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The National ID: Would It Solve the Illegal Immigration Problem?

Like   By [Julissa Treviño](#) 4/23/10 4:02 PM

In short: no, it wouldn't, according to Chris Calabrese, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, and Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning research foundation.

No one is going to be excited by a proposal that involves "finger printing the entire U.S. working population," said Calabrese at a Cato Institute Capitol Hill briefing today. The proposed regulations are "costly, they're ineffective, they're bureaucratic. They'll start with immigrants, but they're a tool for social control."

What Calabrese is referring to is a proposal for a national biometric ID card, laid out by Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) in a [Washington Post op-ed](#) in mid-March as part of the comprehensive immigration reform bill they're drafting. The two senators essentially plan on requiring "all U.S. citizens and legal immigrants who want jobs to obtain a high-tech, fraud-proof Social Security

card," they wrote.

But according to Calabrese and Harper, the nationally uniform ID would create a long list of problems — and it wouldn't help solve the problem of illegal immigration.

Perhaps the most significant issue Calabrese addressed is that the problem targeted by the proposal won't be affected at all. The card would require all U.S. citizens and permanent residents to get a card, but illegal immigrants who already ignore current laws can still just ignore the national ID. "You're saying, 'Let's pass a law to target people who are already ignoring the existing law,'" Calabrese said. Employers could still hire people who do not have a card or have a falsified card, or they could simply pay their workers under the table.

This isn't just an immigration issue, Harper noted. "We're talking about native-born Americans" who would be affected by this.

Harper and Calabrese addressed some of the issues with the national ID:

- Anyone could still present false documents, either by creating a manufactured identity or stealing an identity, to obtain a national ID.

- The actual ID could also be illegally reproduced.

- Biometrics are untested. There is no good standard for biometrics. Harper pointed out that, for example, some people who work in manual labor don't have easily distinguishable fingerprints.

- The ID system could cost at least $100 billion, based on cost figures for a similar identification program, "the Real ID," a voluntary state-issued national ID program implemented in 2005.

- The system would create privacy issues, including a possible government database of information that could be easily corrupted.

- It eliminates the choice of documents someone can use when applying for a job or for government benefits.

- A nationwide system could create long delays for correcting errors.

- It could encourage discrimination in the workforce, because employers might not want to deal with longer delays for immigrants (legal residents or naturalized citizens) who have more documents that need to be added into the system.

"These problems have never been addressed," said Calabrese, "and the problems are going to fall on the backs of workers." He said it would invert the relationship between citizens and the state and it would mean certain rights are conditional upon approval by the government. A national ID would be "sort of like the note you needed to get to go to the bathroom in school." Calabrese said the Arizona immigration bill is a step in that direction.

The ACLU and more than 40 other organizations have publicly opposed the national ID proposal within Schumer and Graham's immigration reform plan. But the entire proposal is still cloudy — the Post op-ed is the only concrete "plan" the senators have so far, and until the bill is actually introduced, no one really knows what to expect. It's also unclear whether a national ID could face opposition from right-leaning anti-immigration groups.

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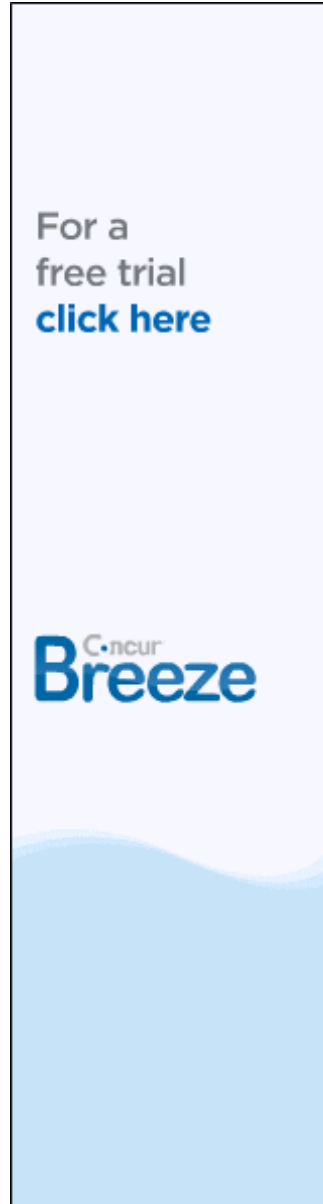
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