



Survey: Most Latino immigrants want legal status, won't insist on citizenship

By: Franco Ordonez – December 18, 2013

Armando Sanchez has had his green card for more than two decades.

The beat-up card in his wallet has allowed the 43-year-old Charlotte, N.C., construction worker to keep a job, open a line of credit and buy a home. He travels back to Mexico twice a year to see his children.

While he sees the appeal of becoming a U.S. citizen, it has not been a major priority. What is most important, he says, is that he doesn't have to worry about a late-night knock at the door by immigration agents looking to deport him.

He's not alone. An overwhelming number of Latino immigrants, 61 percent, feel it's more important to live and work in the country legally without the fear of deportations than getting a pathway to citizenship, according to a new study released Thursday by the Pew Hispanic Center.

The findings could signal an opening for compromise between Democrats and Republicans on the most controversial aspect of the immigration debate.

Few issues in the conversation over immigration stir up emotions as much as the debate over whether to provide those here illegally with a path to citizenship.

Many Democrats see such an option as a basic American principle to provide equal rights and prevent the creation of a second-class community. Many Republicans see it as rewarding those who broke the law with one of the most coveted prizes.

But many of those same Republicans have indicated they'd be open to legal status alone.

"This is a huge opportunity for compromise in immigration reform in 2014," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

The House of Representatives is expected to take up a series of immigration bills as early as January, including one that would provide many of the 11 million undocumented the legal right to live and work

in the United States. It would not create a special pathway to citizenship, but it also likely would not bar people permanently from becoming citizens.

Not all immigrants want to become citizens.

Only 44 percent of Latino immigrants in the country legally have become citizens, according to another Pew Hispanic study earlier this year. Even fewer legal Mexican immigrants, 36 percent, have become naturalized.

Sanchez came to the United States with his family as a child. He benefited after President Ronald Reagan signed sweeping immigration legislation in 1986 that granted nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants so-called amnesty.

There are a lot of benefits to being a resident, particularly the ability to work, Sanchez said.

Citizenship would be great, and he plans to become naturalized. But when he thinks of his undocumented friends and the risks they take going to the grocery store or driving to and from work, he asks whether everything has to happen all at once.

"In the future, in a few years, the laws can change again," Sanchez said. "Right now, people want to relax. They don't want to be afraid."

Advocacy and union groups that insist on a path to citizenship charge that it's a fundamental principle of the United States, and that failing to grant such rights sentences immigrants to second-class lives.

But Nowrasteh notes there are some 10 million people who choose to live in the United States with green cards. And there are millions living and working in the United States on work permits who do not have the same rights as citizens.

If an immigration overhaul does fail, it's not just Republicans who have political capital to lose among Latinos.

While a greater percentage of Latinos (43 percent) say they would blame Republicans for a failure to pass an overhaul, a large portion _ 34 percent _ say they would hold President Barack Obama and Democrats responsible, according to the Pew study.

Almost 400,000 people are being deported each year under the Obama administration. Mark Lopez, a co-author of the Pew Hispanic Report, said Latinos are largely disappointed with how the Obama administration has handled deportations.

"This is something that many Hispanics adults, particularly immigrant adults, are paying attention to _ what's going on with deportations," said Lopez, citing previous Pew studies. "They're aware (deportations) are high under the Obama administration. And ... they disapprove of that."

Before the group dismantled earlier this year, a bipartisan team of House members that included Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Fla., and Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, was close to introducing a bill that would

have granted legal status to many of the nation's estimated 11 million immigrants here illegally but no new path to citizenship, according to those involved in the discussions.

No one would have been barred permanently from citizenship, but they'd be eligible only via pathways that already are available to any other immigrants, including marriage, family or employment-based sponsorships.

Some immigration advocacy groups pushing for an overhaul have left wiggle room for compromise. Frank Sharry, the executive director of America's Voice, one of the strongest proponents for a comprehensive overhaul, said last month that groups could work with Republicans if they offered proposals "that would, in fact, allow for normal channels to be used by undocumented immigrants in America (to attain citizenship)."