

Immigration Measure Stalls in the Senate

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Body

Senate Republicans who support legislation that would legalize the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants said Tuesday that they lacked enough support to bring the **measure** to a vote this week and were working on a more limited compromise that would rally a broader cross-section of Republicans.

But Democrats, angered by what they viewed as Republican efforts to gut the legislation, responded by using a parliamentary tactic to force lawmakers to decide Thursday whether the bill should be considered for a vote on the **Senate** floor.

"What we're trying to do is preserve a strong, bipartisan bill," said Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois. "Are the Republicans going to stand up and vote for comprehensive **immigration** reform? Or are they not?"

Eric Ueland, chief of staff for Bill Frist, the **Senate** majority leader, assailed the Democrats' move as "a serious blow to efforts to find common ground," and said Republicans would continue their negotiations on a possible compromise.

"The minority will be held accountable," Mr. Ueland said.

Mr. Frist has imposed a deadline of the end of this week for a vote on **immigration** legislation. With the growing prospect of a deadlock on a comprehensive bill, Republicans and Democrats started pointing fingers and warning that the opposing party would be to blame if efforts at passing a bill were to collapse.

Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, the Republican chairman of the Judiciary Committee, warned that the Democratic maneuver might result in the demise of his bill, which called for the legalization of the nation's immigrants. He said that "both sides are going to be losers" if a bipartisan compromise did not emerge.

"It's getting very late in the week to salvage the bill," Mr. Specter said. "It's a power struggle now. It's a struggle of wills."

The Republican compromise centered on a proposal that would eventually grant citizenship to illegal immigrants who had already lived in this country for five years or more, provided that they remained employed, paid fines and back taxes and learned English, among other things, said a **Senate** aide familiar with the compromise.

Illegal immigrants who have lived here for less time would have to report to an American port of entry, such as an airport or land port, where they would be classified as temporary workers and allowed to work for up to six years before returning home or applying for permanent residency, which could ultimately lead to citizenship.

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The proposal was intended to bridge the sharp divide between those Republicans who argue that illegal immigrants should return home and those who believe that they should be put on a path to citizenship.

Republicans, who huddled in a flurry of meetings to work through the details, said they hoped that such a compromise would result in some consensus in their party so a vote on immigration legislation could be held this week.

Last week, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted in favor of legislation that would legalize nearly all of the nation's illegal immigrants. But the supporters of that bill, including Mr. Specter and Senators John McCain of Arizona and Mel Martinez of Florida, both Republicans, said Tuesday that they did not have enough support to bring the committee's legislation to the floor for a vote.

"We're going to have to find a place where we can all land," said Mr. Martinez, one of the principal architects of the compromise. "What we're all trying to find is something that is common ground enough to get the majority of Republicans on board."

Mr. Martinez said that his first allegiance remained with the legislation produced by the Judiciary Committee but that he feared it lacked adequate Republican support. "I'm trying to find a fallback," he said.

That effort was swiftly attacked by Democrats, who said that it would weaken the committee's bill, which has the backing of most Democrats. And they worked to block any Republican amendments to the immigration bill in an effort to force a decision on whether to bring the committee bill to a vote on the Senate floor.

Senator Harry Reid, the minority leader and a Democrat from Nevada, said there was no need for a compromise.

"We have a bill that's bipartisan," said Mr. Reid, referring to the Judiciary Committee's legislation. "It covers strong borders, a guest worker program and a path to legalization for the people about whom you just spoke. We don't need a compromise."

The White House also entered the debate on Tuesday, issuing a statement of administration policy that praised the Senate Judiciary Committee for including a temporary worker program in its legislation.

But the Bush administration warned that the final bill should not "create an automatic path to permanent residency or citizenship."

Republicans said they would be working into the night to build a compromise on the question of illegal immigrants that might attract more Republican support without alienating conservatives opposed to amnesty.

Mr. Ueland said he was hopeful that a bill would be passed this week. But he and others acknowledged that time was short.

Mr. Martinez said, "We're still looking to find a magic formula."

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Graphic

Photo: Senator Arlen Specter, second from left, and Senator Jon Kyl, right, conferred with staff members yesterday after a meeting with other Republican members trying to reach a compromise on immigration legislation. (Photo by Stephen Crowley/The New York Times)

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