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The Problem Solvers Take On Immigration

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Last week I argued that the immigration conundrum, which has bedeviled Congress and the country for decades, can be solved only step by step, not all at once. Phase One would focus on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and related issues, while Phase Two would address broader structural reforms of the framework that has undergirded U.S. immigration policy since 1965. On CNN over the weekend, Sen. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat who is one of the leaders of a bipartisan Senate group working toward an immigration solution, suggested a similar distinction.

There is a broad center-left and center-right coalition in the country that is willing to support a reasonable compromise in both phases. The question is whether Congress will reflect the will of this majority or succumb to partisanship.

The purist Democratic and Republican positions are politically unrealistic. If Democrats want a solution to the DACA problem, they must offer more than token concessions to Republicans' long-held concerns about interior enforcement and border security. They will have to accept significantly intensified efforts in this area, which will include elements of President Trump's wall.

For their part, Republicans cannot insist on cramming their entire restrictionist agenda into a solution for the plight of those eligible for DACA. Structural changes, such as the role of family reunification in overall immigration policy, belong in a Phase Two discussion, when all issues will be on the table.

In this context, the proposal recently released by the Trump administration is a mixed bag. On the one hand, its proposed path to citizenship for DACA recipients and other DACA-eligible immigrants illegally present in the United States is reasonable, even generous.

And the administration should be commended for spelling out its position on enforcement and border security, along with a price tag. The \$25 billion figure for the southern and northern borders as well as ports of entry produced sticker shock in some quarters, but every Senate Democrat voted in 2013 for a 10-year, \$46 billion border-security package as part of a bipartisan comprehensive immigration-reform bill.

On the other hand, the administration proposed tight limits on family-based migration that would not only transform the structure of the entire immigration system but would also lead to a 44% reduction in overall levels of legal migration, according to a just-released Cato Institute [report](#). These sweeping proposals have no place in a DACA bill that excludes many of the still-unsolved

issues the Senate addressed in 2013—most important, the status of the remaining unauthorized population.

Against this backdrop, the new bipartisan proposal released on Monday by the Problem Solvers Caucus offers real grounds for hope. This bipartisan House group of 24 Democrats and 24 Republicans endorsed the Trump administration's plan for DACA recipients while spelling out tough eligibility criteria. It proposes a down payment on the administration's border-security plan, along with the elimination of the Diversity Visa program the administration had demanded (although its plan for reallocating these visas on a merit basis is more generous to immigrants from underrepresented countries than the administration's).

The Problem Solvers accepted the administration's proposed restrictions on family sponsorships for current legal permanent residents, leaving the broader issue of family-based migration to Phase Two negotiations. In a humanitarian gesture, the bipartisan plan offers renewable, three-year legal status and work authorizations—but not a path to citizenship—to the parents of young adults participating in the DACA solution.

What happens next? If there is no deal, both chambers will go their separate paths, each developing its own legislation on its own timeline. The final products are likely to diverge significantly. A compromise—if there is one—will come in tough negotiations between the two chambers.

This would be the best case. The worst case would be a repetition of 2013, when Republican leaders in the House prevented the body from taking up any immigration bill at all. Not only did they oppose the Senate bill; they were unwilling to pass their own and risk a conference committee that might come up with a compromise that would have been harder to oppose. As a result, the issue has continued to fester.

This time, the Problem Solvers and other public-spirited members of the House must insist on floor consideration for a range of immigration proposals. If leadership resists, they should resort to other measures—including discharge petitions—to force the long-overdue debate the country needs.