



Heritage Claims Immigration Reform Will Cost \$6.3 Trillion, Sparking Conservative Civil War

By: Benjy Sarlin – May 6, 2013

The conservative Heritage Foundation is launching a new campaign to sink immigration reform by claiming it will explode the deficit thanks to increased social services for undocumented immigrants.

On Monday, the think tank debuted a new study by Robert Rector and Jason Richwine claiming the bill would cost \$6.3 trillion over the lifetime of the 11 million undocumented immigrants who could potentially gain legal status through bipartisan legislation under consideration in the Senate.

“We contend ... that amnesty is unfair to those who come here lawfully and those who are waiting, it will cost the American taxpayer trillions of dollars over the next several decades, and it will make our immigration problems worse,” Heritage president Jim DeMint said at a press conference debuting the study.

The core of the study is its claim that undocumented immigrants, because they are disproportionately less educated and wealthy, will prove a net drain on various benefits aimed at combatting poverty.

“The question is, fiscally, whether they pay more in taxes than they take in in benefits,” Rector said. “College education immigrations do that, other immigrants do not.”

The Senate bill bars newly legalized immigrants from receiving any federal benefits unless they obtain a green card and citizenship, which for most of the affected population would not be possible for at least thirteen years. Heritage said its report took this into account and mostly emphasized spending that would accrue after the first decade of the bill.

Members of the Senate “Gang of Eight” behind the bill and right-leaning groups supportive of reform have been preemptively pushing back against Heritage’s report for weeks now, afraid that it might breathe new life into a restrictionist movement that’s been mostly quiet this year.

Within hours of Monday’s press conference, the Bipartisan Policy Center’s immigration group, which includes former Mississippi governor Haley Barbour (R) and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, condemned Heritage’s report as “fundamentally flawed.”

“Newly legalized immigrants would further expand the economy and our tax base, particularly after earning full access to the institutions that helped make America the

world's greatest mobilizer of human potential," the group's members, who have yet to release their own immigration proposal, said in a statement.

The conservative American Action Forum last month released a report by former CBO director Douglas Holtz-Eakin claiming that a comprehensive immigration overhaul would reduce the deficit by \$2.5 trillion thanks to increased economic growth. The libertarian CATO Institute also published a lengthy critique of Rector's 2007 methodology, claiming it "produced a grossly exaggerated cost to federal taxpayers of legalizing unauthorized immigrants while undercounting or discounting their positive tax and economic contributions."

Critics also noted that Heritage released a background report in 2006 by Tim Kane and Kirk A. Johnson that asserted "[t]he argument that immigrants harm the American economy should be dismissed out of hand," including low-skilled migrant workers identified as a massive drain by Rector. Derrick Morgan, Heritage's vice president for domestic and economic policy, told reporters Monday that its findings came "during a time of boom" and should be reconsidered in light of the 2008 financial collapse.

The gaping chasm between Heritage's findings and those of other right-leaning experts reflects how much immigration has divided conservatives who are typically on the same side of fiscal issues. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), for example, has a long relationship with DeMint and recorded a video introduction to Heritage's Spanish-language site just last year. But these days he's posting debunkers of their findings on his website and criticizing their methodology in TV interviews.

Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ), another of sponsor of the "Gang of Eight" bill, bookended Monday's press conference on Twitter.

The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office concluded a 2007 immigration reform bill similar to current proposals would have a minimal impact on the deficit and senators working on the latest effort say they'll work to achieve a similar CBO score this time around as well.