



# Senate Comprehensive Immigration Reform Bill

## An NPG Footnote

By NPG Senior Advisor David Simcox

Senate leaders are rushing to push through SB 744, a bill enticingly titled as the “Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act.” As the title suggests, the bill is a complex blend of interests favored by diverse and at times clashing constituencies.

SB 744 emphasizes a promise of heightened border control as a prerequisite to its main political objective – amnesty for the estimated eleven million illegal immigrants now living here. Then, to seal the support for amnesty among corporate, business, agricultural and growth-minded political elites, the bill serves up a major expansion of overall immigration, most of it directed at easing presumed labor shortages in scientific and technical fields, farming and low-skill service industries.

NPG believes that this bill, as drafted, would be a major, transformative act of population policy, boosting U.S. population growth for decades to come. We emphatically oppose it. NPG also objects to it because, in the short- to mid-term, it would aggravate our current unemployment, now 7.6 percent, sharply increase the social overhead costs of revenue-short American communities, and intensify competition of American’s and earlier immigrants for jobs, affordable housing and uncrowded schools.

The language of the bill and the selection of hearing witnesses show that population stability is of no concern to the bill’s authors. Indeed, their key intent is to offset what many U.S. economic and political elites see as the threat of lagging growth of America’s population and the labor force. The notion that the U.S. can immigrate and populate its way out of unemployment and economic stagnation has been a major ideological driver, one that is particularly seductive to politicians.

Higher immigration, for business, humanitarian groups, and the present administration, has become an elixir for America’s prosperity. This bill would radically increase admissions of workers and their families, both as permanent residents or as long-term temporary sojourners. Anti-tax activist Grover Norquist, for example, offered his pie in the sky, assuring the Senate committee that higher immigration would add to total revenues, thus “easing the deficit without tax increases” – as if the hundreds of thousands of new immigrants, many of them destined for near-minimum wage jobs, would require no additional government support and services.

At the opening hearings, a spokesman for the administration scarily asserted that “in the absence of immigration the population of the U.S. will decline and the size of its economy will contract.” This is perhaps the broadest assertion to date of the administration’s faith in the myth of perpetual growth. And the spokesman creates a straw man by suggesting that the alternative to acceptance of the proposed bill would be zero immigration.

Even with the bill’s proposed cuts in some family-based and diversity visas, overall immigration by mid-decade would increase by nearly half a million or more, with 300 thousand to 400 thousand entering our already distressed labor force each year. One troubling feature is the Senate bill’s intent to wipe out in five years the “backlog” of some four million persons waiting for family-preference visas under present ceilings. While most of the 11 million resident illegal aliens are already counted in the U.S. population base, the amnesty would stimulate further immigration, as in 1986, by massive fraud, re-admissions of previously deported people, and, after some years, follow-on family reunification.

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NPG's consistent goal has been to make Americans aware that the long-term environmental and social health of this country demands that we stabilize U.S. population and ultimately reduce it to a level consistent with a healthy environment and secure resources for future generations. To do so, net immigration must be reduced by 75 to 80 percent. Pursuit of perpetual economic growth is a dangerous and ultimately self-destructive folly.

It is puzzling how legislators can propose to ease joblessness by adding hundreds of thousands of additional job seekers yearly. Arguments for rapidly increasing the labor force ignore that our existing 155 million-member labor force is now seriously under-utilized because of diverse factors such as deficient training and rapidly rising productivity in key industries, factors not likely to be changed by massive addition of more bodies. Labor force participation in the U.S. is falling, not rising.

Similarly, higher immigration is presumed to allay labor force shrinkage from aging of the population. But many older Americans are healthier and, by need or preference, are working longer than ever before. Congress should seek measures to encourage this trend rather than hasten the displacement of seniors with imported workers.

There are a few promising but inchoate features in the Senate's comprehensive bill that deserve further consideration. We support reductions in family chain migration, and call for an end to all preferences for non-nuclear family members. However, the bill's proposal to end current limits on family reunification for green card holders is a serious population accelerator and must be rejected.

Throughout this complex 844-page bill the Senate adds to population growth with generous concessions to special ethnic and humanitarian interests on interpretation and procedures in enforcement, from easier access to political asylum to expanded "discretion" for adjudicators, to broad waivers on ineligibility for legalization among deportees, absconders and criminal aliens.

The concern of Americans about a porous, disorderly border runs deep. But the bill's pledge to make it more secure before final amnesty is misleading. Illegal aliens will soon after enactment be granted "Registered Provisional Immigrant (RPI)"

status, with full freedom to reside, work and travel in the U.S. They are most unlikely to be deprived of that status if the border is not secured in ensuing years. Ultimately, the judgment of the border's security will depend on the measurements and assessment of an executive branch that since the unimplemented Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 has shown studied indifference to strong border controls.

The Senate's proposals for tightening internal enforcement are innovative, but lack credibility. We have long called for mandatory E-verify (first legislated in 1996 and since ignored) in the hiring process. The present voluntary E-verify system is working and should be mandated immediately. But the Senate bill would delay its implementation for as long as nine years. Similarly, we would welcome firm actions to detect and punish overstays of temporary visas, but the bill's omission of overland entries from coverage cripples its effectiveness.

Washington's present lunge toward an amnesty is an admission that the legislative and executive branches have consistently lacked political will for tough and consistent immigration enforcement for a half century. With the requisite political will, serious deterrence of illegal immigration is attainable even under existing U.S. laws.

Unlike past major immigration initiatives, the Senate proposes its radical immigration and labor force changes without the research and guidance of any Special Commission, and with only three hurried hearings. Congress should see U.S. falling fertility not as a danger but as an awakening. By their demographic behavior, Americans are voting for smaller families, conservation of resources and less population growth.

We urge Congress to take no such sweeping and experimental actions determining our national economic, demographic and environmental future without far more painstaking study and consultation with the American people.

**About the author:** David Simcox, an NPG special advisor, is a former career diplomat and formerly directed the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

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