

Immigration bill may finally get jump-start; WITH BUSH CALLING FOR SOLUTION, DEMOCRATS PROMISE ACTION

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Byline: Frank Davies, MediaNews Washington Bureau

Body

After years of debate and deadlock, Congress seems to have all the ingredients this year to revamp a broken immigration system and devise a way to handle up to 12 million undocumented immigrants while tightening border security.

Advocates of reform can point to new Democratic leaders who have promised action, the support of President Bush, the failure of hard-line anti-immigration appeals in the past election, and a large coalition of business, labor, church and rights groups ready to turn up the pressure again.

"This is a rare time when the politics are right for both parties to act," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, the San Jose Democrat who chairs the House immigration subcommittee. "The expectation is that Democrats, in power, will get something done, and we have to do that. And if most Republicans block this again, they will put themselves in political peril."

But don't expect a comprehensive immigration bill to be on Bush's desk soon. Formidable obstacles remain, including the emotional, unpredictable nature of immigration politics and the pressure of an early presidential campaign.

"It may be approved in some form by the Senate, but it will stumble again in the House, just as last year," predicted Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, in a recent online debate. "The public overwhelmingly supports consistent enforcement to reduce the illegal population."

Many voters said last year they wanted to see tougher border security and better workplace verification of employees' legal status before they would consider a plan to legalize undocumented workers. That has been the position of most Republicans on Capitol Hill.

But exit polls in November showed that more than 60 percent said they agreed that illegal immigrants should be allowed to apply for legal status. Democratic leaders will push for what they call "earned legalization" -- some combination of fines, taxes and other requirements before an illegal immigrant can become a legal resident. Citizenship would probably take much longer.

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“Around the country, people are clamoring to fix this. They know that 12 million people aren't going to be sent back. They know most of these people are law-abiding and important to the economy,” said Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute who has attended meetings and focus groups on immigration.

New bill on its way

This week, Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., plans to introduce a bill similar to the one that attracted the support of almost two-thirds of the Senate last year, including 23 Republicans. His co-sponsor, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., is expected to lend his support again.

The bill will set conditions for undocumented residents to gain legal status. Last year's bill included a three-tier system that made it easier or harder for residents, depending on how many years they have lived in the United States.

That system was included to lure more votes, but its supporters now see it as cumbersome and flawed. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called it “unenforceable” and said a “common-sense system” must be devised that everyone, including illegal immigrants, can understand.

Bush, in his State of the Union speech, said, “We need to resolve the status of illegal immigrants already in our country without animosity and without amnesty.”

While backers of reform talk about “earned legalization,” critics cry “amnesty” and remind voters of the failed 1986 amnesty, which was accompanied by promises of better border security that weren't kept.

Some GOP presidential candidates are sounding that theme, or largely avoiding the issue.

But Republicans face another problem if they are seen as blocking immigration reform -- a backlash from Latino voters, the fastest-growing segment of the electorate.

Matthew Dowd, a strategist who helped Bush and Schwarzenegger win re-election, said Republicans need to hold about 38 to 40 percent of the Latino vote.

Bush made serious inroads in the Latino vote in his two election victories, topping 40 percent in 2004. But last year, GOP candidates and ads with harsh rhetoric -- some equated Mexican immigrants with terrorists -- galvanized the Latino vote, which split about 70 to 30 percent for Democrats. Two Republicans known for hard-line immigration stances lost congressional races in Arizona.

“For Democrats, this could be a California-like opportunity,” said Simon Rosenberg, director of the centrist New Democrat Network, referring to Republican Gov. Pete Wilson's anti-immigrant positions in the 1990s, which drove many California Latinos into the Democratic camp.

Democrats split

Democrats face their own internal disagreements on immigration. Some of their union backers don't want more undocumented workers in the country, and a few new Democrats won House seats from the GOP by stressing the need for border security over a comprehensive plan.

Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said he wants floor action on an immigration bill this spring, with passage before a summer recess in August. Lofgren and other House Democrats say they are ready to take up and debate a comprehensive bill -- something the House did not do under GOP leaders.

Lofgren said she expects a bill to include provisions for more agricultural laborers through a guest-worker program, more visas for high-tech employees and legal status for students who came to the United States as young children.

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“From rocket scientists to strawberry pickers, we want it to be comprehensive,” said Lofgren, who taught immigration law at Santa Clara University.

Contact Frank Davies at fdavies@mercurynews.com or (202) 662-8921.

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