

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 9, 2010 at 7:18am

DREAM Act Passes House & Heads to the Senate

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Distinctly Catholic

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the DREAM Act last night by a vote of 216-198. I hope NCR readers not only know what the DREAM Act is about, but called their congressman to urge support for the measure, but essentially, the bill provides that children who were brought to America by their parents and are currently entering the military or college can follow a path to citizenship that does not require them to leave the country, wait for a visa, etc. It is almost impossible to imagine a bill that is more coherent with Catholic moral principles.

Last week, in his capacity as co-chairman of the USCCB Committee on Migration, Coadjutor-Archbishop of Los Angeles Jose Gomez wrote in a letter to Congress, "There are times when a proposal should be enacted because, simply put, it is the right thing to do. This is one of them. The DREAM Act represents a practical, fair, and compassionate solution for thousands of young persons who simply want to reach their God-given potential and contribute to the well-being of our nation."

On the final vote, a total of eight Republicans voted in favor of passage, six of whom are retiring or lost their bids for re-election. Congressman Mike Castle from Delaware, Charles Djou of Hawaii, Joseph Cao of Louisiana, and Bob Inglis of South Carolina lost their bids for re-election this year and all voted for the bill. Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart from Florida, and Vern Ehlers from Michigan are both retiring and they, too, voted for the measure. Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, and Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both from Florida, also voted aye. That's it. Not a single Republican congressman from Texas voted in favor of the measure, which struck me as odd given the large Latino population there, and as indication of an opportunity for Democratic organizers in the Lone Star State.

I know some prelates have recently welcomed the fact that a "pro-life" Speaker of the House, Cong. John Boehner, will take the gavel in January. Did he heed the call of Archbishop Gomez? Of course not. The

next time Boehner utters the words "pro-family," I hope Archbishop Gomez will call and ask the incoming Speaker if he cares about Latino families too.

There are some Democrats who made themselves into Scrooges on this vote too, 38 in total. I was especially disappointed to see Cong. Bart Stupak in the "no" column. Stupak is retiring so it was a free vote and he should have done the right thing. I will always be proud of Stupak's championing of the rights of the unborn in the Democratic Caucus on Capitol Hill, as well as his determination to get health care reform across the finish line. His vote yesterday is a stain on his record.

Other votes were indicative of future intentions. In Ohio, both Cong. Steve Driehaus and John Boccieri were defeated in their re-election bids. On the DREAM Act, Driehaus voted yes and Boccieri voted no. My hunch is that Boccieri is thinking of running again. Democrats Ben Chandler and Joe Donnelly, who narrowly won re-election from Kentucky and Indiana respectively, both voted no, which is unsurprising even if it is disappointing. The fault is not entirely theirs. Being a Congressman from Indiana's Third District is not exactly a bully pulpit. The President spoke passionately about repealing Don't Ask; Don't Tell, as he should, but he has failed to use the power of his office to shape the immigration debate. The case for comprehensive immigration reform was always a compelling, and a centrist, and even a traditional one: Separating children from their families and husbands from their wives is un-American and unchristian. Obama was not able to deliver immigration reform, but the DREAM Act would have been a downpayment on shaping the debate for 2012. This is smart politics. Needless to say, it was Latinos who carried Sen. Harry Reid across the finish line and formed a Democratic bulwark in California.

The prospects of getting anything passed in the more Byzantine U.S. Senate – besides, of course, tax cuts for the super-rich – remain murky at best. But, as mentioned, Sen. Reid the Majority Leader owes his re-election to Latinos. Sen. Durbin, the Senate Whip is profoundly committed to the DREAM Act. I hope that bishops like Bishop Malone of Portland, Maine, who have been quite vocal on some political issues, will call their Republican Senators and lobby for the bill. And, I hope Cardinal DiNardo and his confreres down in Texas will stand up and be counted and let their elected officials know that the Church is fighting for her own in these matters and we shall not cease. If the bishops do not get out front and fight as loudly on behalf of our Latinos brothers and sisters as they do for our unborn brothers and sisters, don't be surprised if Latinos pay a lot less heed to what the Church has to say. This is a time for the Church to be loud and firm.

The political landscape of 2012 is already taking shape in some regards. Much will depend on the degree of gridlock vs. cooperation we see in the next months between a GOP-led House and a Democratic Senate and White House. But, two issues are clearly in focus: Tax cuts for the super-rich will be on the ballot in 2012 and so will immigration reform. Both are winners for the Democrats, not in every district, but overall. But, these days before the final vote in the Senate are a time for the White House to get out the big bully pulpit and begin framing that issue in ways the President has not before. Latinos will not be taken for granted forever by Democratic politicians.

A final note. The Tea Party and its GOP heroes like to talk about American exceptionalism all the time. There is not an historian in the land who would deny the fact that the thing that is most exceptional about America is its history of welcoming immigrants, the way immigrants bring fresh blood and new energy to our culture and our economy, the way American mores take the traditions of other nations, assimilate them, and produce new ways of being an American. For Catholics especially, this history is not only history, it is the on-going reality of our church in America. The vote in the Senate will tell us a lot about the moral character of those who cast it, and how they understand what American exceptionalism is all about.

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