

Immigration proposals a world apart; Deadlock predicted over House, Senate approaches

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Body

WASHINGTON — Although many members of Congress appear eager to tighten control of the nation's borders, a showdown over plans to accommodate millions of undocumented immigrants already settled in the United States could prevent any reforms from winning approval in this election year.

A bipartisan alliance of senators is advocating a plan that, while tightening enforcement, would let many of the roughly 11 million undocumented immigrants pay fines for breaking the law, pay taxes, learn English and — after several years — apply for citizenship. The Senate Judiciary Committee will consider the plan Monday, with an immigration debate in the full Senate scheduled for later that week.

But should such a plan win approval, it will place the Senate sharply at odds with the more conservative House. That body already has approved a bill that imposes stricter border control without making allowances for undocumented immigrants who already are in the United States. Critics call relief for illegal aliens unwarranted amnesty for willful lawbreakers.

As immigration has grown, a fault line has opened in American politics, with swelling Latino populations creating a powerful political force in states such as Florida, Texas and California, and creating tensions in the Midwest where American workers fear the loss of jobs. And both parties are courting Hispanics.

The debate has sharply divided the ruling Republican Party, with business-minded Republicans stressing the need to maintain a labor force that many employers rely on, while cultural conservatives insist that any accommodation of illegal aliens makes a further mockery of the weak borders.

When it comes to accommodating illegal aliens, "no matter what you call it, a lot of people on our side don't even want to debate it," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who says he is seeking a fair solution. For many in Congress, he said, "It's a very simple answer to a complex question — send 'em all back."

This internal strife will make it all the more difficult for the House and Senate to agree on an immigration reform bill, something President Bush has been seeking since his first term.

In this election year, with the GOP fighting to retain control of Congress and both parties trying to impress voters with their resolve on security, the deadlock could mean nothing passes.

The Bush administration is calling for a comprehensive bill that encompasses border security as well as some provision for temporary workers in the United States. A bill that addresses only border security, or a failure to win any bill at all, could represent yet another setback for the president. Many analysts believe that no bill is the most likely outcome.

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"Given the president's approval rating these days, and with one-third of the Senate up for re-election this year, they are not going to follow the president off the cliff on this one," said Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which opposes what it sees as amnesty.

"If the Senate does go ahead and pass something that looks like amnesty, they will never get this passed in the House," Mehlman said.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., who has presidential ambitions, has made it clear he will push a straight border-protection bill if senators can't agree on another plan. But Senate Democrats vow to oppose an enforcement-only bill, with Minority Whip Dick Durbin, D-Ill., arguing that immigration has been haphazard for decades and that making criminals of millions of people serves no purpose.

Frist has pressured the Senate Judiciary Committee to produce a bill, saying that if they can't, he will take his own plan to a Senate vote the final week of March. Frist has prompted the divided committee to take another stab at an agreement when senators return from recess Monday.

Since Bush started a renewed push for immigration reform in January 2004, the former Texas governor, who has a firsthand understanding of border issues, has insisted that the United States should be able to match "willing workers" with "willing employers."

"We see millions of hardworking men and women condemned to fear and insecurity in a massive, undocumented economy," Bush said then, proposing a new legal status for millions of undocumented immigrants enabling them to work several years in the United States and then return home. He has insisted that this is not amnesty.

But Bush has invested little time in pushing an immigration bill, and he has not threatened to veto an enforcement-only bill.

"We're going to continue working to hopefully get a comprehensive piece of legislation," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said. "It begins with a need to strengthen our borders, but it also includes a temporary-worker program."

Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a pro-immigrant organization, complained that the White House has "become almost a nonfactor" in the debate. Bush could be a factor, Sharry said. "He's got the bully pulpit; he understands the issue. But when all you say is vague generalities that try to please everyone, all you end up with is mush."

Many experts call Bush's idea of requiring temporary workers to return home after several years unworkable. If the law allows undocumented workers to remain here, advocates say, they should ultimately have a chance to become citizens.

"The problem is, if we only have a temporary-worker program, we create another problem coming down the pike," said Deborah Notkin, a New York-based lawyer and president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. "You have planted families here. Asking families to go home? It's not realistic."

PROPOSALS

The Bush plan: Tighter border protections would be coupled with a guest-worker program, in which foreigners could apply for temporary legal status to accept U.S. jobs. Such workers would be required to return to their homelands after a certain time.

The Kennedy-McCain plan: While improving border security, the United States would give illegal immigrants a path to legal status if they paid taxes and a \$1,000 fine and underwent criminal-background checks. After six years, they could apply for legal residency by paying another \$1,000 fine and fulfilling other requirements. They could apply for citizenship if they passed more background checks and proved they were learning English.

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The House-passed plan: Border enforcement would be toughened by such measures as the building of a fence along parts of the U.S.-Mexico border. Employers would be required to verify the legal status of their workers. There is no provision for "guest-worker" status or any form of amnesty.

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