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OPINION: AN IMMIGRATION CHALLENGE FOR BOEHNER

By William Galston
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In his post-shutdown remarks, President Obama identified three areas in which bipartisan progress is possible – agriculture, the budget and immigration. The farm bill is usually routine and should pass easily once agreement is reached on nutrition programs. Unless the ever-elusive grand bargain is on the table, and few believe it is, fiscal talks will yield modest results at best. But immigration is different. Comprehensive immigration reform would be to Mr. Obama's second term what the Affordable Care Act was to his first: a signature legislative achievement.

Unlike the ACA, immigration reform enjoys majority support. The American people strongly back a comprehensive approach that includes a path to earned citizenship for the 11 million immigrants now here illegally. In a survey performed by the Public Religion Research Institute, 84% said the economy would benefit if illegal immigrants became taxpayers; 76% believe illegal immigrants would work hard to earn citizenship; 64% think illegal immigrants take only jobs that Americans don't want.

And most people reject half-measures to deal with illegal immigrants: When offered a three-way choice among a path to citizenship, deportation and permanent-resident status without citizenship, PRRI found earlier this year, only 14% preferred the third option, while those favoring a path to citizenship outnumbered the pro-deportation forces by three to one.

Support for comprehensive reform is near-universal among Democrats; no surprise there. But the majority of Republicans and independents back it as well. Nor is there an ideological split: Comprehensive immigration reform enjoys majority support among liberals, moderates and conservatives. They also agree on the principles that should guide the legislation.

Even more significant, core parts of the Republican coalition are pushing for it. Three major business groups – the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers and the Business Roundtable – have offered formal statements of support. On May 13, after the "Gang of Eight" had produced what became the blueprint for the Senate bill, the Chamber of Commerce sent a forceful letter to the Judiciary Committee. Immigration reform, this influential organization declared, "must include a workable means for people to come out of the shadows who are currently undocumented, without creating a permanent underclass of people who do not have the opportunity to become citizens."

In a pointed reminder of the need for realism and compromise, the business group also declared that it opposes "any amendments that would weaken this bill or upset the delicate balance the sponsors of this legislation achieved when they crafted it" – an admonition that the Judiciary Committee and Senate wisely heeded.

Another development is more surprising and potentially more significant: Substantial numbers of white evangelicals have joined the push for comprehensive immigration reform. A new umbrella group – the Evangelical Immigration Table – enjoys the support of the National Evangelical Association, the leaders of well-known megachurches and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Evangelicals put special emphasis on the Biblical injunction to welcome the stranger, a maxim at the heart of the umbrella group's message. It turns out that pro-immigration-reform evangelical leaders are preaching to the choir. By a margin of 17 percentage points, according to PRRI, evangelicals who attend church regularly are more likely to support comprehensive reform, including a path to citizenship, than are those who attend seldom or never.

If a majority of rank-and-file Republicans, backed by evangelical leaders and business, favor immigration reform, why is it stalled in the House? The answer is simple: the tea party.

Americans who identify with the tea party are more opposed to comprehensive reform than is any other group. According to PRRI, a majority of tea-party identifiers oppose giving illegal immigrants an opportunity to earn citizenship. In June, the Tea Party Patriots organization threatened to mount a primary challenge against any Republican who votes for comprehensive immigration reform. In response, House Republicans have adopted a "piece by piece" strategy designed to separate measures that the tea party supports from those it doesn't, allowing the congressional GOP to say it's reforming the system without stepping on political land mines.

So it comes down to this: Will Speaker John Boehner allow the tea party to sink comprehensive reform supported by a majority of the American people and a majority of the House?

There is nothing as exigent as a default on the debt inducing Mr. Boehner to do the right thing. But as the pressure for action mounts in the coming months, he might ponder some basic truths.

Comprehensive immigration reform would be good for the economy; it would help unify our society; it would show a disheartened people and a disbelieving world that the United States government is capable of reaching agreement on fundamental issues; and it would allow Republicans to put behind them an issue that has done so much to devalue their brand, particularly with Latino voters.

On the other side of the ledger, we have . . . the Hastert Rule, discouraging him from bringing a bill up for a vote unless he's got a majority of Republican support.

It might be a tough choice for Mr. Boehner. But it shouldn't be.

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