Don't forget immigration reform

The presidential candidates owe it to the country to keep the issue alive.

March 22, 2008 | Dowell Myers and Manuel Pastor and Dowell Myers is a professor of policy, planning and development, and Manuel Pastor is a professor of geography and American studies and ethnicity, both at USC.

Barack Obama has done the country a service by trying to launch a serious discussion about the complexities of race, even in the midst of an electoral season that puts a premium on sound bites rather than sound analysis. We hope that such a tone can be brought to another topic that has been getting short and shallow shrift: immigration.

After staking a sincere position on the issue last year, Republican presidential candidate John McCain was driven to retreat from comprehensive reform. Meanwhile, Obama and Democratic rival Hillary Rodham Clinton have steered clear of the issue for fear of being divisive. Such neglect -- like the notion that we can sweep racial resentments under the rug -- actually supports continued division in our society.

For lack of a dialogue, wrongheaded facts fester in the public imagination, namely that immigration is accelerating, that prosperity is threatened and that assimilation is stalled. One fact that is a surprise to many people is that the annual flow of immigrants -- legal and illegal combined -- ended its surge in 2000 and has been in decline since. Projections by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Social Security Administration and the Pew Hispanic Center all concur: The rate of new immigrants per 1,000 current residents will stabilize or drop further over the next 20 years.

Meanwhile, a study by the Public Policy Institute of California found that immigrants often complement local labor and actually prop up real wages for most native-born Californians. Any wage-depressing effects on particular low-skilled populations, many economists contend, could be more effectively addressed through direct wage support than through restrictionist measures.

And how many know that the majority of Latino immigrants in California become homeowners after 20 years in this country, climbing from poverty and buying into the American dream? Indeed, our analysis of Los Angeles using the most recent American Community Survey from the Census Bureau indicates that long-term immigrants are more likely to own homes than U.S.-born residents; that the percentage who speak English "well" or "very well" rises dramatically with time in the country; and that immigrants' children are as fluent in English as native Californians.

Why the perception then that assimilation is stalled? To some degree, it's a "Peter Pan" fallacy, the notion that immigrants are eternally newcomers. In parts of the nation that have only recently received immigrants, newcomers do dominate. But in California, about 70% of the foreign-born have been here more than 10 years.

We in Los Angeles County have a special interest in this topic: One-third of our residents are immigrants, and nearly half of our labor force is foreign-born. Two-thirds of our youth are the children of immigrants, 90% of them U.S.-born. So no amount of election-year clamoring for more border security is going to change the fact that our region's economic resilience depends on how these immigrant families and their children fare in coming years.

A fruitful dialogue about immigration also should take into account the demographic crisis facing America: the looming retirement of the baby boomers. The ratio of seniors to working-age adults will soar by 67% between 2010 and 2030, swamping Social Security and Medicare and generating a need for new workers and taxpayers. Immigrants are one piece of the solution to this massive generational shift, and fostering their educational and economic progress is crucial.

Over the last several months, the two of us have been talking to local business, labor, community and philanthropic leaders, and we have heard a set of consistent messages.

The first is the hope that we can change the narrative: Immigrants should not be viewed as a problem to be solved but an asset to our regional future. New research must be developed, then shared and debated, if we are to build a broader understanding of our interwoven destinies.

The second is a desire to accelerate immigrant integration by increasing services, particularly English classes for adults, enhanced programs for young English learners, reworked job-training efforts and increased opportunities for civic engagement. Investing in immigrant integration is investing in our new middle class.

The third is the need to build new leadership. The immigrant community is increasingly diverse, and the newest populations frequently lack established institutions. But it is not just immigrants who must learn to lead -- we also need business, community, labor and government leaders to focus attention on our immigrant and regional future.

Clearly we cannot wait for Washington; we must start this conversation now in Los Angeles. And maybe in the process, we can lift the tenor of the national immigration debate and point the way to a comprehensive reform that will focus less on borders and more on our common
future.