

Putting "illegals" on "probation"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Greg Sargent [reports](#) on how those GOP House members who want to pass comprehensive immigration reform intend to get enough of their caucus on board to do it. He includes their re-exploration of this doozy: keep the rough outline of the Senate's path to citizenship, but require people to admit their guilt—and instead of calling the middle category “legal status,” call it “probation.” Problem solved: we're still Tough on Crime!

Paul Waldman [applauds this as “genius”](#)—because semantics matter less than getting the thing passed—and I suppose he's right. I know the line: linguistic framing matters a lot to conservatives, and Republicans are very, very good at it. This is what brought us such gems as the “death tax” and the “right to work.”

Still, this is kind of ugly stuff. It isn't just about a preferred euphemism for selling a given policy. It's about making immigrants self-identify in criminal terms. As Sargent notes, the admission of guilt would technically be civil, not criminal—being undocumented is a civil offense, not a crime—but “probation” is a word associated with criminal guilt.

So if you're undocumented, our big, comprehensively reformist move would be to give you the option to accept “probationary” status, presumably so you can think about the wrong you've done and prove that you deserve to be forgiven. Welcome, and thanks for coming out of the shadows! Also: we get to call you a bad guy.

It makes me wonder whether Rob Bell might have gotten a kinder hearing from his right flank if, instead of entertaining the possibility of universal salvation in somewhat vague terms, he had done so by reclaiming the word “purgatory.” It's okay everyone, the ungodly might not be weeping and gnashing their teeth for all eternity, but they'll still have to face the fact that they're not as good as we are.

Of course, if comprehensive immigration reform gets done, it will be in no small part because [evangelical activists got it done](#). And if it takes “probation” to do it, that's probably a price worth paying. After all, even the leading Democratic senator in this

effort already [calls undocumented immigrants “illegals.”](#) Using criminal language in this context is inaccurate and offensive, but it’s nothing new.