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Column: DACA has been a boon to the U.S., but remains on the brink of disappearing

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The story of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals is one of a valuable program with broad public support that is undermined by dysfunctional politics.

Study after study has shown DACA, which allows certain young immigrants to avoid deportation temporarily and receive renewable work permits, is beneficial not just for those in the program, but the country at large.

Think tanks ranging from the liberal Center for American Progress to the libertarian Cato Institute estimate the end of DACA would cost the U.S. hundreds of billions of dollars in lost economic activity and taxes over the next decade.

“The repeal of DACA will place an extreme hardship and burden on U.S. businesses, on local communities and on the American economy,” according to a [statement](#) from Democrats on the Senate Joint Economic Committee.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce also has been a strong supporter of DACA, perhaps even more so with the current labor shortage. More than a dozen Republican political donors recently sent a [letter](#) warning GOP congressional leaders the loss of DACA employees could further fuel inflation.

More important is the large-scale disruption of lives, which would be hard to fathom. With the program continually on the brink of being shut down, hundreds of thousands of people are threatened with being thrown out of the country they have lived in since they were kids.

To [qualify](#) for protection under DACA, young immigrants who were brought into the country illegally as children had to be attending high school, already have a diploma or Graduate Equivalency Degree, or have served in the military. They could have no felony or significant misdemeanor convictions.

The 10th anniversary of President Barak Obama signing an executive order on June 15, 2012 to establish DACA brought plenty of assessments — along with reminders that its fate once again is in the hands of a federal court. The legal battle centers on whether congressional action is needed instead to create the program.

On July 6, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit is scheduled to hear arguments on the Biden administration's appeal of a lower court decision rescinding DACA. A ruling is expected in the fall that likely will be appealed to the Supreme Court.

Last year, a federal district court judge in Texas ruled that DACA is illegal and ordered the Biden administration to stop granting new applications, though that didn't affect current recipients with two-year work permits that can be renewed.

DACA may be 10 years old, but the unresolved immigration issue has been around for more than two decades. Obama took action because legislation to give Dreamers legal status had stalled since 2001.

Some 830,000 DACA applications have been approved over since 2012, though around 600,000 people remain in the program.

Beyond the individual and societal good DACA has done, polls indicate the program is popular across the political spectrum. Surveys showed strong support among Democrats and independents. Support is weaker among Republicans, though a majority still supported the program.

Even a majority of supporters of Donald Trump wanted to protect DACA recipients from deportation, according to a Politico/Morning Consult [poll](#) in 2020. Keep in mind that Trump demagogued undocumented immigrants as a candidate and president.

For years, there appeared to be enough bipartisan support in Congress to give some form of permanent legal status to DACA recipients. Trump, whose effort to end DACA was blocked by the Supreme Court, at times talked about supporting a deal to save DACA.

That went nowhere, even though Republicans had full control of Congress during his first two years in office. There was no progress after Democrats won a House majority in the 2018 election.

Along the way some peculiar dynamics emerged.

At one point, there were discussions about Democrats backing off opposition to Trump's border wall project in exchange for a DACA deal. That fell apart in March 2018. Some Democrats could not accept the wall under any circumstances and it was never clear whether there was enough Republican support for the deal.

A month earlier, former Mexico President Vicente Fox made a surprise plea for the U.S. to fix DACA once and for all. In a video, Fox talked about the importance of DACA recipients, many of whom were born in Mexico.

"I mean, imagine kids with a university degree with the knowledge that very few have. With the capacity and the skills they have developed in themselves," he said.

"We would love to have them in Mexico, but we respect their will to be . . . in the United States. We respect that they love their families and they want to stay."

The political reality has been that Democrats and Republicans often want more than just a straight-up DACA bill that the other side wouldn't accept.

Further, there's a core of Republican voters that won't support giving legal status to any undocumented immigrants, and members of GOP members of Congress either agree with them or are wary of crossing them.

Meanwhile, Democrats still have trouble getting on the same page, even with control of the White House and slim majorities in both houses of Congress.

On President Joe Biden's first day in office he proposed a comprehensive bill to overhaul the immigration system, including a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country along with a DACA deal.

But the president and immigration advocates eventually considering taking a piecemeal approach, seeing that sweeping legislation was stalling as it had for decades.

The split in strategy was symbolized by how California's two Democratic U.S. senators commemorated DACA's anniversary last week. Sen. Dianne Feinstein called for "comprehensive immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients." Sen. Alex Padilla continues to back a comprehensive overhaul, but argued for narrowly focused legislation to provide "permanent protections, pathway to citizenship for Dreamers."

In March 2021, the Democratic-controlled House passed a measure creating a path to citizenship for Dreamers that was supported by nine Republicans. Its prospects of getting past a Republican filibuster in the Senate have always been grim.

“Congress has had a decade to solve this issue, and it defies reason that they have not found a way forward,” Neil Bradley, chief policy officer for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, told The New York Times.

A reasonable Congress would be nice to have.