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Immigration Reform Advocates Look For A Way Forward Under A Donald Trump Presidency

The president elect doesn't agree with them on much.

Elise Foley

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In an alternate universe, the days after the 2016 presidential election might have looked like the day after the 2012 presidential election, when Republicans expressed shock at their failure to win over Latino voters and vowed to change, including by pressing for immigration reform.

Some of them followed through on that promise and passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill through the Senate in 2013 — although it was left to die in the House. The reckoning happened, it was taken seriously, and then it was forgotten.

If Republican nominee and now President-elect Donald Trump had lost, a similar reckoning would almost certainly have occurred again. The puzzle pieces are there: He alienated Latino voters, in part through harsh rhetoric on undocumented immigrants. Latinos supported his opponent, Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, by significant margins, even if exit polling indicates it was slightly better than GOP nominee Mitt Romney in 2012. The Latino population is still growing, and Republicans still may need to improve their standing if they want to have a future in the changing U.S. demographics.

But Trump won, and on immigration reform, that changes everything.

Unlike in 2012, there have been next to no calls to push for reform in the wake of the election result. Trump proved that he could win either thanks to or in spite of — possibly both — his hardline anti-unauthorized immigrant stance. Now the questions are whether he will follow through with his promises to build a wall on the southern border and expand deportations, and supporters of immigration reform are left scrambling how to figure out what to do next.

The first act of business for many groups is reassuring the undocumented immigrants they seek to protect that they won't stop trying.

“There is a lot of fear and hysteria and panic in the undocumented community right now,” Kica Matos, director of immigrant rights at the advocacy group Center for Community Change, said in

an interview. “A lot of emotion, a lot of trauma and people have this sense of fear and helplessness about what’s ahead, so we want to reassure the community that there are places that people can go to to call and ask questions.”

The next step is to fight. Trump said Thursday that border security would be one of his top priorities, and has said he will quickly do away with President Barack Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which gave more than 700,000 people temporary work authorization: they could live without fear of deportation.

Those people are all now known to the government as undocumented immigrants — a scary prospect, even if Trump does not decide to use that information to target them for deportation. Given that and the fact that DACA will likely be eliminated, immigrant rights groups are now discouraging people from applying for the program and looking into what Obama may be able to do to protect DACA recipients.

Going forward, Matos said they will also work on the local level, for things like preventing law enforcement from getting involved in deportation efforts.

On the federal level, some pro-reform advocates said they *could* have a shot to moderate Trump, if enough Republicans are willing to push back on him. That moderation might be happening already — Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus said on Wednesday that Trump doesn’t want “mass deportation” and will deport only criminals. (There’s also reason to think Trump might be more extreme than ever: He picked Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, an architect of anti-unauthorized immigrant policies, for his transition team.)

Polling, after all, still shows that most Americans don’t support deporting all undocumented immigrants, even if doing so was a policy the president elect advocated.

“It wasn’t clear that he was representing the consensus among Republicans,” said Ali Noorani, executive director of the group National Immigration Forum. “So I think the question will be how are conservatives of conscience who voted for Trump going to push back on him as he moves into the phase of implementing the promises he made on the campaign trail.”

Plus, the election showed that pro-immigration reform Republicans can win. Most of the House GOP members who called for legal status for undocumented immigrants were re-elected, and even senators who lost their races, such as Sen. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), made it through their primaries.

These might be the people Trump would have to work with if he needed to go through Congress for certain immigration policy changes.

“The biggest point is there are a large number of both Republican voters and Republican elected officials who don’t agree that we need to go down the path of deportations,” said David Bier, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

“So that is ultimately going to be the question: whether Trump is going to ignore the issue entirely and not do anything on his signature issue or is Trump going to moderate, try to get something done on enforcement and border security while allowing something positive to happen for the undocumented immigrants who are here,” he said.

Jeremy Robbins, executive director of the Partnership for a New American Economy, said he's not naive about the difficulty of getting anything done with Trump in the White House. But the fact that it's on the agenda could be a good thing, because it shows people want some sort of change rather than the status quo, he said.

Their plan is to continue making the case to Republican lawmakers on a local level that immigration reform is a good idea, he said.

"We were hoping for a different narrative coming out of this, but any way you look at this, immigration is still the driving force of this election," Robbins said. "We are glad that it's on the agenda, and it's going to be a difficult conversation but I think it is one where there is potential to make progress."