

The Tea Party's Cynical Opposition to Immigration Reform

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Last month, the Senate adopted immigration reform by a 68-32 vote, with 14 Republicans in favor. Prospects for reform are still grim, however, because Tea Party Republicans in the House are dead set against the bill's "path to citizenship." At a minimum, these members insist a path cannot occur without "enforceable" triggers that confirm the effectiveness of the bill's new border security measures.

The Senate's bill has real flaws -- insufficient legal immigration, and grotesque over-complexity - but the Tea Party's objections are misguided and cynical.

Tea Partiers claim that a path to citizenship is wrong because it rewards people who have broken the rules to immigrate. This perspective has a grain of truth. Other things equal, policy should promote respect for the law and avoid rewarding those who break it. In this instance, however, other factors are more important.

Undocumented immigrants have, in most cases, been law-abiding productive residents of the United States for years or decades. Their "crime" of entering illegally is unfortunate, but it is hardly the whole story. Many immigrants endured severe hardship to migrate; they came to build a better life for themselves and their children. Indeed, those who take these risks are often more energetic, entrepreneurial, hard-working, and sympathetic to America's values than those who did not come. These are exactly the people America should welcome.

The costs and disruption of deporting even a fraction of existing undocumented immigrants would be unimaginable. So the relevant choice is not between the status quo and an imaginary world in which undocumented immigrants disappear; it is between the status quo and a path of some kind. Under the status quo, however, some 11 million people live outside the law and often outside society's social fabric. How does that promote the rule of law, or assimilation, or any sensible goal?

Beyond these considerations, Tea Party opposition to a path has the distinct air of self-interest; these politicians fear that new immigrants-turned-citizens will vote for Democrats. That fear is reasonable (especially if the Republican Party continues to treat immigrants with disdain), and

it is one reason liberals support a path. But political implications should be irrelevant to choosing the right policy.

The Tea Party position on enhanced border security is even more problematic.

The Senate bill calls for 20,000 more border guards, 350 miles of additional fencing along the Southern border, increased surveillance equipment, and a new electronic system to monitor people entering the U.S. via airports and seaports, at a cost of \$46 billion over ten years.

The impact of these measures on undocumented immigration will be minuscule. Immigrants can evade fences via planes, boats, or tunnels (which happens already). Or, immigrants can disappear into the wind after entering legally on student or tourist visas (which also happens already). A longer fence and more expensive surveillance equipment will just mean increased use of these alternate methods by those who want to enter illegally.

Thus enhanced security is pure waste; it is the kind of expenditure that Tea Partiers should hate. Worse, it means another 20,000 federal employees. Which way do Tea Partiers expect them to vote?

Tea Partiers know, moreover, that it will take years before any new fence is built, and it may be impossible for any system to satisfy the conditions of the existing or new metrics for whether the security is working. Thus House Tea Party members can know that new Democratic voters will not be relevant for many electoral cycles.

The Senate's immigration bill is deeply flawed, as any law that runs to 1198 pages must be. The bill contains true improvements in immigration policy, but also much nonsense. Reasonable people can support or oppose the existing bill.

But Tea Partiers who claim to believe in freedom and limited government should be trying to purge the big government overreach in the Senate's bill -- especially the enhanced border security, and the expanded E-Verify -- rather than cynically trying to gut the entire effort with phony concerns about the rule of law or border security.

The public is not stupid; voters understand the game that Tea Party politicians are playing, and voters will eventually punish these politicians at the ballot box. So the House Tea Partiers are buying only a temporary respite with their cynical tactics.