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Trump and the Dreamers

The political incentives are in place for a bipartisan compromise.

Senators are debating immigration this week in a way the Senate was intended to function—with open debate and amendments. Imagine that. No one knows how it will turn out, but this is the best chance the U.S. has in years to break the right-left stalemate, if both parties are wise enough to seize it.

The moment is possible, paradoxically, thanks to Donald Trump. His decision not to renew Barack Obama's illegal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals order means that more than 700,000 young adults who arrived here as children could soon be subject to deportation. But having campaigned as an immigration restrictionist, Mr. Trump also has the credibility on the right to sell legalization for these so-called Dreamers.

These columns have long supported a generous immigration policy that makes America a mecca for the world's talent. But we've also had to concede that this aspiration faces political restraints, especially in a post-9/11 world. We'd happily support a clean bill authorizing a pathway to citizenship for the Dreamers stuck in legal limbo, but Mr. Trump needs something he can call a political victory for his voters.

The good news is that Mr. Trump's recent policy outline is more reasonable than the demands that the White House made last fall. The President has proposed providing a 10- to 12-year pathway to citizenship for an estimated 1.8 million immigrants who would be eligible for DACA even if they haven't signed up. This is smart politics since it gets the citizenship issue off the table so Democrats can't use it as a wedge against Republicans in the future. The U.S. also shouldn't create a group of second-class permanent residents.

In return, Mr. Trump wants \$25 billion for border security. This money would do more for national security if it went to build more Navy submarines, but Mr. Trump won't sign something without a victory for his wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. Construction would take years, and Congress could appropriate some of the funds for technology such as infrared imaging systems, drones and X-rays to detect smuggled drugs at border checkpoints and ports. Democrats already agreed to more than this in the 2013 Senate bill.

Mr. Trump also wants to hire more attorneys and administrative judges to clear the backlog of 670,000 cases—more than 23,000 of which involve criminal and security threats—pending in immigration court. This seems reasonable. On average, each case takes two years to adjudicate, which abridges due process and makes it harder to deport criminals.

The biggest sticking point will be restrictions on family-based migration. Mr. Trump wants to limit who citizens can sponsor for green cards to minor children and spouses, so no more siblings, adult children and parents. Our friend Stuart Anderson at the **National Foundation for American Policy** estimates that this policy if fully implemented would reduce legal immigration by about 400,000 a year, which would hurt the economy.

But Mr. Trump has also agreed to process the backlog of 3.7 million family members currently waiting for visas. The latter could take more than a decade, so there won't be a major reduction in family-based immigration anytime soon. Mr. Trump's offer has also exposed restrictionists who have long argued that any form of "amnesty" for illegal immigrants is unfair to those who have waited in line. But now these restrictionist want to bar those waiting in line too.

This is a bait and switch that Mr. Trump is right to reject—and Democrats should give him credit for doing. Some compromise over family migration ought to be possible, but if Democrats won't budge then the GOP will surely withdraw Mr. Trump's offer on the backlog. Democrats have to decide if they want to accept this concession and fight for more family migration when a Democrat is President.

As for the immediate politics, both sides have good reason to strike a deal. Democrats could finally take credit for legalizing young people they claim to speak for but haven't been able to help for the long term. If they are seen as killing legalization after they tried and failed to shut down the government, they will look cynical and Mr. Trump will blame them for the failure.

Republicans should also not want the issue trailing them through November and beyond. That's especially true for candidates running in states with large Hispanic populations like Nevada and Arizona. Mr. Trump would get money for his wall and say he solved a problem that Mr. Obama and George W. Bush could not.

Above all, a deal would break the vetoes that left and right have held over immigration policy. A demonstration of good will could lay the political ground for future compromises on skilled immigration. It would also provide a morale boost for the country, which for too long has been roiled by poisonous immigration politics. The incentives are in place for a deal, and those who are seen to kill it may pay a larger political price than they imagine.

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