


The Good Immigrant Worker: 2013 US Senate Bill 744, Color-Blind Nativism and the Struggle for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

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Abstract We explore immigration politics in the contemporary USA through analysis of the political framing of 2013 US Senate Bill 744, especially among its supporters. SB 744 is a bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform proposal that called for the largest overhaul of the immigration system in more than 25 years; it was passed in June 2013 by the US Senate but blocked in the House. Through analysis of the 2012–2013 textual content of the official websites and blogs of six US immigration lobby organizations from across the political spectrum, we offer a typology of political framings of comprehensive immigration reform. Drawing on popular anti-immigrant rhetoric, organizations with an agenda of immigration restriction and deterrence battled against the bill. On the other side, supporters of the bill ranged from business coalitions to immigrant rights groups, an assortment of interests that was reflected in the variety of arguments advanced in favor of the bill. Despite the far more fragmented character of pro-SB 744 discourse in comparison to that advanced by the opposition, our investigation suggests the ongoing and contested formation of a strategic pro-SB 744 framing that centered on the “good immigrant worker,” a “race-blind” trope that melds US nationalist narratives of immigration with an ethos of neoliberalism that upholds individual merit and market value to create a notion of “deservingness” that affirms the worth of immigrants as diligent workers.

Keywords Immigration policy · Deserving immigrants · Neoliberalism · US immigration reform · Senate bill 744

Despite widespread, bipartisan consensus since the 1990s on the need for change, the US legislature has repeatedly tried and failed to pass a comprehensive immigration

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reform bill that seeks a complete, systemic overhaul of all aspects of the immigration system (Pottie-Sherman 2012; Rosenblum 2011). With a focus on the 2013 Senate Bill 744 (SB 744)¹ or the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, in this paper, we examine the political framing of comprehensive immigration reform as offered by immigration lobby organizations from across the political spectrum.

“Secure Our Borders” and “Deserving Immigrants”: Political Narratives of Immigration

The contemporary politics of US immigration is often seen in polarized terms, with opposing movements for restriction and inclusion (Yoo 2008; Yukich 2013). Those who call for restriction draw on the country’s long-standing traditions of nativism in which immigration, defined by an essential “foreignness,” is a threat to American values and the American way of life (Bloch 2013; Chavez 2008; De Genova 2012; Jacobson 2008; Johnson 2012; Lippard 2011; Sanchez 1997; Schrag 2010). In the late twentieth-early twenty-first century, nativism has merged with a racialized narrative of “secure our borders” that is focused on the USA’s southern borders and is anchored in new forms of racism, specifically color-blind racism in which the presence and significance of racial ideologies and practices is shrouded by their packaging in “race-neutral” or “race-blind” terms. The “secure our borders” narrative has been supported since the 1990s by the growth of a massive immigration-industrial complex dedicated to the enforcement and the criminalization of undocumented immigrants (Golash-Boza 2012; Nevins 2002). Since the early 2000s, the state apparatus of immigration control has grown even further, spurred by the security concerns generated by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA (Kanstroom 2007).

The contemporary political landscape has also fostered an immigrant rights movement composed of a broad coalition of groups, including churches, labor unions, immigrant and student organizations (Enriquez 2014; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2006; Voss and Bloemraad 2011). Challenging the nativist agenda, they have drawn on the long-standing nationalist narrative of America as “immigrant nation,” merging it into a broad ideology of social justice that views all forms of oppression as interlinked. They have also invoked principles of universal human rights by which all persons, regardless of citizenship, have basic rights, such as the right to live without fear of persecution and to earn a livelihood. In an attempt to broaden support, there have been efforts to draw attention to selected segments of the undocumented immigrant population, focusing on their moral and social worth and thus their “deserving” character (Ahmad 2011; Fujiwara 2005; Marrow 2012; Yukich 2013). This strategy has been evident in the politics of the DREAM Act (the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act), which was first proposed in 2001 to grant legal status to certain unauthorized immigrants who entered the USA as children (Nicholls 2013).

