

Senate hearing on immigration reform touches on human cost of the debate

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Growing immigration reform noise took another step towards bipartisan harmony on Monday as the Senate judiciary committee followed [President Obama's State of the Union call for legislation](#) and [Senator Marco Rubio's GOP response](#), which echoed the need for comprehensive reform.

The speakers at the committee hearing included Jose Antonio Vargas, the undocumented Filipino journalist who came out in a high-profile New York Times piece, Janet Napolitano, the head of the Department of Homeland Security and Janet Murguia, [the president of the National Council of La Raza](#).

"I can say unequivocally, what everyone knows," Napolitano said as she opened her remarks. "The immigration system is broken and reform is long over due. Nothing is more central to the American story than the contribution of immigrants."

Napolitano said that communities, workers and employers are "frustrated with a system that treats a drug smuggler the same way as a high achieving student."

She was twice interrupted during her remarks, first by a group of Latino protesters who held "No More Deportations" signs and then by members of Migrant Justice from Burlington, Vermont who stood up and turned around to reveal "Human Rights Vermont" signs. Both groups were escorted out by security.

Vargas became impassioned as he described what his life is like as an undocumented immigrant.

"Immigration is not merely about borders," an emotional Vargas said, as he quoted the late Ted Kennedy's book ['A Nation of Immigrants](#).' "Immigration reform is about our future — immigration reform is about us," he said.

Vargas sought to humanize the immigration debate much like he did in [an editorial in the New York Times](#) ahead of the hearing where he stated that the [Pew Hispanic Center](#) estimates 17 million people in the United States live in households where at least one person is an undocumented immigrant. "Furthermore, about 4.5 million children who were born in this country have at least one undocumented parent," he wrote.

Republicans, who are in favor of greater border security and skeptical of a path to citizenship, peppered Napolitano with questions during her much longer turn speaking at the outset of the hearing. They zeroed in on asking her how the country can avoid the "mistakes of 1986," when 3 million undocumented immigrants were granted citizenship but border security was porous.

“Immigration enforcement is light years away from what it was in 1986,” Napolitano responded. “There are 655 miles of fence infrastructure now, back then it was just a couple of miles of fence. [They] removed 25,000 individuals, now there have been 409,000 removals, which have caused some of the tensions we have seen today,” she said, referencing the protesters.

The hearing had a different overall tone than the [House judiciary committee version last week](#), which seemed to be in favor of helping highly skilled workers but was skeptical of a path to citizenship.

NCLR’s Murguia said that most undocumented immigrants are long-time hard-working residents, many of whom came to the U.S. as children, pay taxes and provide for spouses and children. “The majority of Americans support earned citizenship,” she said. “The Latino community — three-quarters of which are citizens — want to see a clear path. If the process is unreasonable the Latino community and most Americans will consider the program disingenuous,” she added.

Murguia asked for the petitions of 300,000 Americans to be added to the record during the hearing. The petition drive was led by a wide range of immigration, Latino and progressive organizations, including CREDO Action, Presente.org, Reform Immigration FOR America (RI4A), Daily Kos, National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and America’s Voice Education Fund (AVEF).

Not much was heard from Tea Party firebrand Ted Cruz, who was recently admonished for being hard on cabinet nominee Chuck Hagel. “ I apologize, I lost my voice,” he said in a gravelly tone, adding sarcastically, “Perhaps from cheering too much at yesterday’s State of the Union.”

But Republican Senator Lindsay Graham picked up any slack, as he added his voice to the chorus of those who believe now is the time for immigration reform.

“I want to applaud you for making progress, we certainly have,” he said to Napolitano in reference to border enforcement. Graham asked her for a list of things that can be done across the nine sectors of border security to make it even stronger.

“This is the moment,” Graham said. “The pay offs for the nation are enormous. We can improve national security, the economy, help some people by giving them a second chance on our terms and get rid of those who are breaking the law.”

But Vargas brought it back to the human side of the debate. “What is the national interest of the country?” he asked, invoking the stringent Alabama law that affected undocumented immigrants. “Once HB56, out Arizona-ed, Arizona, I spoke with a Republican farmer. He said, ‘It’s not right for this state to say who my friends can be. My best worker is Paco.’ He has a room for him called the Guatemalan room.”

Vargas, who hasn’t seen his mom in 19 years, yearns for a day when he can travel with his grandmother to go visit his family in the Philippines. “We talk about immigration and enforcement as if we’re talking about aliens from Mars,” he said.

“We’re talking about human beings.”

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