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Senate, in Bipartisan Act, Passes an Immigration Bill

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

WASHINGTON, May 25 — The Senate easily passed legislation on Thursday that would give most illegal immigrants a chance to become American citizens. But the vote did little to soften opposition to the measure among House conservatives, and Republican leaders acknowledged that delivering a final bill to President Bush's desk would be enormously difficult.

The Senate legislation, which also creates a guest worker program and seeks to tighten control of the border, passed 62 to 36. Twenty-three Republicans and one independent joined 38 Democrats to win approval of the bill in one of the few displays of bipartisanship on a major piece of legislation in years.

If the Senate bill's provisions were to make it into law, they would be the most substantial overhaul of immigration law in two decades. The key architects of the bill, Senators John McCain, Republican of Arizona, and Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, hailed the bipartisan coalition for withstanding a slew of amendments intended to sink the legislation.

The bill was also praised by some immigrant advocacy groups, the Roman Catholic Church and business leaders, who worked to ensure its passage. And Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee, the majority leader, described the vote as "a success for the American people" as well as for the immigrants "who hope to participate someday in that American dream."

Mr. Bush issued a statement praising the Senate for its vote and the House for passing an earlier immigration bill that he said "began a national dialogue." He urged both chambers to work together to pass a bill that he could sign into law.

But with Republicans deeply divided over immigration, the bill's future remains in doubt, reflecting the fluid politics of the issue in a Congressional election year. House conservatives, who passed a border security bill in December, vowed to thwart any deal that includes a central provision of the Senate bill: its call to give most illegal immigrants a chance to become citizens if they meet certain conditions.

Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio, the House majority leader, said on Thursday that he was hopeful that the Senate and House could reach a compromise. But when asked whether that compromise might include a guest worker program, he said he did not know.

The House bill did not include a guest worker or legalization plan.

"This is a very difficult issue," Mr. Boehner said, adding, "I don't underestimate the difficulty of the House and Senate trying to come together in an agreement."

Conservatives in the House denounced the bill for legalizing illegal immigrants and creating a guest worker program that would admit 200,000 foreign workers each year.

Representative J. D. Hayworth, Republican of Arizona, called it an amnesty for lawbreakers and "a nonstarter."

But some Republicans in the House said that the ground seemed to be shifting, if only slightly.

They pointed to Representative Mike Pence, Republican of Indiana, the leader of the conservative caucus in the House, who proposed a bill this week that would allow illegal immigrants to become guest workers, though not permanent residents or citizens.

They also said that the effort to reach a compromise could benefit from a strong push for a deal by Mr. Bush. And they noted the sizeable numbers of Republicans, including Mr. Frist, who offered vigorous support for the Senate legislation.

All of those developments, they said, might provide enough political cover for Republicans facing midterm elections in the fall to sign on to a plan that might include at least a temporary worker program.

Representative Jeff Flake, an Arizona Republican who supports legalizing illegal immigrants, said that a week ago he was betting that the House and the Senate might not even agree to a meeting. On Thursday, he described the chances of a House-Senate compromise bill as "50-50."

Representative Peter T. King of New York, the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said he also thought there was significant support for a temporary worker program. "A good number of Republicans who are opposed to legalization are willing to support guest workers," Mr. King said.

But supporters of the Senate legislation said they hoped to keep their central principles intact. Democrats said they would not support legislation that did not place most of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship.

Under the legislation, illegal immigrants who have lived in the United States for five years or more, about seven million people, would eventually be granted citizenship if they remained employed, passed background checks, paid fines and back taxes, and enrolled in English classes.

Illegal immigrants who have lived here two to five years, about three million people, would have to leave the country briefly and receive a temporary work visa before returning, as a guest worker. Over time, they would be allowed to apply for permanent residency and ultimately citizenship.

Illegal immigrants who have been here less than two years, about one million people, would be required to leave the country altogether. They could apply for the guest worker program, but they would not be guaranteed acceptance in it.

Some immigrant groups criticize the plan for leaving out illegal immigrants who have been here for less than two years. Others praise the legislation, but not without qualms.

"It means there is real hope that we will have immigration reform that will legalize millions of people who are here," said Cecilia Muñoz, a vice president of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights group. "But we still have some real reservations."