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The Morning Plum: How conservatives will try to kill immigration reform

By: Greg Sargent - April 29, 2013

Leading Republican officials who are advocating for real immigration reform are now all in. There's no more hedging from the likes of Marco Rubio. The sense is unmistakable that there's no going back. And with Members of Congress on recess this week, conservative foes of reform are gearing up for their last stand.

With the Senate's "Gang of Eight" compromise introduced, Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee have already signaled that they will introduce immigration reform in pieces. The ostensible purpose of this legislative strategy is to move slowly, to make it easier to eventually win over House conservatives and get them to back a path to citizenship. But it remains unclear how citizenship would figure into that piecemeal approach, or why moving reform pieces would make it any more likely that those opposed to citizenship would come around to it. Indeed, the strategy may be designed to scuttle reform, rather than make it more likely. The Post editorial board explains the real game plan:

That strategy gives conservatives a chance to say they were for immigration reform before they were against it. They may vote for bills that would tighten border security, provide a steady source of migrant farm workers and expand a program that companies may use to verify the immigration status of employees. Then, decrying "amnesty," they can shoot down measures that would extend legal status and eventual citizenship to most of the undocumented.

As the editorial puts it, "opponents of reform are banking on derailing the measure with a strategy of delay and dismemberment."

And that's why I continue to believe comments from John McCain last week were so important. McCain flatly stated that immigration reform without any path to citizenship is a non-starter. "There's no way of getting this job done without giving people a path to citizenship," he said, adding that the sub-citizenship legal status favored by some Republicans "offends fundamental principles of fairness in our society."

In other words, this is all on House Republicans. They can hatch all the legislative trickery they want, but if reform fails, it will be for one simple reason: House Republicans were unable to embrace citizenship. Nothing short of citizenship will do. And by the way, there is no political outcome that could be worse for the GOP — and its efforts to begin repairing relations with Latinos — than having far right Republicans in the House kill immigration reform.

Here's another thing to watch: will the effort on the right to scuttle reform really prove as fearsome as advertised? We keep hearing about armies of talk radio hosts whipping

listeners into a frenzy. But it wouldn't be surprising if leading commentators on the right pay lip service to opposition to reform while quietly accepting that it needs to happen. After all, those commentators are well aware of demographic realities. And establishment GOP figures are mounting intense pressure on lawmakers to make reform happen, for the long term good of the party. Many GOP officials plainly want reform to happen, and ultimately, this may be what really matters. So keep an eye on how deep opposition runs. It could end up proving shallower than expected. Which would bode well for the prospects of reform.

* No, Obamacare implementation will not be a "train wreck": Jonathan Cohn has a must read bringing some sobriety and balance to a discussion that's been badly marred by hyperbolic predictions (and in some cases, outright hopes) that Obamacare's implementation is guaranteed to be a policy and political disaster. As Cohn notes, the problems Obamacare is designed to solve were decades in the making; even if implementation is more problematic than we'd like, it will still mean untold numbers will have insurance who didn't have it — or couldn't get it — before. Major reforms have historically been difficult to implement, and have required revision and adjustment, as they slowly got woven into the fabric of American life. Read the whole thing.

* Anti-tax conservatives losing another battle: The absolutist anti-tax brigade is finding itself in the midst of another losing battle, as some Congressional Republicans are embracing a new proposal that would require internet retailers to collect sales taxes. These Republicans are responding to retailers in their states who are decrying unfair competition. This quote is interesting:
"I have a lot of constituents saying to me, 'Grover Norquist did not elect you,' " said Representative Steve Womack, Republican of Arkansas and the author of the Internet tax bill in the House. "Members that come to Washington and kowtow to special interests end up contributing to this very polarized government. These are tough decisions we have to make up here."

Norquist didn't elect House Republicans? Good to know! *Now* we're making progress.

* Democrats recruiting "pro gun" candidates": The Hill reports that national Dems are quietly coalescing behind red state Dem Senate candidates who are expected to oppose the Manchin-Toomey background check compromise, such as Brian Schweitzer in Montana and Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin in South Dakota.

Schweitzer has said he favors background checks but has not said whether he'd support the proposal to expand them. Since liberal groups are also getting behind Schweitzer partly over his support for single payer, it's worth nailing down his position on Manchin-Toomey.

* Large majority wanted Manchin-Toomey to pass: A new Gallup poll finds that 65 percent of Americans, including 64 percent of independents and even 45 percent of Republicans, wanted expanded background checks to pass. Only 29 percent of Americans didn't.

Key finding: The main motivator of those opposed to the bill was the idea that *people have a right to own guns*, while only a tiny number cite privacy fears claimed by the

bill's leading opponents. Of course, Manchin-Toomey would not infringe on the gun rights of the law abiding in any way. Misinformation wins!

* The libertarian case for expanding background checks: Robert Levy of the Cato Institute, who helped institute the process overturning D.C.'s handgun ban, has a good piece telling fellow libertarians that they should be able to accept Manchin-Toomey, albeit with a few tweaks. The general goal of expanding background checks while taking care to safeguard the rights of law abiding gun owners is, by any measure, a reasonable middle ground position.

Indeed, while Levy says the bill could still do more in this department, this gun rights libertarian notes that it *strengthens* protections against the threats to liberty opponents of the bill say they fear.

* Maybe it's time to do something about unemployment: Paul Krugman again takes apart the bogus idea that government must tighten its belt in lean economic times, just as families do, and gives a refresher course on what caused the economic crisis and how government spending is the only way out of it.

I would only add that Obama, too, was complicit early on in the government-must-tighten-its-belt rhetoric, though he has of late been talking about jobs and making the push for more stimulus. We could use still more of that.

* The sequester is bad for the economy, remember? E.J. Dionne connects the failure of D.C. elites to do anything about unemployment to Congress' amazing speed in addressing the harm the sequester has done in the arena of flight delays:

It's outrageous that Congress and the administration are moving quickly to reduce the inconvenience to travelers — people fortunate enough to be able to buy plane tickets — by easing cuts in air traffic control while leaving the rest of the sequester in place. What about the harm being done to the economy as a whole? What about the sequester's injuries to those who face lower unemployment benefits, who need Meals on Wheels or who attend Head Start programs?

Instead, we should be using this period of low interest rates to invest in our infrastructure. This would help relieve unemployment while laying a foundation for long-term growth. But anti-government slogans trump smart-government policies. For reasons rooted in both ideology and the system's bias against the less privileged, we hear nothing but "deficits, deficits, deficits" and "cuts, cuts, cuts."

* And Obama gave CIA what it wanted on drones: Steve Coll has an excellent review of two new books about Obama's war on terror, one by Times reporter Mark Mazzetti, that paints a chilling picture of a government program that hands out death sentences with no accountability or public discussion. This is key:

In Mazzetti's telling, C.I.A. leaders repeatedly pushed Obama for more expansive authority to use armed drones. They got their way in almost every instance.

The Obama administration is expected to respond soon to calls for more accountability and transparency. The sooner the better.

What else?