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Commentary, analysis and investigations
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June 19, 2008 - Issue 282

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Obama and McCain on Immigration: Life vs. Death

By Roberto Lovato

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

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[This commentary was originally published in [New America Media](#).]

A recent story by Maribel Hastings of [La Opinión](#) newspaper provides the most comprehensive analysis yet of the similarities and differences between John McCain and Barack Obama around immigration policy. According to Hastings, "Both candidates support construction of a wall at the southern U.S. border. But the most important differences are less obvious and have more to do with what kind of reform the candidates advocate for and try to get approved, according to Cecilia Muñoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)."

Among those revealing details, says Hastings, are small but important differences that may make a major difference in what will surely be an intense fight for the Latino vote. Hastings continues, "McCain, for example, is opposed to the DREAM Act, which would benefit undocumented students and Obama supports it;" adding that "McCain opposes

the idea of giving driver's licenses to the undocumented, while Obama favors the proposal."

Reading Hastings' article, one can't help but think of how many other opportunities for differentiation the seemingly endless maze of migration law and policy offers the candidates - and the immigrant rights movement - this election year.

If only the political will to bring greater attention to these often life-saving details existed.

The most strategic and important opportunity to turn the page on the immigration debate via the elections does not orbit around the twin axes of legalization and border security favored by the liberal-conservative consensus of some Democrats, some Republicans and their allies. This is the approach of the McCain-Kennedy bill still favored by both candidates.

Much has changed for immigrants since that bill failed in 2006-2007. What is, without a doubt, the most significant change since backers of the various versions of the McCain-Kennedy bill failed to reform immigration policy in 2006-2007 is how rancid and radically bad - detention deaths, thousands of raids, massive deportations, traumatized children, steadily growing streams of hate media and hate crimes, etc. - the anti-immigrant climate has become thanks to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency and others. In such a climate, "immigration reform" focusing primarily on legalization and "border security" seems out-of-touch, if not dangerous.

A more strategic, urgent and powerful immigration reform strategy has to center around the colossal tragedy caused by ICE, the colossal tragedy that is ICE. The greatest good Obama, McCain or anyone else can do to aid current and future immigrants is to put radically re-organizing, if not dismantling, ICE at the center of any discussion about "immigration reform" in the United States. Asking McCain and Obama to lead calls for either Congressional investigations or the establishment of a special investigative committee of some sort (as happened with detention facilities in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo) seems like a good place to start. So would calls for the immediate resignation of ICE chief Julie Myers, who has overseen an agency that has sexually abused, physically beaten, drugged, used dogs against and even killed immigrant detainees in a manner not unlike that seen in offshore military detention centers. With increasing frequency since 2006, Hastings and other Spanish language reporters in print and electronic media outlets have filled pages and airwaves with tear-inspiring, almost daily reports of numerous forms of abuse, death and fear experienced by immigrants at the hands of ICE.

In their efforts to differentiate themselves among voters, especially Latino voters, Senators McCain and Obama might also want these voters to see and hear them lead the fight to pass the Secure and Safe Detention and Asylum Act (SSDS), which was reintroduced last Wednesday by Senators Lieberman, Brownback, Kennedy, and Hagel. The SSDS addresses some of the more serious problems faced by immigrants in detention, problems recently brought to light by major news reports. The detention-focused legislation includes provisions for improved conditions and medical care, reporting of deaths, judicial review of detention for asylum seekers and other detainees, expansion of alternatives to detention and, most importantly, more

oversight.

So, in the netherworld of the immigrant gulag growing on our shores, the small differences around the minutiae of immigration law can mean the difference between life and death, a difference that can win the hearts and minds of many voters this year.

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Roberto Lovato, is a contributing Associate Editor with New America Media. He is also a frequent contributor to [The Nation](#) and his work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Salon, Der Spiegel, Utne Magazine, La Opinion, and other national and international media outlets. Prior to becoming a writer, Roberto was the Executive Director of the Central American Resource Center ([CARECEN](#)), then the country's largest immigrant rights organization. Click [here](#) to contact him or via his [Of América blog](#).

(Note: What follows is the La Opinion piece translated into English thanks to Matt Ortega)

Immigration Reform Defines Positions Obama and McCain Plans Overlap Somewhat, but Have Significant Differences By Maribel Hastings La Opinion Correspondent

At first glance there doesn't seem to be significant differences between Senator Obama and Senator McCain's stance on immigration. It's because Obama supports reform previously supported by John McCain until the political climate led him to take a "security-first" approach.

If anything is similar between McCain and Obama and their respective political parties, Republican and Democrat, it's to avoid the issue all together when possible. Especially since it's not on the top of the issues of most concern to voters, and a volatile topic.

What's odd is that it's an issue that, according to some, would benefit McCain in the fight for latino votes as the Senator from Arizona co-authored the Immigration Reform Bill with Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA).

Although McCain presently emphasizes a "security-first" approach, the McCain/Kennedy bill still resounds among many hispanics.

But everything is relative. Yesterday a NBC/WSJ poll concluded that 62% of hispanic voters prefer Obama versus 28% for McCain.

Upon closer scrutiny of both candidate positions, there are differences. For example, McCain opposes the Dream Act that benefits undocumented students and Obama supports it; McCain opposes giving driving licenses to illegal immigrants; Obama supports it.

Nevertheless, both would vote in favor of building a wall on the southern border.

"But the most important differences are less obvious and have to do with what type of reform they'll propose and try to pass," said Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR).

According to Munoz, McCain's talk on immigration changes "depending on his audience."

"We had George Bush's heart behind immigration reform and that wasn't enough. I think John McCain's heart is behind the legislation but we don't know if he wants or would be able to really push through the type of reform he wants," she added.

"Not only is he trying to placate latino voters, but the anti-immigrant side of his party as well, and this will constrain him in an important way" said Munoz.

McCain spokesman Jeff Sadosky told La Opinion that McCain thinks its very important to express his positions with "clear and compassionate" language.

"John McCain thinks that we need to secure the border first, but at the same time he understands that we need to handle the immigration debate humanely while understanding that everybody needs to be treated with respect," declared Sadosky.

For McCain it's to attract hispanics without alienating the conservative Republican base.

But Obama also faces obstacles.

Certainly, the Senator's positions are also more progressive than the official position of the democrats that control congress, like the Senator's support for giving drivers licenses to illegal immigrants.

But not even the democrats that control both Houses of Congress have been able to advance comprehensive reform.

The Senator tried, but the House of Representatives seems more interested in holding hearings than producing concrete results.

There's a division between conservative democrats in the House that favor measures focused on security like Rep. Health Shuler's (R-NC) plan and those that support comprehensive reform like the Hispanic Caucus.

Furthermore, it's not only the white working class that's hostile to comprehensive reform. There's also a perception that there are sectors within the Afro-American community that are hostile to such reform as well.

Munoz pointed to surveys that prove otherwise and that national Afro-American organizations, like the NAACP, actively support comprehensive reform.


But, according to Munoz, the fact that Obama promises to advance immigration reform in the beginning of his possible administration not only is a message to the immigrant community but also to Congress.


"It's the type of difference with [John McCain] that is less obvious but equally important: the quality of the compromise," she concluded.

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