¹ On April 16 2013, SB 744 was introduced to the US Senate by the “Gang of Eight,” a bipartisan group of senators. After a series of hearings and amendments, the Senate passed the bill (68–32) on June 27, 2013. However, to date, the House of Representatives has not acted on the bill, thus preventing its legislative passage.

SB 744 and the Challenges of Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Put forward by a bipartisan group of Senators, SB 744 speaks to virtually all aspects of immigration policy.² The core goal is that of comprehensive immigration reform or CIR—an approach to policy change that is guided by an understanding of immigration as a multidimensional phenomenon that requires simultaneous and coordinated policy efforts in three major areas.³ The first policy focus is immigration enforcement, which is achieved in SB 744 through a Comprehensive Southern Border Security Strategy (CSBSS) that mandates the growth of USA-Mexico border fencing, the expansion of the border patrol force, increasing mobile surveillance and prosecutions of illegal border crossings as well as the required use by employers of E-Verify, an electronic employment verification system.

Visa reforms are the second policy arm of CIR. SB744 proposes an expansion of legal immigration channels in response to employer needs. The cap of H-1B visa quotas is raised and the H-2A agricultural worker program is replaced by a new W visa agricultural worker category which includes a sub-category of non-agricultural W visas designed for less-skilled, non-seasonal workers, such as those in the service industries. These visas contain several provisions to protect temporary workers, such as allowing them to move between registered employers. Other visa reforms include a tiered “merit-based” point system that determines who should be at the front of the line for visas and eventual legal permanent residency. In recognition of polarized labor needs, a two-tiered track system allocates visas to the highest point-earners in high skilled work and low skilled work, respectively. Professional migrants are however privileged in this system in several ways, such as in their exemption from the per-country ceiling for employment visas. The goal of an economy-centered visa system is also suggested by the proposed expansion of Investor Visa programs as well as cuts to visas for siblings and the married adult children of US citizens.

A third area of CIR reform is the incorporation of undocumented immigrants. SB 744 includes a Registered Provisional Immigrant (RPI) program under which undocumented immigrants who meet certain criteria are allowed to remain in the USA and eventually apply for permanent resident status. The RPI program incorporates features of the DREAM Act by placing the undocumented who came to the USA as children on an accelerated path to permanent legal status and citizenship. Implementation of these and other provisions of the RPI program are however made contingent upon the completion of various border security measures, including certification from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that the CSBSS is deployed and operational.

In considering the legislative history of SB 744, we note the trenchant opposition that comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) bills have typically faced in the USA. Rosenblum (2011) notes how political representatives opposing CIR have the advantage of being able to rally support around the single valence issue of “illegality” and the potent narrative of “secure our borders” that frames it. Brushing aside the provisions for enhanced border control within CIR bills, opponents have placed a spotlight on the

² <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/s744/text>

³ For a comprehensive overview and analysis of the bill, see A Guide to SB 744: Understanding the 2013 Senate Bill (AIC, Americans for Immigration Control, Inc. 2013a, b) <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/guide-s744-understanding-2013-senate-immigration-bill>

legalization programs within them in order to argue that they reward illegal behavior and encourage rather than deter undocumented flows. In contrast, advocates for CIR have faced the more challenging task of legitimating lengthy and detailed reform packages with multiple provisions that touch on a variety of interests, thus making it difficult for them to focus on a single issue to create a widespread support base.

Indeed, pro-CIR groups are typically faced with the choice to make political concessions if they are to support CIR bills, given that they tend not to support all aspects of them. For example, business interests tend to favor CIR bills, given their incorporation of measures to strengthen legal channels for employers to hire immigrant workers. But, they are less enthusiastic about tough enforcement programs that penalize employers for hiring undocumented workers. Immigrant rights groups have often favored CIR due to its incorporation of legalization programs for the undocumented as well as the expansion of legal protections for immigrant workers. At the same time, the highly restricted nature of eligibility for the legalization programs as well as the contraction of family reunification opportunities within points-based visa systems have been a focus of conflict and division within the immigrant rights movement, resulting in the absence of unified support within the movement for CIR bills (Das Gupta 2014; Pallares 2014).

