

# Rifts among African Americans over immigration

## Immigration debate exposes tensions between blacks and Latinos.

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WASHINGTON — Frank Morris has been outraged as he has watched leaders in the African American community stand arm-in-arm with Latino groups in support of immigrant rights.

Morris, the former director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, a retired college professor and a current board member of the Center for Immigration Studies, said immigrants compete directly for jobs with African Americans, driving down wages and working conditions while in the country illegally.

"As long as there is an available labor supply, (immigrants) will be preferred to African Americans," Morris said. "Employers prefer illegal immigrants because they can be exploited without any recourse."

To Morris and other critics, an alliance between Latino and African American organizations seems to be at odds with what is best for the black community. But supporters argue that by helping this burgeoning movement for immigrant rights, African American groups are establishing a reliable alliance of minority groups that can help sway Congress on issues such as Hurricane Katrina aid and voting rights.

Those African Americans who oppose the immigrant rights movement say that anger over illegal immigration stems from more than just job competition. Tension between blacks and Hispanics is also blamed on immigrants' ability to gain what some African Americans see as a favored work status while violating the law. Some also resent activists who compare the immigrant issue to the civil rights movement.

Robert Brown, an Emory University professor who studies African American politics, said many blacks are "less than sympathetic" to the plight of immigrants. Although many aren't willing to speak publicly on the issue for fear of angering Latinos, a peek inside the

editorial pages of African American newspapers, glimpses into town hall meetings and a look at national polls all indicate that many black Americans are uneasy about supporting immigrant rights.

But at the national level, groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and African American leaders such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson support legislation that would let many of the nearly 12 million illegal immigrants in this country work legally and eventually become citizens.

"You have this disjuncture for those folks on the ground versus the leadership position," Brown said.

As the Senate gears up for another round of immigration debate this month, the Congressional Black Caucus is trying to formulate its position, but, as of press time, it hadn't confirmed what stance it would take.

This issue also has divided the Republican Party, created unusual alliances between labor and business and spawned a raging debate on the Internet and talk radio. So it's no surprise that African Americans are also divided.

Leaders at the national level say a guest worker program would help blacks by forcing employers to pay higher wages and adhere to labor laws.

Hilary Shelton, director of the NAACP's Washington bureau, blames the media for portraying this as a Latino issue.

"When people are forced into the shadows of our employment system, everyone suffers," Shelton said, adding that "the issue of fair treatment for immigrants is one the NAACP has been actively engaged in for a long time."

The National Council of La Raza touts immigration reform as a way "to put all workers on a level playing field," spokeswoman Lisa Navarette said. The struggle for immigrant rights is a struggle for the rights of all workers, she said.

Political experts say there is an informal quid pro quo lobbying agreement between Latino and African American groups.

"This is a time when black leaders are called upon to support this 'Latino issue' in ways that Latino groups have been called upon to support black issues in the past," Brown said.

Local black ministers have appeared at news conferences held by Latino groups, expressing their support in the terms of the 1960s civil rights movement.

"One thing we truly understand from our own history is the struggle to come out of the shadows," said the Rev. Graylan Hagler, pastor of the Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington. "So this relates to us in a very real and dynamic way."

Hagler downplayed African Americans who don't want to support immigrant rights as a small minority of the black community who have "misplaced blame."

But frequent comparisons between the civil rights movement and the push for immigrant rights is a point of contention.

Fighting racism and segregation in the 1960s is nothing like what illegal immigrants face, Morris argued.

Navarette said such comparisons are made not to put them on equal footing, but to show admiration for the nonviolent methods used during the civil rights marches.

"We have enormous respect for what the civil rights movement has accomplished," she said.

Experts say the controversy stems primarily from job competition.

Steve Camarota, director of research with the Center for Immigration Studies, said African Americans are likely to feel more threatened by illegal immigrants because they tend to work in the same sectors, such as construction, retail and food.

"They are more likely to be in occupations where there is a large illegal component," Camarota said, adding that African Americans have higher unemployment than the U.S. average.

Camarota said employers can be biased toward hiring illegal immigrants because they have a "good worker" reputation. They also benefit from intricate employment networks of families and friends that many African Americans don't have.

Other labor experts say illegal immigrants have become an easy scapegoat for African Americans. It's a simplistic explanation for a complex problem rooted in racism and poverty, they say.

"You still have racism in the labor market," said Steven Pitts, who works at the University of California-Berkeley's labor center. His studies of the black labor market have found that an employer is more likely to hire a white person convicted of a felony than an African American with no criminal record.

"That is causing problems among current jobs in the black labor market," Pitts said. "In terms of unemployment and bad jobs, in the absence of any clear solution, people tend to lash out and look for scapegoats."

But Morris said a guest worker program would be seen as amnesty and would encourage preferential treatment of Latinos.

He emphasized stronger enforcement of laws prohibiting the hiring of illegal immigrants.

"No one is really defending those who are the most vulnerable, and that includes the NAACP and Jesse Jackson," Morris said.

"There is naivete in the black elite leadership," he added. "They see alliances as ways of forwarding their agenda . . . but what happens when our interests collide?"

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