

2013 Immigration Reform: Should The Undocumented Choose Between Citizenship And Legal Status?

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As the Syrian civil war, budget battles and defunding Obamacare continue to command the immediate attention of Congress, it's easy to assume that a 2013 immigration reform bill will never make it out of the House and onto President Barack Obama's desk before year's end.

There's still time to get a vote on the issue, says one immigration policy analyst, but it will depend on pro-reform Republicans showing some guts -- and possibly on offering the 11 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be living in the U.S. two choices for legal status.

“What Republicans just need to do is get over their fear of a relatively small number of people who don't like immigrants in their party, but who are very loud,” said Alex Nowrasteh at the Cato Institute. “They need to realize that there is a difference, that the anger expressed by anti-immigration people is much greater than their influence, their size and their impact on politics.”

Though numerous polls have shown that a majority of Americans support immigration reform, including one with a path to citizenship, it will take some leadership to rid Republicans of this fear, Nowrasteh said.

But House Speaker John Boehner has no intention of allowing a bill like the Senate-passed comprehensive measure, which includes a path to citizenship,

onto the House floor for a vote. That's even though providing legal status to the 11 million undocumented immigrants is backed publicly by other top Republicans such as House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan.

"At the end of the day, if everybody else in line who came here legally and did everything right is through the system and a person then, after an exhaustive period, after a probationary period, after a green card, not consuming any government benefits, wants to get in line like everybody else for citizenship, we should allow that person to do that," Ryan [told](#) MSNBC's "Morning Joe." "That's earning the right to become a citizen."

But not all undocumented immigrants are clamoring for citizenship, as opposed to being legalized for work, Nowrasteh said, a point Ryan also [agreed on in past interviews](#). That's why Nowrasteh believes immigration reform can be helped along by presenting immigrants with the option of choosing either a path to citizenship, or a path to a permanent work visa that can't be turned into citizenship.

"Let the immigrants choose. That's my solution to it," Nowrasteh said. "But everybody wants to force immigrants onto one path. Pro-immigration forces usually want to force them onto a path that guarantees that they'll become a citizen. Anti-immigration people either want to force them out of the country or force them on a path where they could never vote or become a citizen. I say let's choose a middle approach, create options and let them choose for themselves."

If the inaction continues, evangelical groups, which have been some of the most vocal in this year's debate, have promised to increase the pressure on lawmakers until a bill is moved out of Congress.

"To me, the critical issue is to have the House of Representatives take a vote on immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship and stop this senseless ripping apart of families from one another," said Troy Jackson, director of Ohio Prophetic Voices.

Leading Republicans like Rep. Bob Goodlatte, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Kevin McCarthy, majority whip, are against creating a “special pathway” for immigrants, which some Republicans call amnesty.

McCarthy noted on his website that America being a nation of immigrants, it should embrace those who wait in line to legally become citizens.

“However, we should not provide any amnesty that would benefit those who defy our laws and enter the United States illegally,” the [website stated](#). “In order to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in our country, we must enforce the laws that already exist. In order to do this, we must secure our border by using both physical as well as electronic barriers.”

That a “special” pathway is being rejected by Republicans seems absurd to Jackson, who said some kind of resolution needs to be created to streamline immigrants who are out of status.

“It’s dealing with a challenge that we face as a country that has been building for decades and finding a resolution that is human and keeps families together that doesn’t allow for permanent second-class status,” the former pastor said. “If they want to call that special that’s fine, but this is a situation that demands a response that is humane and just and honors the God-given dignity of every person. So that’s what we’re going to hold their feet to the fire on. This is important and I don’t care what adjective they want to give to it.”

And if there was any other way that out-of-status or undocumented immigrants could fall in line without Congress intervention they wouldn’t be asking for special help, Nowrasteh said.

“So by definition, chronologically, we have to create a pathway of some kind for them,” he added. “The disagreement is how far this pathway should go. ... Nobody talks anymore about deporting 11 to 12 million people. That’s not a serious policy consideration except amongst weirdos in Congress like Steve King.

So it's off the table and I think that's a sign that the debate is going into a positive direction."

Presenting immigrants with two choices will satisfy both sides and solve the problem causing the snag, he said.

If inaction should kill the bill this year, Jackson said lawmakers can count on Americans taking the fight to them at the ballot boxes starting next year.

"We are hopeful and we're going to work to push this to happen in 2013," he said. "If they continue to delay we are going to make it an issue into 2014."

"As the economy improves, unauthorized immigration will increase," Nowrasteh said. "This problem is not going to go away if we don't solve it this year. It's going to continually crop up every year or every couple of years going forward. So this is definitely not going to be the last we hear of it if it fails."