jordan Commission made excellent recommendations, which went nowhere. One would have required employers to make a single phone call to verify a job applicant's Social Security number. Even that was too much.

The rationale for the 1986 amnesty (and we've had seven categories added to it since then) is that we had been sending illegal immigrants mixed messages. After all, it had been previously legal for employers to hire them.

Nowadays, the messages aren't even mixed anymore. A cheap-labor Republican, George Bush won't enforce the employer penalties. He has a new amnesty program. And he vows to "match any willing worker with any willing employer." Hence the latest stampede at the southern border.

Sounds as if the Democrats have an issue. And if Senator Clinton can seriously address the problem in nonracial terms, she could march straight to the White House. Go for it, Hillary.

• *Froma Harrop is an editorial writer for The Providence Journal. ©The Providence Journal. Distributed by Creators Syndicate, Inc.*

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