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Immigrants' Kids Get Support From Some House Republicans

By Roxana Tiron and Kathleen Hunter - Jul 23, 2013

[Rosa Velazquez](#) had enrolled in college with a music scholarship after years of practice and competitions. She'd already chosen her classes at Ouachita Baptist University in [Arkansas](#) and was at the financial aid office when officials asked whether she was a U.S. citizen.

"Of course I am a citizen," Velazquez recalls telling them in 2002 as they were looking for her records. That's when her mother, Rosalinda, told her that they were in the U.S. illegally. Velazquez lost her scholarship and instead went to [community college](#).

"I knew that it was really messed up and I knew that it was really unfair," Velazquez said in an interview.

At a House Judiciary Committee hearing today, Velazquez, 30, will speak for undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. by their parents as children. Thus far, this is the only group of undocumented immigrants for whom House Republican leaders have been willing to consider granting legalization.

The idea is earning endorsements from House Speaker [John Boehner](#) and Majority Leader Eric Cantor even as many House Republicans oppose creating a broader citizenship path for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

After a July 10 Republican conference meeting on immigration, Boehner and Cantor said many party members agree that children in the U.S. illegally shouldn't be punished for their parents' decision to break the law. Virginia Republicans Cantor and Bob Goodlatte, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, are working on legislation to address the issue.

Advocating Citizenship

Velazquez is part of United We Dream, a group that advocates citizenship for immigrants in the U.S. She's pursuing two master's degrees and helps her mother at her taco stand in De Queen in western Arkansas.

The Republican measure is expected to be more limited than the Dream Act, a Democratic-backed bill that would have provided a path to citizenship for many undocumented children who attend college or serve in the U.S. military.

[House Republicans](#)' support for the children of immigrants is the only sign so far that they would budge on the legalization issue. That concerns congressional Democrats and immigration advocates who seek a citizenship path similar to the one in the Senate's immigration bill, S. 744. That measure, passed June 27 with bipartisan support, would create a citizenship path for most undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

The Senate measure also would give those who entered the U.S. younger than 16 immediate permanent legal residency if they seek a college education or serve in the military.

Reject Comparison

The rift might jeopardize congressional efforts to revamp U.S. immigration laws. Cantor's and Goodlatte's offices reject comparisons between the Republican idea and the Dream Act and aren't providing details on how their legislation -- with the working title KIDS Act -- would be shaped.

Representative Zoe Lofgren, a California Democrat, said the Republicans' effort makes her "apprehensive" because it's "being done on a partisan basis rather than a bipartisan basis."

"It's telling that they are pursuing a partisan-only effort," said Lofgren, the top Democrat on the Judiciary Committee's immigration sub-panel. She also is a member of a bipartisan House group working on a rewrite of immigration laws that hasn't been released.

Cantor, Goodlatte and Boehner were among 160 Republicans who in 2010 voted against the Dream Act. At the time, Republican opponents said it was too broadly written, maintaining that it would allow some young undocumented immigrants with criminal records access to citizenship.

'Tight Parameters'

Goodlatte today emphasized some of his caveats for legislation to help legalize those brought to the U.S. as children. In his opening statement for the hearing, Goodlatte said not all children should be "treated the same."

"For instance, if they have joined gangs or been involved in other criminal activity such as by entering the country as a drug mule crossing the border, or if they have otherwise shown that they do not intend to be productive members of American society, they should not be treated the same for purposes of legal status," Goodlatte said.

Representative Trey Gowdy, a South Carolina Republican who leads the Judiciary Committee's immigration sub-panel, said he expects other bills to address additional aspects of legalization. For the bill focusing on immigrants' children, he wants to see "very good, tight parameters in terms of fraud."

"I don't want anyone taking advantage of this legislation that is not entitled to it," he said in an interview.

May Qualify

Of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., about 2 million were brought to the country by their parents as children and may qualify for legalization, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan group that analyzes the movement of people worldwide.

Some states have started to make it easier for immigrant youths to attend college by allowing them to pay in-state tuition. Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, on April 29 signed a law allowing undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition at the state's public universities.

Maryland Law

In 2011, [Maryland](#) enacted legislation allowing in-state tuition for immigrant students if they met conditions such as graduating from a community college in the state. The measure was put on the ballot in 2012 and was approved by voters.

A [poll](#) conducted July 18-21 by the Washington Post and ABC News found that 50 percent of those surveyed would be disappointed if the House didn't pass a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Forty percent said they would be relieved if the House didn't provide one. The survey of a random national sample of 1,002 adults had a 3.5 percentage-point error margin.

[Arizona](#) Republican [John McCain](#), an author of the Senate plan, said senators are eager to negotiate a cross-chamber compromise on legalization for immigrants' children and that the proposal Cantor is crafting might bring them closer to that goal.

"Whatever they want to do, we want to negotiate, with respect," McCain said in an interview at the Capitol. Asked whether he thought the House proposal was the best chance for a legalization proposal, McCain replied, "Maybe, I don't know."

'New Openness'

While he called the Republican position on immigrants' children a sign of "new openness," Democratic Representative Luis Gutierrez of [Illinois](#) said the House needs to do more.

"I will celebrate the beginning with them but they should understand, if that's it, then they missed the mark by a long shot," Gutierrez, a member of the Judiciary panel and the bipartisan immigration group, said in an interview. "And they would not be rewarded or recognized very quickly for it."

Illinois Senator [Richard Durbin](#), the chamber's second-ranking Democrat, said the Republican proposal could be useful in opening House-Senate talks on a broader bill.

“I hope that Republicans don’t entertain the belief that merely helping a few of the Dreamers is all we can do,” Durbin, a co-sponsor of the Senate-passed bill, said in an interview at the Capitol. “There’s much more that needs to be done.”

New Jersey Senator [Robert Menendez](#), a Democrat who was part of the group that wrote the Senate bill, said the House proposal won’t “meet the challenge” posed by the estimated 11 million people in the country without authorization.

Legal Status

Immigration advocates agree with Menendez and say it’s “window dressing” to address the children of immigrants without a way for their parents to gain legal status.

“The best that can be said about the Republicans is that they are fumbling their way out of the dark ages,” [Frank Sharry](#), founder and director of America’s Voice, a Washington group that backs a path to citizenship, said in an interview.

Meanwhile, Rosa Velazquez says she will continue to seek [citizenship](#) for herself and her mother although she’s concerned about speaking out as an undocumented immigrant.

Velazquez’s mother flew to the U.S. when Rosa was 5, also bringing her 4-year-old son, Rudy. Velazquez says her mother decided to stay in the U.S. to give her children better opportunities than they had in Mexico City.

“Giving our parents something different is creating like a second class of citizens that are not citizens,” Velazquez said. “I want to understand why it is only possible for me and my brother. If anyone deserves citizenship, it’s her because of her courage,” she said of her mother.

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