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Senators Push Biometric ID Card

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WRITTEN BY JACK KENNY
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Two prominent U.S. Senators are promoting national ID cards as a means of mending the nation's "badly broken" immigration system. Senators Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) have said they will co-sponsor legislation to require all workers in the U.S., citizens as well as aliens, to have a biometric Social Security cards, with a unique personal identifier such as a fingerprint or eye scan, in order to work.

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Prospective employers would be required to swipe the card through a machine to verify a worker or applicant's identity and immigration status. "Employers who refused to swipe the card or who otherwise knowingly hired unauthorized workers would face stiff fines and, for repeat offenses, prison sentences," the Senators said in an op ed entered Thursday on the *Washington Post* web site.

The new cards would be a "high-tech, fraud proof" improvement of the Social Security cards people already have, they said. "Each card's unique biometric identifier would be stored only on the card; no government database would house everyone's information. The cards would not contain any private information, medical information or tracking devices."

Yet a few paragraphs later, they propose, among the other steps for fixing the immigration system, "an entry-exit system that tracks people who enter the United States on legal visas and reports those who overstay their visas to law enforcement databases." That raises questions about whether the biometric cards they propose would really contain "no tracking devices." And how would it work if it not connected to a government "data bank" to confirm that the fingerprint or image on the card truly matches the identity of the person presenting it?

The biometric plan is one of "four pillars," the senators propose for immigration reform. They also propose strengthening border security and enforcement of immigration laws, creating a process for admitting temporary workers and, in what is likely to be the most controversial feature, "implementing a tough but fair path to legalization for those already here." Illegal immigrants, whom Schumer and Graham number at 11 million, "would be required to admit they broke the law and to pay their debt to society by performing community service and paying fines and back taxes. These people would be required to pass background checks and be proficient in English before going to the back of the line of prospective immigrants to earn the opportunity to work toward lawful permanent residence."

The features of the plan are similar to the immigration reform proposed by President George W. Bush in 2006 and 2007. That effort prompted a widespread backlash against what opponents called amnesty for the illegals, and many of its supporters in Congress, including 2008 GOP presidential candidate John McCain, backed away from it as the election year approached. President Obama, in a statement released from the White House on Thursday, pledged "to do everything in my power to forge a bipartisan consensus on this important issues so we can continue to move forward on comprehensive immigration reform."

But at a time when the President and Congress are still in a deadlock over health care reform, the immigration issue is not at the top of the White House agenda. Obama's press secretary, Robert Gibbs said the administration's next two priorities are financial regulatory reform and the campaign finance reform the President called for in this year's State of the Union address, when he criticized the Supreme Court over a ruling allowing corporations and unions to spend money on ads supporting or opposing candidates.

The issue may also become entangled with the health care reform effort, as Graham warned that Republicans will not support immigration reform if Democrats pass the health care bill through a parliamentary maneuver, such as a reconciliation motion, rather than a straight up or down vote on the legislation itself.

The Schumer-Graham proposal would award green cards to immigrants who receive a PhD or master's degree in science, technology, engineering, or math from a U.S. university. "It makes no sense to educate the world's future inventors and entrepreneurs and then force them to leave when they are able to contribute to our economy," they said. They would also allow workers to come into the

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country for short-term employment when employers are unable to recruit Americans to fill the positions. They promise a "zero tolerance policy" for those who commit felonies after coming here legally.

The senators gave no date as to when they would present a bill. Their editorial seems timed to coincide with a march on Washington on Sunday, as Latino groups and other activists are expected to press their case for the kind of immigration reform legislation Obama promised he would champion when he campaigned for President.

On the web site at the libertarian Cato Institute, Jim Hoffman has zeroed in on the potential dangers of using a biometric Social Security card as a means of controlling illegal immigration.

"It would also subject every employment decision to the federal government's approval," Hoffman wrote. It would make surveillance of law-abiding citizens easier. It would allow the government to control access to health care. It would facilitate gun control. It would cost \$100 billion dollars or more. It would draw bribery and corruption into the Social Security Administration. It would promote the development of sophisticated biometric identity fraud." Addressing Graham in particular, Hoffman told the South Carolina Republican, "Your saying that bigger government is the solution, not smaller government."

Many European countries require both citizens and non-citizens to carry an ID card. The idea gained some temporary popularity in the U.S. after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A Pew research poll conducted between September 13 and 17th of that year showed 70 percent in favor of requiring all citizens to carry one. The following week 56 percent in a *New York Times*/CBS poll said they would accept mandatory national electronic identification cards. A Time/CNN poll found half of those surveyed were in favor of requiring Arab-Americans to carry federal ID cards. A Week in Review article in the *New York Times* of October 7, 2001 offered a picture of what might be in store if a national ID requirement is enacted by Congress:

Imagine you were moving to a new state and the government required you to register at the local precinct. Or that before the hospital let Mom leave with hr newborn, Dad had to register the newly arrived citizen at a central office. Or that the police could stop you and demand to see your papers while you stepped out for a quart of milk.

Most Europeans are already living under such regulations, the *Times* said.

Photo: Jamie Court of the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights holds an enlarged version of President Bush's Social Security card in 2003: AP Images

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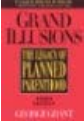
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