



Executive Action Benefits Immigrants in the Short Term While Their Long-Term Prospects Remain Uncertain

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Mayra Rangel has been living in the United States for nearly two decades, having entered the country illegally from Mexico when she was 16. She worked in the fields in California picking fruit, but dreamed of going to college to study accounting. She even started working on a degree she that ultimately had to drop because of her lack of documentation.

But even when President Barack Obama offered a reprieve to a group of unauthorized immigrants in 2012, known as DREAMERS, Rangel did not meet the criteria: she was too old by the program's standards.

On Friday, Rangel, now 35 and living in Alabama, learned that she would be able to apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program after all, as Obama had eliminated the age cap with the executive action he unveiled Thursday.

"I'm very happy," she says. "I can do so much for my country, for the community, I think I have so much potential to get a better job."

Rangel is just one of the estimated 5 million undocumented immigrants who may now be shielded from deportation. Under Obama's executive action announced Thursday, undocumented immigrants who are parents of citizens or legal residents, and have been in the country for five or more years, may also apply for deferred action – which, once applicants clear a criminal-background check, grants them a Social Security number, authorizes them for work and requires them to pay taxes.

"If you meet the criteria, you can come out of the shadows and get right with the law," Obama said in an address from the White House.

The measure is only temporary, Obama emphasized, and could in theory be revoked by his successor. And by acting unilaterally, Obama has faced criticism by Republicans and even some Democrats who say he has spoiled the chance of long-term, legislative immigration overhaul to deal with the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the country.

But for those who will be able to seek the relief offered by the executive action, its effect could be significant, given they have faith in the announcement. If implemented the way the White House has promised, they will no longer live in fear of being deported. They will be able to have

more open relationships with their communities, including with police officers, who depend on them to report on crime. Applying for drivers licenses and attending colleges will be easier, especially in states that offer in-state tuition, which will be a which in turn will pave the way for immigrants to get better jobs.

Advocates say that their advancements will have a ripple effect on the wider community, including growing the tax base (though many already pay taxes) and an increase in wages, particularly as many immigrants now work for low wages paid to them under the table.

“This issue is directly linked to the living wage debate,” said Janai Nelson, associate director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, at a press conference at the National Press Club Thursday. “This courageous step forward on immigration paves the way for a more just economic system, that will assist various marginalized communities in finishing their footing in the American economy and American society.”

According to Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the CATO Institute, President Ronald Reagan’s immigration reform bill, which granted amnesty for nearly 3 million immigrants, brought about a 5 percent -15 percent increases in wages for immigrants covered, though it did not lift wages on the whole.

“Companies pay illegal immigrants less than legal workers because of the risk they face by hiring them,” Nowrasteh says. “By removing that risk these workers will be able to get a higher wage.”

Furthermore, immigrant workers are more likely now to invest in skills like learning now that they know they won’t be deported. Those investments are likely to trickle down to the next generation, as the bulk of the beneficiaries of Obama’s action will be the undocumented parents of citizens or legal residents.

“The opportunities that this might bring is ultimately good for this next generation of Americans,” says Audrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

While in the short-term, the prospects of those covered by the action are good, the fate of immigrants is far more uncertain in the long-term.

“The problem is that it’s temporary, and it doesn’t take the place of something that offers permanent relief and legalization and the stability that comes when you are here to stay,” Singer says.

Some Republicans have threatened to block funding for the action at the risk of shutting down the government – though the House Appropriations Committee has signaled their ability to do so is limited. There is also the chance that Obama’s successor could revoke the order, though the political calculations are tricky there as well.

“This is a demographic and cultural shift that’s about to happen and I don’t think we can turn back,” says Jose Antonio Vargas, the filmmaker behind the immigration documentary “Documented” and an undocumented immigrant who will be covered by the president’s action.

The bulk of concern is how this will affect the chances for overhauling the broader immigration system. A comprehensive bill passed the Senate with bipartisan support in 2013, but stalled in the House, where leadership refused to bring it up for a vote. Many pundits speculated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va.'s surprise defeat in a primary race was due to his rival's candidate critique of his immigration stance, further casting doubt that House GOP would be willing to act on the proposal. Nevertheless, House Speaker John Boehner along with other Republican lawmakers, said Congress must lead the way on the issue.

“With this action, the president has chosen to deliberately sabotage any chance of enacting bipartisan reforms that he claims to seek,” Boehner said Friday.

Many Republican lawmakers, including 2016 contenders Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky and Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas have called Obama's immigration actions unconstitutional. While the legality of his move is being questioned, there are also concerns about how it will further politicize the issue.

“Even pro-reform Republicans are so angry and so, I think the Republican Party has been turned into some chaos,” says Tamar Jacoby, president of the pro-immigration reform business group Immigration Works, who says that anti-immigration politicians in the party will have the advantage as the issue continues to be debated.

“Meanwhile, it's also, I fear, encouraging a kind of polarization in the public,” Jacoby says.

Other immigration activists however reject the claims by Republicans that Obama's action, as Boehner has put it, “poisoned the well,” for a long-term solution.

“I get very incensed when I hear these claims, because they are dishonest, they're disingenuous and they're simply not true,” says Kica Matos, director of Immigrant Rights and Racial Justice Center for Community Change.

When it comes to working with the next Congress, which now includes a Republican-controlled Senate in addition to a Republican House, the prospect for new legislation is a “blank slate,” said Dan Pfeiffer, a top White House official, at a breakfast sponsored by Christian Science Monitor Friday.

“I don't want to rule anything in or out because we're not even at the first step,” Pfeiffer said.

Without a legislative fix to the overall immigration system, Obama's executive action is merely a band-aid, according to Jacoby.

“Every single person the president is bringing out of the shadows today is going to be replaced by a new person in the shadows,” she says.