

THE BUDGET DEAL: IMMIGRATION;
Agency Gains in Deal; Haitians Do So, Too

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Body

In a significant shift of United States policy toward immigrants, Congressional Republicans and the White House agreed yesterday on a **budget** proposal that could benefit thousands of immigrants and the Federal **agency** that serves them.

The agreement lets about 49,000 Haitian refugees stay in the United States legally, increases the number of specialized foreign workers allowed in the country and earmarks \$171 million for the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service to reduce its backlog of citizenship applications (About 1.9 million people are waiting to become citizens).

The **deal**, which would have seemed impossible two years ago with Congress's anti-immigrant mood, was the result of new Senate leadership, bipartisan alliances, heavy lobbying from advocacy groups, a coincidence of agendas among the Congressional Black Caucus and Republican senators, as well as White House pressure.

But negotiations that led to the agreement were not smooth. Practically all **immigration** issues were hotly contested until the end, including the amount of money earmarked for citizenship efforts.

In addition, the House did not accept a measure to grant **Haitians** the right to apply for residency status until the conference committees met to produce a compromise earlier this month.

And the wrangling over the visas for specialized high-tech workers drew the threat of a veto from a White House concerned that there were not proper protections for American workers.

"It was tough going all the way," said Maria Echaveste, deputy chief of staff to the President and one of the main advisers to White House negotiators on **immigration**.

Ms. Echaveste said Congress had "overreached" when it voted for measures in 1996 that restricted **immigration** and affected the lives of legal residents. The current agreement, she said, would impart some balance to those laws.

None of the measures directly reverses any of the **immigration** laws of 1996, but they represent the first good news that immigrants and their advocates have received in a long time. Some advocates said the agreement is

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telling because it reflects that both Democrats and Republicans are eager to please immigrants, hoping to earn their trust and, eventually, their votes.

"It's a rare day indeed," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum. "It's a new day when immigrants are viewed not as easy targets, but as a powerful new constituency."

Advocates for immigrants are particularly pleased that Haitian refugees who have been in this country since 1995 can stay permanently. They will receive the same benefits that were granted last year to about 150,000 Nicaraguans and about 5,000 Cubans, who, like Haitians, came to the United States to escape political turmoil.

Black Congressional leaders complained that leaving Haitians out of the bill amounted to racial discrimination, and Florida's Senators, Connie Mack, a Republican, and Bob Graham, a Democrat, introduced the Haitian Refugees Immigration Fairness Act. Most Haitians who will benefit from the bill live in South Florida. Neither Senator was available for comment yesterday, but aides called the agreement a victory.

Negotiators from the White House and Congress also agreed to a 30-month delay to implement a law that, as of today, would have forced border patrol officers to track every person entering and leaving the United States from Mexico and Canada.

The measure would have caused border delays of up to 24 hours that would have hurt businesses and cost millions of dollars in delayed or lost trade, critics said.

Several immigration initiatives were dropped from the final bill. As a result, the immigration service will remain one agency and American farmers will not be allowed to bring in tens of thousand of foreigners to work in the fields.

But the deal struck yesterday does allow the immigration agency to nearly double the number of employment visas available for skilled foreign workers, a measure that was sought by high-tech industries and introduced in Congress by Senator Spencer Abraham, Republican of Michigan.

There are 65,000 of the so-called H1B visas available for skilled foreign workers; the bill increases the number to 115,000 for the next two years and sets the number at 107,500 in the third year.

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