

Bush Goes Slow on Immigrant Amnesty; Resistance in Congress Forces Gradual Steps

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Byline: Dana Milbank, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

President **Bush**, who hopes to unveil his much-anticipated immigration proposal next month, has begun signaling to his allies in **Congress** that they should plan a **slow**, piecemeal process that likely won't make sweeping changes until after the 2002 elections.

Expectations have been climbing among Hispanic, immigration and business interests since the administration floated a trial balloon contemplating full **amnesty** for the 3 million to 4 million Mexicans living illegally in the United States. But **Bush** is said to be concerned that expectations are surpassing legislative reality, which dictates a **gradual** liberalization of immigration policy over several years.

"What the president said the last time I talked to him is we've got to be careful not to overpromise," said Rep. Chris Cannon (R-Utah), who is likely to be **Bush's** point man on immigration in the House. "This is a system with a lot of **resistance**. He wants change, but he wants it in an orderly, reasonable fashion."

Cannon, the conservative former impeachment manager who shares **Bush's** eagerness to liberalize immigration, has been consulting with the president, senior **Bush** adviser Karl Rove and White House immigration specialist Diana Schacht. The White House has characteristically been mum publicly.

"I don't even know if we can get a bill in this **Congress**," Cannon said, predicting that broad immigration changes would likely wait until after next year's midterm elections. "They're just not ready to do it over there" at the White House, he said. "It's just an enormously complicated thing. We want to be careful as we **go**. This is why the president doesn't want to overpromise."

The piecemeal approach doesn't reflect a change in **Bush's** desire for immigration legislation, his allies said, but a reflection that there's not a consensus for rapid action in **Congress**. Rich Bond, a former Republican National Committee chairman working with unions to boost support for immigration legislation, said the likely **go-slow** approach is politically astute. "The proper amount of political space does not exist on this at this point," he said.

The **go-slow** approach outlined by **Bush** allies on the Hill appears to be consistent with what Mexican officials said after meetings Aug. 9 with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Attorney General John D. Ashcroft. Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda told Mexican reporters after the meeting that "there is no hurry." Mexican officials

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had indicated they hoped to be able to roll out a policy proposal when Mexican President Vicente Fox visits Washington in September. But according to Mexican reporters -- American reporters weren't allowed in the briefing by Castaneda -- the minister said Fox's visit "isn't a deadline" and that it was more important to reach a good agreement than a quick one.

Immigration advocates called the gradual approach disappointing but not surprising. Charles Kamasaki, senior vice president of the pro-immigration National Council of La Raza, said his group has also heard about a gradual timeline, which "doesn't sound implausible." But he said that would disappoint the Hispanic voters Bush is eager to win over. "The issue is a big issue that requires a bold response," Kamasaki said. "Incrementalism is probably a recipe for nothing happening or very little happening." Those in the immigrant community "have already heard the linkage of President Bush and some legalization, so to take it back would be an enormous political disaster."

Gabriela Lemus, who as director of policy and legislation for the League of United Latin American Citizens met with White House officials to discuss immigration, said progress can't possibly keep up with expectations. "My biggest fear is that expectations have been raised, and I think it's [Bush's] fear, too," she said. "There's all this talk about a sweeping thing, but he's never said that. I don't think it's going to be as drastic as all that." Even if Bush sought rapid action, "the infrastructure is just not in place," she added.

White House officials have declined to discuss details of their immigration proposals, although they, too, have indicated that there is no rush. "The feeling is this will be tackled in a manner as serious as the issue itself," said Ken Lisaius, a White House spokesman. "It takes time to craft the correct solution."

Cannon said he and the administration would not be content to pass a guest worker program that allows Mexicans to work in the United States temporarily without a legalization component. "That's not the solution," he said. At the other end, blanket amnesty -- legal status for all -- is also not a serious possibility, and Bush has rejected the idea.

