



## DREAM Deferred

By [Kathy Lee](#) and [John He](#) — October 30, 2010 at 10:23 pm

*Failure to pass the DREAM Act highlights partisan gridlock*

In the polarized world of American politics, bipartisan support is hard to come by. So when the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act came to the Senate floor in mid-September, one might have expected the bill to pass overwhelmingly. After all, the measure enjoyed support from both parties, the White House, and a clear majority of Americans. At a Sept. 21 press conference, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared, "It is no surprise that a common-sense law like the DREAM Act has always been supported by both Democrats and Republicans. There is no reason it shouldn't receive that same bipartisan support now."

Later that day, however, Senate Republicans blocked action on the DREAM Act by filibustering the defense authorization bill to which the legislation had been attached. Surprisingly, the bill's recent failure is only the latest installment in a long history of defeat and disappointment. Despite the widespread, bipartisan popularity of the DREAM Act, the decade since it was originally proposed has been characterized by a baffling inability to harness its popularity and get the bill passed. The DREAM Act's failure signifies the extent to which polarization and partisan wrangling in Congress have eroded the possibility of bipartisan achievements.

*DREAM Act Basics*



The DREAM Act, reintroduced in the Senate last year by Senators Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), would create a path to citizenship for young people who are undocumented immigrants. Dan Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, told the HPR that the DREAM Act is limited to "undocumented students who entered the United States at least five years before passage of the act and were under the age of 16 when they entered." As introduced in the current Congress, the bill would require that

the students have earned a high school diploma or its equivalent. After completing two years of college or military service, they could then apply for permanent legal status.

The DREAM Act would not instantly extend citizenship to all of those eligible to apply for it. In fact, of the 2.1 million undocumented youth eligible for applying under the DREAM Act, only an estimated 825,000 would likely attain citizenship due to the educational demands of the bill, according to a report by the Migration Policy Institute.

*Public Support, But Not Enough Votes*

With over a hundred cosponsors among outside organizations, the DREAM Act has a diverse coalition of supporters. An unlikely alliance of interest groups has endorsed the bill, including the AFL-CIO, the Episcopal Church, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Public opinion likewise offers strong support. A June 2010 poll by the Opinion Research Corporation found that 70 percent of Americans support the DREAM Act, including 60 percent of prospective Republican voters.

The DREAM Act is also the only immigration reform legislation that the White House has endorsed. It enjoys nearly 40 cosponsors in the Senate and over 120 in the House, representing various states, ideologies, and backgrounds. In 2007, a similar bill received the vote of 11 Republican Senators, but failed to receive a filibuster-proof supermajority.

As Congress became hyper-politicized during the first two years of the Obama presidency, the DREAM Act suffered from an erosion of this bipartisan support. When Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) included the DREAM Act in the defense authorization bill in September, the bill failed the cloture vote 56-43 without garnering a single Republican in favor. Republican Senators Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett, both of Utah, voted in favor of adding the DREAM Act to the defense authorization bill in 2007, but voted against the measure in the most recent bill. Likewise, Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), who co-sponsored the DREAM Act in 2005, 2006, and 2007, voted against it in 2010.



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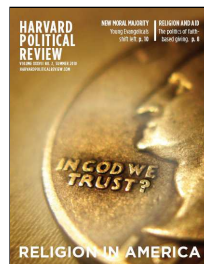
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*Caught in the Crossfire*

The DREAM Act now faces a substantial political challenge. The legislation occupies a tenuous middle ground: liberals accuse it of being too limited in scope and conservatives charge that it is too far-ranging. Kristen Williamson, a spokesperson for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a conservative group, told the HPR that many Republicans view the DREAM Act as "amnesty disguised as an educational initiative." Critics of the DREAM Act allege that the measure rewards lawbreaking and creates a greater incentive to defy immigration laws. With midterm elections on the horizon, Republicans also accuse congressional Democrats of capitalizing on the DREAM Act "to motivate Hispanic voters in the upcoming elections," Williamson said.

On the other side of the aisle, some liberal Democrats believe that comprehensive immigration reform is still possible and oppose the DREAM Act's piecemeal approach to reform. Marshall Fitz, director of immigration policy at the Center for American Progress, told the HPR, "The expectation that we will only get one shot at an immigration debate during a legislative session suggests that moving forward on a piece like DREAM means it is to the exclusion of other equally worthy pieces."

But Margie McHugh, co-director of the National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, criticized this position in an interview with the HPR. "How long can hopes for comprehensive immigration reform be used to block the DREAM Act?" she asked. "Should smaller pieces of legislation continue to be held hostage to an increasingly unlikely proposition?"

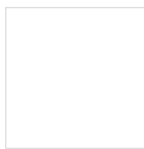
*Dream Versus Reality*

Democratic leaders promise to vote on the DREAM Act again in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, but it seems unlikely that its supporters will overcome the 60-vote threshold needed to break a filibuster in the lame-duck session, before the new Republican senators come into town. The future of the DREAM Act depends, then, on the support of both the moderate Republicans who have supported the measure in the past and the Democrats who are holding out in hopes of passing comprehensive immigration reform.

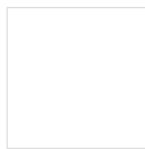
Ultimately, the bill's failure to pass should be no surprise, even with all the public support it has. As Fitz put it, expectations of passage stem from "the faulty premise that the legislative process is closely related to either the will of the majority or to rational policy-making. At best they are distant step-cousins." In an increasingly gridlocked Washington, even middle-of-the-road, moderate measures are being politicized and pushed aside.

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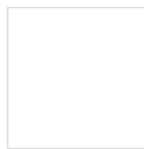
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