

## Hope for Immigration Reform?

A new Republican proposal deserves a look.

Editorial  
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PERHAPS IT WAS to be expected of an emotional issue in an election year, but the debate over immigration reform descended this summer to ever-lower levels. The one-sided "hearings" staged by House Republicans to trash the bipartisan Senate immigration measure have been particularly odious -- aimed mostly at scoring points. Into this poisonous environment, two conservatives -- Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.) and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.) -- have introduced an intriguing, if imperfect, proposal that may offer the last, best hope for achieving immigration reform this year. It would begin with beefed-up enforcement -- but as part of a comprehensive package that would also put the millions now living in the United States illegally on a path to legal status and eventual citizenship.

We are not endorsing Pence-Hutchison; that would be impossible given that no actual legislation has been introduced. We do, though, applaud its authors for seeking to refocus the immigration discussion in a positive way. One plus is that their brand of enforcement-first is not tied to achieving an unrealistic -- and unattainable without other reforms -- degree of border control. Rather, Pence-Hutchison concentrates on benchmarks tied to resources and capabilities: hiring more agents, increasing detention capacity and making certain that employers poised to hire immigrant workers have a reliable system (secure identification cards, accurate databases) to verify eligibility. Postponing the rest of reform for two years while these goals are met isn't ideal, but it's a reasonable compromise.

On the legalization side, Pence-Hutchison would provide a path to citizenship -- albeit an overly lengthy and arduous one, 17 years in all, plus "self-deportation" to privately run "Ellis Island Centers" in their home countries -- for most of the 11 million or more people now in the United States illegally. It would also create a new category of temporary worker visas whose holders could -- again, after a long wait -- obtain citizenship. This framework, at least in theory, could avoid the perpetuation and expansion of a permanent underclass of foreign-born workers.

There are many unanswered questions and potential pitfalls. Among them: Only illegal immigrants from countries that are part of the North American and Central American free-trade agreements would be eligible for citizenship. How would other illegal immigrants be dealt with? What about a mechanism to reunify families? Are the requirements for ultimately obtaining citizenship so cumbersome that many people will be unable to comply -- and be forced back into the shadows? Will there be protections to ensure that new temporary workers wouldn't be exploited by the employers who would sponsor their visas?

Still, the proposal is the most promising development in months and, however long a shot, deserves attention. House Republicans have spent months fanning the flames of outrage over illegal immigration. When they return in September, they ought to ask themselves: If they fail to come up with a realistic solution by election time, won't voters blame the folks who have been in charge?

