

WORLD

Tangling with immigration

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IMMIGRATION | Current proposals offer long-term changes rather than solutions to the border crisis

Pictures of migrant teens huddled on floor mats under foil blankets in U.S. immigration detention flooded the internet this week. Americans—especially those in border states—want immediate and decisive action to alleviate the crisis, but congressional efforts up to this point have focused on targeted, incremental immigration reforms.

On March 18, the House of Representatives passed two immigration bills with limited bipartisan support. [The American Dream and Promise Act](#) would help immigrants brought to the United States illegally as children, also known as “Dreamers.” The other bill, the [Farm Workforce Modernization Act](#), deals with illegal immigrants working in the agricultural sector. Both face stiff odds in the U.S. Senate, where garnering the 10 Republican votes needed to advance the bills seems unlikely, in part because of the ongoing migrant surge.

“These bills really aren’t talking about the border crisis, but they do have some indirect effects that will mostly be positive on what’s happening at the border,” said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst with the Cato Institute.

The American Dream and Promise Act would allow about 2.5 million Dreamers to gradually earn lawful permanent residency and, eventually, citizenship. It also would create a path to citizenship for people who hold temporary protected immigration status. Nine Republicans voted in favor of the bill.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act would give immigrant farmworkers a way to earn temporary legal status. A [2018 report](#) from the Pew Research Center estimated that 325,000 agricultural workers were in the country illegally. By working eight years consecutively in the agricultural sector, farmworkers could qualify for permanent residency under the bill. It would also protect their families from deportation. Thirty Republicans voted for it.

Bier explained that the two bills could decrease some of the border woes for relatives of farmworkers or Dreamers, who, once legalized, could apply for visas for their spouses, children, or parents in another country.

“It’s not going to have an immediate effect, it’s not going to be a total solution, but it would help,” Bier said. “By opening up eligibility, you’re creating a whole new pathway for people to apply to come to the country legally. The reason they’re crossing illegally is because there isn’t that pathway.”

Bier noted that, partly because of the pandemic, most of President Donald Trump’s border policies are still in place. He said claims of an open border are a gross exaggeration: “[They’re] still shoving as many people as they can back in Mexico. ... In terms of policy, we’re still very much in the 2020 universe.”

Still, President Joe Biden's promise to undo the strict immigration protocols that Trump enacted is drawing migrants to the southern border even if the new administration has yet to follow through.

"Expectations were created that with the government of President Biden there would be a better treatment of migrants," Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said at a recent news conference. "And this has caused Central American migrants, and also from our country, wanting to cross the border thinking that it is easier to do so."

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said at a House committee hearing last week that the United States was "on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years." He said the United States continues to turn back most single adults and families who come to points of entry, though border agents are allowing in unaccompanied minors, about 15,000 of whom are being held in temporary or emergency shelters staffed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection or the Department of Health and Human Services.

Mayorkas blamed the root causes of poverty and widespread violence and corruption in Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—for driving the surge in migration. "This is not new. We have experienced migration surges before in 2019, 2014, and before then, as well," he said.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., one of the supporters of a bipartisan immigration overhaul attempt in 2013 that ultimately failed, introduced a bill on Wednesday that focuses on border security. At a news conference, he said he worried any attempt to legalize Dreamers at this point would cause "a run on our border like you've never seen before." He told Politico he's "not in support of legalizing one person until you're in control of the border."

On the House side, freshman Rep. María Elvira Salazar, R-Fla., proposed a bill that would allot additional funding to securing the border and give Dreamers immediate legal status. Her bill would also establish a gradual path to citizenship for illegal immigrants who can pass a criminal background check, provide proof of employment, and pay five years' worth of income taxes. She also voted for the House bills.

"No political party holds a monopoly on compassion in our country," Salazar said. "We Republicans, we're compassionate too. We want to give dignity to those who have lived here among us for years and to those who want to come into this country—but they have to follow the law."

Ali Noorani, president of the National Immigration Forum, said that absent bipartisan action from lawmakers, Biden's next steps will likely involve reversing more than 1,000 changes to the immigration system Trump made through various federal agencies. Noorani pinpointed increasing the cap of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States as low-hanging fruit. But those changes would not address long-standing issues with legal immigration.

"If we're going to have a border that can be managed, we need to have a functioning legal immigration system," Noorani said.

Travis Wussow, vice president for public policy at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, told WORLD he believes evangelicals want compromise on the issue.

“Our immigration system is broken and has been for years. A solution that both welcomes immigrants and keeps our nation secure is achievable, but only if leaders from both parties will come together,” Wussow said. “Evangelicals, like all Americans, are exhausted from the endless political drama in our nation’s capital. An agreement on this front would be a welcome respite from that turmoil.”