

Tech Experts: Immigration Reform Needs To Happen

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The United States needs more high-level scientists and engineers, according to technology experts. That's why they're pushing for immigration reform as a way to educate and retain the most talented workers in the world.

But how that reform should happen -- in one big piece of legislation or in a series of small bills -- is fueling debate on Capitol Hill.

While lawmakers in Congress agree that reform should be a priority, the comprehensive package that the White House and top Democrats are pushing has House Republicans worried that it will turn into "amnesty" -- a dirty word in their playbook -- and provide a mass legalization for undocumented immigrants.

"Comprehensive has become a code word for amnesty," Representative Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) said during a Tuesday morning panel on immigration and technology hosted by Politico.

Chaffetz, joined by Republican Representative Raúl Labrador of Idaho, said he prefers the "piecemeal" approach to reform.

"I don't think it should be comprehensive," Labrador added, because "every member [of Congress] will find something flawed" in one wide-ranging bill.

Labrador supports a series of immigration bills that tackle specific, narrow issues, such as how to handle visas for experts in science, technology, engineering and math, what are called STEM visas. He said he wants the House of Representatives to vote on all immigration proposals, as many as five or six of them, together.

But Zoe Lofgren (D-California), who also attended the Politico event, thinks one comprehensive bill makes more sense. She says Democrats are waiting "for a signal" from House Speaker John Boehner that he's open to the comprehensive immigration reform he mentioned in a speech shortly after President Obama's reelection.

If Republicans such as Lamar Smith (R-Texas) continue to set the GOP immigration agenda, she said, "we're going nowhere fast."

Smith favors tighter enforcement of current immigration laws and opposes programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which grants two-year deportation reprieves to some undocumented young people. He joined other restrictionists in [blasting DACA](#) at a panel hosted by the Center for Immigration Studies, a D.C.-based think tank, on Monday.

A group of technology industry leaders at the event said they want immigration reforms that will allow them to retain highly skilled foreign workers. As it stands, they said, too many workers currently obtain advanced degrees in the United States and then return to their home countries to start businesses that compete with companies here.

Gary Shapiro, president and chief executive officer of the Consumer Electronics Association, said that for business owners, the debate over what type of immigration reform to pass is "like asking someone dying in the desert what type of water they want."

"We need [reform] desperately," he said, adding that he has no problem with a path to citizenship being included in a reform bill if the reforms allow businesses to retain highly skilled workers.

"Immigrants create economic activity," Shapiro said, "highly skilled or not."

John Engler, current president of the Business Roundtable and former Republican governor of Michigan, pointed out that bringing foreign students into the country does not limit the number of U.S. students who can enroll in advanced STEM degree programs.

"Programs would simply close" if they had to depend on American students, he said.

STEM jobs pay better, the employment rate is higher, and there are a number of federal grants available for students that choose that career path, but not enough American students opt to go in that direction.

It's a problem with broad consequences and a challenge that concerns leaders in immigration and education alike.

"There's something in our culture," Labrador said, that causes kids to opt for non-STEM degrees.

Without a clear solution, technology experts say they want reforms that allow the country to educate and keep the best workers in the world, to help bolster the economy and spur innovation.

But Chaffetz and Labrador contend that the White House has not done a good enough job of reaching out to Republicans on immigration reform.

"I don't see them as any help in any way, shape or form," Chaffetz said.

According to Labrador, the White House just wants "a political victory on immigration."

He noted that Obama failed to take action on immigration during his first four years in office, and blamed him for flip-flopping on the idea of a STEM bill. Labrador criticized Obama for originally saying that he would support a STEM bill before rejecting one proposed by Republicans and demanding comprehensive reform.

But according to Lofgren, that STEM bill, which died in December after the Senate declined to consider it, was flawed because it eliminated the diversity visa lottery, a lottery that awards visas to people from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States.

Labrador argued that the Senate should have considered the bill, removed the provision that ended the diversity lottery program, and sent it back to the House. He thinks it would have had enough support to pass.

Lofgren said lawmakers need to focus on the future of immigration reform and not dwell on the past.

"Let's fix this," she said. "We can do this."

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