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## Heritage Foundation Warns of Steep Costs of Immigration Reform

By: [Rebecca Kaplan](#) – May 6, 2013

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The Heritage Foundation released a study Monday saying that legalizing the current population of illegal immigrants could cost \$6.3 trillion in entitlements and social programs in the long run. But the report came as no surprise, given that the conservative think tank issued a similar warning in 2007, and it's unlikely to substantially change the fate of immigration reform in the Senate.

Senators who oppose the "Gang of Eight" bill—such as Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., and David Vitter, R-La.—have already raised concerns about its cost. Opponents cite a variety of other concerns as well, ranging from perceived shortcomings in the border-security provisions to the inclusion of a pathway to citizenship.

And although the economy is far weaker than it was during the most recent immigration debate, conservatives who support reform—such as Douglas Holtz-Eakin of the American Action Forum and Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute—have seen this study coming for so long that they've spent weeks "pre-butting" it with their own analysis that immigration reform will boost the beleaguered U.S. economy, as long as the bill is evaluated using dynamic scoring. Republicans prefer this scoring method, which takes into account behavioral changes spurred by policy. The Heritage Foundation usually evaluates bills that way—but it didn't in this case.

"This study is designed to try to scare conservative Republicans to try to think the cost here is going to be so gigantic that you can't possibly be for it," said Haley Barbour, Mississippi's former GOP governor, on a conference call with reporters Monday.

Many of the Senate's most ardent budget hawks already oppose the immigration bill for other reasons. And some who have been open to an overhaul, including Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, may be critical of Heritage's methodology when they evaluate the costs of changing the immigration laws.

"I do think it ought to be based on behavior, meaning dynamic [scoring]," said Portman, who, like many other senators, said Monday evening that he had not yet seen the study. "I'm for it for everything, as you know."

Portman's comments were echoed by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, another advocate of dynamic scoring, whose view of immigration reform could sway the votes of some of his fellow conservatives. "The Congressional Budget Office has found that fixing our broken immigration system could help our economy grow. A proper accounting of immigration reform should take into account these dynamic effects," he said in a statement through a spokesman. CBO indicated in a letter to Ryan last week that it would consider some macroeconomic effects when evaluating a major immigration overhaul.

Heritage President Jim DeMint, a former GOP senator from South Carolina, argued that there could be no “true dynamic scoring” within the 10-year window CBO considers while evaluating bills. The Gang of Eight stipulated that newly legalized immigrants could not receive federal benefits before getting green cards, which would be a 10-year process for many. That could push the cost outside the CBO’s evaluations—“their normal tricks,” DeMint said of his former colleagues.

The 2007 Heritage study was a “contributing factor” in the demise of the last major immigration-reform effort in the Senate, but not the “death knell,” said Madeline Zavodny, an adjunct scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. The guest-worker program was a bigger problem, as was a major popular blowback against the idea of “amnesty.”

Those concerns still exist, as do doubts about the border and interior enforcement mechanisms in the Gang of Eight’s plan. “That alone will probably be enough to prevent 41 Republicans from voting for [the bill],” said Brian Phillips, a spokesman for Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah. The cost concerns raised by Heritage “might just end up being another talking point on why we might not vote for it.”

As another GOP aide put it, “I think at the end of the day, a lot of the people who oppose the bill are going to point to costs as a primary reason for their opposition.”

But that doesn’t mean the study will add to the handful of lawmakers who already oppose the bill. A Democratic aide to the Gang of Eight said that while cost is a legitimate question to examine, concerns about Heritage’s methodology and the resulting high estimate mean the study “has kind of discredited itself.

“The study’s impact going forward will be minimal,” the aide said. “I don’t think it will gain traction beyond those who oppose the bill reflexively.”