

Immigration Reform, Finally

By The Editorial Board

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The Senate on Thursday [approved the most ambitious overhaul of the nation's immigration system](#) in a generation. The vote on the bill was 68 to 32, enough to overcome a Republican filibuster and to deliver, as its sponsors had hoped, a strong signal to the House of Representatives that the measure has broad bipartisan support and deserves to be swiftly passed and sent to President Obama's desk.

Of course, as far as signals like those are concerned, the Republican majority in the House has its hands over its ears and is going la-la-la-la-la. It does not care about the Senate's preoccupations, and it is unimpressed with the months of debate and arduous deal-making that led to the historic vote. As John Boehner, the House speaker, has said more than once, the House majority will do what the majority wants, in its own way and on its own time.

And what that majority wants, apparently, is not a big, bipartisan immigration solution, at least not one that turns millions of undocumented immigrants into citizens. Mr. Boehner insists that he won't even bring a bill up for a vote unless a majority of Republicans support it.

To say immigration reform has uncertain prospects going forward puts it mildly.

Which is too bad, because the Senate's bird in the hand — the [Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act](#) — is good for both parties and, lest anyone forget what this is all about, the country. It is not perfect, or even ideal, but it is a decent bill that could get better and offers the best chance in decades to improve on a disastrous status quo.

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It starts with a path to citizenship for as many as 11 million people now toiling at the edge of society and outside the law. It offers them a chance to live, work and travel without the suffocating fear of arrest and deportation. Lifting that burden makes possible an outpouring of energy and hope such as this nation has never seen.

The bill contains other good and sensible reforms. It gives a faster citizenship path to farmworkers and to the Dreamers, the blameless young unauthorized immigrants who came here as children, and whose advocacy has honored their country. It allows some deportees to return from abroad to join their families and creates a more generous and sensible future flow of temporary workers. It reduces the backlogs that have kept millions waiting years to join their families. It includes reforms to the cruel and corrupted detention system and immigration courts and protections for vulnerable women and children.

The price of Senate approval for these good things has been a lot of foolish expense and enforcement overkill. The bill includes a vast expansion of the employment-verification system, whose implications for privacy and workers' rights the country has yet to fully grasp or debate. It throws billions more dollars at the southern border, soon to be gulped by private security

contractors, the for-profit prison industry and a constellation of enforcement agencies lined up from San Diego to Brownsville, Tex.

And the citizenship path is far longer and costlier than it should be: at least 13 years and hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars per family, and strewn with other burdens. Make it any harder and you would have to honestly start calling it a path to limbo.

And for all these hard compromises, things could get worse. The House has a handful of bills in the works, of varying degrees of awfulness, to criminalize the undocumented and add new layers of self-defeating enforcement. Hard-liners will be applying all the pressure they can to drag reform further to the right or kill it dead.

But, even so, there is no reason to despair — yet. Democrats in the House can apply pressure, too. So can Mr. Obama, the American people and any Republicans who don't want their party continue its estrangement from the American mainstream. The failure of immigration reform would be a disaster, but it can be avoided if Mr. Boehner gives Republicans and Democrats the chance to vote on comprehensive reform. There is a strong chance that if he does so a good bill could pass.

There is a historic chapter on immigration to be written this summer. Mr. Boehner could help write it.