In short, those pushing for the passage of SB 744 have faced serious political challenges, from the multi-layered complexity of the bill's provisions, the diverse and at times conflicted interests of the bill's supporters, as well as the deployment of potent anti-immigrant rhetoric by those working against the bill. How, within this difficult political terrain, have those seeking the positive votes of legislators worked to frame SB 744?

Methods

To study the SB 744 debates, we turned to the publicly available information of Immigration Lobby Organizations (ILO), defined as organizations committed to legal reform of the existing immigration system and involved in direct lobbying to legislators.⁴ While the ILOs we examined engaged in some grassroots lobbying whereby the general public is asked to support a particular position by asking for its endorsement from legislators, we selected organizations that actively engage with legislators on comprehensive reform.

We generated a sample of ILOs through a multi-step strategy that began with querying the official Lobby Disclosure Act Database of the US Senate, searching for clients with "Immigration," "America/n" and other related terms in their titles. We then purposively removed organizations with names indicating interests broader than immigration (e.g. American Conservative Union) and those that appeared industry or ethnically specific (e.g. American Farm Bureau Federation) to narrow the sample to 20 ILOs. Ultimately, we focused on national organizations that were deeply engaged in

⁴ An ILO organization may either register as a lobbyist under its own title or act as a "client" whereby the organization "employs or retains another person for financial or other compensation to conduct lobbying activities on behalf of that person or entity" ("Lobbying Disclosure Act, Section 3: Definitions." [2 U.S.C. 1602].)

SB 744 debates and had websites operating from a private domain. These included The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Americans for Immigration Control (AIC), ImmigrationWorks USA (IW), The Essential Worker Immigration Coalition (EWIC), America's Voice (AV), and National Immigration Forum (NIF).

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of these organizations by examining the textual materials on their websites, including mission statements, commentary, reports, newsletters, and other publicly accessible content. We also reviewed related materials, drawn from links to associated blogs, other lobbyist organizations, and news stories. Since these sites offer a combination of both relatively stable and dynamic content, we investigated them at three different points in time over the course of the study. Following the first stage of data collection in December 2012, we revisited the sites twice (June and October) in 2013, in order to incorporate any new information.

Restrictionist, Pragmatist, and Immigrant Lobby Organizations

Based on our analyses, we constructed a typology of ILOs or immigrant lobby organizations (see Table 1) in order to highlight broad differences in framings of immigration, including approaches towards immigration policy reform.

"Restrictionist" ILOs are organized around the cause of controlling; limiting; and in some cases, eliminating immigration into the USA. The discourse here is one of a pressing "immigration crisis" in which immigrants are endangering the nation through their contributions to a range of social problems, from "balkanization" and overpopulation, to environmental degradation, moral decline, shrinking public resources and an employment crisis for Americans. Anchored in the narrative of "secure our borders," the focus of reform is on enhanced border security, along with cuts to channels for legal entry. Despite SB 744's incorporation of massive border security and control measures, the bill is generally opposed, on the grounds that it fosters immigration through the expansion of employment-based visas and guest-worker

Table 1 Restrictionist, pragmatist and advocate immigration lobby organizations

Type of Immigration Lobby Organization	Immigration reform principles	Immigration reform goals	Focal policy issues	Frequent terms
Restrictionists	National sovereignty	Immigration limits	Border control and security	Illegal aliens; foreigners; crime, drugs, terrorism
Pragmatists	Free market, practicality, American economic competitiveness	Employment-based immigration system	Employment-based visas and guest-worker programs	American global/competitiveness; essential workers; free market
Advocates	Human rights, American values, practicality, deserving immigrants	Inclusive, fair and accessible immigration system	Pathways to legalization; immigrant workers' rights	American/values; deserving; family/families; hardworking; workers

programs as well as the RPI program. The RPI program is a particular target of condemnation due to its alleged rewarding of criminality as well as its ineffectiveness in checking further undocumented movements into the country, as evidenced by the failures of the 1986 IRCA amnesty.⁵

