

Discord on the Immigration Accord; Groups on Both Sides Plan to Challenge Senate Compromise

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Body

There is little doubt about how grass-roots organizations feel about a bipartisan **immigration compromise** reached in the **Senate**: They don't like it.

The New York **Immigration** Coalition issued a statement that called the proposal unacceptable, saying, "We say no to this deal." In California, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund vowed to oppose numerous provisions in the **plan**. In Massachusetts, an immigrant and refugee advocacy coalition said the deal was "immoral, unworkable and unacceptable."

While the senators and Bush administration officials exchanged congratulations on Capitol Hill for reaching the **compromise**, supporters and opponents of illegal immigrants eyed the politicians warily and prepared for a legislative showdown as the proposal heads to the **Senate** floor this week.

Under the proposal, an estimated 12 million immigrants who are in the country illegally would be eligible for legal status if they work hard, obey the law and go back to their countries of origin with the assurance that they could return. A guest-worker program would allow 400,000 new foreign nationals each year to work temporarily in the United States, but they would have no path to citizenship.

A provision that allows new U.S. citizens to sponsor relatives would be changed. A complicated point system would be instituted that rewards skilled workers who have more education and an ability to speak English. The higher the total, the more likely they would be able to bring in their family members.

But condemnations from supporters and opponents of illegal **immigration** were a sign that the bipartisan **compromise**, like the illegal immigrants it addresses, faces a rocky future. Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.), a staunch opponent of illegal **immigration**, believes that the proposal's path to legal status is an amnesty that rewards lawbreakers.

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Tancredo favors strengthening the Mexican border and, in the U.S. interior, cracking down so hard on illegal immigration at the workplace and in other areas that illegal immigrants would depart voluntarily.

As far as the advocates are concerned, the creation of a path, albeit an arduous one, to legal status for illegal immigrants is the deal's only high note. It is "responsive to the immigration movement's demand for a legalization program for the undocumented," said Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Community Change, which helped to organize and bankroll last year's huge immigrant marches.

But Bhargava agreed with others who said the proposal cannot work without significant changes. Angelica Salas, executive director for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, said the proposed guest-worker program that creates jobs for migrant workers but gives them no path to citizenship is wrong.

"In the future we'll be talking about guest workers who have no rights," she said.

Salas said the point system that rewards workers is a step back from the 1965 immigration act that widened quotas on the number of people who emigrate from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

"It's not being said outright, but they're saying, 'We want the right type of immigrants,' " she said. "Well, how do they look? Most people from Africa, Asia and Latin America don't speak English."

Citizens of the African nations of Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana speak English, as do some residents of India and Bangladesh. But Ethiopians, Somalis and Eritreans, who represent the greatest number of African immigrants in the Washington area, often do not.

John Trasvi?a, president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, says the push against allowing new U.S. citizens to sponsor family members for green cards is an anti-immigrant drive to end cultural diversity.

"The number one way for Asian citizens to be reunited is through family reunification. Originally the brothers and sisters provision was for European immigrants. Now Asian Americans use it the most," he said. "There's a resentment. It was good enough for the country when other people used it, but now you see who's using it and suddenly it's the first thing to go. The opponents of illegal immigration say, 'We're okay with legal immigrants,' but now it suddenly goes away."

Eun Sook Lee, executive director of the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, ticked off what she called a number of problems.

"If we take out the future family program" that allows sponsorship, she said, "we will be creating another problem. People will continue to come without documentation. People want to be with their family members. It's something you can't kill."

Lee joined Bhargava, Trasvi?a and Cecilia Mu?oz of the National Council of La Raza in seeing room for more compromise. They vowed to lobby Democrats in the Senate and House to attach amendments that would create a more workable proposal.

"We see this as a draft . . . , something that can be improved and changed," Lee said. "But that depends on community pressure."

Mu?oz said pressure would be applied this way: "You start with amendments on the Senate floor, then you proceed to the House, which may have an entirely different debate than you have in the Senate."

Advocates, however, do feel they have some momentum, Mu?oz said. "There is a legalization path that benefits the people we've been talking about for all these years, so that's not a small thing. We have to measure the entirety of the proposal, but several things are clear: If this bill goes down now like this, then the debate is over. It's unworkable," she said.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Guillermo Arias -- Associated Press; Mexican workers line up outside the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey, Mexico, to wait for an interview for a working visa.

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