



Opinion: Republicans Can Pass Immigration Reform, Here's How

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As President-elect Trump prepares for his term in office, Republicans in Congress have stumbled out of the gate with an ill-advised attempt to gut an independent ethics office that investigates House lawmakers and staff accused of misconduct. But if the GOP is looking for an easy victory that could put the Democrats on their heels, they may look no further than a compromise on immigration reform.

Immigration reform has been difficult, mainly because of one important disagreement between the GOP and the Democrats; what to do with the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants. Democrats desire a pathway to citizenship for this population; they have touted the economic and social benefits and it doesn't hurt that new citizens also means new potential voters.

However, Republicans have been opposed to a pathway to citizenship, saying this would reward illegal immigration and sidestepped the legal system, despite the many incentives businesses provide to undocumented labor. Some in the party have also used thinly veiled racially charged arguments against a pathway to citizenship because these immigrants would dilute the social fabric of the country, ie. they may be less likely to assimilate into American culture. And frankly, given the GOP's performance with minority voters, the party knows they have a demographic disadvantage with new Latino and Asian voters that would only be made worse by extending this population with the right to vote.

Immigrants without documentation are faced with daily struggles. It is difficult to work without proper identification. They are susceptible to human and labor rights violations because of their status. Their status is also a source of extreme stress for their families, many of whom are citizens. An undocumented immigrant may be pulled over for a traffic infraction and be taken to a detention facility without any notice to their family which can last weeks or months.

Moreover, many undocumented immigrants were young when they migrated to the United States and had no idea that they were not processed properly until later in their lives. Recall that Senator Ted Cruz, who is married to a corporate banking executive and who has a law

degree from Harvard University, did not discover that he was a Canadian citizen until he announced his candidacy for President. Cruz was also the longest serving Solicitor General of Texas who argued nine cases before the Supreme Court.

However, a key compromise exists between the two parties that is both acceptable to the majority of voters in the country and would humanely solve the immigration issue. Perhaps as important, immigration reform would be beneficial to the economy and to Donald Trump's investment portfolio.

Marco Rubio floated an immigration reform plan that addressed the most important issues outlined above in 2012; a plan that granted undocumented immigrants a pathway to legalization without a special pathway to citizenship. His proposal became the basis for a compromise under the "Gang of Eight" proposal the following year, which died when an upswell of dissent rose from the Republican grassroots. But while Rubio's plan was also cast as unacceptable to Democrats because it did not provide an explicit path to citizenship, President Obama was praised for implementing a temporary reprieve program for Dreamers, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which was essentially the same as legalization without a special path to citizenship.

For undocumented immigrants, the economy, and Donald Trump, the benefits are immediate.

"Increasing immigration is a guaranteed way to boost economic growth. Immigrants boost the supply and the demand side of the economy," says economist Alex Nowrasteh with the conservative Cato Institute. Even for immigrants already here without status, formally integrating them is a boost to economy, says Nowrasteh.

Legalization brings undocumented immigrants out of the shadows so that they may work, take their kids to school, go to church or participate in society without fear of being torn from their families.

Research from the social sciences shows that greater social integration increases immigrants' assimilation into American culture, like speaking English and gaining the education they need to maximize their contribution to the economy. And as Pew Research has shown, many immigrants do not desire to be citizens even if offered.

Legalizing undocumented immigrants who can then freely participate in the economy brings them formally into the community. For Donald Trump, a real estate mogul, the benefits are obvious. Nowrasteh of Cato says, "The smallest estimated effect of immigration on rental prices is that a 1 percent increase in population from immigration increases rents by 1 percent. A huge impact."

The case for immigration reform that includes a path to legalization without an explicit path to citizenship is obvious for all except those who either see immigrants as a threat to cultural purity in the Republican party or those in the Democratic party who see their value only in what they can provide in votes.

But a great majority of voters in the 2016 wanted undocumented immigrants to be offered legal status. Exit polls during the election showed that 70 percent favored legal status, and these data

have been consistent for years. Voters are not resistant to legal status, except that the real point of disagreement is over what "legal status" actually means.

Politically, a Republican solution to immigration reform would put Democrats in a difficult spot. Obama enjoyed a majority in Congress in his first term in office and could not get immigration reform through, largely because the GOP was united against it and a few Democrats in red districts defected against the party. Obama had also largely expended all of his political capital on health care reform. But the inability to get immigration reform passed was one of the biggest failures of the Obama administration. The GOP can start by settling an issue that is long overdue.