

## Q & A: Professors Meagher & Pumar

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This week, we are discussing the prospects of immigration reform and we have heard from Kevin Appleby of the USCCB, Jennifer Butler of Faith in Public Life, and Congresswoman Linda Sanchez. Today we hear from two fellows at Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, Dr. Timothy Meagher and Dr. Enrique Pumar.

**The question:** What will it take to get immigration reform passed this year and what are the prospects for passage?

**Tim Meagher:**

Historically, Americans' concerns or fears about immigration have usually risen during economic hard times. It is not too difficult to figure out why: natives become more worried about immigrant competition for jobs as employment opportunities shrink. So, for example, the American Protective Association, weak and struggling in the 1880s, grew to enormous size when the economy crashed in 1893 and 1894.

Yet major changes in immigration laws rarely came in the middle of major economic crises. The big changes historically came in 1882, when the Chinese were excluded; the early 1920s when almost all Asian groups were formally barred and Southern and Eastern European immigration was restricted to a trickle; the early 1950s, when a new law reaffirmed the 1920s legislation and added anti-communist "security" provisions; and the 1960s, when the entire system was revamped to eliminate discriminatory quotas. Economic insecurities played a role in all of these revisions in immigration laws but the economy was substantially healthy when all of them passed. The Federal government did tighten rules and the administration of immigration laws considerably during the Great Depression, squeezing the numbers eligible to arrive and aggressively forcing many already here, especially Mexican immigrants, to leave, but the Congress did not remake the basic structure of immigration law laid down in the 1920s.

It is interesting to speculate why this was true. Immigration slowed down in bad times, perhaps helping take some of the edge off nativist fears. Yet, it may have been the inability to produce a consensus on a law more than anything else. More specifically, while labor became increasingly hostile to immigration during depressions and recessions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, businessmen appreciated cheap labor and were reluctant to "close the gates."

**Enrique Pumar:**

It will take a lot of political capital and mobilization of resources by the White House to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill this year as the President promised in his speech at American University few weeks ago. I think that the future of this legislation rest on the outcome of the midterm elections in November. Here is the dilemma the President faces. One the one hand, the President promised immigration reform during his campaign and, for obvious reasons, Hispanics and other immigrant groups keep reminding him of this campaign promise. The President and the Democratic Party also needs the immigrant vote, particularly the Hispanic vote, on what promises to be a very contested election campaign this fall and there is no issue that unites all immigrant groups like immigration reform. For them, this legislation is a matter of long overdue social justice.

On the other hand, there is a growing anti-illegal immigration mood throughout the country as we witnessed more prominently with the passing of the Arizona legislation. There is a perception among Americans that immigration reform would legalize citizen status for far more immigrants than our economy can sustain right now. Worse yet, immigrants are perceived as ungrateful to America because they are not assimilating at the rate other Americans expect them. According to a Pew Research Center 2009 report, the majority (55%) of adults believed there are "very strong" or "strong" conflicts between immigrants and people born in the United States. Finally, the number of migrants residing in the states is staggering. To what extent immigrant groups manage to mobilize and keep the pressure on Congress to pass this reform could also be decisive.

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