

Texas DREAM Act Under Fire in Caucus Campaigns

Written by Hannah Hess

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Texas Governor Rick Perry touts his immigration record as a strength, but his opponents for the GOP presidential nomination accuse him of creating a magnet to draw illegal immigrants across the border.

His state's decision to offer in-state tuition rates to undocumented students through the Texas DREAM Act has drawn a barrage of questions from lowans on recent visits, and a stream of attacks from fellow conservatives.

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney threw the most recent elbow during a Sioux City stop on October 20, saying he had nixed a similar proposal in the Bay State.

Lawmakers "passed a DREAM Act saying we should give tuition breaks to illegals living in our country – that taxpayers should fund the college education of illegals in Massachusetts," Romney said. "I vetoed that bill."

Earlier this month, Perry took heat about his support of the DREAM Act from western lowans who wanted to know if he supported extending it to the federal level.

"Never," Perry said, explaining that the solution was appropriate for his state, which has the nation's second largest illegal-immigrant population.

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The act offers in-state tuition rates to children of illegal immigrants who have lived in Texas for at least three years, graduated from a public high school, and signed an affidavit promising to apply for citizenship.

Perry defended signing the 2001 act, which passed the Texas legislature with bipartisan support.

“Because of the absolute failure of the federal government to secure its border, states got forced upon them decisions on how you’re going to deal with people who are in your state,” Perry said. “The federal government also says you’ve got to give them health care, you’ve got to have education.”

Some 1.1 million illegal immigrants lived in Texas in 2001, according to estimates from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In 2010, the total was close to 1.8 million – an increase that Romney attributes to benefits such as in-state tuition.

“You’ve got to turn off the magnets,” Romney said. “Build a fence, have enough people to patrol it, and turn off the magnets – [if] we do those things, we will stop illegal immigration.”

Iowa’s illegal-immigrant population is not among the 10 largest states tracked by the Department of Homeland Security, but it has drawn national attention.

In 2008, federal immigration officials arrested nearly 300 immigrant workers at a Postville meat-packing plant. The event was the largest single raid of a workplace in U.S. history at that time.

Among the supporters of a federal DREAM Act is President Barack Obama, who has attempted to rally congressional support for the measure – which was rejected by the Senate in 2010. Immigration advocates have pressured the president to use executive authority to push the measure, but he has declined to act without a law on the books.

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Texas U.S. Representative and presidential contender Ron Paul decries the DREAM Act on the state and federal level, saying the government should not be rewarding people for coming into the country illegally. The entire Republican presidential field outside of Perry has latched on to this argument.

Other Republican candidates have also expressed universal support for pedestrian fencing along the border, but Perry – who governs 1,200 miles of the Texas-Mexico border – has said that is unrealistic.

Whenever Perry speaks about the DREAM Act, he follows his comments with a call for tighter border security in the form of more boots on the ground and aerial drones. He also decries the current administration for failing to secure the border.

Congress passed legislation to construct a fence along the border – the Secure Fence Act of 2006, which was signed by President George W. Bush and supported by Obama.

Former Iowa House Speaker Chris Rants, who was in the audience for Romney's latest attack on the DREAM Act, predicts that Iowans have not heard the last of the hot topic of immigration. People relate illegal immigration to the availability of jobs, he said.

"It is going to be an issue in which I think fault lines are being drawn in the race, not just in Iowa but elsewhere," Rants said. "It's always been a hot topic in western Iowa, and it is one that candidates are going to be asked about and held accountable for."

But state Senator David Johnson (R-Ocheyedan), a Perry supporter, said he believes the issue of the DREAM Act will be eclipsed by jobs and the economy as the presidential race moves forward.

He called linking illegal immigration to the availability of jobs a "stretch."

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