

“Pathway to citizenship” is the sticking point on immigration talks

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The wide gap between different legislators on the proper way to ‘bring out of the shadows’ the nation’s 11 million undocumented is throwing some cold water on the increasing momentum for immigration legislation in Washington.

“The issue of giving a pathway to citizenship for all is a real sticking point in the debate,” says University of New Mexico political scientist [Gabriel Sanchez](#). “I am not confident you could overcome the differences right now to get the votes needed. It is going to require compromise,” he says.

[President Obama has proposed](#) a gradual path to citizenship for the nation’s undocumented as part of the immigration reform package. [The Senate bipartisan group](#) has also proposed a slower path to citizenship tied to border security and enforcement. These plans have requirements such as paying fines and back taxes, learning English and going to the ‘back of the line’ to apply for citizenship. [Senator Menendez said yesterday](#) this process could take 10 years.

Some House members, however, have made it clear that they would not support this kind of legislation.

“People that came here illegally knowingly – I don’t think they should have a path to citizenship.” [said Raul Labrador](#), a Republican congressman from Idaho. Labrador said that if Democrats insist on a pathway to citizenship, it could doom the prospect of bipartisan legislation, “since they know the Republicans in the House are not going to be able to vote for that.” The congressman says one alternative is to “legalize” the status of the undocumented, but without citizenship.

Today a group of immigration reform advocates fired back at Labrador’s comments.

“I don’t know what more sanctions this country wants from the undocumented,” said Angelica Salas, Executive Director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles ([CHIRLA](#)). Immigrants have been living in fear and have had their families torn apart, Salas said, and they are already doing backbreaking work while getting paid very little. Marielena Hincapié, Executive Director of the National Immigration Law Center ([NILC](#)), said, “the fact that we’re even considering a ‘permanent underclass’ is so extreme -that is really sad.”

The group said that while many immigrants who become legal residents might not even go through with citizenship due to economic, language or other issues, they should have a choice.

The issue is whether these differences on how to legalize the nation's undocumented could derail immigration reform.

[Illinois Democratic Congressman Luis Gutierrez](#), one of the staunchest proponents of comprehensive immigration reform, “is opposed to proposals that bar citizenship or create a permanent non-citizen underclass,” says his communications director Doug Rivlin. Yet Rivlin states, however, that Gutierrez is still “extremely optimistic” that a bill can be signed this year. “It is too early in the process to say this position or that position has derailed reform before the debate really takes off,” he explains.

In the meantime, Gutierrez, as well as Latina Republican [Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen](#) and Latino Democratic [Congresswoman Lucy Roybal-Allard](#) will re-introduce a Dream Act bill to the House. A pathway to citizenship for Dreamers has lately received more support from Republican legislators.

Alfonso Aguilar, a Republican who is the Executive Director for the [Latino Partnership for Conservative Principles](#), says that while he believes there should be a pathway to citizenship, “the fact that Republicans who were against any form of ‘amnesty’ are now even talking about legalization for the undocumented is an incredible development,” he says.

Aguilar says Democrats should consider options which fall short of citizenship if it legalizes undocumented families. “We shouldn’t sacrifice the good for the sake of the perfect,” Aguilar says, adding that “if Democrats decide they won’t support an immigration reform bill because of citizenship, they are going to have some explaining to do to,” he says.

When asked whether some Republican legislators are opposed to citizenship because that would increase the number of Latinos who could vote Democratic, Aguilar says that while this may be the view of some Republicans, “it is retrograde to think new Latino voters will automatically be Democrats. If Republicans are not secure enough to think they will be competitive with Latinos now or years from now when someone becomes a citizen, they should pack their bags right now,” says Aguilar.

The [Senate Judiciary Committee](#) will hold its [first hearing on immigration](#) next week. In the meantime, many think there is an incentive not just for Democrats but also for Republicans to pass some sort of immigration reform package.

“If the Republicans ever had an incentive to pass some form of immigration reform, it is now,” says [Stella Rouse](#), a political scientist at the University of Maryland. “If they want viability in their party, especially from a changing demographic, I think it’s incumbent for them to act when it comes to legislation reform.”

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