In fact, restrictionist discourse is highly focused on undocumented immigration and the need for its deterrence, an activity that is depicted as a patriotic battle in which it is the national sovereignty and security of the USA that is at stake. The websites of restrictionist organizations contain frequent references to “illegal aliens” and “foreigners,” often paired with “invasion” and “occupation” as well as “crime,” “drugs,” and “terrorism.” Despite the racialized imagery surrounding these terms, there is pointed endorsement of “race-blind” values, including claims of how the desire to limit and deter immigration has nothing to do with race and racism but is rather driven by a principled stance of patriotism. Such declarations of non-racism may be self-consciously bolstered with references to black Americans as the prime losers in the immigration battle. In general, restrictionist discourse has a strong anti-elitist theme in which the struggle to limit immigration is one in which working and middle-class Americans are pitted against self-serving big business and elites.

Formed by diverse business interests, “*pragmatist*” ILOs emphasize the need to move the immigration system towards instrumental, “economic-based” principles, specifically towards policies that are responsive to the labor needs of US businesses. Pragmatist organizations are thus the biggest champions of the proposals within SB 744 to create points-based systems (PBSs) and to expand employment-based visas and guest-worker programs. In framing these proposals, pragmatist ILOs draw on neoliberal rhetoric with its valorization of markets, human capital, entrepreneurialism, individual responsibility, and competition (Goodman and James 2007; Steger and Roy 2010). These themes are situated within long-standing nationalist tropes of America as a champion of individual freedom and opportunity, such as America as “the land of opportunity” and the “American Dream.” What results is a market-based narrative of American national values, interests, and global power that enables pragmatist spokespersons to counter the restrictionist rhetoric of patriotism and the exclusivity of their claims to defense of the “American way of life.”

On pragmatist organization websites, “immigrants” are frequently paired with the “free market,” “American global/competitiveness,” and “essential workers”. A naturalized free market with its immense power, even in the face of strait lacing by government regulations, legitimizes and normalizes the presence and flow of immigrant labor. American global/competitiveness affirms the role of immigrants in maintaining the power and supremacy of the USA in the global economy. The “race-blind” notion of essential workers establishes the fundamental identity of immigrants as workers along with asserting their necessity in the labor force. Finally, in response to restrictionist accusations of catering to elite, big business interests, pragmatist discourse includes references to “small business.”

⁵ The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act included what came to be known as “amnesty”—a 5-year program whereby unauthorized immigrants who had been continuously present in the USA since January 1, 1982 were allowed to apply for temporary, and eventually permanent, legal status if they met certain conditions.

“*Advocate*” ILOs are distinguished, as lobbying groups, from the immigrant rights movement of which they are a part by their focal commitment to mainstream politics and political mobilization that is directed towards legislators and shaping votes on specific bills. However, like the broader movement, a discourse of human rights and justice frames their activities. Immigrants are most frequently paired with “hardworking” and “workers.” Also prominent are the terms “family/families,” “deserve/deserving,” and “American/values.” These associations situate immigrants within a race-blind narrative of “deservingness” based on values and character, especially in terms of commitment to work but also in relation to family values. The pairing of immigrant with “American” is notable for how it challenges restrictionist discourse by reversing the association of immigrant with “foreignness.”

Indeed, the websites of advocate ILOs are typically peppered with nationalist imagery such as US flags and the use of such terms as the “ideals of our Founding Fathers” and “American democracy” that highlight the continuity of the advocate agenda with national traditions. Drawing on the discourse of the DREAM Act movement, the struggle to gain rights and opportunities for the undocumented is compared at times to the iconic American struggle for justice—the civil rights movement of the 1960s. That is, the battle for immigrant rights, like the civil rights movement, is rooted in core American commitments to equal rights and justice. With particular attention to the Dreamers, activists of the immigrant rights movement are compared to those of civil rights and valorized as similarly youthful, idealistic, and courageous and committed to political change.

