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### **Brademas Internship Paper: Integration Act**

The "Strengthening Communities through Education and Integration Act of 2008," also known as the Integration Act, was introduced in the 110<sup>th</sup> Session of Congress by Democratic Rep. Mike Honda (CA-15). The bill is co-sponsored by Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Democratic Reps. Ruben Hinojosa of Texas, Raul Grijalva of Arizona, and Henry Cuellar of Texas in the House, and it also found support from Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Senate. The primary goal of the Integration Act is to help newly arrived immigrants become socially and economically integrated into American society by employing different and diverse strategies. These strategies include promoting "English language education; civics instruction; incentives for businesses that invest in the education of their non-English speaking employees, and federal support for state and local plans to integrate new immigrants."<sup>1</sup>

At the height of the campaign for comprehensive immigration reform, a number of bills were introduced to address the issue but eventually failed. With immigration being a hot-button issue, advocates of immigrant rights have become exasperated with the impasse that has resulted from partisan wrangling in Washington. Even more frustrating for immigrant rights advocates are the English-language debates in which immigrants were being portrayed as being hesitant to learning English and continuing to speak their native languages, and thus were demonized for their refusal to assimilate to American society. The Honda office, in turn, sought to address this demonization head-on by introducing the Integration bill. Recognizing that it would be a difficult task to pass a comprehensive immigration reform legislation due to the current partisan

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<sup>1</sup> "Senator Clinton and Rep. Honda introduce legislation to assist immigrant families." Clinton Press Office and Jose Dante Parra (Honda). News from US Rep. Mike Honda.

environment in Washington, advocates strategically decided to introduce a legislation which even though will not fully address the numerous issues regarding immigration, will nonetheless deal with an issue that many feels is something that everyone can agree on.

Different Congressional offices employ different strategies on how they would bring together significant support for a bill before introducing it (or “dropping the bill” in Congressional-speak). Representative Honda’s office decided that one of their key priorities before the bill is introduced is to have a bipartisan co-sponsor, which happened when Rep. Ros-Lehtinen of Florida signed on to be an original co-sponsor of the bill. Having a Republican co-sponsor would ensure, or at least make easier, the passage of the bill. In the event that some Republicans make strong objections to the bill, having members of their party endorsing the bill can silence these objections.

Second, the Honda Office also wanted supporters across different ethnic and racial minority groups to ensure that their concerns are represented and considered. Thus, a number of Asian American and Latino groups were reached out to and gave their endorsements for the Integration Act, including the Asian American Justice Center, Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum, National Council of La Raza, and Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). In fact, MALDEF worked very closely with the Honda Office and played an instrumental role in drafting and gathering support for the bill.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, the Honda Office also actively pursued various groups representing different (and often times, conflicting) interests to endorse the bill. This was a priority for the office to highlight and illustrate the urgency and importance of the bill, and at the same time, show that the bill is not contentious and has a diverse support. Organizations traditionally associated with

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<sup>2</sup> Strengthening Communities through Education and Integration. Office of Representative Mike Honda website. <<http://honda.house.gov/legislation/2008/integration/>>

immigrant rights and social and economic justice endorsed the bill alongside business groups. Established and well-known organizations that have signed on to the Integration Act include the US Chamber of Commerce, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Marriot International, the National Education Association, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and National Immigration Law Center (NILC), to name a few. In the end, the Integration Bill was endorsed by more than 100 organizations representing diverse interests.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the bill did not go without problems. Immigration reform has been a contentious issue in the past years, as illustrated by the lack of progress in passing and enacting a comprehensive immigration reform legislation. Further complicating the issue is the fact that 2008 is an election year, which makes it harder to pass and introduce legislation with bipartisan co-sponsors. In fact, the Integration Bill was ready to be introduced approximately 3 months before it was formally “dropped.” Currently, the office is still trying to gather support for the bill to get enough votes to pass.

How a bill moves through the legislative process varies depending on the situation. For example, some bills are staff-driven, with Congressional staffers taking an active role, with the help of Congressional Research Service staffers, to advance legislation. The Integration Act, however, is very advocacy-driven. As stated earlier, MALDEF has played a key role in drafting the bill and reaching out to Congressional members to sign on as co-sponsors. Also, the Integration Act has numerous endorsements from different and a diverse set of organizations.

The Honda Office is employing different strategies to continue gathering more support and co-sponsors for the bill. First, they are working through the different caucuses to get enough members to sign on as co-sponsors of the bill. Rep. Honda is currently the chair of the

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<sup>3</sup> Strengthening Communities through Education and Integration. Office of Representative Mike Honda website. <<http://honda.house.gov/legislation/2008/integration/>>

Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), which together with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), forms the Congressional Tri-Caucus, which is committed to advancing social and economic justice. Second, the office is still sending “Dear Colleagues” letters, one of the traditional methods of gathering sponsors from other House members in which offices send letters to other Congressional offices to solicit their sponsorship of the bill. Lastly, the different organizations who have endorsed the bill continue to play an active role in encouraging Congressional members to sign on as co-sponsors for the bill.

Realistically, the Integration Act will probably not be enacted in this session of Congress. With the House in recess and with only fifteen legislative days left before the members go out and campaign for elections, there probably is not enough time for the bill to be debated and voted upon. However, this is not unique, and is actually representative of how long it takes between the time the bill is introduced and it is actually enacted. In fact, most bills actually go through a number of sessions of Congress before it eventually becomes a law. To hit the point home, some of the legislation that have been a priority for the office of Rep. Honda, such as a legislation that will give benefits to Filipino World War II Veterans, have been introduced in every session of the past seven sessions of Congress. Nonetheless, the foundation has been laid out that the Honda Office is hopeful that the legislation will eventually be passed and signed into law to help immigrants assimilate into the American society.