

How Republicans Can Benefit From Immigration Reform

By [Lanhee Chen](#) Dec 5, 2013 1:30 PM CT

President [Barack Obama](#)'s suggestion that he'd be willing to entertain piecemeal efforts at immigration reform is a devilish trap for Republicans. The best way to avoid it is to agree to a comprehensive set of reforms to fix our broken immigration system.

From a policy perspective, some reform would certainly be superior to the status quo -- basic changes, such as better tailoring guest worker and visa programs to the needs of our economy and improving border security, are sorely needed. But such partial change is a dangerous political trap for Republicans.

In my view, Republicans are therefore left with two alternatives: passing nothing at all, or embracing a complete set of reforms that addresses the legal status of those who came to the U.S. illegally. Between these two, Republicans should embrace comprehensive reform. It's good policy and good politics.

That entails a significant shift in direction. The Senate passed comprehensive immigration reform legislation last summer, and the bill has subsequently languished in the House, where its prospects are grim at best. Now, with President Obama's approval ratings in the tank because of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act's horrific rollout and congressional Democrats desperate for a win going into 2014, there is newfound interest in trying to jumpstart the stalled effort for immigration reform.

Higher Bar

From a policy perspective, Republicans can accomplish a lot for our economy by acting, even if they fail to address the legal-status question broadly. Republicans are in a position to pass into law efforts to improve temporary worker programs for low-skilled labor; increase the number of visas for highly skilled workers; bolster efforts to enforce immigration laws at our borders and in our workplaces; make it easier to reunify immediate family members stuck overseas; and pass some pathway to citizenship for immigrants who were brought here illegally as kids.

All of these reforms would significantly improve the really broken system we have now. But politically, it's hard to imagine how Republicans benefit from passing reforms that do everything but address the legal-status question. So they should be wary of President Obama's apparent invitation to do just that, for a few reasons.

First, the bar that Republicans must clear to get credit for tackling the issue is significantly higher than the one faced by Democrats. Recall how [Mitt Romney](#)'s efforts during the 2012 presidential campaign to advance a set of common-sense immigration reforms -- which didn't include an explicit plan to deal with the vast majority of those already here illegally -- were

largely ignored by the media covering the campaign and widely decried as insufficient by President Obama and his allies.

The same fate would likely befall congressional Republicans if they tried to pass a series of reforms without addressing the legal-status question. They would have passed some really important improvements to our broken immigration system while getting very little benefit for doing so.

Second, passing piecemeal reforms that don't address the status of most immigrants here illegally does little to improve the image problem that Republicans have with Hispanic voters. This was a problem with real electoral consequences in 2012, and it has the potential to undermine all of the work that the Republican National Committee and other groups have done over the last year.

President Obama and Democrats would say Republicans are obstructing "real" immigration reforms and actually want to deport the vast majority of those here illegally. While sensational, arguments like this could resonate with Hispanic voters and threaten future Republican electoral prospects.

Republicans need to worry more about that problem. There are some important 2014 Senate races in states with significant Hispanic populations, such as Colorado and Georgia. But Republicans must also be aware that traditional swing states with large numbers of Hispanic voters, including Florida, Nevada and New Mexico, will once again play important roles in the 2016 presidential election.

Reasonable Solutions

So why should Republicans embrace a comprehensive set of reforms that includes an earned pathway to legal status for illegal immigrants, instead of simply sitting on their hands and doing nothing? This question is particularly relevant given the reluctance that many House Republicans have toward supporting any policy that could be interpreted as granting amnesty to those already here illegally.

Championing comprehensive reform allows Republicans to finally embrace a reasonable solution for the millions of immigrants currently here illegally. It gives Republicans the opportunity to rebut the claim that their preferred answer is mass deportation. And it allows them to make the case, particularly with Hispanic voters, that they, working together with Democrats, were able to solve one of the most vexing public policy challenges of the past 25 years.

Republicans who fear being branded supporters of amnesty should realize that earned legal status doesn't have to (and shouldn't) come free, or cheap. They can and should argue for predicate reforms that dramatically strengthen border security and enforcement. Any pathway to legal status should include real penalties and require high standards of conduct and productivity. Immigrants who came here illegally shouldn't be given preference over those waiting to immigrate to the U.S. legally. And, finally, incentives must not be created for future illegal immigration.

Obama may be severely weakened, but he's still got some political fight left in him. Republicans should avoid the trap he's laid for them. The best way around it is to do the one thing that Obama doesn't think they're willing or able to do: pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation that effectively deals with all of the problems our broken system faces today.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-05/how-republicans-can-benefit-from-immigration-reform.html>