

Is Utah a model for fixing America's broken immigration system?

At a time when immigration debates are more contentious than ever, could the Utah Compact be a model for fixing America's broken immigration system?

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SALT LAKE CITY — At a ceremony at the Utah state Capitol in November 2010, law enforcement, business, community and religious leaders came together to sign the [Utah Compact on Immigration](#).

Immigration debates in Utah had become caustic, and the document was intended to change the tone of the conversation from combative to collaborative by focusing on the common ground shared between the state's diverse decision makers — including a desire to treat immigrants with respect, keep families together and focus on deporting serious criminals. The approach made [national headlines](#) and was echoed by several other states.

Almost a decade later, in March 2019, the same Utah leaders reconvened and re-signed the document to [reaffirm their commitment](#) to “common sense” immigration solutions.

At a time when immigration debates are more contentious than ever, could the Utah Compact be a model for fixing America's broken immigration system?



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A photo of the Utah Capitol building.

The Utah Compact contained [five key principles](#) to guide the immigration debate in Utah: 1) immigration is a federal policy issue and solutions should come at a national level, 2) respect for law enforcement, while focusing resources on criminal rather than civil violations, 3) keeping families together, 4) acknowledging the importance of immigrants to Utah's economy, 5) adopting a humane approach that reflects Utah's "unique culture, history and spirit of inclusion."

The document's signatories and some national immigration experts say the document is not just helpful at a local level, but represents what is missing from the national immigration conversation: a genuine willingness for diverse groups

to come together to solve complex problems while preserving the dignity of immigrants.

“If we had the principles of the Utah Compact in place at a national level, these are principles that everyone could get behind, and they would not only guide the conversation, but ultimately they would guide the solution,” says Derek Miller, president and CEO of the Salt Lake Chamber and one of the signatories on the March 2019 reaffirmed Utah Compact.

A ‘visionary document’

Timothy Wheelwright, a Utah-based immigration attorney and chair of the Immigration Task Force of the Salt Lake Chamber, describes the Utah Compact as a “truly visionary document.”

In 2010, Arizona's [strict illegal immigration act](#) was passed, and Wheelwright says many in the Utah community were concerned about the effect of similar legislation passing in Utah's legislative session that year and the impact it would have on Utah's economy and state reputation.

Wheelwright says the Utah Compact “made all the difference in what transpired in that particular session,” creating a more respectful conversation that started with the lawmakers' agreement that solutions to immigration policy were the responsibility of the federal government.

The compact also emphasized the economic contributions of immigrants to the Utah economy. In 2017, immigrants in Utah paid \$534.6 million in state and local

taxes and held \$5.3 billion in spending power, according to data from the New American Economy's [Map the Impact](#) analysis.



Kristin Murphy, Deseret News

Derek Miller, Salt Lake Chamber president and CEO, signs the Utah Compact, a set of principles to guide the immigration discussion, during a press conference at the Salt Lake Chamber in Salt Lake City on Thursday, March 21, 2019.

Wheelwright says the Utah compact has already served as a model for other states — business and community leaders in [Florida, Iowa and Texas](#) have recently launched compacts on immigration in their respective states — and he believes the Utah Compact could be successfully applied at the federal level to guide the national immigration debate.

“Let’s stay away from the extreme and look for solutions in the middle,” he said. “And that’s where we’re going to have the most success in reforming our broken immigration system. And I believe that’s what happened in this case: there were enlightened community leaders who said, we need to espouse principles that are practical and in the middle. And people on both sides of the issue can agree on trying to find common ground.”

Cynthia Buzia, executive director of the [California Immigrant Policy Center](#), agrees. She says she remembered when the Utah Compact was signed nearly 10 years ago and was impressed by its humane, middle ground approach to such a thorny issue.

“At the time, it was a set of principles that looked at common sense solutions to the (immigration crisis) without pandering to the vitriol and the dehumanizing narrative that has characterized a lot of the immigration debate in the past,” said Buzia. “This was really an attempt to humanize the conversation and to make people realize that there is another way to talk about the issue.”

If applied at the national level, the Utah Compact’s focus on respect — for other decision-makers and for immigrants themselves — would change the national immigration debate for the better, she said.

“It’s possible to come together on this issue without stripping away the dignity and humanity of immigrants,” she said. “We can feel guided by our American values of fairness and justice and come together to find solutions.”

But Wheelwright says the principles the Utah Compact can only be helpful in the national immigration debate if there is a genuine desire at the national level to

have an open discussion between diverse groups about solutions to the immigration crisis.

“The problem I see is we're not having a debate, we're not discussing immigration, except in sound bites on TV,” he said. “We just we need to get to the debate, we need to have the discussion. And that's where I think Congress truly has been abdicating its responsibility. The Supreme Court has clearly said this is Congress that has to do this. And it just has not stepped up to the plate to deal with the issue.”

‘Exercise in the extreme obvious’

A prominent Utah lawmaker says while he appreciates the sentiment of the document, the Utah Compact is not a helpful model to apply to the national immigration debate. He says while the Utah Compact has been heralded as “grand compromise,” a closer look reveals a document that offers no tangible solutions.

“Much of what was said in the Utah Compact was an exercise in the extreme obvious,” he said. “Most of what they said amounts to what everyone knows already.”

He says, partly because of the vague and broad nature of the compact's principles, he believes many people in the Trump administration making policy decisions on immigration would say that they agree with the principles of the Utah Compact and are adhering to them.



Steve Greenwood

This is an evening view of the Utah State Capitol Building with the new lighting system on. The Capitol Building is now back in service after an extensive four-year reconstruction and renovation.

“It kind of creates the suggestion that it’s insightful, when it’s really not,” the lawmaker continued. “It’s not just that it’s more bland than would need be for lawmaking. But they’ve identified an area that is particularly difficult and fraught with controversy, and said, now go do it. Now go figure out all the stuff that’s controversial.”

Matthew Sussis, assistant director of communications for the [Center for Immigration Studies](#), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that favors lower immigration numbers, agrees.

“I certainly appreciate the humane approach,” says Sussis. “But it’s hard to imagine what kind of specifics we can agree upon in terms of how you actually turn those principles into policy.”

But Miller with the Salt Lake Chamber says the Utah Compact’s language was intended to be broad in order to create a platform for respectful discussion and collaboration.

“The Compact was never intended to say, here’s the solution,” said Miller. “It was designed ... to be a great starting place. Sometimes when we’re so focused on the details we can miss the forest for the trees. So let’s take a step back and look at where we actually agree, and let that guide us. That’s what the compact was intended to do.”

The Utah Compact was helpful in that it urged Congress to take action on the immigration issue, says the Utah lawmaker.

“Congress needs to act,” he said. “There’s no question about that. And in that respect, I think the tone was helpful because it is kind of an urgent plea for help from Congress, saying: please do something. You’re the only people who can act here. And you haven’t been acting. So please act.”