

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

Background

Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) refers to the various proposals for broad changes to American immigration law that would increase legal immigration, decrease illegal immigration, and, in some cases, offer a pathway to citizenship for some of the nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States. CIR is needed because it addresses the needs of our nation's broken immigration system and must include a high level of transparency and guidelines. Various reform proposals have included recommendations to:

1. fix border enforcement
2. enhance "interior enforcement" (e.g., preventing visa overstays)
3. prevent people from working without a work permit
4. adapt the number of visas available to changing economic times
5. implement "amnesty programs" to legalize undocumented immigrants, and
6. help immigrants adjust to life in the U.S.

Current Status

The American electorate has become increasingly politicized about the issue of immigration. Rather than a debate that acknowledges and celebrates the historical narrative of America as a nation of immigrants, the rhetoric of today's debate is increasingly charged and polarizing. Efforts that previously enjoyed bipartisan support have seen a precipitous decline in Republican support in recent years. Among the numerous points of contention are the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) and the E-Verify system.

First introduced in 2001, the **DREAM Act** has been reintroduced and debated in many forms, both as a part of comprehensive immigration reform and as a separate entity. The DREAM Act would provide conditional permanent residency to certain undocumented students of good moral character who (a) arrived in the U.S. illegally as minors, (b) graduated from U.S. high schools, and (c) lived in the country continuously for at least 5 years prior to the bill's enactment. By completing 2 years in the military or 2 years at a 4-year institution of higher learning, students would obtain temporary (6-year) residency. As apparent from the narrowly defined set of prerequisites, the DREAM Act is designed to provide relief to young people whose undocumented status is no fault of their own and who are contributing to society as either students or soldiers. The DREAM Act provides a path to citizenship for these hardworking people and is worthy of our support.

The mandatory inclusion of **E-Verify** is also a point of contention. This online system connects employers to federal databases in order to determine employment eligibility of new hires and verify Social Security numbers. The system is operated, at no charge to employers, by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in partnership with the Social Security Administration. However, E-Verify's high error rate has led the government to estimate that mandatory use E-Verify would force 3-4 million American workers to have their records corrected by a government agency or lose their jobs.

Recommendations

- Comprehensive Immigration Reform should be pursued aggressively on a bipartisan basis, with proposals considered on their merits, rather than on the current political climate.
- The DREAM Act should be included in any Comprehensive Immigration Reform proposal, as children who had no role in their parents' immigration to the U.S., who know no other country as their home, and who are now working actively to improve their lives or their communities, deserve a pathway to legal status.
- Comprehensive Immigration Reform should not require the use of E-Verify unless or until the E-Verify system's error rate is dramatically reduced.
- Since 9/11, Arab Americans and American Muslims have been unfairly targeted by a number of national security initiatives, many of which are executed through an already overburdened and inefficient immigration system. As such, we believe that real immigration reform must include a termination of measures (like NSEERS) that base their actions on race, religion, or national origin.