

How Republicans Abdicated on Immigration Reform



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If there is one thing that everyone actually agrees on in Washington, it's that our immigration system is broken. Members of both parties have been saying it for years. Yet despite this consensus, legislation to update this system has eluded Congress for over thirty years. And at this point, it seems that only one side of the aisle is actually interested in solving the problem.

Even after Trump's anti-immigrant policies lost at the ballot box in 2020, Republican policymakers in Washington only seem to care about exacerbating the challenges we face in immigration and at the border. Clearly no one expects Senate Republicans to endorse the Biden administration's immigration reforms wholesale, but they aren't even putting forth a competing vision anymore.

Since 2008, the Republican platform has become an almost caricature of itself; literally doubling down on border barriers.

- In 2008, the platform demanded a fence along the Southern Border.

- In 2012, the platform demanded a *double layered* fence.
- In 2016, the platform demanded a wall.
- In 2020 they didn't adopt a platform of any kind, preferring to run solely on rhetoric.

Fast forward to today, and it seems fairly clear that Republicans are only interested in obstructionism, poison pills, and blame when it comes to immigration. As Democrats look to exhaust each and every avenue for reforming our broken immigration system, a look back at how a few key Senators have shifted shows just how far the party has strayed. While Republicans may have once been interested in a deal, they're no longer interested in even coming to the table. For years they claimed that once the border was secure, they would come to the table. But at the height of the Trump Administration, when the border was restricted more than ever before, nothing serious came forward. And because of that, it seems increasingly clear why Democrats are pursuing immigration solutions through the reconciliation process. There should be room for bipartisan progress on immigration, but it can't happen unless Republicans return to reality.

Marco Rubio

Once the promising new gentler voice on immigration for the Republican Party, Senator Rubio has fallen in lock step with the rightward swing it has taken in the Trump era. A look back at his positions shows that he could have led on key areas in immigration reform, particularly around Dreamers and guest workers.

- **2004:** Rubio co-sponsored in-state tuition for undocumented residents while in the Florida legislature. He also blocked anti-immigrant bills as Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives.
- **2012:** Rubio proposed a compromise version of the DREAM Act that would have provided deportation relief, though not a pathway to citizenship.
- **2013:** Rubio joined 8 Senators in crafting a bipartisan comprehensive immigration bill which passed in the Senate 68-32.
- **2016:** Rubio defended immigration reform in the 2016 election primaries while then-candidate Trump campaigned on a wall and mass deportation.
- **2018:** Rubio voted in favor of the Rounds-King deal on Dreamers which would have granted them legal status in exchange for funding for Trump's border wall.

“We need a functional guest worker program so that, in times of low unemployment and rapid economic growth, our industries have the labor they need to continue growing. And

we need an agricultural worker program that allows our growers to contract the seasonal and year-round labor they need legally.”¹

"We all wish we didn't have this problem, but we do," he said. "Leaving things the way they are, that's the real amnesty.”²

“And I also don’t believe that because you’re in favor of reforming our immigration system, that makes you a supporter of open borders.”³

Despite Rubio’s promising stances and statements on immigration in the past, he’s seemingly abandoned immigration as a priority so as not to risk the ire of the Republican base. He opted to not join a bipartisan working group in 2018 and seems to avoid the issue as much as possible after he lost to Trump in the Republican 2016 primary. And if the starting point for bipartisanship doesn’t include the former bellwether on the issue, it’s likely not going far.

Lindsey Graham

While Senator Graham backed many of President Trump’s policies on immigration, he was one of the Senators most interested in making bipartisan progress on immigration not that long ago. He was the Republican champion for action on Dreamers for years and has continued to introduce bipartisan legislation to legalize that community with Senator Durbin every single Congress.⁴

- **2006:** Graham co-sponsored the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act.
- **2013:** Graham joined 8 Senators in crafting a bipartisan comprehensive immigration bill which passed in the Senate 68-32.
- **2016:** Graham pushed back against candidate Trump’s rhetoric and proposals for a wall in the Republican presidential primary.
- **2018:** Graham voted in favor of the Rounds-King deal on Dreamers which would have granted them legal status in exchange for funding for Trump’s border wall.
- **2021:** Graham once again introduced the Dream Act again with Senator Durbin.

“These young people have lived in America since they were children and built their lives here. There is support across the country for allowing Dreamers -- who have records of achievement -- to stay, work, and reach their full potential.”⁵

“For the 11 million immigrants already in this country illegally, we would provide a tough but fair path forward...The American people deserve more than empty rhetoric and

impractical calls for mass deportation.”⁶

Like Rubio, Senator Graham has seemingly said the right things in the past and seemed sympathetic towards immigrants and the need to fix the system. But sadly, at this point, Graham has shown time and time again that given the choice between being a Trump loyalist and doing the right thing, he'll choose Trump every time.

Chuck Grassley

Long serving as the Judiciary Committee chairman and a consistent vote against comprehensive immigration deals, Senator Grassley has still been persuadable on certain immigration measures. He may not have been a champion of broad-based reform, but he was hardly now in Trump's camp on the issue. Like many, he has recognized the need to protect Dreamers and also had a more reality-based view of border policy.

- **2018:** Grassley voted in favor of the Rounds-King deal on Dreamers which would have granted them legal status in exchange for funding for Trump's border wall.
- **2019:** Grassley opposed Trump's national emergency declaration for border wall funding.

"I'm willing to give increased [H-1B visa] numbers.”⁷

While Senator Grassley has clearly stood against reform compromises in the past, there are select areas around where he's agreed we need action. Even in the height of the Trump administration, when a deal on DACA couldn't be found and the administration was looking to restrict *legal* immigration, Senator Grassley supported adding more guestworkers to our economy.⁸ Yet predictably, like so many of his colleagues on the Republican side of the aisle, he's now nowhere to be seen.

Conclusion

There were moments in time in the era before Trump where it looked like Republicans may have actually wanted to get something done on immigration reform. That's not where they are anymore.

Democrats have tried for decades to negotiate in good faith with Senate Republicans to fix the broken system. If the former leaders on that side of the aisle on immigration reform refuse to engage, it's understandable that Democrats will work to push forward solutions on their own.

TOPICS

IMMIGRATION 78

ENDNOTES

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