

Iowans support path to citizenship for immigrants. Will Congress listen?

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Every five or six years, Congress takes on immigration reform. And fails.

Now the Senate is at it again. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has set aside this week for debate on no particular piece of legislation, offering senators a chance to create a bill from scratch.

Forgive us our pessimism.

Even if a bill passes the Senate, we don't have a lot of hope one would pass the House. At least that's what history shows.

In 2013, the Senate passed a \$50 billion bill that would have increased border security — doubling the number of Border Patrol agents and adding 700 miles of fencing, surveillance and other measures — as well as requiring employers to use the E-Verify system.

It would also have provided legal residency and a chance at citizenship for undocumented immigrants, as long as they paid thousands of dollars in fines and back taxes. But House Republicans objected to any path to citizenship and did not consider the legislation.

In 2007, another immigration reform effort didn't even make it out of the Senate. That bill included the DREAM Act, which would have provided a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants brought into the country as minors.

So Congress could have solved the question of DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, 11 years ago. Instead, our elected representatives are scrambling to work out a deal granting legal status to Dreamers before March 5, a deadline imposed by President Donald Trump.

How could this time be different? Conservatives could listen to the majority of constituents, and not just the loud, anti-immigration voices that have helped sink past reform efforts.

Americans overwhelmingly support a path to citizenship for DACA recipients, polls show, and 81 percent of Iowans do, according to Des Moines Register/Mediacom Iowa Poll conducted Jan. 28-31.

But most Iowans are ready to go beyond citizenship for DACA recipients. Sixty-five percent of respondents in the Iowa Poll call a pathway to citizenship for all undocumented workers living in the country “a worthy goal.”

That's an increase from June 2013, when the Iowa Poll found that 54 percent of those surveyed supported a path to citizenship for all undocumented workers.

Mary E. Campos, center, holds a sign supporting immigrants during a rally outside the federal building following the suspension of the DACA program Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2017. Zach Boyden-Holmes/The Register

This time, the question wins support from a majority of Republicans and residents of Iowa's 4th Congressional District, home of immigration hardliner Rep. Steve King.

Will members of Congress have the courage to consider a path to citizenship for all undocumented workers this time? Will they recognize it is time to bring these immigrants out of the shadows?

They're not off to a great start. Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst and other Republicans have introduced a bill that mirrors the White House's approach. It would provide a path to citizenship for up to 1.8 million Dreamers, in exchange for \$25 billion for a border wall and at least a 25 percent cut in legal immigration. It would also further limit family-based immigration and end the diversity visa lottery.

But the plan has "far-reaching negative consequences for economic growth in the United States," warns the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. Its study shows the Trump plan would exclude nearly 22 million people from the opportunity to immigrate legally to the United States over the next five decades and would hurt our labor force growth as population ages.

Trump and his allies are holding the DACA recipients hostage in hopes of gaining his wall and severe restrictions on legal immigration. Congress would be wiser to solve the DACA question alone than pass a bill that strains our budget and harms our economy.

We don't want to be considering the same questions five years from now. But we also don't want Congress to pass a bill the country will regret later.