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President's executive order on immigration is better than nothing

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President Obama's announcement that he would act unilaterally to implement immigration policies through executive action sent ripples through the political world. His action could provide an estimated 5 million undocumented workers work visas that protect them from deportation. While use of executive powers is nothing new -- presidents Eisenhower, Reagan and the elder Bush all addressed immigration issues through executive powers -- the scope of influence is, affecting as it does so many people here in the U.S.

"The magnitude and the formality of it is arguably unprecedented," said Peter J. Spiro, a Temple University law professor, quoted in The New York Times. "It's fair to say that we have never seen anything quite like this before in terms of the scale."

Despite the constitutional questions raised by the action, something audacious was needed to move the stuck needle.

This executive action should spur to Republicans, who now hold majorities in both chambers, to act. Obama has handed GOP a chance to prove they can govern, build consensus and create meaningful, long-term reform legislation. Congress has been worse than useless, all the while screaming about illegal immigration, but refusing to act on sensible reforms. Republicans, finally, are talking about a bill. And it's about time.

The GOP's role is no longer the noble opposition. The question becomes: What are you for? There have been some sensible proposals already, such as one passed by the Senate in 2013, an 837-page bill that left the Judiciary Committee with bipartisan approval. Even that was an imperfect approach -- but it was something.

It's also not enough to continue the "ship 'em all home" rhetoric that plays so well with the base. Deportation is an impossible goal. The dollar cost for a program to send home the estimated 11 million people here without documentation would be in the billions. If the GOP is willing to appropriate that money -- \$200 billion over five years, according to 2010 projections calculated by the Center for American Progress -- we say have at it. That figure isn't adjusted for inflation, by the way. And if you don't trust a liberal-leaning think tank with the math, how about the libertarian Cato Institute, which projects a \$250 billion-a-year economic hit from a mass deportation policy?

The sweeping label of "criminal" is a simple, blunt and profoundly flawed characterization of many undocumented workers who have established themselves, pay taxes and have families, and

in many ways -- other than a slip of paper granting them citizenship -- are indistinguishable from those born and raised in America's diversity.

At least this executive action finally prioritizes which undocumented workers are targeted for overstretched immigration enforcement agencies in a way that is humane -- undocumented residents who have lived here five or more years, pay taxes, with no criminal record and children born here are exempted. But at best it's temporary and easily overturned by the next president, and addresses a fraction of the greater problem.

As we've said numerous times before, doing nothing is not an option. As unpleasant as this unilateral action by the president is, it is better than the status quo and better than nothing, and if Congress has a better idea, now is the time to present it.