

## Experts: Rep. Chris Smith a leader on immigration

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Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J.

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Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J. / Gannett News Service file photo

With immigration reform seemingly at hand, two experts on the issue believe Rep. Chris Smith's ultimate stance could serve as a bellwether for the legislation's chances in Washington.

Generally recognized as a conservative on many causes, Smith, R-N.J., has also supported legislation protecting the rights of illegal immigrants to seek counsel with attorneys, said Ryan Lilienthal, chair of the Task Force on Immigration for Einstein's Alley, a nonprofit organization that promotes economic development initiatives in central New Jersey.

"He's been a leader on human rights and humanitarian issues," said Lilienthal of Smith.

"He could play a pivotal role within the New Jersey delegation."

Aides to Smith could not be reached for comment.

Smith is considered one of several swing Republicans whose views could go a long way towards determining if or how the nation's immigration laws are changed, said Janice Fine, an associate professor at Rutgers University who serves as faculty coordinator of the Program on Immigration and Democracy at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

The potential changes would impact tens of thousands of immigrants in New Jersey, from blue collar earners who work in service, agricultural or construction fields to white collar employees of pharmaceutical, business or technology firms, Fine said.

"It seems very likely that something's going to happen this time," said Fine, referring to several previous failed attempts to reform the nation's immigration laws.

On Tuesday, President Barack Obama appealed for a series of reforms that would dramatically change the lives of millions who currently live in the United States illegally.

Like a bipartisan reform proposal outlined Monday by eight U.S. senators, Obama's plan would create a pathway to citizenship for the approximately 11 million people who may have crossed the border illegally or remained in the country after their travel or work visas expired.

"Yes, they broke the rules," Obama said.

"But these 11 million men and women are now here. ... An overwhelming number of these individuals are not looking for any trouble."

Both plans call for immigrants to undergo background checks and pay a series of fines and back taxes before they could obtain a temporary legal status.

The plans differ on their calls for added border security and on the speed of the process immigrants would need to undergo before obtaining a residency status, the precursor to becoming a U.S. citizen.

Obama's previous proposals for creating a pathway to citizenship required those already in the U.S. illegally to register with the government and submit to security checks; pay registration fees, a series of fines and back taxes; and learn English.

After eight years, individuals would be allowed to become legal permanent residents and could eventually become citizens

five years later.

The Senate group's pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants already in the U.S. would be contingent upon securing the border and improving tracking of people in the U.S. on visas.

Linking citizenship to border security could become a sticking point between the White House and lawmakers.

The Senate framework would also require those here illegally to pass background checks and pay fines and taxes in order to qualify for a "probationary legal status" that would allow them to live and work here — but not qualify for federal benefits — before being able to apply for permanent residency, a critical step toward citizenship.

Once they are allowed to apply they would do so behind everyone else already waiting for a green card within the current immigration system.

But while broader support for the proposals may be possible in the Democratic-controlled Senate, the plans may face a tougher sell in the more conservative U.S. House of Representatives, controlled by Republicans.

Outside a grocery store on Shrewsbury Avenue in Red Bank, where slightly more than one out of every three residents is Hispanic, several took a wait-and-see attitude to the proposals.

"Politicians always speak and promise," said Angel Barroso, 32, an immigrant from El Salvador who lives in the borough.

"I don't think people should go forward until there is more security with what will happen."

Concepcion Armas, who pays the bills by cleaning and babysitting, said she's hopeful things will get better.

"Here, you have to live your life in secret," said Armas, 27, who emigrated three years ago from Mexico.

"We will have to wait."