

The Immigration-Reform Movement Grows Weary

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As this week's series of demonstrations on the National Mall shows, it's hard to rally citizens when Congress seems incapable of responding to their demands.

On March 21 2012, José Gutiérrez—41-years-old and undocumented—was deported to Mexico. A successful film engineer in Los Angeles with two young children—a two-year-old son and a four-month-old daughter who was in the hospital at the time—Gutiérrez had lived in the United States since childhood. Nine days later, he risked crossing the border illegally at the San Luis Port of Entry in Arizona to reunite with his family. The next his wife Shena, a United States citizen, heard of him, he was in a coma.

"He was beaten so badly his skull had to be removed in five parts," Shena told a group of about a dozen supporters of immigration reform on the National Mall earlier this week. "How do you explain to your children, 'This happened to your Dad because he's undocumented?'" Behind her, organizers from the Southern Border Communities Coalition, which sponsored the event, had laid out rows of tables covered in white cloth and adorned with banners decrying the militarization of the border—"Keep Families Together," "Bridges Not Border Walls." A few hundred yards away, several large tents contained the "Fast for Families," where a core group of four activists has been abstaining from food since Tuesday to protest Congress's inaction on immigration reform. With the wind blowing ripples across the Capitol reflecting pool, the air was cold, the mood somber. After the event, a handful of journalists, a small corps that still managed to outnumber the activists, mulled about the dry grass, but the scene was mostly empty.

Stories like José's—a longtime resident with a stable job, a citizen wife, and two young children—highlight the human impact of our dysfunctional immigration system, which forces undocumented immigrants like José to choose between breaking the law and staying with their family, pursuing their livelihood. It makes clear the pressing need for reform. But as the poor attendance at the rally organized by Southern Border Communities Coalition shows, it's hard to draw a crowd when speaking out seems to make little difference. Over the past week, a coalition of [dozens of organizations supporting immigration reform](#) have sponsored events across the country intended to push Congress to act on immigration; the Senate [passed](#) an omnibus immigration bill in July, but the Republican-controlled House has failed to act. The push shares little of the momentum or scale of the [massive demonstrations for immigrant rights in 2006 and 2007](#), or even those earlier this year, when legislation was being actively debated in Congress.

The Fast for Families—whose sponsors include America's Voice, an advocacy organization dedicated to immigration reform; the National Council of La Raza, the largest national Hispanic civil-rights and advocacy organization; the Service Employees International Union; and the

National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference—is the cornerstone of the latest effort to keep pressure on legislators. Civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson and feminist Gloria Steinem, in town to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, stopped by the activists' outpost on the corner of 3rd Street and Jefferson Drive on Tuesday. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senator Chuck Schumer have also visited the tents, and on the Fast for Families website, more than 3,000 people have pledged to join them in solidarity.

But the legislative effort has hit the same Republican roadblock that shut down the government for two weeks in October and has kept Congress from passing a host of important bills, from immigration reform to the farm bill and climate-change legislation.

The comprehensive immigration-reform bill passed by the Senate addressed a wide variety of problems with the system; it set out a path for the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently in the country to earn citizenship, contained a massive overhaul of the visa system, and beefed up enforcement. But in a strategy that critics say shows Republicans are not serious about reform, the GOP-controlled House has [adopted a piecemeal approach](#), drafting smaller bills that deal with issues like enforcement or high-skilled workers separately. Supporters of immigration reform hoped the omnibus Senate bill could be reconciled with a handful of stand-alone bills from the House in a [conference committee](#). But last week, House Speaker John Boehner dashed the prospects of that happening. “We have no intention of ever going to conference on the Senate bill,” Boehner [told](#) reporters. Even Republican Marco Rubio, a member of the Senate's "Gang of Eight" that sponsored the immigration-reform legislation, has [backed away](#) from his own legislation.

Congress has been debating immigration reform since President George W. Bush took office more than ten years ago. As Muzaffar Chishti, director of the New York office of the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, pointed out in September, the policy debates have all been settled. Business groups and organized labor, which helped sink the 2007 immigration-reform bill because of its guest-worker program, have reached the necessary compromises. The support for reform from business, faith, and immigrant-rights groups is bipartisan and overwhelming. "It's now about political will," Chishti said.

It's no surprise the reform movement is wearing thin; it's hard to keep momentum going after nearly a decade without results. This is the Catch-22 supporters of immigration reform currently find themselves in: Legislators' failure to act discourages citizens from speaking out, yet citizens must speak out in order for Congress to act.

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