

# **Immigration Reform 2015: High Hopes For High-Skilled Immigration Reform, Even As Congress Battles Obama**

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Immigration reform is one of the most divisive issues in Congress right now, but for bills favoring high-skilled immigrants, there may be some hope. Senators introduced two bills this week to increase and streamline high-skilled immigration, and the sponsors say they're optimistic about their prospects.

Measures to expand immigration channels for high-skilled workers, particularly in the tech industry, have long enjoyed bipartisan support but have fallen victim to the thornier politics of comprehensive reform. Passing the bills separately could be a win for business interests that want skilled labor and signal some progress on immigration from Congress. But detaching them from a comprehensive bill might dim the chances for legislation on more polarizing issues, like pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

The Immigration Innovation Act, also known as I-Squared, was introduced Tuesday in the Senate by a bipartisan group of six including Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah; Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn; and Marco Rubio, R-Fla. The bill would drastically expand the number of available visas for temporary high-skilled workers, [raising the existing cap](#) of 65,000 to 115,000, with room to expand up to 195,000 under certain circumstances. The proposal also exempts some categories of immigrants from the quota for employment-based green cards, effectively doubling the number of those available visas.

A separate bill called the Startup Act, backed by six senators including Sens. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., and Mark Warner, D-Va., would create a new type of visa for entrepreneurs looking to start companies in the United States.

Neither bill is a new proposal; various versions of them have cropped up in Congress before. But reform of the high-skilled immigration process has usually been attached to broader legislation as a sweetener for lawmakers to pass it.

Now the new Republican-dominated Congress seems more inclined to implement piecemeal reform, rather than a sweeping comprehensive bill. “Just because we can’t do everything doesn’t mean we can’t do some things,” Moran told the [Wall Street Journal](#) on Tuesday. “In my view, Congress makes a mistake when it tries to do everything in one piece of legislation.”

Immigration is a particularly sore subject in Congress right now, as House Republicans voted Wednesday to [defund President Barack Obama’s executive action](#) granting deportation relief to some 4 million undocumented immigrants. The House also narrowly passed a bill to undo deportation relief for undocumented childhood arrivals under the president’s 2012 executive order. Passing measures for high-skilled immigrants would give the Republicans something to point to when accused of blocking any immigration reform.

Not all Republicans are on board, however. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., released an [immigration handbook](#) Tuesday that outlined arguments against increasing temporary high-skilled worker visas. “It is understandable why these corporations push for legislation that will flood the labor market and keep pay low; what is not understandable is why we would ever consider advancing legislation that provides jobs for the citizens of other countries at the expense of our own,” he wrote.

Nevertheless, analysts say the bills have a strong chance of passing both houses. “Congress seems much more amenable to high-skilled reform than they were before,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. “Republicans have been on board with expanding high-skilled immigration for a very long time. Now that they control the Senate, they can control the discussion on that, and they’re going to push for more liberalization of the system than they would have gotten in a mixed Congress.”

But Obama and some Democrats in Congress have championed comprehensive immigration legislation, and it’s unclear whether the president would sign these measures on their own. Obama “said that he is amenable to some piecemeal bills that are sent up to him, but he’s been decidedly less enthusiastic about that compared to a comprehensive bill,” Nowrasteh said.

“The question is: Have we reached a point where, if we believe the other pieces aren’t going to go in a comprehensive bill, is it time for one of these bills to be considered by itself?” said Emily Lam, vice president of health care and federal issues for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, a tech trade association.

“We believe the system is broken for everybody, not just for us,” Lam added, noting that her organization has long lobbied for comprehensive action. “If we can get a piecemeal bill, then we will be supporting it. But we’re happy to continue to say, ‘Look, we all need a solution on this.’”

“There’s no time like the present to improve our immigration system,” Nowrasteh said. “It’s a system that doesn’t work properly, it hasn’t served the interests of American workers or the American economy, and the sooner we liberalize it the better.”