



Will the House of Representatives Enact - Or Kill - Immigration Reform?

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In late June, a carefully negotiated immigration reform bill passed the Senate by a substantial bipartisan majority of 68 to 32. Action now shifts to the Republican-led House of Representatives – where dozens of ultra-conservative legislators are determined to deny a clear path to citizenship to eleven million undocumented residents.

THE 2013 QUEST FOR COMPREHENSIVE LEGISLATION

"Comprehensive immigration reform" refers to a grand-bargain approach to legislation that combines tighter enforcement of federal rules with some form of legal status and potential path to citizenship for some eleven million undocumented immigrants currently living and working in the United States. Attempts to fashion such a bargain previously happened under both Democratic and Republican presidents, but repeatedly stalled in Congress – until June 2013, when the U.S. Senate acted. The key provisions of the landmark Senate bill are highlighted in ["Comprehensive Immigration Reform, 2013 Edition"](#) by [Rob Glover](#) of the University of Maine.

The Republican-led House of Representatives is, so far, unwilling to bring the Senate bill to a vote or advance any alternative version of comprehensive reform that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who live and work in the United States. Instead, House Republicans are taking a piecemeal approach, and four narrowly tailored bills have advanced through the House Judiciary Committee. How do the House bills line up in comparison to the Senate's comprehensive legislation? In late July, a San Diego-based team of SSN scholars developed a detailed side-by-side comparison of Senate and House provisions on all aspects of immigration reform. [Angela García](#) was the lead researcher for this project, and the [memo the team sent to staffers in Congress](#) spells out all of the details, which are also summarized in [a short brief comparing the Senate and House bills](#).

Predicting possible outcomes in Congress is a challenge that has been tackled by [Tom Wong](#) of the University of California, San Diego, who has [developed a model](#) that can be adapted to look where House members might stand on all kinds of immigration bills and amendments. Various advocacy groups have drawn on Wong's expertise to help them identify legislators open to persuasion, and Wong was recently interviewed about his model on the ABC News "Power Players" program.

Why Immigration is Socially and Politically Divisive

Immigration and policies to address it arouse intense emotions and spark fierce political battles in nations across the globe, argues [John Skrentny](#) of the University of California, San Diego. His thoughtful new brief probes why immigration politics is so explosive, and pinpoints value-laden conflicts playing out in the United States between traditionalists who value stable communities and experts and advocates who highlight the economic benefits of immigration and favor expanded human rights for newcomers.

Values and interests about immigration divide both major U.S. political parties, explains [Daniel Tichenor](#) of the University of Oregon, and consequently reforms tend to happen only when [Congress manages to patch](#)

[together "grand bargains" that offer something to all of the conflicting factions](#) and forge compromises within as well as between the parties. Naturally, most attempts fail. Today, Republicans are especially divided, to the point that it is difficult for their Congressional leaders to participate in the necessary bargains. Many GOP elites and business supporters favor immigration reforms that allow additional economically valuable workers to enter or stay in the United States, but about half of Republican base voters are Tea Party sympathizers who firmly oppose welcoming more newcomers or granting legal status to undocumented immigrants.

Contentious Issues in the Current Debate

As comprehensive reform inches through Congress in coming weeks, it will face hundreds of attempted amendments from all directions. SSN scholars offer an efficient overview of some of the key issues at stake.

> ***Will immigration reform cost American taxpayers more than \$6 trillion?*** That claim was made in a recent Heritage Foundation report opposing reform, but [Richard Alba](#) of the City University of New York [debunks the dubious assumptions and calculations](#) that went into both short and long-term cost calculations in that report. Even taking into account very long term costs, Alba shows, the Heritage authors wildly over-estimate the costs of reform. Recently, the Congressional Budget Office [issued its own cost estimates](#) for a two-decade time frame, and their calculations back up Alba's critique of the Heritage claims.

