

Is 2014 the year for immigration reform?

By Laura Colarusso | January 7, 2014

Last year was supposed to be the year of comprehensive immigration reform. After a bruising 2012 election fight — with Latino voters [turning out](#) in droves to support President Obama in key swing states — it appeared as though Latinos had marshaled enough electoral power for lawmakers in Washington to take note.

But the year came and went without a bill crossing the president's desk. Despite progress in the Senate, which [passed](#) a massive 1,200-page bill in June, House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) refused to consider the upper chamber's work, opting instead to take a piecemeal approach. By the time Congress recessed in December for the holidays, however, none of the House's bills had even made it to the floor, leaving activists concerned that the lower chamber wasn't serious about fixing the country's flawed immigration system.

With a new year comes new hope, and pro-reform advocates believe 2014 will usher in a new phase for the immigration debate. They point to two pivotal events from the end of last year. The first was Boehner [hiring](#) Rebecca Tallent, an immigration policy aide who served as point person for Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) during the 2007 push for reform. Tallent is known in D.C. circles for her in-depth knowledge of the issue, and is said to be someone the speaker would not have hired unless he was ready to move some kind of legislation forward.

The second was Boehner's mid-December [rant](#) against Tea Party types who had criticized the budget deal then winding its way through Congress. "Frankly, I think they've lost all credibility," he said at the time. Wrapped in his tirade was a message that it was time for the more polarizing factions of his party to back off so Congress could actually get something done. Most observers saw this as an opening for immigration reform, which has been pilloried by conservatives who equate a pathway to citizenship with amnesty for lawbreakers.

Two big questions loom on the horizon. First, it's unlikely Boehner will embrace the sweeping overhaul passed by the Senate, but it remains to be seen how far he's willing to go. Second, it's unclear whether enough House Republicans can embrace even a modest reform package in an election year when many could face primary challenges from the right.

Moderate Republicans who see reform as critical to remaining competitive with Latino voters are said to be working on a compromise that would allow students who came to the United States as children and agricultural laborers to gain some sort of legal status fairly quickly. (Their plan would also expand the number of visas available for high-tech workers.) It's the start of a potential deal, but the framework leaves out the majority of undocumented immigrants, which means Democrats will have a difficult time supporting it.

"The details matter hugely," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a pro-reform advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. "It would be easy for the House to pass something so controversial that it winds up hurting immigrants rather than helping."

There is a small window of opportunity to pass the bills the House is considering — which include border security, high-skilled immigration, enforcement, and a pathway to citizenship — in the late spring. The bulk of primaries will be over by then, but the general election season will not have started in earnest. The closer we get to an election, the [more difficult](#) it will be to move legislation through the House, as members of both parties turn their attention to their campaigns.

And even if the House does pass a few measures, the next challenge will be reconciling the Senate and House versions of the bill. That won't be an easy task given how far apart the two chambers are on many of the details.

Still, immigration advocates are hoping that Republicans were chastened by the debacle of the government shutdown, and are ready to show their constituents that they can govern.

"The punditry in D.C. is pretty pessimistic," Sharry said. "We're dealing with a Congress that put the world economy at risk. But the choice is still pretty stark. That imperative to listen to Latino voters that was so clear after the 2012 election is still there."

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