

Immigration activists slam Gingrich on ‘Red Card Solution’

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Newt Gingrich is trying to carve out a middle way on illegal immigration, pushing a “Red Card Solution” that would essentially expand the guest-worker program without giving those immigrants a pathway to citizenship.

But Gingrich’s compromise isn’t eliciting much praise within the immigration community: Activists on both on left and right say that Red Carding fails to address fundamental problems with the U.S. immigration system.

On the right, advocates who want greater restrictions on immigration say the Red Card Solution simply gives businesses a pool of cheap labor at the expense of native-born workers. The Kriebel Foundation, which developed the idea, “has an interest in a modern-day form of slavery while wages have atrophied for less-skilled American workers,” says Dan Stein, president of the conservative Federation for American Immigration Reform. “This is effort to create a stratified labor force that provides wealthy employers with a way to get employees at below-market rates.” What’s more, he warns, guest workers with Red Cards might simply overstay their visit when their work permits expire.

Pro-immigration advocates argue that the Red Card plan would undermine the rights of immigrants and would be massively difficult to put in place. “It virtually guarantees that we create second-class status for workers and their families — lawful but with no real rights,” says Mary Giovagnoli, director of the Immigration Policy Center. She described plan’s the elimination of birthright citizenship for Red Card workers as “eradicating rights.” She also says the proposal ignores the need to reform the legal immigration system.

Giovagnoli disagrees with the plan’s supporters that it would be easier to find political consensus on increasing the number of temporary workers than on creating a pathway to legal citizenship. “The red card is wrapped in a pretty bow...they make it all sound so simple, but the contours of a temporary worker program have been bitterly fought over in all major immigration packages,” Giovagnoli says.

Countering the backlash, the Kriebel Foundation argues that there are jobs that native-born Americans are reluctant to fill and that the Red Card Solution is the most politically viable way to address the resulting worker shortages. For example, Alabama farm owners say they have struggled to find enough employees to work the fields since the state’s strict immigration law — among the toughest in the nation — went into effect.

“Do we have enough dishwashers in American society? The answer is no,” says the Rev. Louis Cortes, head of Esperanza USA, a Hispanic evangelical group, in a promotional video for the Red Card Solution.

Gingrich’s endorsement of the plan sets him apart from the rest of the 2012 Republican primary field. And despite their strong criticism, some in the pro-immigration camp applaud Gingrich’s call for compassion for illegal immigration and his interest in finding a workable compromise.

“While we see deep flaws in the plan as described, we like that he is drawing attention to immigration policy instead of just immigration rhetoric and politics,” says Jenny Werwa, a spokesperson for the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Frank Sharry, executive director of America’s Voice, says: “Gingrich, while hardly a reformer in the

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tradition of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, at least deigns to acknowledge the reality that it is neither practical nor humane to drive 11 million people out of the country.” Sharry says that GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney, who has slammed Gingrich’s plan, “wants 11 million people who live in our communities, care for our children, take care of the elderly, clean our homes, and are Americans in all but paperwork to get lost.”

Still, those pushing for tighter immigration restrictions believe Gingrich is “out of touch” with their priorities, according to FAIR’s Stein. “Romney’s discussing E-Verify, that’s a big priority for us,” says Stein. “He’s opposed to amnesty and seems to have a strong position when it comes to robust interior enforcement.”

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