



Aiming to build opposition, foes liken immigration to 'Obamacare'

By: Carrie Dann – June 11, 2013

Pointing to its hundreds of pages of legislative minutiae, opponents of the immigration reform effort are painting the bipartisan Senate bill as the policy sibling of the Affordable Care Act, hoping that conservative distaste for the law dubbed "Obamacare" will bleed into President Barack Obama's next attempt at legacy legislation.

See Exhibit A: A new op-ed from bill opponent Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, titled "My view: The 'Gang of Eight' bill is an immigration version of Obamacare."

"Like the president's health care law, the 'gang' bill was negotiated in secret by insiders and special interests, who then essentially offered it to Congress as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition," Lee argues in the Deseret News piece. "It grants broad new powers to the same executive branch that today is mired in scandal for incompetence and abuse of power. Total cost estimates are in the trillions. And rather than fix our current immigration problems, the bill makes many of them worse.

It's a blunt summary of an idea that skeptical conservatives began to voice during the Senate bill's drafting, which was largely negotiated behind closed doors by the bipartisan "Gang of Eight" and included input from stakeholders like the Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO and pro-immigrant groups.

Last month, Rep. Steve King of Iowa – who is leading the House effort against the bill – drew a similar parallel but added that the pending immigration legislation, which would offer a 13-year path to citizenship to many undocumented immigrants, is in fact "far, far worse than Obamacare."

"If this amnesty goes through, there's no undoing it," he told reporters. "The genie of the left will have escaped from the bottle and he will be as amorphous as a puff of smoke."

Mythical imagery aside, opponents are hoping to lash the new immigration effort to legislation that is suffering from sagging approval ratings more than three years after its passage.

A new NBC/WSJ poll out last week showed that 49 percent of Americans said the Affordable Care Act is "a bad idea," up five points from July of last year. Just 37 percent called the law a good idea.

And the partisan divide on that question is deep. Eight-five percent of self-described Republicans gave a thumbs-down to the health care law, along with 58 percent of independents.

Some experts say that Lee and company have a point in comparing the two sweeping legislative efforts – but mostly when it comes to style rather than substance.

“There is a physical similarity but not a fiscal similarity,” says Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. “This is another giant bill with all sorts of obscure definitions and passages.”

But, Tanner argues, the budget picture is a different story.

“Obamacare’s going to cost money, and we believe that it’s going to slow economic growth,” he said. “The immigration bill is actually good for the economy.”

The Cato Institute is one of several conservatively-aligned groups that calculates a net positive economic effect from the Gang of Eight legislation. They’re at odds with the Heritage Foundation – often cited by immigration foes -- which concluded that the reform would cost a whopping \$6.3 trillion in federal resources.

While GOP-aligned groups are nearly united in their distaste for the health care law, the Senate immigration bill – with its foundational path to citizenship – is viewed by many vocal Republicans as a political and economic imperative.

And the dispute is reflected in polling, too.

The same NBC/WSJ poll found that about six in 10 self-identified Republicans oppose legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship, with 32 percent saying they “strongly” oppose it.

But compare that to 80 percent of Republicans who “strongly” believe that the Affordable Care Act is a bad plan.

Proponents of the immigration legislation also point out that the Obama health care legislation is often maligned for being passed without a single Republican vote. With New Hampshire Sen. Kelly Ayotte joining the Gang of Eight Republicans this weekend in pushing for passage, that’s not the expected path for the immigration legislation.

“The attempt to link the perceived transgressions of the Affordable Care Act to immigration just shows how desperate our opponents are,” said Frank Sharry, the founder of America’s Voice, one of the leading groups backing the Gang of Eight bill. “It’s just not going to work.”