

## Immigration reform: Can Mark Zuckerberg and friends deliver?

Mark Zuckerberg and a cast of Silicon Valley players are entering the fray over immigration reform. But the new group, FWD.US, says it's also interested in promoting education reform and scientific research.

Washington's bipartisan Gang of Eight senators are in what many hope is the endgame in the debate over immigration reform. But just in case, on Wednesday, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg brought in a slew of major players to bring it all home.

He and an impressive roster of Silicon Valley luminaries have teamed up with political strategists from across the spectrum to launch a political action group on the issue. Since by most accounts some kind of reform package is likely, the move has some asking, why now?

It's all about the game, says David Mark, editor-in-chief of the online political site politix.

"This is basically to drive the game across the finish line," he says, noting that if this pack of corporate heavy-hitters had jumped onto the field earlier, "it could have easily turned people off thinking that this was just a cynical move to get more cheap labor for business."

Biding their time and weighing in after much of the political

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- Dan Afrasiabi  
Author,  
*Restart Entrepreneurial  
Immigration*

gamesmanship has already played out, he says, “allows them to both make their case and help clinch the final deal.”

However, according to the group’s founders, it has a broader horizon than just the current legislation. Dubbed FWD.US, the group plans to advocate for comprehensive immigration and education reform as well as support for scientific research well beyond 2013.

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In a Washington Post Op-Ed piece Wednesday, co-founder Mr. Zuckerberg wrote that today’s “economy is based primarily on knowledge and ideas – resources that are renewable.... In a knowledge economy, the most important resources are talented people.”

Beyond helping to nudge the current debate, according to a statement released on Wednesday, the group’s goal is to “organize and engage the

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tech community in the issues where we can contribute to the national debate, on issues of vital importance to America's ability to compete in the global knowledge economy."

Says co-founder Joe Green, a former college roommate of Zuckerberg's with long involvement in social activism and entrepreneurship, in the same release, "We view this as one of the key challenges to improving our country's economic future – ensuring that we have as many people as possible in the workforce who have the skills to participate."

What this means right now is leveraging the group's collective knowledge of marketing and social media in support of a more immigrant-friendly environment, particularly when it comes to skilled labor.

But whether that marketing and social media expertise will be effective depends on how the group is perceived politically, both in Washington and by the general public.

In that sense, the politics of the Silicon Valley cohort – a coalition of industry heavyweights just came down on the side of same-sex marriage – could hobble the group's effectiveness, suggests presidential scholar Charles Dunn, a professor of political

science at Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA.

"Although Silicon Valley's involvement is a distinct plus for immigration reform, its involvement could backfire, because its political strength rests more on the liberal side of the issue," he says via e-mail, adding, "Zuckerberg's support is not a minus, but it does not carry the strength that it could, because he is a lightning rod politically."

The vast majority of Americans may not relate to Silicon Valley's need for more skilled workers, says Dan Afrasiabi, author of the upcoming book "Restart Entrepreneurial Immigration." But he notes that Silicon Valley can have an important impact by helping to move the focus of the national immigration debate from security issues to economic issues. "9/11 refocused the debate on security but Silicon Valley can help shift the focus back to the importance of keeping jobs here in the country," Dan Afrasiabi says.

Currently, the US government issues some 85,000 H-1B visas, which are reserved for highly skilled workers, each year. This year, when the application period opened on April 1, the US Citizenship and Immigration Service received more than 124,000 applications within five days and closed the process,

finishing it off with a lottery to decide recipients.

"This is a horrific way to run an immigration system," says Andrez Mejer, a member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, who was in Washington Wednesday for a day of action on the issue of immigration reform.

The country does not have enough skilled workers to fill industry's needs, he says, and it sorely needs a more sensible approach to keeping America competitive. "Silicon Valley can play an important role in getting that message out," he says, "because small individuals or companies cannot get that message out, but a company like Apple or Microsoft can be heard."

Mike Beckley, CTO of Appian, a high-tech firm with 225 employees in Reston, Va., says he spends more than three fourths of his time recruiting, noting that more than half the qualified applicants he turns up are foreign nationals.

"There are just not enough applicants to fill the jobs we have," he says, but the solutions begin with early education – an important prong in the FWD.US platform. "It has to start with grade school," he says, noting

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that in Vietnam, for instance, “there are fifth graders who already know how to write computer code.”

The education and research sides of the Silicon Valley group may be even more important than the skilled worker visa issue, says Reaz Jafri, head of the immigration practice at the international law firm Withers Bergman.

Besides lobbying for more high-tech visas, he says via e-mail, it is important to ask, “what is Silicon Valley doing to encourage a STEM-driven education system where young Americans look more and more to science, technology, engineering and mathematics?”

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