

DEAL FAVORS IMMIGRANT SKILLS, NOT FAMILIES

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Highlight: Negotiators close to a bill on citizenship rules.

Body

The U.S. Senate inched closer Wednesday to approving landmark legislation that would overhaul the nation's immigration laws and allow 12-million illegal residents a path to citizenship.

But the fragile **deal** largely hinged on a significant but little-known change that would grant legal residency to **immigrants** based on their **skills** rather than their **family** ties.

It would mark a change to a decades-old policy that some fear will lead to inhumanely separating **families** or forcing them to sneak into the United States illegally.

Tamar Jacoby of the conservative Manhattan Institute, who **favors** comprehensive immigration reform that includes citizenship, said altering the **family** preference policy would be a dramatic shift.

"That's the way it's been for more than 40 years," she said. "That would be a big change."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., had imposed a deadline of this week for a **deal** but pushed it back until Monday when he learned negotiators were getting close.

"This is a good bill," said Sen. Mel Martinez, a Florida Republican and one of the negotiators. "There are no issues that rise to the level of **deal** breakers or anything like that."

The Senate proposal would expand the guest worker program, provide employers with new ways to verify the legal status of their workers and increase security on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Illegal **immigrants** in the United States would be granted a new Z visa, allowing them to remain here legally for eight years. After that, they could petition for citizenship by temporarily going back to their home country, paying fines and meeting other criteria. Many of the details are still being worked out.

The last big sticking points: How long should guest workers be allowed to stay in the country, and should they be allowed a path to citizenship?

Polls show Americans overwhelmingly support immigration reform that includes citizenship, and President Bush has continued to make it a top domestic goal.

Immigration on **skills**

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Last year, the Senate passed a bill supporting a path to citizenship, guest worker programs and border security. The House rejected the proposal, demanding only enforcement.

The move away from **family** preference was never seriously considered last year, but was brought up this year by a key negotiator, Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz.

Supporters of the change say the nation should base immigration on **skills**, which would help the economy and reduce the number of **immigrants** on public assistance.

"**Family** preference is chain migration," said Bob Dane of the Federation for American Immigration Reform. "It's runaway population growth. ... This restores control to the U.S."

Opponents of the change say it would violate the right of Americans to live with their **families**.

Kevin Appleby, director of migration and refugee policy at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the bishops will likely **not** support the bill, partly based on the change to **family** preference.

"I think there will be undocumented **immigrants** because of these cuts," he said.

Under the current system established in 1965, spouses, minor children and parents of those here legally are eligible for green cards. **Family** members, including adult children and siblings, are given preference over others who do **not** have **family** in the United States.

What others do

About two-thirds of the more than 1-million people admitted to the country last year were **family**-sponsored **immigrants**. About 12 percent came in based on employment, and the rest were refugees, asylum seekers and others. Many of those others had relatives here as well.

Other countries, including Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, use a point-system similar to what the Senate is considering. Priority is given to education, work experience, language **skills** and income.

Lawmakers have talked for two decades about reducing or eliminating preference given to **families**. In 1997, the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform urged Congress to move to a system that **favours** higher-skilled **immigrants**.

Rosemary Jenks, director of government relations for Numbers USA, supports eliminating **family** preferences, but **not** if it means the Senate will agree to allow 12-million illegal **immigrants** to become citizens.

"There is no question the status quo is bad, but this is worse," she said.

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report. Anita Kumar can be reached at akumar@sptimes.com or (202) 463-0576.

Highlights

What's next?

The Senate expects to begin debating immigration reform next week with a preliminary vote expected for Monday. The House plans to consider a proposal in July before Congress' monthlong August recess.

FAST FACTS

The proposals

Senate: The proposal, still being negotiated, includes a path to citizenship for illegal **immigrants** after eight years if they meet certain criteria and return to their home country. It would also change the criteria for legal immigration by

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focusing more on the needs of the U.S. market and less on family considerations. It would expand the guest worker program, create a stronger verification system for employers and increase border security.

House: The Strive Act (Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act), introduced by Reps. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., and Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., includes a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants after six years if they meet certain criteria, they briefly leave the country and then return through a port of entry. It also includes an expanded guest worker program, a stronger verification system for employers and increased border security.

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