

Boston Herald

Advocates should promote citizenship for illegal immigrants

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The political fracas over illegal immigrants filling out the national census brings to light a thorny dilemma concerning the undocumented. While the Constitution does call for non-residents to be counted for apportionment as well as population purposes in the census, undocumented immigrants are in the country illegally. So one is calling upon the very laws they are flouting for protection.

The focus of the ire is on President Trump, who on Tuesday directed his administration to exclude immigrants who are in the United States illegally when calculating how many seats in Congress each state gets after the current census. According to the White House, census workers would continue counting such illegal immigrants, but they would not be factored into decisions about congressional representation.

Boston as well as local immigration advocates pushed back, advising people to ignore the president and fill out the national count anyway.

“Ignore the partisan political stunt,” said Mira Coalition immigration activist Eva Millona, chair of the Statewide Complete Count Committee in Massachusetts for the 2020 U.S. Census. “It’s another partisan political stand that’s being used by the administration. ... It’s to intimidate these mixed status households.”

But it does beg the question: Should those who are in the country unlawfully be allowed the same representation as those who play by the rules?

When the Constitution was drafted, and the first census recorded, the country was far different than it is today. The first census recorded on Aug. 2, 1790, put the United States population at 3,929,214. While the exact number of illegal immigrants is hard to come by, the Brookings Institute places estimates at 10.5 million to 12 million, out of a total population of about 328 million.

In general, adults who are in the country unlawfully are not eligible for federal benefits, though lawmakers and advocates are doing their best to give illegal immigrants the same perks as those who play by the rules.

At this stage, the name of the game shouldn’t be papering over illegal status with benefits that do little to empower people to fully attain the American Dream, it should be working toward helping people achieve citizenship or permanent legal resident status.

There has been legislation recently to address citizenship, including a bill last year that would legalize up to about 325,000 immigrants currently working in agriculture who do not have legal status. Two million would be legalized under the “Dream and Promise Act.”

There are other ideas for helping currently illegal immigrants attain citizenship — the Cato Institute proposed a few that Congress should definitely consider.

For example: Immigrants could be legalized through a tiered system, where they could choose to either be legalized quickly and inexpensively without the ability to become a citizen in the future, or begin a longer pricier path toward full citizenship.

There could also be rolling legalization, in which long-term illegal immigrants could legalize their status on an ongoing basis without an application cutoff date. And Cato also proposed slowing chain immigration by limiting legalized immigrants’ ability to sponsor family members from overseas for lawful permanent residency or green cards.

Without examining ideas and legislative action to help illegal immigrants become permanent residents or citizens, we will be having the discussions about piecemeal benefits, perks and representation for years to come.