

## **Congressional Republicans soften immigration stance; CALL TO REMOVE FELONY PROVISION FROM HOUSE BILL**

San Jose Mercury News (California)

April 12, 2006 Wednesday

Copyright 2006 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

**The Mercury News**

Found on BayArea.com

**Section:** A; Pg. 6

**Length:** 686 words

**Byline:** Jonathan Weisman, Washington Post

### **Body**

---

In the wake of this week's massive demonstrations, many House Republicans are worried that a tough, anti-illegal-immigration bill they thought would please their political base has earned them little benefit while becoming a lightning rod for the fast-growing national movement for immigrant rights.

Tuesday, GOP leaders in the House and the Senate called for removing a provision in the House-passed immigration bill that would make it a felony for an illegal immigrant to be in the United States.

The written statement from House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee seeks to deflect blame for the harshest provisions of the House bill on the Democrats. The statement did not represent a change in position for the Republican leadership, which supports making the offense a misdemeanor.

Democrats ``voted to make felons out of all of those who remain in our country illegally," the leaders wrote. ``It remains our intent to produce a strong border security bill that will not make unlawful presence in the United States a felony."

Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., fired back that ``there's no running away from the fact that the Republican House passed a bill and Senator Frist offered one that criminalizes immigrants."

House Republicans rushed through legislation before Christmas that would build hundreds of miles of fence along the U.S.-Mexico border, mandate that businesses verify the legality of all employees through a database, fortify the Border Patrol and declare illegal immigrants and those who help them to be felons. After more lenient legislation failed in the Senate last week, the House-passed version burst into public this week, as hundreds of thousands of protesters nationwide turned out to denounce the bill.

House Democrats acknowledged that they helped block Republican efforts in December to soften the Republican-crafted section declaring illegal immigrants to be felons, but they said responsibility for the bill rests with the Republicans, who voted overwhelmingly for its passage.

``The Democrats were not going to do anything to make it easier for Republicans to pass an atrocious bill," said Jennifer Crider, a press officer for House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco.

## Congressional Republicans soften immigration stance; CALL TO REMOVE FELONY PROVISION FROM HOUSE BILL

Tuesday's maneuvering underscores how the immigration issue has mushroomed into a fierce political debate with large political stakes heading into the November congressional elections. The thousands of protesters in the streets Monday vividly demonstrated the power of the issue, which some strategists say threatens to undercut President Bush's longstanding hope of making Latino voters a GOP constituency.

"There was political calculation that they could make this the wedge issue of 2006 and 2008, but it's not playing out that way," said Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz. "This has galvanized and energized the Latino community like no other issue I have seen in two decades, and that's going to have electoral consequences."

The politics of the issue have shifted markedly since the House acted. Republican lawmakers are increasingly saying that they will now consider some avenue to grant illegal immigrants access to lawful employment. Democrats who voted for the House bill with an eye on their political futures or to pre-empt attacks from conservatives are rethinking their position.

The House measure passed after GOP leaders had rushed lawmakers back to Washington for a December session to vote on the immigration measure, hoping to give their members an accomplishment to tout over the winter recess. But it was the maneuvering of Democrats that preserved the bill's most infamous provision, declaring illegal immigrants felons.

The bill, written by House Judiciary Committee chair James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., included the felony provision. But when he took it to the House floor, Sensenbrenner offered an amendment to downgrade the offense of being an undocumented worker from a felony to a misdemeanor.

The Democratic leadership pushed its members to vote against the amendment, and 191 Democrats did.

The Los Angeles Times contributed to this report.

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** US REPUBLICAN PARTY (92%); IMMIGRATION (92%); POLITICAL PARTIES (91%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (90%); LEGISLATION (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); FELONIES (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); ELECTIONS (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (78%); SOCIETAL ISSUES (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); US FEDERAL ELECTIONS (78%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (78%); VOTERS & VOTING (77%); POLITICAL DEBATES (73%); MISDEMEANORS (73%); NATIONAL SECURITY (72%); CHRISTMAS (65%)

**Person:** TED KENNEDY (58%); RAUL M GRIJALVA (58%); NANCY PELOSI (58%); GEORGE W BUSH (58%)

**Geographic:** MASSACHUSETTS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%); MEXICO (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

**Load-Date:** April 12, 2006

Congressional Republicans soften immigration stance; CALL TO REMOVE FELONY PROVISION FROM  
HOUSE BILL

---

End of Document