

Pathway to citizenship

From the Editors in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue



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Newt Gingrich's call for a more humane policy toward undocumented immigrants produced the usual reaction from other Republican presidential candidates: they accused him of advocating "amnesty." The former House Speaker had observed, "If you've been here 25 years and you got three kids and two grandkids, you've been paying taxes and obeying the law, you belong to a local church, I don't think we're going to separate you from your family, uproot you forcefully and kick you out."

Gingrich injected a smidgen of reality into the conversation. Most leaders in his party talk as though the 10 million undocumented immigrants in this country snuck across the border last night and should be—could be—rounded up and deported. Such a deportation policy, even if it were remotely feasible, would be inhumane and devastating to families throughout the country.

Whether he knew it or not, Gingrich was describing a great many adult immigrants. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research organization, 35 percent of immigrants have been in the U.S. 15 years or more, and another 28 percent have been here at least ten years. About half are parents of children under 18 years of age. And 39 percent attend church weekly. In sketching a portrait of an undocumented immigrant as family-loving, hardworking, tax-paying, churchgoing and deeply rooted in the U.S., Gingrich was pretty much sketching the typical immigrant.

As Gingrich suggests, it's absurd not to offer such a person a pathway to legal status. Perhaps the worst element of the broken immigration system is that it offers no reasonable way for that tax-paying, hardworking immigrant to become a citizen. The only application process available requires the immigrant to leave the U.S.—uproot his family or leave his family behind—and return to his home country, apply for U. S. citizenship, and then wait on average ten years for a decision. That's no option at all—and it's certainly not a policy that cares about families.

Gingrich's remarks hardly constitute a workable plan for immigration reform, however. To begin with, why pick 25 years as the magic number? (If you've been here 24 years, you'll be deported?) Furthermore, he proposes holding individual hearings for the 10 million illegal immigrants, with local panels—on the model of local draft boards—making the decision on residency status. That's a recipe for massive injustice, not to mention a logistical nightmare. Perhaps worst of all, Gingrich posits giving undocumented immigrants legal residency but not citizenship, a policy that would create something the U.S. has never had—a permanent class of guest workers who play a major role in society but lack the right to vote.

Perhaps in calling for a more humane immigration policy, Gingrich was merely indulging in his famous penchant for tossing out off-the-cuff ideas. That his remarks advanced the discussion is a measure of how empty the rhetoric has been.