"What we want is not a window of time to admit you broke the law, what we want is a process," Cannon said. "What we want is for people who can show they've worked here to have an agreement not to deport them while they earn temporary status and eventually permanent status." Cannon says that concept, "earned adjustment," is the likely recommendation of the U.S.-Mexico working group of Powell, Ashcroft and their Mexican counterparts.

The agenda Bush allies lay out begins with some small items this fall: a bill protecting unaccompanied minors who are illegally in the United States and a change in the law so that if an immigrant's sponsor dies, the immigrant can get a substitute sponsor without restarting the naturalization process.

Next year would come some intermediate steps. Cannon and others have sought ways to extend student visas and other benefits to children of illegal immigrants who have been in American schools for several years.

Looming before broad immigration changes is a reform of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) and immigration subcommittee Chairman George W. Gekas (R-Pa.) have said wide-scale legalization and guest-worker programs would have to wait for a "comprehensive reform" of the INS, which would likely split the agency's administrative and enforcement functions. "Failure to act only will bottle up other immigration proposals," the two men said in a statement.

Also next year will be another attempt to create a guest-worker program for agricultural workers. The most recent effort was blocked last year by Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), who favors a restrictive version that would require all guest workers to return home. Cannon would like to see a program of earned adjustment, or earned legalization, that would make guest workers eligible for legal residency after several years. Such a proposal would cover about 1.6 million undocumented seasonal farm workers, but Cannon said it would be a "prototype" for dealing with the nearly 8 million immigrants, about half of them Mexican, in the country illegally.

Ultimately, lawmakers will haggle over which type of workers will qualify and how many years they would have to have worked in the United States to become legal. High on the list would be workers in the restaurant, hotel, nursing home and health care fields. "Let the haggling begin," said Rep. Howard L. Berman (D-Calif.), an immigration advocate.

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Bush aides selected Cannon, a junior member of the immigration subcommittee, over more senior lawmakers such as Gekas and Sensenbrenner because of his pro-immigration leanings, people close to the White House say. That a pro-immigration advocate such as Cannon would be a Republican president's point man on immigration indicates how far the GOP has come since California Gov. Pete Wilson's Proposition 187 and the 1996 federal welfare law, both of which limited benefits to illegal **immigrants**.

Cannon has solid conservative credentials: The 50-year-old Mormon and father of seven had a 100 percent rating from the American Conservative Union last year. A lawyer and former steel executive, he gained attention as a Clinton impeachment manager when he told a newspaper that "this administration has had as a policy goal the public discussion of weird sex."

But Cannon is an internationalist who believes in the free movement of people. He spent his early youth in Chile, where his family was in business, and had Hispanic friends growing up in California. He speaks fluent Spanish because he served as a missionary in Guatemala in 1970-71. Even his rural Utah district feels the press of immigration: Hispanics are now more than 10 percent of the population.

Democrats see Cannon as an ally on the issue. "Chris Cannon sincerely believes in **immigrants**' rights, and he should be intimately involved in any discussions we have with the **Bush** administration on immigration policy," said Rep. John Conyers Jr. (Mich.), the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee.

But that doesn't mean easy passage of Cannon's -- or **Bush**'s -- proposals. A large number of Republicans oppose any immigration liberalization. Others, notably Gekas and Sensenbrenner, have been unenthusiastic. Any concession **Bush** and his allies make to win the support of reluctant Republicans may cause them to lose Democrats who favor broader liberalization.

Already, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) is preparing to file his own immigration legislation this fall. "Whatever the administration will announce won't be as far as the Democrats want to **go**," a top Kennedy aide said. Yet **Bush** gestures to please Kennedy, another Democrat pointed out, "would immediately lose a sizable part of [the GOP] caucus in the House."

But while it may take time for **Bush** to get his immigration plans through **Congress**, he has a strong incentive. **Bush** officials said that if he doesn't improve on the 35 percent of the Hispanic vote he received in 2000, he will lose in 2004. "This isn't a thing you have to convince the president of," Cannon said. "He's real predictable on these issues."

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