

## Dems and Reps inching toward immigration reform

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Right after the November elections, legislators and observers from both sides of the political aisle acknowledged the record Latino vote for President Obama was a strong mandate for immigration reform. The big question in the last few months has been whether it really will be different this time and whether we will see some bipartisan legislation before the summer.

The Obama administration and those close to it say immigration reform is a top priority — and they are pushing for sooner rather than later.

“I think comprehensive immigration reform is something we’re hoping we can get going shortly after the inauguration,” said Juan Sepulveda, a former Obama administration official who has been working as a Senior Advisor to the Democratic National Committee and with the incoming administration.

But reform needs congressional legislation. Here, longtime immigration reform activists are seeing movement from both parties.

“The reality is we are in a new environment, and we are seeing a shift in how people are grappling with the issue,” says [Clarissa Martinez De Castro](#), Director of Immigration and National Campaigns at the [National Council of La Raza](#) (NCLR).

Democratic Latino leaders have been advocating immigration reform as a top priority, especially during the hard-fought presidential campaign. After the election, the push has been to keep up the issue front and center. In an op-ed in [Politico](#) today, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said, “let’s make 2013 the year when we welcome 11 million people out of the shadows. Let’s make 2013 the year that we all agree immigrants don’t deserve half a handshake — they deserve a full embrace.

The issue, though, is the need to have a bipartisan consensus for reform. Today, Florida Republican Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart and Florida Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen held an immigration reform forum in Miami to hear from community members. After hearing from Latinos and others in the community, Rep. Diaz-Balart promised to compile all the suggestions, “bring them back to Washington, and seriously take them into account as we continue to work with our colleagues on both sides of the aisle to find a real, permanent solution to immigration reform,” stated Diaz-Balart.

[In an interview with the Wall Street Journal](#), Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio said he supports a plan to let the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in this country “earn” a working permit which can lead to citizenship. He said, however, the waiting time “can’t be unrealistic — it’s not good for our country to have people trapped in this status forever.”

NCLR's Martinez De Castro says Senator Rubio's proposal is an important development. "The statements by Senator Rubio mark an aperture on a conversation on which there is more agreement than one might initially assume," she says, also noting there is increased support from different sectors on the need for Congress to take point on the issue.

"Not only has there been more work and attention to immigration reform from social justice groups, but the increased support among evangelicals has created a space for conservatives to look at the issue in a different way," she says. There is also the economic angle, Martinez De Castro adds, on how reform can be seen as potentially benefiting the needs of the high-skilled as well as low-skilled job sectors. The support of labor groups and unions for reform is seen as a welcome development by many immigration advocates.

On the political side, many say there is a political imperative for both parties to deliver on reform. "Republicans realize they have to rebuild their relationship with Latino voters, and Democrats have to deliver on their campaign promise of immigration reform," says Martinez De Castro.

There is still a group of Republicans who are saying they are opposed to a path to citizenship for the country's 11 million undocumented immigrants or a path to legalization for Dreamers. "I won't speak for the House, but mass amnesty I think will have a hard time getting through the House," [said Texas Republican Congressman Lamar Smith](#), as quoted in a recent Huffington Post article.

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This does not deter longtime immigration reform proponents such as America's Voice's Frank Sharry. "Democrats have promised it, Republicans need it and our movement is prepared to deliver it."

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