



Immigration Reform Could Mean National ID Card for All Workers

New America Media, News Analysis, Marcelo Ballvé, Posted: Apr 26, 2010 [NT Review it on NewsTrust](#)

A national identification card of any sort has long been thought politically unfeasible in Washington, D.C.

But the idea is again receiving attention as part of an immigration reform plan gaining ground on Capitol Hill.

In 1981, a Reagan-era Cabinet meeting famously took up the idea of a national ID, according to the 1990 book, *Revolution: the Reagan Legacy*, by former domestic policy adviser Martin Anderson.

In that meeting, Secretary of the Interior James Watt fulminated against a national ID as "the mark of the beast," a biblical phrase alluding to Satan.

Reagan quashed the plan with the sarcastic comment that perhaps newborns should be branded with an ID number.

Watt's remark and Reagan's acid jest reveal the deep-rooted resistance to national identification in the American political culture.

Enemies on both the right and left will greet any new ID scheme as evidence of an incipient totalitarianism.

Nonetheless, a national ID proposal of one form or another has returned with cyclical regularity. Most notably, this occurred in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, when security concerns momentarily gave a national ID some traction, thought not enough to turn it into reality.

Even a 2005 "Real ID" law that required states to comply with federal standards for driver's licenses has resulted in scant compliance due to states' concerns over federal meddling and privacy issues.

But now the quest for immigration reform has resuscitated national identification, in a plan put forward last month by Sens. Charles Schumer and Lindsey Graham.

Their national ID would be a card held by all authorized American workers (residents, visa-holders, and citizens) to prove their eligibility and would contain a "biometric" identifier such as fingerprints or a scan of the vein pattern on the back of people's hands.

"Each card's unique biometric identifier would be stored only on the card; no government database would house everyone's information," the senators wrote in a March 19 Washington Post op-ed. "The cards would not contain any private information, medical information, nor tracking devices."

On Friday, President Obama renewed his call for Congress to act on immigration reform this year.

The president said that the absence of legislation creates a vacuum that would lead to more counter-productive state and local initiatives like an Arizona law making lack of proper immigration status a crime under state law.

The measure was signed into law by Gov. Jan Brewer the same day.

Despite its unclear prospects, the immigration reform framework put forward by Sens. Graham and Schumer is the only concrete proposal making rounds in Congress. If the two powerful senators have it their way, immigration reform would hinge on a national worker's ID and vice-versa.

The ID card they've proposed is an attempt to address the most complicated question that bedevils legislators whenever they try to piece together immigration overhauls—how to prevent future illegal immigration.

If some sort of legal relief is to be given to undocumented immigrants presently in the country as the Schumer-Graham plan does, opponents ask, how will other foreigners be discouraged from entering the country illegally in search of jobs?

Historically, undocumented immigrants have found it relatively simple to purchase stolen social security numbers on the black market in order to apply for U.S. jobs.

The national ID card “tries to plug a gap that has always existed with employer verification ... the use of other peoples identity documents,” says Donald M. Kerwin, Jr., vice president of programs at the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute.

Sen. Graham, a South Carolina Republican, has tried to play down suggestions that this national worker's ID presents a major shift in how Americans are identified and tracked by the federal government.

In comments to The Wall Street Journal, Sen. Graham said these ID cards would merely be a “tamper-proof” version of Social Security cards.

“We've all got Social Security cards,” he was quoted as saying. “They're just easily tampered with. Make them tamper-proof. That's all I'm saying.”

The libertarian think tank Cato Institute took issue with Graham's characterization.

“No, Senator, that's not all you're saying,” wrote Cato's Jim Harper at the institute's blog. “You're saying that native-born American citizens should be herded into Social Security Administration offices by the millions so they can have their biometrics collected in federal government databases.”

Harper believes a national worker ID would put the country on a slippery slope to a sprawling mandatory identification system overseen by a federal bureaucracy.

Eventually, Harper contends, the ID card would need to be presented for virtually any transaction, including traveling, applying for a job, or going to the doctor. Harper urged Graham and Schumer to jettison their “big government” ID plan from their immigration reform blueprint.

The American Civil Liberties Union has also taken a strong stance against the proposed ID.

In congressional testimony last year, the ACLU's Christopher Calabrese said a national ID, besides being hugely expensive to implement, would trample Americans' right to privacy and freedom to seek work without government imposing a filter.

“A person's ability to participate in a fundamental aspect of American life – the right to work – would become contingent upon government approval,” Calabrese said.

And Calabrese has reaffirmed the ACLU's opposition to a national ID in the wake of the Schumer-Graham proposal.

Despite libertarians' opposition, a national ID of one form or another has in the past drawn support from prominent voices across ideological divides, although elected officials are typically loathe to publicly admit support of because of the political risks.

More secure identification was one core recommendation of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission Report issued in 2004. Prominent Republicans, such as Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney have said they support a national ID for foreigners (similar to a system now in place in Britain).

Philip Bobbit, law professor and leading counter-terrorism expert at Columbia University who has worked with Democratic and Republican administrations, has often argued that Americans' fixation on privacy and suspicion of government needs to be revised in the post-Sept. 11, 2001 era.

He sees a strong national ID card law— perhaps incorporating biometrics and uniform templates into state driver's licenses— as integral to homeland security.

In other parts of the world, national ID cards aren't considered too much of a nuisance or threat. They are widely used in Latin America. India, the world's largest democracy, recently began a mammoth Census effort in which an estimated 1.2 billion people will be registered via biometric information and eventually issued individual identity cards.

Whatever the fate of the Schumer-Graham proposal, it already has given the idea of a national ID another airing. Americans will need to decide whether it is indeed the "mark of the beast" or an inevitability of the new need for high-tech controls at workplaces and airports.

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