

Conversations with Tamar Jacoby on May 12, 2014 and May 23, 2014

Participants

- Tamar Jacoby – President and CEO, ImmigrationWorks USA
- Alexander Berger – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Ms. Jacoby.

Summary

ImmigrationWorks USA is a national advocacy group working to reform U.S. immigration policy, particularly with regard to authorization for low-skill immigrants. GiveWell spoke with Ms. Jacoby about the strategy for passing new immigration legislation, how ImmigrationWorks is funded, and the possibility of building ImmigrationWorks' capacity.

Costs and benefits of guest workers

It is difficult to estimate the return on investment for a guest-worker program. One approach is to compare the costs and benefits of having an unauthorized worker to those of an authorized worker. In general, authorized workers make higher wages than comparable unauthorized workers, and are less vulnerable to abuse, in addition to improving law and order. This approach is often used when estimating the costs and benefits of proposed changes to immigration policy.

Strategy for passing immigration reform

Context

House Republicans are currently the main obstacle to passing immigration legislation.

In the last five years, there has been a big shift in House Republicans' views of immigration. When Tom DeLay was House Majority Leader, he championed a strategy of resisting immigration reform at all costs in order to retain the Republican majority in the House. During this time, the House refused to take any action on the Senate immigration bill, and no legislation was passed. During his presidential campaign, Mitt Romney endorsed a policy of "self-deportation," and said that he would veto the DREAM Act if elected.

In contrast, last January, House Republican leadership issued a set of "standards" for immigration reform that included a proposal all but indistinguishable from the DREAM Act. The standards also endorsed the principle of legal status for unauthorized immigrants—a proposal that would have been considered "amnesty," and therefore opposed, by House Republicans just a few years ago. Most surprising, at the House Republican retreat where the standards were unveiled, the discussion was not focused on "if we will pass immigration reform," but "when will we pass immigration reform?"

ImmigrationWorks' strategy to help pass immigration reform has three main parts: vote-by-vote advocacy to win the support of representatives, messaging research and dissemination to increase public support for reform, and work to develop the specifics of a policy proposal.

Vote-by-vote advocacy

The key to passing legislation is to turn votes. Many Republicans have changed their views on immigration, but more need to change in order to pass legislation. Turning votes on this issue is a door-by-door fight. For example, a coalition of Illinois businesspeople was recently formed to advocate for an immigration solution that includes legal status and speedy implementation, and they succeeded in getting the Illinois Republican Congressional delegation to support reform.

Turning votes is done best by targeting the representatives who are on the fence. With this sort of campaign, there is a tipping point effect. Once many of the target representatives from a state have endorsed reform, turning the last couple is less difficult. This tipping point effect exists within each state and also on the national level. Ms. Jacoby believes that the efforts of vote-by-vote advocacy have a cumulative effect. For example, if one representative from a given state came out in favor of reform, it would be easier for the representatives of neighboring districts to support reform, as well as for his successor to support reform.

Ms. Jacoby believes that changes in policy views are typically fairly permanent. Once representatives turn in favor of reform, they will generally remain in favor of reform.

In terms of hours, bandwidth, and effort, vote-by-vote advocacy is much more difficult than public opinion research.

Messaging research and dissemination

ImmigrationWorks has had difficulty communicating the importance of a low-skill guest worker program to the public. The public basically understands the importance of combining enforcement with legal status, and is beginning to understand the importance of permitting more high-skill worker immigration. However, regarding low-skill immigration, public support remains very low. ImmigrationWorks has conducted some public opinion polling on this issue, but opinion research has not been its top priority.

An advocacy group could use focus groups to test a wide variety of messages on the issue. A humanitarian, pro-social case for increased immigration should be tested, along with other pro-immigration messages.

ImmigrationWorks has conducted polling on messaging twice, and has not yet created a highly effective messaging product. The first messaging poll did not test messages (like a humanitarian case) that are likely to strongly challenge public opinion; it focused on

understanding the public opinion baseline. The second poll tested more refined messaging products, but it did not find a message that resonated with a high percentage of respondents.

Two messages that have not been fully tested:

- A legal program for temporary low-skill workers is the best border security.
- Combining low-skill immigrant authorization and job skill training for Americans.

