

5 things to watch in the GOP immigration plan

01/27/14 04:15 PM

After a year of dithering, House Republican leaders are close to unveiling a barebones set of principles that they say will guide them in crafting a series of immigration bills. The proposal could make its public debut as early as this week, according to [The New York Times](#), when House Republicans meet in Maryland for their annual retreat.

While details are still closely guarded, activists expect the principles to include a plan to grant legal status to undocumented immigrants, a breakthrough for a caucus where “self-deportation” has long been the default position. Will it be able to thread the needle between reformers and border hawks? Here are five things you should keep an eye on once it drops to find out.

Is there a path to citizenship?

Under the [Senate’s bipartisan bill](#), most qualifying undocumented immigrants who pass a background check would be able to apply for citizenship after a minimum wait of 13 years. The House plan is expected to be less generous. Rep. Bob Goodlatte, the chair of the Judiciary Committee and the GOP’s point man on reform, has been [floating a compromise for months](#) that would grant legal status to undocumented immigrants but only let them apply for citizenship through existing channels, which can be backlogged for decades.

Based on numerous reports, it’s likely some version of Goodlatte’s idea will be in the House principles and it’s a given that Republican leaders will tout the absence of a “special path to citizenship” as a sop to conservative skeptics. You should ignore this talking point and wait to see the details. That’s because “no special path to citizenship” doesn’t mean “no new citizens.”

Under current law, undocumented immigrants are barred from applying for a green card unless they first leave the country for three or 10 years – even if their spouse and children [are American-born citizens](#). It’s a huge obstacle to citizenship and if House Republicans waive the bans, the nonpartisan National Foundation for American Policy estimates that 4.4-6.5 million of the estimated 11.7 million unauthorized immigrants in America today might [eventually qualify for citizenship](#). That’s less than the Senate’s plan, which the Congressional Budget Office estimated would add 8 million new citizens, but far from insignificant. Republican leaders have also suggested they might treat DREAMers separately and give them their own path to citizenship.

On the flipside, some Republicans like former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush have suggested plans that would explicitly block legalized immigrants from becoming citizens. That would likely be a nonstarter with Democrats and immigration advocates.

How hard is it to get legal?

Citizenship aside, the question of whether to grant even limited legal status to undocumented immigrants is a painful one for House Republicans. House leaders will undoubtedly come under heavy fire from conservatives and tea party groups for even bringing it up.

Immigration advocates are worried that Republicans might try to make the legalization process too difficult in order to reassure their critics on the right. In particular, they're concerned about suggestions that there may be "triggers" that have to be met before immigrants can apply for legal status like new security measures or benchmarks for success. Or they might prevent immigrants from applying if they have minor misdemeanors – some lawyers are worried being arrested for civil disobedience at an immigration reform rally might qualify.

As Simon Rosenberg, founder of the New Democrat Network, put it to reporters, activists want legalization to be "universal, immediate, and untriggered" as a starting point for negotiations.

Will the House turn America into Arizona?

To win over conservatives, the Senate bill added billions of dollars in new security measures at the last minute, including funding to double the size of the border patrol. Its sponsors backed the changes even as they grumbled the new measures would be expensive, inefficient, and unnecessary.

As it turns out, the House Republicans who were supposed to be won over by the move mostly felt the same way and were unimpressed. Instead, their focus is on better tracking unauthorized immigrants within the country rather than stopping them at the border, where security has improved significantly in recent years.

Here's where they run into problems. Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee are considering a bill, the SAFE Act, that would encourage states to organize their own crackdown on illegal immigration. So far, states like [Arizona](#) and [Alabama](#) that have tried to turn local police into immigration enforcers have been stymied by a combination of public backlash and judicial rulings. The SAFE Act would put them on sounder legal footing, setting the stage for a potential flood of draconian state laws in Republican-controlled states.

Immigration groups, which organized mass protests against Arizona's state law, are completely [dead set against](#) the idea. If Republicans make it a non-negotiable part of their principles, it could be the end of the line for reform.

How will the other side react?

If you haven't noticed by now, John Boehner doesn't have a great reputation for whipping his caucus. When it comes to [the toughest issues](#), he often needs Democratic votes to help him overcome tea party opposition.

Immigration reform would likely be the most difficult vote of his career and that means Boehner needs Democrats in a major way if he's serious. That means you should keep a close eye on the response from the Democratic House members and immigration advocacy groups.

There's some division in both groups about how much to bend to reach a deal. The White House, Senate Democrats, and major pro-immigration groups say a path to citizenship is essential. But a [handful of activists](#) argue they shouldn't dismiss a legalization-only offer out of hand. Congressman Luis Gutierrez, a leading Democrat on immigration, has been urging his colleagues to keep an open mind as well. A [recent poll](#) by Pew Research Center found immigrants are more concerned about removing the threat of deportation than obtaining a clear path to citizenship. Depending on how the GOP structures a bill, they might be able to split off some Democrats and activists.

Will conservatives revolt?

Immigration reform's been on the agenda in Washington for more than a year now. In that time, grassroots opposition to a bill has been mostly [weak and unorganized](#), while right-leaning immigration advocates have led a massive campaign to win Republican votes. Despite this imbalance, the tea party side has stayed just frightening enough to keep most Republican lawmakers – the [overwhelming majority](#) of whom live in safe, white, and conservative districts – [wary of hugging reform](#). In Sen. Marco Rubio's case, conservative complaints grew intimidating enough that he [all but abandoned the issue](#) after his own bipartisan bill passed in the Senate.

This month will be the ultimate test of whether the political environment has truly changed enough to allow real reform to pass in a GOP-controlled House. Up until this point, Boehner has [carefully avoided](#) antagonizing either side by keeping the issue on the backburner. Once he formally gets behind a legalization plan, however, that truce is over. Conservative groups, who [have feuded with Boehner](#) recently over the budget, will get one last chance to rally the base against “amnesty.” Can they scare members into breaking from Boehner early on? Or is this just the [next example](#) of their ongoing decline since the government shutdown?

One troubling trend that Boehner needs to watch out for: A handful of Republicans who worked unsuccessfully on an immigration compromise earlier this session have come out against passing reform this year. Some complain that Obama's [emphasis on executive actions](#) has eroded their confidence that he could enforce a border security deal. Others make the [political argument](#) that it's better to keep the party united heading into November's elections. Either way, Boehner needs to nip these concerns in the bud early if reform has a chance to succeed.

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