

# How the Tea Party extreme blocks US immigration reform

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**On 30 January, John Boehner – the Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives – surprised many with the release of a new set of principles on immigration reform. The paper argued that “Washington’s failure to fix [immigration] is hurting our economy and jeopardising our national security”. For many, this move was a glimmer of hope that the United States’ Congress would finally tackle the issue head-on this year. Indeed, Republicans know that they might lose the next presidential elections if they do not act on immigration reform.**

Boehner’s plan stressed that stronger border control has to come first, but also offered a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers, the children of irregular immigrants who arrived as minors in the US and hope for regularisation under the proposed Dream Act.

The paper also stipulated the option of legalisation for other immigrants, on preconditions such as the passing of rigorous background checks, paying significant fines, being proficient in English as well as self-sufficiency without access to public benefits.

## Change of heart

However, not even a week later, Speaker Boehner declared that Republican representatives claimed distrust in President Obama’s willingness to enforce immigration control, thereby putting a halt to negotiations.

So what happened? Why the sudden change of heart? The short answer is Republican Senator Ted Cruz, one of the leading figures of the ultra-conservative Tea Party movement.

The same day John Boehner made the GOP plan on immigration reform public, Cruz – who is also a potential presidential contender for 2016 – denounced the plan as an “amnesty” and called on the party to wait until 2015 to debate the issue.

The bedrock conservative Cruz was born in Canada to Cuban parents, and was the first Latino to win a US Senate seat in Texas. Notwithstanding his own immigrant background, Cruz is an outspoken opponent of immigration reform, specifically advocating for the tripling of the current deployment of border patrol agents. Fellow hardline Republican Sarah Palin praised Cruz by declaring that he “chews barbed wire and spits out rust”.

## Anti-immigrant attitudes

Anti-immigrant sentiment and activism has been part of the Tea Party agenda from the beginning, and polls have shown that Tea Party supporters are more likely than others to hold anti-immigrant attitudes.

It’s important to note this, as while the Tea Party movement only represents a minority of the US population, it appears to be extremely powerful. In October last year the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party even managed to force the shutdown of the federal government, which had a hugely negative impact on the US economy.

Observers of American politics summarising the influence of the Tea Party have remarked that many Republican lawmakers are unwilling or refuse to vote for legislation that they understand to be necessary, and even beneficial for their party and the country, out of fear of retribution from their extremist but outspoken peers.

Hence, as New York Times journalist Carl Hulse argues, in many cases “Republicans hope yes but vote no”. As such, this momentary standstill for immigration reform is not necessarily an indicator of what the American people want, or even what the majority of Congress thinks is necessary to do. It is simply a symptom of the current dysfunction of US politics.

Leila Hadj-Abdou is a fellow at the Centre for Transatlantic Relations (SAIS/Johns Hopkins) in Washington DC.