

Immigration Reform: Obama's Big Stick

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Obama's plan could include green cards to undocumented immigrants whose children are already citizens.

Fresh from a historic wave of Election Day victories that left the GOP in power in both the U.S. House and Senate, Congressional Republicans were set back on their heels Nov. 13, when administration sources revealed that President Barack Obama may seek executive action to implement sweeping immigration reform that could protect upwards of 5 million undocumented immigrants from deportation and broaden the availability of work permits.

The news prompted howls of opposition from House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) and incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), and spurred threats of a government shutdown from hardline conservative lawmakers led by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas). [Quoted by *The New York Times*, Boehner said](#) House Republicans would "fight the president tooth and nail" should he embark on a unilateral overhaul of the country's immigration enforcement policies.

Obama may announce his plan as early as this week, which is reported to include granting green cards to undocumented immigrants whose children are naturalized citizens or legal residents, as well as protecting parents here illegally from deportation. Further, the president's plan may include granting protections to longtime undocumented workers in the agriculture industry, as well as those who came to the country as children.

Though compared to the amnesty measure passed in 1986--Obama's plan would actually almost double the number of people protected under the previous legislation--the *Times* reports this new overhaul "will not provide any formal, lasting immigration status, much less a pathway to citizenship." For immigrants in the country legally, new opportunities will be made available for those with high-tech skills. United States-Mexico border security will see increased investment and enforcement agents will be redirected away from "low priority" immigrants "with strong family ties and no serious criminal history," according to the *Times*.

So-called amnesty for illegal immigrants prompted protest around Idaho, with the conservative group Overpasses for America staging demonstrations in Twin Falls and North Idaho this summer.

The protests came amid news in July that more than 57,000 children from Central America had crossed illegally into the U.S. since October 2013. Though only a handful of those children were reportedly living in Idaho, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter sent a letter to officials with U.S. Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services urging them not to send more children to the state.

"It should be understood that the State of Idaho and its subdivisions will not be actively involved in addressing the humanitarian crisis the federal government has created," Otter wrote. "The Obama administration seems to have entirely disregarded the impact of its failures on states and taxpayer resources."

In July and August, the Idaho branch of Overpasses for America picketed in the Coeur d'Alene area at the I.B. Perrin Memorial Bridge outside Twin Falls.

"Obama wants a blanket amnesty for illegal immigrants," protester Dennis Frisby told the Twin Falls *Times-News*. "This country is as close to an economic collapse as we've ever been. We just can't support 20 million illegal immigrants."

For [Brent Olmstead, executive director for Milk Producers of Idaho](#), the issue is not so clear cut. "There are undocumented people in Idaho that have been here for 20 years; they have kids who have grown up and gone to college. I'd hate to see them deported," he told *Boise Weekly*.

According to a July 2013 report from the Immigration Policy Center of the American Immigration Council, 6 percent of Idaho's population is foreign-born. Citing numbers from a 2010 Pew Hispanic Center study, about 2.2 percent of immigrants--or 35,000 people--are living in Idaho illegally.

As a representative of Idaho's \$2 billion milk industry--ranked third in the nation--Olmstead said those immigrants, illegal or not, are vital to the state's economy. While he added there should be "no shortcut to becoming a citizen," Olmstead said Idaho has nothing to lose from policies that allow those undocumented immigrants to come forward, pay a fine, pay back taxes and work legally on renewable five-year permits.

"Right now in the Magic Valley there are proposals out there for new dairies, but we don't have the work force--there are permits for another 30,000-40,000 head of cows, but there's nobody to milk the cows or work the dairies," he said. "The whole country is suffering. The Cato Institute has done studies... they all come to the same conclusion: Immigration is good for the economy."

[The Immigration Policy Center](#) reported that foreign-born and native-born Latinos and Asians in Idaho command \$4.1 billion in consumer purchasing power and own businesses with sales and receipts topping \$900 million.

"Idaho can ill-afford to alienate such an important component of its labor force, tax base and business community," the report stated.

Whether the president's use of executive action helps or hinders lasting immigration reform remains to be seen. Olmstead fears that this push is another play in a longstanding game of "political football," and that "the president is playing a pretty dangerous game in Congress. If he acts quickly, he's not giving Congress the chance to do something. He'd be better served by saying, 'I want to see a bill on this by February.'"

"I would rather see Congress act than the president act unilaterally," Olmstead added. "I don't know if this is a poker game between Boehner and the president; who's going to call whose bluff, or if they're bluffing at all."

Arizona Congressman Matt Salmon upped the ante on Nov. 13, when he drafted a letter signed by 61 fellow Republican House members calling on the House Appropriations Committee to withhold any funding for implementation of immigration reform measures authorized by executive action.

The House is currently working on a Dec. 12 deadline to craft appropriations legislation funding the government.

"[T]he Congress has the power of the purse and should use it as a tool to prevent the President from implementing policies that are contrary to our laws and the desire of the American people," the letter states.

Idaho Republican Congressman Raul Labrador, who has made immigration reform a key plank in his platform, was not among the signatories of Salmon's letter. Labrador was not available for comment before press time, but his website emphasizes a border-security-first approach and support for "modernizing" guest worker programs.

If Obama insists on going it alone, Labrador states, the president will derail substantive action on the issue.

"The President can buy a lot of goodwill this year by working with Congress to enforce the laws already on the books and--if he does that--we can tackle immigration reform in early 2015 when we'll be in a better position to negotiate and get real results for the American people."