

The Dallas Morning News

Now that they control Congress, Republicans must take charge on immigration

By Ali Noorani
13 November 2014

Now that the GOP controls both chambers, it gets to pass legislation, and no other issue provides a combined economic, social and political payoff for Republicans like immigration — if they play their cards right.

Left to their own devices, Republicans will respond to the Obama administration's pending action on immigration with a sound and fury that ignores the interests of law enforcement, growers, builders and technology leaders.

More important, an angry Republican response sends young and minority voters into the arms of Democrats who are competing for the presidency and aiming to take back the Senate. True, administrative action is not ideal, but after Congress was unable to get immigration legislation to the president's desk in 2014, it is a temporary way to protect families and bring predictability to our economy and labor force.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker John Boehner have a choice. They can hand the microphone to Steve King and Ted Cruz and allow them to be the Republican face of immigration reform. Or Republican leadership can use administrative action as a golden opportunity to offer clear vision and process to be put in motion on the first day of the 114th Congress.

If done correctly, Republicans can claim credit for permanently replacing our broken immigration system. If not, Republicans may get credit only for separating families and further destabilizing the workforce, fulfilling the demographic doomsday outlined by pundits on the left and right.

Claiming the president poisoned the well by taking administrative action just won't cut it. That well hasn't held water for decades — and both parties share responsibility for that.

Reaching a compromise will require Republican leadership to provide a principled, pragmatic approach to policymaking. And it will require Democrats to negotiate.

On the bright side, the current contours of the immigration debate fit easily into an approach where both parties have much to gain.

For example, just two weeks ago, nearly 200 leaders on the cutting edge of social and economic change [came together in Washington](#) to talk about the short- and long-term value of immigrants to our communities. From conservative tax reformers to Southern Baptist pastors to military veterans, they emphasized that for America to thrive, new Americans must have the opportunities, skills and status to reach their fullest potential.

The economic need for reform is simple. With an economy still unsteady on its feet, reform would result in at least \$1.5 trillion in GDP growth over 10 years, according to the [Cato Institute](#).

A modern immigration system also would strengthen family values — starting with reinforcing, rather than threatening, family unity.

Finally, albeit paradoxically, the politics of moving forward with reform are both awfully difficult and a no-brainer.

In the House, Republicans have gained seats with candidates on the far-right end of the spectrum. These new members of Congress will be loath to endorse bipartisan legislation, and their trust in a Republican-controlled Senate may be no greater than in a Democrat-controlled Senate.

Looking ahead to 2016, the GOP will have to defend 24 Senate seats, including seven in states Obama won twice. With newly elected establishment candidates, McConnell's path to retaining the majority might very well flow through an immigration compromise with Democrats.

That's the difficult part.

But immigration reform should be a no-brainer because it's more than just good politics. Americans recognize that immigrants are changing the face of the country in positive ways.

For the next two years, eyes will be on the Republican majorities in the House and the Senate. They can keep immigrants and immigration stuck in the political mire that has defined this issue and held us back. Or they can pick up the torch and carry all of us forward to a brighter, more prosperous future.