



How Many New Voters Would S.744 Create?

A look at the electoral implications of the Gang of Eight immigration bill

By Steven A. Camarota

Based on projections published by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), we estimate that if S.744 were to become law it will add more than 17 million new potential voting-age citizens by 2036. These new potential voters are in addition to the nearly 15 million that the current level of legal immigration will add by 2036. Combined, current immigration plus the effects of S.744 would add more than 32 million potential new voting-age citizens by 2036. To place these figures in perspective, the last four presidential elections were decided by 4.5 million votes on average.

Among the report's findings:

- Based on the CBO's analysis of S.744, we project that the bill will add 4.6 million new potential voters above the number added by the current level of legal immigration by 2024. The bill would add 9.5 million potential voters by 2028 and 17.3 million by 2036.
- Of the new potential voters S.744 would create by 2036, slightly more than one-third would be a result of the bill's amnesty provisions based on CBO projections, the rest are due to the bill's large increases in future legal immigration.
- Even without the effects of S.744, the current level of immigration will add 5.1 million new potential voting-age citizens to the country by 2024, 8.4 million by 2028, and 14.9 million by 2036.
- Combined, the current level of immigration plus the additions from S.744 would create nearly 10 million potential voting-age citizens by 2024, and more than 32 million by 2036.
- The 32 million potential voters current immigration plus S.744 will create is slightly larger than the number of Americans over age 65 who voted in 2012. It is more than twice the number of veterans who voted in 2012, and nearly three times the number of Hispanics who voted last year.
- For legal permanent immigrants to be potential voters they must be at least 18 years old and have lived in the country for at least five years, allowing them to naturalize. For most amnesty beneficiaries under S.744, it will take at least a decade for them to naturalize.
- These projections are only for potential immigrant voters, not their U.S.-born children. The projections take into account deaths, return-migration, and residency requirements to naturalize. We do not estimate the share that will actually naturalize and vote once eligible to do so.

