

WILL THE UNITED STATES OVERHAUL ITS IMMIGRATION SYSTEM?

By Tamar Jacoby
February 11, 2013

U.S. President Barack Obama said on January 30 that he wants Congress to pass an immigration system overhaul in the first half of this year. Obama's comments came a day after he presented his plan for immigration reform and just after a bipartisan group of senators presented their own plan. What stands in the way of passing the legislation before July? Are the immigration reforms that would get through Congress likely to be significant enough to change the status quo? How might U.S. action on immigration affect the country's relations with Mexico and other Latin American nations?

What a difference an election makes. Just four months ago, it was hard to find a member of Congress who would take a meeting on immigration. Many opposed comprehensive reform, others had written it off as impossible. Even those who were strongly in favor generally had more important things to do.

Today, you can't avoid the subject on Capitol Hill or at the White House. President Obama's plan is one among many (and not necessarily the best of the lot). Everyone wants to talk about reform, and virtually everyone, Democrat and Republican, supports doing something.

The problem is just what 'something' means. There's no one answer, and there's not likely to be one for months to come.

What to do about the 11 million unauthorized immigrants already living and working in the United States is only one of many issues. Almost as contentious: how much enforcement is enough and whether other reforms should have to wait until we make more progress on enforcement; should the United States rethink its traditional commitment to family-based immigration, limiting visas to Americans' nuclear families and denying them to adult siblings and adult children; and what about employment-based visas. There's growing support for visa programs for high-skilled immigrants and agricultural workers, but what about less-skilled, nonfarm workers.

Restaurants, hotels, food processing, construction and home-health employers, among others, also need to hire immigrants when they can't find enough willing and able Americans. And if Congress doesn't create a way for these workers to enter the country legally, in a decade or two America will once again be home to a vast underground population of unauthorized foreigners. But there's no agreement in Congress yet on whether we need visas for less-skilled workers.

There's no consensus on any of these issues. The conversation has just begun, and there's a long road ahead – months of hard negotiations and even harder compromises.

Can we get there by July? More important is that we get it right. We can't afford to delay, but it won't pay to pretend there is more agreement than in fact there is.

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