Exploring these messages could yield an effective messaging product. Messaging research would be very useful if an effective message was developed, but an effective message is not a guaranteed outcome of research.

An excellent public opinion research project would cost approximately \$150,000. First, focus groups would be held to test messages, then a national poll would be conducted. Focus groups cost about \$7,500 each and six to eight would be held; a national poll costs around \$50,000 to \$60,000. If the research project did develop an effective messaging product, it would then be expensive to use this product in advertising campaigns, but ImmigrationWorks might focus on convincing other groups to adopt the message.

Policy development

In addition to the “outside game” of changing public opinion, “inside” work must be done to develop a policy proposal that is both effective in practice and acceptable to policymakers.

The key to effective policy development is to generate a proposal that is acceptable to all interested parties, then to convince other business advocacy groups to support this proposal. In the past, ImmigrationWorks has developed consensus of this kind through a series of meetings – first a big meeting to gather the target audience and introduce them to the general idea, then many smaller sessions to work out the minutia of the proposal. Every step of this process takes a lot of time and staff capacity.

When developing immigration policy, attention must be devoted to three areas: working with business grassroots organizations to maintain their attention to the issue, working with Washington business coalitions that support immigration reform to build and maintain consensus, and working with congressional staffers to broker the details of the policy proposal. Each of these areas requires substantial time commitment.

ImmigrationWorks' role in immigration reform

ImmigrationWorks is primarily focused on making the case for guest workers to Republican members of Congress. ImmigrationWorks maintains relationships with a number of immigration groups that mainly focus on making the case for legalization of undocumented immigrants already in the U.S., and they occasionally collaborate, but they do not work closely together.

ImmigrationWorks does not electioneer. Its efforts are primarily focused on coalition building, public opinion research, and policy development. In addition to these areas, ImmigrationWorks also organizes events and develops messaging products.

Prospects for reform

There is a very small possibility that an immigration bill will be passed this year.

The Republican Party is divided on the issue of low-skill immigration – some representatives support it because of the economic case for reform, while others are firmly against increased immigration. With more time and resources, ImmigrationWorks could attempt to solidify the position of those representatives who support reform. There are currently a few Republicans who are championing the issue (such as Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, Ted Poe of Texas and Raúl Labrador of Idaho), but Ms. Jacoby would like to cultivate a broader public consensus.

ImmigrationWorks is flexible in its focus. If the prospects for a vote this year look poor, it could focus less on turning votes and more on developing an effective messaging product.

It is possible that the immigration policy that passes will not contain any gains for low-skill immigrants. Policy reform occurs on a large scale, and advocacy for specific policy components must follow the momentum of the broader issue. When a reform effort reaches the point of passing legislation, a single group (such as ImmigrationWorks) is unlikely to be able to disrupt it. Even if she could, Ms. Jacoby would not want to derail an overall comprehensive immigration reform package because it included insufficient improvements to the guest worker system.

Funding for ImmigrationWorks

ImmigrationWorks has a funding gap of about \$55,000 for this year; the first portion of any grant it receives would go towards covering this gap. Progressive foundations that support immigration reform used to provide approximately half of the ImmigrationWorks budget, but this source of funding has recently declined to around a quarter of their budget.

Fundraising with business groups is growing more challenging. Business groups are becoming fatigued by the immigration issue and are dedicating less money to it. Many businesses are sympathetic to the issue but do not want to shoulder the financial burden. Also, business groups tend to prioritize well-understood and more pressing-seeming issues like Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulatory reform or minimum wage reform rather than the issue of low-skill immigration, which is more controversial.

Building ImmigrationWorks capacity

If ImmigrationWorks had sufficient resources, it would expand its capacity by hiring more staff. Ms. Jacoby would consider hiring in several different roles, depending the current phase of the debate:

- A grassroots organizer
- A communications director
- A policy analyst or researcher
- Campaign workers active in specific states

Hiring is a difficult process, but it is doable. Offering a good salary increases the chance of hiring the right people.

If funding were not a meaningful limitation for ImmigrationWorks, Ms. Jacoby would make three hires:

- A high-level staff member to work on policy, research, and communications
- Consultants to campaign in specific states (hired on an interim basis)
- An organizer to oversee the state campaigns and work on building a robust coalition in D.C.

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