In what follows, we turn to a more in-depth exploration of the political framing of SB 744 by its pragmatist and advocate ILO proponents with a focus on two features of the bill—legalization for the undocumented and the expansion of labor market visas.

Practical Solutions and Tests of Deservingness: Framing RPI

SB 744 was frequently and widely described by supporters of all political stripes as “practical” or “common sense” as highlighted by the taglines of several ILOs: “Practical Solutions for Immigrants and America” (National Immigration Forum) and “The Power to Win Common Sense Immigration Reform” (America’s Voice). The bill’s practicality, as it was explained, stemmed from its comprehensive character and thus its responsiveness to multiple interests. Brushing aside the conflicts that also result from the wide scope of the bill’s provisions, they emphasized political consensus and the high likelihood of the bill’s successful legislative passage. Under these conditions, they suggested it was practical for lawmakers to vote in favor of SB 744.

The idea of a “practical solution” was also defined as the need to deal with the vast underground population of undocumented immigrants in a manner that was realistic and feasible. The strategy of deporting immigrants was not one that took into account their key economic role: “Immigrants who are here illegally broke the law, but their importance to our economy demands a realistic solution.” (NIF 2011b). Deportation was also not feasible given not just the size but also the character of the population, which included long-time, well-integrated workers and families. In the following, Immigration Works, a pragmatist ILO of state-based coalitions of employers and trade associations, emphasizes practicality as it also takes a swipe at restrictionist rhetoric by

arguing that effective measures to bring the undocumented population out of the shadows would actually strengthen rather than erode national security and the rule of law:

[A]ny overhaul must include a practical answer for the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country... National interest—national security and the rule of law—requires that the nation find a way to deal realistically with this vast underground population (IW).⁶

Peppered through the arguments in favor of legalization programs, whether the emphasis was on practicality or national interest, were references to how potential recipients were deserving due to their moral and social character and economic contributions (“hard working,” “families,” “law-abiding,” “workers”). The regulations of such programs as RPI, they claimed, were such as to ensure that only the deserving could benefit from them. And, contrary to the claims of opponents of the bill, RPI did not signal “amnesty.” Besides its widely negative association with the 1986 IRCA, amnesty also connotes a pardon for legal offenses committed, thus reinforcing the criminalized image of undocumented immigrants. Rejecting amnesty, the pro-SB 744 lobby used non-stigmatizing terms such as “pathways,” “mechanisms,” and “earned legal status” that underscore the procedurally complex, contingent, and earned character of legalization under the RPI program: “Levying a fine, requiring background checks, requiring back payment of taxes, requiring continued work, requiring people to learn English, and requiring them to meet these obligations over a number of years in order to earn a green card doesn’t sound like a ‘general pardon’” (EWIC 2007).

Both pragmatist and advocate ILO forces described RPI as a selective, discriminating rubric that effectively sifted out the deserving from the undeserving. Often explained as “not an easy path,” it was one that would allow the deserving to demonstrate social worth and merit to the state and thus achieve the reward of legal status. Consonant with neoliberal values, supporters battled strenuously against the identification of RPI as an entitlement program. They noted that undocumented immigrants who qualified for provisional status under RPI were to be given no special advantage over legal immigrants but in fact placed behind them in the queue for permanent residence. As noted earlier, the proposed RPI program has been a focus of protest for the immigrant rights movement precisely due to its limitations. But faced with an uphill battle, on political turf that has been deeply shaped by restrictionist elements, advocate ILOs joined with their pragmatist counterparts to argue for the program on the basis of its restrictions. America’s Voice, an advocate ILO, argued strenuously against the idea that the proposed RPI gave any special advantages to applicants:

There is no special path to citizenship in the Senate bill. Those who are currently undocumented get on the path to residence by qualifying alongside similarly situated immigrants. There is no unfairness to legal immigrants. Undocumented immigrants who qualify for provisional status are not able to become permanent residents until all those outside the country and waiting in line enter the country and receive permanent residence first. There is no negative fiscal impact. The

⁶ ImmigrationWorks USA. “Principles.” <http://immigrationworksusa.org/index.php?p=50>.

