



Immigration

April 10, 2008

The Missouri Senate can be an insular place sometimes. It's easy to get caught up in the drama over a bill when you have so many competing factions pushing and pulling you in every direction. On this subject, a good friend and mentor once gave me some of the best political advice I've received: "Before every single vote, think about your constituents," he said. "Sometimes your constituents won't agree with your conscience, and so sometimes you will cast lonely but principled votes, but you should never, ever forget to think about your constituents."

Almost every weekend, I come home and immerse myself in my district. I attend meetings of neighborhood associations and interest groups, advocating for an array of causes. But nothing gives me the pulse of my district quite like a good long run.

Last Saturday, the day the weather in St. Louis finally broke, I went out for a run. One thing about my runs - I never take the same route twice. I just start running and see where my legs lead me. Saturday, after a week of sometimes heated debate about immigration, my legs led me to the southeastern edge of my district, home to many of the city's immigrants.

Ten miles, several neighborhoods, and over an hour later I'd heard from more than a dozen constituents (including, by happenstance, my predecessor, Senator Dougherty.) A few people asked me about early childhood education, a couple about property taxes. One asked about legislation concerning dog fighting, another about my public campaign financing bill and a third about a bill legalizing left turns on red.

Earlier in the week, newspapers around the state reported on a compromise I'd negotiated with the sponsor of the omnibus immigration bill ([Senator Scott Rupp, R-Wentzville](#)), which addressed the section of his bill that banned the children of illegal immigrants from attending college in the state of Missouri. We agreed to exempt kids born before August 28th of this year, provided they attend 3 semesters of high school in the U.S.

I thought it was a fair compromise, and I was able to insert compromise language into another section as well, but I didn't like most of the bill, [so I voted against it and gave a](#)

[floor speech in opposition to it](#). But I declined to filibuster because of Senator Rupp's promise to fight for our compromise language both on the floor and, potentially, in a conference committee. Had I filibustered, Senator Rupp surely would have rejected the compromise.

I received angry correspondence both from people who wanted me to vote for the bill, and from others who wanted me to filibuster the bill. But as I jogged through the very neighborhoods that have seen more (and more diverse) immigration than any in the state, and during a time in which immigration is supposedly the hottest issue in the state, no one asked me about it.

That's not to say I didn't encounter many immigrants on my run. I talked to a Bosnian coffee-store owner, played touch football with a group of Somalian boys, and laughed with a group of girls from Mexico, Vietnam, and Thailand, who danced animatedly in the street as they sang from the [Marvalettes #1 hit from 1961, "Please Mr. Postman."](#)

"Oh yes, wait a minute Mister Postman."

I thought about the American ethos of trying to leave things a little better for the next generation. I thought of the doctors, engineers, and professors who had escaped dire situations in other countries to seek a better life in America, many of whom work as janitors, housekeepers, or groundskeepers here so that their children can take advantage of the world's best universities. And then I thought about the main argument of the people seeking to "crack down" on illegal immigration — that immigrants were taking what was rightfully "ours".

Only belatedly did I realize that in these girls and their joyful emulation of the Marvalettes was the best answer to that: even amidst a dreadful war and pervasive economic anxiety, we are the greatest nation in the world. We should be secure enough in our greatness to embrace immigration as a source of economic and cultural strength. Because in the end, assimilating second-generation immigrants, given their tremendous enrichment of our society on so many levels, is the best way to ensure that we remain the most diverse, innovative, entrepreneurial, and vibrant nation in the world — the same beacon that attracted all of our ancestors decades if not centuries ago.

I found myself wondering what might become of the girls in the street. Would they make it to college? Would they stay in America? Would they grow up to be professional musicians?

All I knew was that I was glad that I'd tried to do my small part to give them the same opportunities that my ancestors had.

How do *you* feel about the children of undocumented immigrants attending college in the state of Missouri? I'm afraid that the majority of Missourians disagree with me on this, but I wonder how you feel.

Let me know — you'll find my contact information below.

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