

Is Immigration Really Dead in the House?

By [Fawn Johnson](#)

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Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, declared immigration reform dead, so why aren't the opponents of a big overhaul pouring the champagne?

Because they know better than anyone that the issue could be resurrected at any time.

When President Obama declared immigration reform his top post-shutdown priority, opponents of a pathway to citizenship could have declared victory then and there. The president's advocacy gives House Republicans an easy way to ignore the issue, much like a teenager tunes out a nagging mother. The bad blood between the White House and House Speaker John Boehner got worse during the government shutdown, making bipartisan negotiations on other issues more difficult. Republicans also flinch at the thought of giving Obama another legacy victory.

All this should add up to a dead issue. "So why am I not sleeping at night?" queried Roy Beck, president of NumbersUSA, a grassroots group that has effectively lobbied dozens of rank-and-file House Republicans to oppose anything that could lead to legalization of people without papers. "What worries me is that Boehner and the business lobbies get together to pull some kind of maneuver" for a limited legalization/guest-worker/border-security bill. "Then Democrats in the Senate will say, 'Maybe this is our last chance until 2017,' " he said.

That's all it would take. Obama would sign it, and a troublesome issue for Republicans would be off the table until at least after the next presidential election. Republicans could then appeal to Hispanic voters who are angry at Obama for ignoring them during most of his administration.

It could be tough for Democrats to say no to half a loaf. "This is very tricky for the press and liberal immigration advocates. If they try to argue that this is unfair and this is second-class citizenship and they kill it, they're going to look terrible," said Alfonso Aguilar, a former Bush administration official who touts the benefits of immigration reform for Republicans. He now runs the Latino Partnership for Conservative Principles.

Powerful House Republicans like Boehner, Majority Leader Eric Cantor, and Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan all want to see something happen on immigration. The only thing that has stopped them is skepticism from tea partiers like Rep. Lou Barletta, R-Pa., who says that Obama hasn't enforced existing laws, or Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kan., who warns that the president is using the issue for political gain. This group of hard-line House members is amplified by nonstop advocacy from groups like NumbersUSA, which flood their offices with calls saying there should be no legalization for unauthorized immigrants under any circumstances.

Beck's grassroots network has been actively lobbying House Republicans this week to stop a noncontroversial border-security bill from coming to the House floor, fearing that the measure is the "camel's nose under the tent" leading to legalization of undocumented immigrants. The bill

could become a conference-committee vehicle with a Senate bill that would give unauthorized immigrants a 13-year path to citizenship. The roughly two dozen House Republicans who want to avoid such negotiations “remain scared to death of [House GOP] leadership on this,” Beck said.

Boehner has made it clear for months that he wants the House to vote on immigration in a piece-by-piece fashion. He has categorically rejected the Senate’s broader bill. The House Judiciary Committee has readied four other immigration bills that could come to the House floor at any time; none of them has Democratic support. Cantor is working on a bill that would give a path to citizenship to some undocumented youth who were brought to the country as children.

All of those measures form the basis of a decidedly Republican response to Obama’s challenge to act on immigration. Aguilar terms it as “no special path to citizenship,” meaning to legalize the undocumented immigrants who qualify under a Republican-defined set of conditions, then let those now-legal immigrants figure out how to use existing channels to become citizens if they so choose.

“It’s all out there. There is a conservative answer that is ‘legal status.’ There is leadership and grown-ups in the House that understands it needs to get done,” said Tamar Jacoby, a conservative who runs the business-centered lobby group ImmigrationWorks USA.

The only question is whether House Republicans will take up that mantle. The decision is likely to come from within the House Republican Conference, where different opinions reside, and the answer may not surface immediately.

Advocates on all sides fear defeat in the post-shutdown environment, and none smell victory. That means the issue isn’t dead, but it could lie dormant for some time.

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