

Demos seize immigrant issue after Bush abandons effort

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Body

Congress and the White House have abandoned a bipartisan effort to loosen immigration law this year, prompting Democrats to seize on the issue in a bid to lure Latino voters in the upcoming midterm elections.

The quiet death of the immigration legislation comes even though President Bush had urged passage of a bill to make it easier for certain illegal immigrants to apply for legal residency.

Over the last year and a half, versions of the legislation have passed twice in the House and once in the Senate.

The legislation was attacked by opponents as an amnesty in disguise and supported by proponents as a modest measure to help keep hard-working immigrant families together in the United States. While broader reforms were broached last year by the Bush administration, this legislation was the only significant measure easing immigration rules to reach a floor vote in this Congress.

But advocates and foes alike say the push to grant protections to a narrowly defined group of illegal immigrants stalled after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, caused the government to rethink the connections between immigration policy and national security.

"Had it not been for Sept. 11," said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a group that favors restrictions, the legislation "probably would have gone through." Now, he said, the proposal "is pretty much dead for the remainder of this session of Congress."

Bush twice tried to breathe life into the legislation that would extend a now-lapsed provision of immigration law known as 245(i). The extension would have allowed some undocumented immigrants who appear eligible for permanent residency to apply for legalization from within the United States.

Under current law, such immigrants are required to return to their native countries to make the application, where they can be forced to wait years for permission to emigrate. In practice, this requirement is a powerful deterrent for applicants because few want to risk being shut out of the country for as long as a decade.

In early 2001, after the 245(i) program was resurrected for a few months under legislation enacted at the end of the Clinton administration, Bush sought to extend it as a matter of fairness to some would-be immigrants who had missed the deadline.

In March, Bush pushed the idea again as part of a diplomatic initiative before he made a visit to Mexico. The House, by a vote of 275-137, again passed a narrowly crafted measure. But Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., and others then objected to relaxing immigration rules on national security grounds. Many Democrats, on the other hand, said the 245(i) program should be made permanent law.

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Efforts to bridge the differences between the House and Senate died, and the White House made no protest.

Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum, a group that favors easing restrictions said many advocacy groups have now turned their attention to enacting broader reforms -- in the next Congress.

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