> ***Will Mexican immigrants become a "permanent underclass" in the United States?***

This is another extreme claim made by the Heritage authors and other opponents of reforms that grant undocumented residents a path to American citizenship. But the best social science evidence shows that pessimism is unwarranted, as detailed by [Tomás Jiménez](#) of Stanford University and [Helen Marrow](#) of Tufts University. Mexican immigrants and their children and grandchildren make steady progress at becoming full participants in American society, just like European immigrants did in an earlier era. Legal status for parents, furthermore, boosts the educational attainments of immigrant children.

> ***Should tougher immigration enforcement in the future stress further fortification of the border or use of the E-Verify system by businesses offering jobs across the country?*** [David FitzGerald](#) of the University of California, San Diego explains this choice in a compelling brief that explains why border barriers cannot frustrate all illegal entries in the Southwest, but do drive up the death rate for desperate immigrants who try to get into the United States across harsh stretches of remote deserts. [Many lives can be saved](#), Fitzgerald argues, by placing more stress on employer vetting of job applicants.

> ***Should reform legislation expand future access for highly skilled workers*** – by creating more visas that high tech businesses can use to bring in foreigners with advanced degrees or special capabilities in science, math, engineering, and computer technologies? As John Skrentny lays out in [a valuable brief on this matter](#), business groups are at loggerheads with some experts as well as with representatives of American workers. Businesses say they cannot find enough qualified employees here at home, but others argue that qualified U.S. workers are numerous and the real problem is the unwillingness of U.S.-based employers to offer good enough wages and benefits to attract them.

> ***If immigration reform grants a provisional kind of legal status to currently undocumented immigrants, should they be able to get U.S. social benefits such as unemployment insurance, cash assistance, or publicly subsidized health care?*** The current inclination of reformers is to [bar immigrants from access to benefits](#) for up to ten to fifteen years, explains [Cybelle Fox](#) of the University of California, Berkeley. But that may not be either fair or economically logical, she points out. Focusing specifically on [health care for immigrants](#), [Micah Gell-Redman](#) explains why both immigrants and American society generally would benefit from making sure decent health care is available to everyone.

> ***What will happen to undocumented immigrant residents in the United States who are waiting in line to become legal residents?*** [Ernesto Castañeda](#) of the University of Texas at El Paso tells the story of [those who wait for up to two decades for a decision](#) from the currently backlogged bureaucracy.

> ***What does the future hold if national reform legislation succeeds or fails?*** If comprehensive legislation passes, Americans will face important opportunities and challenges to make reform work for everyone, explains [Manuel Pastor](#) of the University of Southern California. Governments at all levels, including the states and localities, will need to reach out to newcomers, welcoming them into American society and enabling them to make optimal contributions to our economy and democracy.

But what if Congress stalls and bipartisan immigration reform legislation, once again, fails to make its way to the President's desk? In that case, the consequences will not be pretty. Businesses will not get changes in visa procedures, and millions of undocumented workers and families will remain in the shadows.

Should the federal government fail to act, states and localities will step in – and the results are certain to be highly uneven in the future as they have been in the past. Repressive measures can [frustrate efforts to bring immigrants into local community life](#), as Helen Marrow found in her fieldwork on North Carolina, and as [Andrew Papachristos](#) of Yale and [David Kirk](#) of the University of Texas at Austin demonstrated in their work on police practices in immigrant communities. In fact, asking local police to check the immigration status of routine offenders is a formula for trouble. As [Doris Marie Provine](#) of Arizona State University spells out, this can lead to civil rights violations and [undermine the capacity of police to gain the cooperation of the community to ensure public safety](#).

In contrast, welcoming and effective state and local policies toward immigrants have eased the process of incorporating newcomers and their children in some places. [Elizabeth Ackert](#) of the University of Washington documents this point with [data on school enrollments](#) in various states; and Helen Marrow shows how San Francisco has reaped advantages from helping all immigrants, [including the undocumented, get decent health care](#).

On all facets of the debates at hand, the Scholars Strategy Network has much to offer. Individual scholars can be contacted for further discussion, and SSN briefs can be downloaded for distribution by any group or individual. The contributions highlighted here are just the tip of the iceberg, and they build upon additional research about the full range of issues featured in our [December 2012 Spotlight on "Immigration - Time for a New Approach."](#)