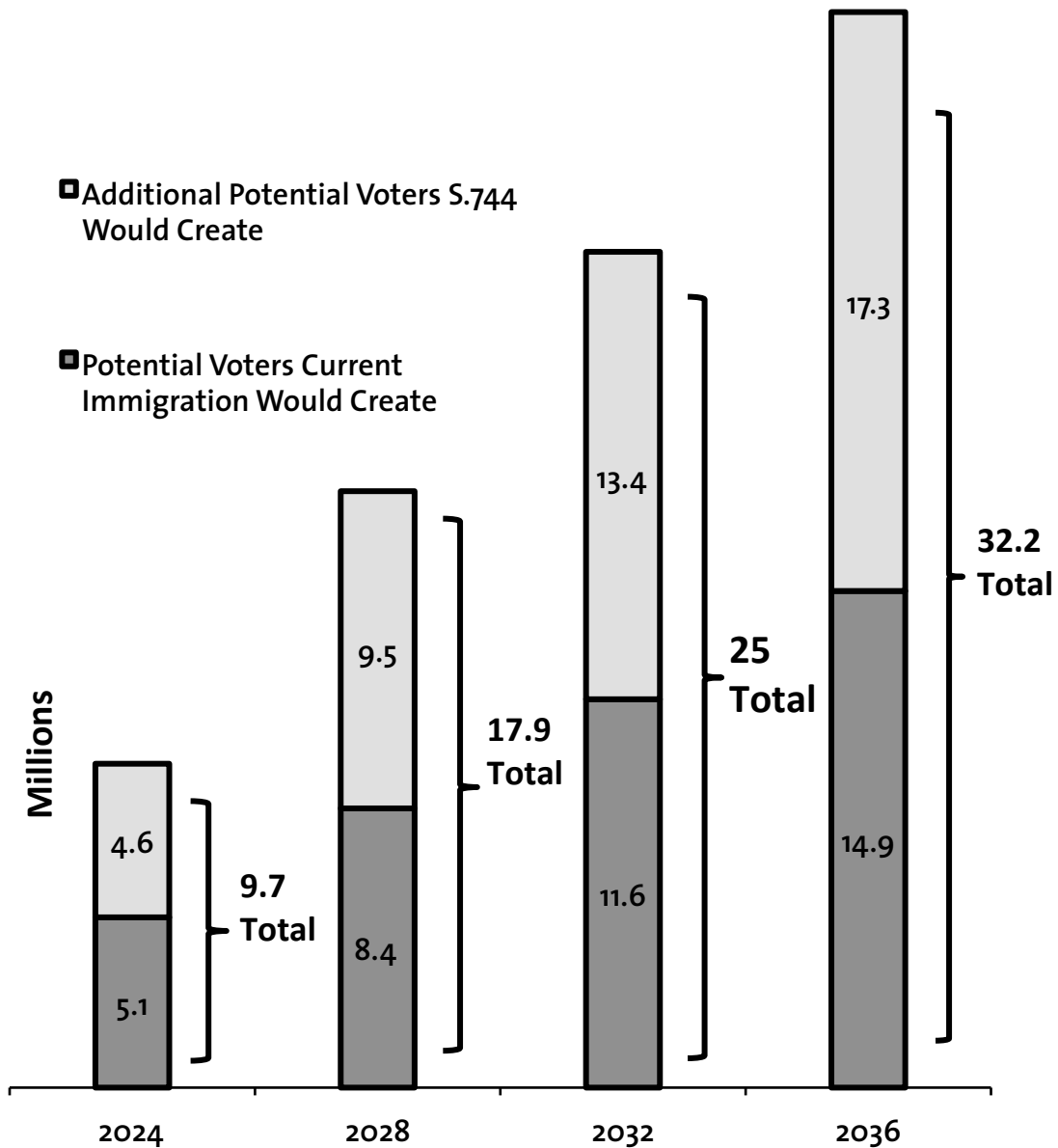
Discussion

While the impact of immigration generally or S.744 in particular is hotly debated, there is general agreement on the effect immigration has the size of U.S. population, including those eligible to vote. Lawful Permanent Resi-

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dents (LPRs), colloquially referred to as green card holders, can, if they wish, become citizens by naturalizing, normally after five years of residence. The same is true of those legalized under the amnesty provisions of S.744. (Most amnesty beneficiaries will have to wait more than a decade to naturalize; however, those who arrived before age 16 or have worked in agriculture can do so much more quickly.) This report takes into account return-migration, mortality, and residency requirements to naturalize and then projects the impact of both current immigration and the added effect of S.744 on the number of potential voters created in the four presidential elections 2024 through 2036.

Figure 1. Current immigration law plus S.744 would add millions of new voters.



NOTES: Assumes the current level of legal permanent immigration of 1.1 million a year under current law 2014 to 2036, those arriving 2031 to 2036 have no impact on projections because they have not resided in the country long enough. Takes into account mortality, return migration, and the five-year residence requirement for citizenship. CBO projections for the number of new potential citizens can be found in their [report on S.744](#) (page 15). The CBO projections are only for the additional potential citizens that S.744 will create above the current level of legal immigration.

In recent years, the United States has issued 1.1 million new green cards annually. So even without S.744, current immigration will add 9.5 million potential voters by 2028 and 17.3 million potential voters by 2036 (See Figure 1). These are individuals who will have LPR status, have lived in the country for at least five years, and are old enough to vote by these dates. The figures also include those who entered in 2014 or later and will have already naturalized. To project the added impact of S.744 we use the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) analysis of S.744. Because S.744 would significantly accelerate family immigration for a decade and create new programs for skilled and unskilled workers it will create an additional 9.5 million potential voters by 2028 and 17.3 million by 2036.

Perhaps surprisingly, projections developed by the CBO, on which our voter projections for S.744 are based, indicate that only about one-third of the increase in potential citizens is due to the bill's amnesty provisions. The rest of the increase is due to the bill's expansion of green cards.¹

Of course, these projections are not inevitable; they are instead a direct result of policies that can be changed. None of the 32 million potential voters current legal immigration and S.744 would create over the next two decades have yet received LPR status or amnesty. In fact, the overwhelming majority have not yet entered the country. The projections, therefore, show one possible future. The current level of immigration can be reduced or increased and S.744 can be defeated, modified, or passed in its current form. We do not attempt to estimate what share of these potential voters will actually naturalize and vote. However, even if S.744 does not become law, but current trends are allowed to continue, the impact of immigration on a closely divided electorate will be substantial. This is the case even if only a modest share of the potential voters future immigration policy will create actually vote.

Methodology

The Current Level of Immigration. We first project the impact of current immigration law on the number of potential voting-age citizens. We are only interested in future immigration, not naturalized citizens and potential citizens currently residing in the United States. Nor do we project the number of children future immigrants will have. In the last five years, the United States has issued 1.1 million green cards each year on average.² Green cards are the common term used to describe those who become Lawful Permanent Residents. In almost all cases, LPRs can choose to become citizens by naturalizing after residing in the country for five years.³

Although the number of new green cards issued each year has tended to rise over time, in order to be conservative we assume the level of new legal immigration will remain unchanged over the next two decades. We incorporate both mortality and return migration into our projections.⁴ Potential voters are persons who are at least 18 years of age, are LPRs, and have lived in the country for at least five years, allowing them to naturalize.⁵ It includes those who came to the country after 2014 and will have naturalized. We do not estimate what share of these voting-age potential citizens will actually become citizens.

