

Tech companies driving the Lobbying on Immigration

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Story Highlights

- Quarterly lobbying reports show tech's leading role in immigration debate
- Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg funding pro-immigration ad push
- Traditional immigration advocates swamped by tech's heavy spending

WASHINGTON – Seven technology companies and a software association – all with interests in shaping the immigration debate now underway in Congress -- each spent more than \$1 million on their federal lobbying efforts during the first three months of this year, new reports shows.

Their spending, totaling \$13.8 million, swamps the \$80,000 one longtime immigration advocate, the National Council of La Raza, spent on lobbying during the same time period. The spending is one part of the tech industry's new advocacy push to shape a leading Senate proposal that would dramatically expand the temporary visas and green cards given to foreign workers in the technology field.

Among the biggest increases: lobbying by Facebook, which soared to \$2.45 million, up from \$650,000 during the same period last year and \$1.4 million during the last three months of 2012.

In a separate move from his company's official lobbying activity, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has assembled some of the Silicon Valley's wealthiest figures, including Microsoft founder Bill Gates and Google chairman Eric Schmidt, to underwrite FWD.us, a non-profit group aimed at building public and congressional support for a large-scale rewrite of U.S. immigration policy.

To advance the cause, the Zuckerberg group also has launched two subsidiaries with vague, patriotic-sounding names -- Americans for a Conservative Direction and the Council for American Job Growth, designed to appeal to conservative and liberal and independent voters, respectively.

Americans for a Conservative Direction currently is running ads in six states that feature clips of Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., one of eight lawmakers behind the Senate's leading immigration bill, touting the measure's border-security provisions. A separate ad backs South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, another Republican member of the Senate's "Gang of Eight."

Its sister group, meanwhile, is running ads in Alaska praising Sen. Mark Begich's economic record. Begich is not among the immigration bill's authors, but he is one of the most vulnerable Democrats in the Senate up for re-election in 2014. Neither the Graham nor Begich ads mention immigration.

The technology sector stands to make big gains under the Senate plan, which dramatically changes the way the federal government grants visas and green cards to future immigrants.

Currently, most green cards are issued based on family ties to U.S. citizens. In 2012, only 14% of immigrants – nearly 144,000 people -- were granted green cards tied to employment, according to data compiled by the Department of Homeland Security. Under the Senate plan, about 50% of future green cards would be employment-based.

Some family-based immigration would be curtailed.

The Senate bill would end the practice of allowing U.S. citizens to petition for green cards for their siblings 18 months after the measure becomes law. Nearly 60,000 siblings of U.S. citizens became permanent residents through that program in 2012, but the backlog for some countries is enormous. This month, the federal government started processing visas for siblings in the Philippines who first applied in August 1989.

The Senate bill also includes another measure long sought by the technology industry by increasing the annual cap on the number of temporary H1B visas from 85,000 to 205,000. These visas go primarily to college-educated foreigners in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

"The aim is to remake the immigration system so it has a much clearer economic focus," Graham said in a statement about the bill's goals. "Green cards should be viewed as economic engines for the country."

Technology groups say the suspension of the sibling program is the result of political compromise between Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill -- not their lobbying efforts.

"We fully support family immigration to the United States," said Scott Corley, executive director of Compete America, a coalition of businesses and universities promoting high-skilled immigration. Its members include Facebook, Intel and Google. "Many people who started companies in this country came through the family immigration system."

"We don't go and talk about 'what can we take from other people in order to get our provisions in order to get our provisions done?' " he said.

The new lobbying reports show technology companies seeking to influence policy on a wide range of topics from cyber security and online privacy to tax policy. Companies do not have to report how much they spend on a particular issues, such as immigration.

Facebook officials said their lobbying expenses increased dramatically during the first quarter of this year because of a one-time compensation boost as restricted stock was transferred to some employees.

Even so, the company has increased its presence in Washington. Thirty-eight federal lobbyists represented the company in 2012, up from two lobbyists in 2009, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a non-partisan group that monitors lobbying spending.

The tech industry "needs a modernized, high-skilled immigration system in order to keep growing ... and the Senate bill moves us in the right direction," Facebook spokeswoman Jodi Seth said in an e-mail. She said the company has not been involved in talks to end the sibling program.

Clarissa Martinez with the National Council of La Raza said the lack of a powerful lobby behind family unity in the U.S. visa system has made it difficult to defend. Programs that are cut in the Senate bill – including the ability of a U.S. citizen to petition for a sibling – have been under threat for years because it is difficult to muster a powerful coalition behind them.

"There's less defined, moneyed interest arguing for that," Martinez said. "Perhaps that's part of the reason some of these categories have always had a bull's-eye on their back."

Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a group that advocates for immigrants' rights, tech companies are not the impetus for Washington's sudden interest in immigration – six years after the Congress's last attempt to overhaul the system, he said. The 2012 elections – where Republican candidate Mitt Romney garnered only 27% of the Hispanic vote – are driving the GOP to get on board with a broad immigration bill, he added.

"Bill Gates has been coming to Washington for the last decade pounding the table and saying, 'We need high-skilled visas,' and he's been unsuccessful," Sharry said. "This is an issue that turns more on votes than on dollars."

But now that the entire immigration system is finally open for debate, Sharry said, Silicon Valley has been able to capitalize on the developments and potentially secure thousands of new work-related visas.

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