CBO score shows that reform will cut the deficit by nearly a trillion dollars over two decades. There is no softness when it comes to enforcement (AV 2013a).

American Competitiveness, Free Markets, and the Essential Immigrant Worker: Framing Legal Entry for Workers

At the heart of SB 744 are its provisions for expanding legal entry for workers, whether through removing per-country caps on H-1B visas or creating guest-worker programs. A neoliberal framing of these provisions was evident as SB 744 was depicted by proponents, especially pragmatist ILOs, as a much-needed move towards a free market-based immigration system that was responsive to the natural rhythms of the market: “bottom line: the free market is far and away the best tool for setting immigration quotas and picking immigrants” (IW 2009). The free market appeared here as an ethos, a core orientation whose intrinsic, taken-for-granted value was such as to provide legitimacy without attention to the details of how it might be actually implemented as a policy.

Analysts have noted the development of a neoliberal discourse of immigration in which nations are in a race for the “best and the brightest” in global talent, especially in the STEM fields (Simon-Kumar 2014; Pottie-Sherman 2012; Tannock 2011). Reflecting these ideas, the pro-SB 744 camp, including both pragmatist and advocate ILOs, argued that failure to support SB 744 and its proposal to raise the per-country caps on H-1B visas placed US businesses and thus the US national economy at a distinct disadvantage, threatening the country’s power in the world. Passage of SB 744 was thus a matter of supporting both free market principles and US national interest. Furthermore, contrary to restrictionist rhetoric, the bill would not result in job loss for Americans. Rather, the highly skilled immigration encouraged by it was conducive to economic growth and more jobs for Americans:

Our increasingly outdated immigration system is unable to meet the needs of our workforce or our economy, driving talent from the US. While skilled immigrants—and their employers—wait up to nine years for an immigrant visa, our economy overall suffers. There is a multiplier effect when companies hire high-skilled immigrants: for example, technology companies hire, on average, five to seven additional workers for every high-skilled immigrant hired... Meanwhile, other countries, such as Australia, Britain, and Canada, are taking advantage of the broken US system and luring the talent we discourage (NIF 2011a)

Besides H1-B, SB 744 facilitates less-skilled immigration through the introduction of the W visa, a measure that allows legal entry to both agricultural and service sector workers. For pro-SB 744 forces, the framing challenge posed by the W visa was that of how to construct a notion of market rationality and economic value that did not depend, as in the case of H1-B visas, on the legitimacy offered by high levels of human capital. One response, especially evident in pragmatist forums, was to emphasize the power and significance of the free market. That is, the market was a force of nature that could not be effectively deterred by government intervention and thus immigration policy that did

not incorporate channels for allowing less-skilled workers to legally enter and work in the USA were impractical. Drawing on this logic, pro-SB 744 forces described the growth of employment-based visas as proposed in the bill to be a key strategy for achieving the primary stated goal of the restrictionist camp—the reduction of undocumented immigration. In the following statements, the first from a pragmatist ILO and the second from an advocate one, IRCA (Immigration Reform and Control Act) of 1986 is cited as a measure that had failed to reduce undocumented immigration precisely because, unlike SB 744, it had not taken the US economy's ongoing need for workers into account by including provisions for employment-based visas:

Think about other unrealistic limits—prohibition, or a 500-calorie-a-day diet—and how hard it is to make them stick...without an adequate pipeline for future workers, the US could not make immigration enforcement stick... The dynamism of the global economy will always be stronger than government mandates (IW 2009).

...[T]he Senate bill creates a set of worker-oriented legal channels that provide a legal alternative for low-skilled workers coming in the future...One of the fundamental reasons IRCA fell short is that it did not acknowledge the need for a properly regulated legal channel for essential workers. [The] gap in demand and supply led to high levels of unauthorized immigration and, due to increased border patrols at traditional entry points, high levels of migrant deaths in the desert (AV 2013b).