The figure reports the number of potential immigrant voters that will be added to the United States by 2036 assuming no change in immigration policy.⁶ Although not shown in the figure, by 2020 1.7 million new immigrants who will have received green cards in 2014 and 2015 under current law will have lived in the country long enough to naturalize and will be of voting age. The numbers become much larger as the projections move forward as an ever-larger population meets the five-year residence requirement for citizenship. By 2024 there will be more than five million new potential voting-age citizens in the country. By 2028 there will be 8.4 million. By 2032, under current law, there will be 11.6 million new potential immigrant voters, and 14.9 million by 2036.

While the number of potential voters current immigration will create may seem improbably large, it must be remembered that the arrival of 1.1 million immigrants annually adds up over time. Of course some immigrants do die and some go home, but most eventually become eligible for citizenship. So, for example, 12.1 million new immigrants will have arrived from the start of 2014 to the end of 2024, yet only 5.1 million will be potential voters by 2024 because more than five million LPRs living in the country in that year will not have been here long enough to meet the five-year residency requirement. In addition, more than one million legal immigrants who arrived in 2014 or later will have died or gone home by the end 2024. Finally, of those remaining we estimate that 13 percent will not be of voting age in 2024. It takes time for the arrival of legal immigrants to have a big impact on the number of potential voters. But as the figure shows the number builds over time. By 2032, only eight years after 2024, the number would more than double from 5.1 million to 11.6 million potential immigrant voters.

There is no question that the effect of future immigration on the number of potential citizens will be very large if current policies remain unchanged. We cannot say what share of future arrivals will become citizens and vote. Even if only half do so, the impact could be significant and not just at the national level.

Projecting the Impact of S.744. We have not created our own projections of the number of new potential citizens that the Gang of Eight bill will create. Table 2 (p. 15) of the Congressional Budget Office's report on S.744 projects the number of additional potential citizens that the bill would create. CBO projects the impact of the bill's legalization provisions and the increases in legal immigration above the current level of immigration. The CBO reports that the amnesty and increased legal immigration in S.744 would create four million new potential citizens (of all ages) by 2023, 10.7 million by 2028, and 15.5 million by 2033.⁷ To be clear these are CBO projections of the number of individuals who will have legal status and have lived in the country long enough to become citizens, as a direct result of S.744. It is important to understand that CBO's projections are for the *additional* net increase in the number of potential citizens S.744 will create above the number that the current legal immigration system will add. Like our projections above, CBO projections do not include the U.S.-born children of immigrants.

We take CBO figures and adjust them downward to reflect the share who would be of voting age and carry the projections forward to 2036 from 2033, the last year for which CBO reports numbers. The top portion of the bars in the figure report the results of our CBO-based projections for the number of new potential voting-age citizens S.744 will create. The figure shows that by 2024, S.744 would add 4.6 million new potential voting-age citizen immigrants above the level added by current legal immigration. By 2028, the bill would add 9.5 million potential citizens, 13.4 million by 2032, and 17.3 million new potential voting-age citizens by 2036.⁸ Of the additional 17.3 million new potential voters the bill creates by 2036, CBO estimates indicate that about one-third would be amnesty beneficiaries.⁹

Two points need to be made about the CBO's estimates of amnesty beneficiaries. CBO is assuming that a significant share of illegal immigrants will not come forward and take advantage of the amnesty and, second, they are assuming that a significant number of illegal immigrants would have legalized anyway over time, even without S.744 under one of the existing immigration categories. This second point is important because CBO is explicitly projecting only the added impact of S.744. Thus those that would have gotten green cards in the future without S.744 are not counted their projections.

Because of these assumptions, the CBO reports that somewhat less than eight million illegal immigrants will legalize under S.744 initially. They further assume that this figure will decline over time to 5.7 million over the next two decades due to return migration and mortality. These estimates may seem low given an illegal immigrant population currently estimated at 11 to 12 million.¹⁰ However, the CBO's projections have the advantage of being conservative. Furthermore, because their projections take into account those who would have legalized anyway, it allows us to add the impact of existing immigration to S.744 without double counting.

