

Recent US election results show immigration reform is not dead

‘Immigration policy should be generous; it should be fair; it should be flexible. With such a policy we can turn to the world, and to our own past, with clean hands and a clear conscience.’

This plea was expressed by the progressive US President John F Kennedy, who was assassinated 50 years ago last month. Yet despite the time that’s since passed, the claim remains highly topical.

Many of today’s political elites in the US believe that the immigration system is broken and needs to be fixed. And they have a point, considering it’s thought there are more than 11 million undocumented people in the US, among them some 50,000 Irish, who live in the margins of society.

Even those who do not classify themselves as ‘pro-immigrant’ acknowledge it is unlikely that the US government would be able, let alone willing, to deport such a huge number of people. Hence, many agree that something else has to be done.

In June this year a comprehensive immigration reform

bill was passed by the US Senate; now it has to be discussed in Congress. But reaching a decision on this matter will not be easy, given the current extreme polarisation of US politics.

The safest decision is none
Most commentators believe it unlikely that an immigration reform bill will be passed in the next two years. Many have even declared the bill to be dead. The safest decision for politicians, it has been argued, is no decision.

There is some reasoning for that. After support for one of the initiators of the bill, Republican Senator Marco de Rubio, dropped significantly among Republican primary voters, he was prompted to call on Congress to refrain from a comprehensive overhaul. Senator De Rubio proposed to focus instead on those aspects on which there is consensus, through a series of individual bills.

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strated in last month’s results in the race for New York’s mayor. Democrat Bill de Blasio won out not least because he was taking clear sides in the reform discussion – proposing, among other measures, municipal IDs for undocumented workers.

This might not come as a surprise, taking into account the fact that the Big Apple is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Indeed, three in 10 New York voters are likely to have an immigrant background. But the immigrant vote was also decisive in both the Virginia and the New Jersey gubernatorial races. Virginia’s foreign-born population has increased by 58 percent in the past 10 years, and includes many eligible voters.

As a result, Democrat Terry McAuliffe has radically altered his previously negative public stance towards immigration, emphasising the importance of a pathway to citizenship for undocumented migrants. It paid off: McAuliffe won 66 percent of the Latino vote and 63 percent of the Asian vote. For many of these voters,

immigration issues were among the most important factors in their decision.

Own interests come first
The position of the newly re-elected Republican Governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, also underwent a major shift. The governor of a state in which one-in-four residents are Latino or Asians stated during his electoral campaign that “we have to be fair” to undocumented migrants, and so “we are going to have to come up with a solution”. Christie won about half of the Latino vote.

These developments show that although politicians might be able to afford to ignore voices from economic interest groups or humanitarian considerations, in the long run they certainly will not act against their own interests in getting elected. This might be the ultimate winning formula for a comprehensive immigration reform.

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