



Putting a price tag on immigration reform

By: Steve Benen – April 9, 2013

The right has gone through a variety of arguments to oppose comprehensive immigration reform -- many involve saying "amnesty" an awful lot -- but one of the newer talking points has to do with financing. Politico reports that conservatives have begun arguing that the costs of reform, including the funding necessary for increased border security, "would be prohibitive."

Even at face value, this isn't exactly compelling. I'm trying to imagine the elevator pitch: "Sure, there's broad agreement that the country has a broken immigration system, but fixing it might cost money, so we're better off letting it remain dysfunctional indefinitely."

Apparently, this is roughly the argument being pushed by Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) and former Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), who now heads the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

There is, however, a more substantive response, which also happens to come from the right.

Conservative champions of opening the flow of legal immigration into the United States are invoking economics in hopes of winning Republican lawmakers' support -- specifically, the idea that more immigration will increase growth and cut the federal budget deficit.

The American Action Forum, a conservative think tank, will release an analysis on Tuesday that projects that an overhaul of immigration laws could boost gross domestic product growth by a percentage point each year over the next decade. That growth would produce tax revenue that would reduce federal deficits by a combined \$2.5 trillion, according to the group's president, the economist Douglas Holtz-Eakin.

The AFF line has been embraced by the Cato Institute and Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, suggesting there's at least some conservative firepower backing up the argument.

All things considered, I think the pro-reform conservatives have the stronger case -- easily.

Sure, reform would come with some costs, and I haven't seen anyone suggest anything to the contrary. But the point is that those costs would be easily covered by the larger economic benefits.

Indeed, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office has reminded lawmakers in recent years about the economic and fiscal benefits, especially as undocumented immigrants paid more taxes, on top of fines and fees that are part of the bipartisan approach.

Specifically, the CBO found that domestic spending would increase by about \$22.7 billion over 10 years under the last comprehensive plan, but the CBO and the Joint Committee on Taxation also estimated that reform would increase revenues by \$48.3 billion during the same period.

This is not, in other words, a good excuse for inaction.