The Combined Impact. Adding the numbers from S.744 to the number from current immigration means that future immigration, and the legalization provisions of S.744, would create 9.7 million potential new voters by 2024, 17.9 million by 2028, 25 million by 2032, and 32.2 million by 2036. None of the results in the figure should be too surprising. The current level of immigration is already very high. In addition, S.744 offers legal status to millions of illegal immigrants and dramatically increases the level of legal immigration in the future. Although it has not received much attention during the current debate, these projections demonstrate that one of the biggest and unavoidable potential effects of immigration generally and S.744 in particular is a steady and profound remaking of the political landscape.

End Notes

¹ See end note 8.

² See Table 1 of the [Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012](#).

³ Spouses of U.S. citizens can become citizens after only three years; however, to be conservative we apply a five-year residence requirement to all new LPRs in our projections.

⁴ Death or mortality rates have been well established by ethnic group and there is even a literature on the death rate of the foreign-born. See, for example, Karl Eschbach, Jim P. Stimpson, Yong-Fang Kuo, and James S. Goodwin, “Mortality of Foreign-Born and US-Born Hispanic Adults at Younger Ages: A Reexamination of Recent Patterns”, *American Journal of Public Health*, 2007. It should be noted that we are only interested in mortality over the 22-year period 2014 to 2036, that nine out of 10 new legal immigrants arrive prior to age 55, and that illegal immigrants are also mostly a younger population, so mortality is only a modest component of change in this analysis. While estimating mortality by age, race, and sex is straightforward, there is more debate about out-migration. The outmigration rates estimated by the Census Bureau for its population projections can be found [here](#). New immigrants and illegal immigrants tend to be younger and return migration tends to take place at older ages, so the share of new immigrants or amnesty beneficiaries returning home over the time period of our projections is modest in size. Based on prior research, we estimate that slightly less than 2 percent of post-2014 green card holders will die or return home each year. As for the number of new potential voters S.744 will create we simply rely on the projections published by CBO. This means we are implicitly accepting their assumptions about return-migration and mortality. It may be worth noting that the CBO report (Table 2, page 16) shows that the decline in the number of Registered Provisional Immigrants (RPIs) of two million from 2018 to 2033 implies an average rate of return-migration and deaths of about 2 percent annually.

⁵ A small number of new immigrants arriving in the first few years of our projections will have had U.S.-born citizen children who will be of voting-age by 2032 or 2036, but they are not included in this analysis.

⁶ We do not include 2016 because none of the post-2014 immigrants will have been in the country long enough to naturalize and become citizens by 2016. The immigrants in the analysis are those who will arrive 2014 to 2031 — immigrants arriving after 2031 will have no direct impact on the 2036 election.

⁷ It may be worth noting that S.744 would also substantially increase the number of guest workers allowed into the country, but those figures are not included here as these individuals cannot become citizens unless they receive LPR status.

⁸ CBO does not provide continuous projections for the number of potential citizens every year, but instead reports figures for 2018, 2023, 2028, and 2033. We use a linear extrapolation for the years between the years in CBO’s report, we do the same to carry the projection forward from 2033 to 2036. We do this in order to provide projections of the number of potential citizens for each presidential election from 2024 to 2036. In the presidential election year of 2028, CBO reports 10.7 million potential citizens, while our projections show only 11.6 million potential voters. Our figures are lower than CBO because not all of these potential citizens will be of voting age in that year.

⁹ Under a section in Table 2 of their report titled “Legalization Programs”, CBO reports that the number of Registered Provisional Immigrants will peak at 6.3 million in 2018, along with 1.4 million Agricultural Workers (blue card holders). Thus the budget office believes that, at least initially, there will be 7.7 million amnesty beneficiaries of all ages. A footnote in the CBO report’s Table 2 for those in RPI status states that it includes “all individuals who initially adjusted to that status, even after they adjust to LPR status or naturalize.” By 2033, CBO projects 4.3 million RPIs and 1.4 blue card holders for a total of 5.7 million amnesty beneficiaries of all ages. By that date virtually all of those initially legalized should be eligible for citizenship. CBO projects that the total number of potential citizens (all ages) that would result from S.744, above what current immigration would create, is 15.5 million by 2033. Thus CBO believes that by 2033 somewhat more than one-third ($15.5 \div 5.7$) of the total number of new potential citizens that S.744 will create are due to the bill’s legalization provisions.

¹⁰ The newest estimates from the [Pew Hispanic Center](#) indicate that there were 11.7 million illegal immigrants in the country in 2012. The number of illegals has generally stayed between 11 and 12 million for the last five years.