Both pragmatist and advocate ILOs participated in a framing of proposed legal channels for less-skilled workers as beneficial due to its deterrent impacts on undocumented immigration. However, this shared framing was at times accompanied by important threads of difference. As suggested by the AV statement shown above, advocate ILOs, unlike their pragmatist counterparts, were likely to mention not only the “practical” benefit of the reduction of unauthorized immigrant flows to be derived from the proposed law, but also that of lowering border crossing casualties and extending workplace laws to immigrant workers. And, pragmatist ILOs, in their arguments in favor of legal channels of entry for less-skilled immigrant workers, were especially likely to bring up the idea of complementarity. This is a theme that has also appeared in arguments made by labor unions in the US and Europe when supporting immigration (Freeman and Birrell 2001). That is, immigrant workers are complementary rather than competitive with native workers because they occupy a distinct segment of the labor market. The website of The Essential Worker Immigration Coalition (EWIC) offers a link to a report published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas that emphasizes the significance of immigrant difference from “native” workers; it is this difference that produces economic gains from immigration for Americans:

Although immigrants may have fewer skills than natives, being different isn't bad. In fact, differences are crucial. There would be no economic gains to immigration for natives if immigrants were clones of natives or, in economic

jargon, perfect substitutes. Differences can create complementarities, with immigrant workers making natives better off. (Orrenius and Zavodny 2010).

The idea of immigrant complementarity was often used to counter restrictionist rhetoric about Americans losing jobs to immigrants. In this framing, immigrants did not take away American jobs because they performed *immigrant jobs*. Indeed, there were “natural” boundaries between immigrant and American workers in terms of the jobs that each were suited to perform. Thus far from taking away jobs, immigrants created a ladder of occupational mobility for American workers by performing the most physically demanding and least desirable and unskilled jobs, thereby leaving Americans with managerial and skilled positions. The “immigrant complementarity” framing was thus one that simultaneously asserted the value and difference of immigrant labor from American labor:

Immigrants rarely compete with Americans. They bring different skills and strengths. Jobs filled by low-skilled Americans require better communications skills; those filled by low-skilled immigrants are more physically demanding. And, jobs held by low-skilled immigrants support and create jobs for Americans, freeing them to move up to slots that require more communications skills and managerial ability (IW, ImmigrationWorks USA 2013).

The notions of essential immigrant difference and inferiority that are suggested here powerfully foreground racialization, offering a potent political and cultural space for the emergence of more specific conceptions of racial difference. That is, without invoking explicit racism, the narratives support the discriminatory treatment of immigrants. They reinforce the dynamics of occupational racialization whereby occupations become defined as “immigrant jobs” along with the presumption of the inherent suitability of certain immigrants for them (Kibria, et al. 2014). Given the heavy reliance of US agriculture and service industries on the labor of Latino immigrants, these ideas of immigrant complementarity hold particular significance for the dynamics of Latino racialization in the USA.

Conclusions

The June 2013 Senate vote in favor of SB 744 brought a moment of victory, albeit short-lived, for those in favor of comprehensive immigration reform. In the face of deep-seated opposition from nativist, anti-immigrant forces to the reform package, especially to its provisions for legalizing unauthorized immigrants and expanding worker visas, the success of the bill (at least within the Senate) was in many ways remarkable. Immigrant lobby organizations that argued against the passage of SB744 drew on traditions of nativism, melding them with color-blind ideologies of racial difference to construct what may be described as “color-blind nativism.” On the other side, the discursive strategies deployed by the pro-SB 744 lobby included the use of race-blind nationalist and neoliberal imagery to gain legitimacy for the bill. In essence, the pro-SB 744 lobby took a reactive and defensive position, shying away from an explicit critique of color-blind nativism. Instead, they drew on the language of “worthiness” to construct a notion of the “good immigrant worker.” Such a strategy has a certain pragmatic value, as highlighted by the

successful passage of the bill in the Senate. Ultimately however, the bill could not sustain the massive political opposition grounded in “secure our borders” rhetoric that surrounded it. Thus, the political challenge remains, to construct a narrative of immigration that supports comprehensive immigration reform.

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