

# **Bush renews efforts on immigration: Overhaul plan faces battle in divided Congress**

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President Bush will relaunch his push for an overhaul of the nation's immigration laws today in Arizona, with a fresh speech on the border and a new congressional leadership that is friendlier to his views, but with the same dynamics that scuttled his last attempt: a cooperative Senate but bipartisan opposition in the House.

In contrast to her approach to other controversial issues, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has told the White House that she cannot pass a bill with Democratic votes alone, nor will she seek to enforce party discipline on the issue. Bush will have to produce at least 70 Republican votes before she considers a vote on comprehensive immigration legislation, a task that may be very difficult for a president saddled with low approval ratings.

Democratic conservatives, particularly freshmen who seized their seats from Republicans, weathered a barrage of attacks on the issue before their victories in November and are not anxious to relive the experience, aides and lawmakers say. Some of those lawmakers, such as Reps. Nancy Boyda (Kan.), Brad Ellsworth (Ind.), Nick Lampson (Tex.) and Heath Shuler (N.C.), are implacably opposed to a bill that would grant any of the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants legal residence or citizenship, at least until new border controls are implemented and working.

"I've been respectful with my leadership, but I have been very firm on where I stand," said Boyda, who endured attack ads last fall from her opponent, then-Rep. Jim Ryun (R), accusing her of favoring "amnesty" for undocumented workers. "I think they know I will be voting to represent my district, and they want me to do that."

In his speech in Yuma, Bush will stress four elements that he has to see in an immigration bill: more border security; better enforcement of immigration laws in the interior, especially laws against the hiring of undocumented workers; a temporary-worker program to address labor shortages; and "resolving without amnesty and without animosity the status of the millions of illegal immigrants that are here right now," White House spokesman Scott Stanzel said.

A recently leaked White House presentation, devised after weeks of closed-door meetings with Republican senators, suggests some hardening of Bush's positions, however.

As spelled out in the presentation, which White House aides describe as ideas for debate, undocumented workers could apply for three-year work visas, renewable indefinitely at a cost of \$3,500 each time. To get a green card that would make them legal permanent residents, they would have to return to their home countries, apply for reentry at a U.S. embassy or consulate, and pay a \$10,000 fine.

In a new twist, more green cards would be made available to skilled workers by limiting visas for parents, children and siblings of U.S. citizens. Temporary workers could not bring their families into the country.

Key Democrats have said the plan would unacceptably split families while creating a permanent underclass of temporary workers with no prospects of fully participating in U.S. society. Their competing vision is the Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act -- or Strive Act, newly introduced in the House by Reps. Luis V. Gutierrez (D-Ill.) and Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.).

The bill would make illegal immigrants who were in the country before June 1, 2006, eligible for legalization after a \$500 fine, a security clearance and proof that they had been actively employed before that date. After six years, immigrants who learn English, stay crime-free and pay an additional \$1,500 would be eligible for permanent residency and eventually citizenship. Under the bill, hundreds of thousands of guest workers could enter the United States each year to fill jobs that Americans do not want.

Illegal immigrants hoping to become legal would have to return briefly to their countries, but they would have six years to do so. That "touch back" provision would include exemptions for children, non-working spouses taking care of those children and workers who could lose their jobs over an extended absence.

There is evidence that recent border crackdowns and workplace raids have slowed the flow of illegal immigrants, said Steven A. Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates reduced immigration. After increasing from 30 million in 2000 to 35.2 million in 2005, the official census count of foreign-born U.S. residents grew by 500,000 last year. And wage growth at the bottom rung of the economy suggests that the glut of low-skilled workers is beginning to dry up.

Demonstrations that brought immigrants into the streets by the hundreds of thousands last year have largely disappeared, in part because immigrants no longer fear a Republican Congress's plans, advocates for immigrants said.

But Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.), a freshman who beat a hard-line immigration foe in November while backing the president's approach, says the nation still faces an "immigration crisis." In the Tucson sector of the border, in her district, law enforcement officers are apprehending more than 2,000 border crossers a day.

The problem for Democrats who need legislative action, such as Giffords, is that in districts where the issue has quieted down, lawmakers would like to let sleeping dogs lie. Rep. John Yarmuth (D-Ky.), who unseated a longtime Republican congresswoman in the fall, said the issue is dormant in Louisville, and he worries that the 700-page Strive Act is so complicated, lawmakers will never be able to explain it to their voters. Instead, he said, it will be demagogued by political opponents.

In Midwestern and Southern districts with high unemployment and job fears, especially those experiencing their first influx of foreign workers, opposition to immigrant labor remains high. Because Democrats control Congress, labor union leaders are pressing their own concerns harder, opposing expansive guest-worker programs and demanding union wage rates for legalized workers -- issues that could jeopardize crossover GOP support.

"It's going to be very, very difficult" to pass an immigration bill, Yarmuth said.

House Democratic leaders have tasked Rep. Zoe Lofgren (Calif.), who chairs the Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, citizenship, refugees and border security, with heading the chamber's effort. Lofgren insisted that support is broad for the principles of tightening border security, cracking down on employers of illegal immigrants and bringing those immigrants "out of the shadows" by offering them new avenues to live and work in the country legally. But she conceded that support in principle does not necessarily result in the passage of legislation.

"There's really a lot more consensus than people think," she said. "Now whether that consensus translates to votes on the floor, we'll have to see. It's still a politically charged subject."

Last fall in Indiana, Ellsworth faced Republican ads asking: "Will Brad Ellsworth vote for liberal Democrat Nancy Pelosi for speaker of the House? . . . Pelosi and other Democrats want to raise your taxes, cut and run in Iraq, and give amnesty to illegal immigrants."

In Asheville, N.C., conservatives opposed to Shuler put up billboards of a Mexican flag flying atop an upside-down U.S. flag. Lampson, in his race for the seat vacated by former House majority leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), contended with campaign signs reading: "Want more illegals? Vote Democrat."

Challenging Rep. Brad Miller (D-N.C.), now in his third term, Republican Vernon Robinson charged, "If Miller had his way, America would be nothing but one big fiesta for illegal aliens and homosexuals."

"Something like 90 percent of Republican ads ran on immigration. These new Dems don't want to see that again," Flake said.

House leaders have made clear that they want the Senate to go first on the issue. In the Senate, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), key Republicans, Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff have been making closed-door efforts to reach a consensus since November. Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) has scheduled the last two weeks of May for Senate action on immigration.

But there is no Senate bill. Kennedy and his partner on immigration last year, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), had been expected to join Flake and Gutierrez last month in the unveiling of the Strive Act, but McCain dropped off. Opponents of such immigration plans say he is running from the issue as he tries to gain traction with conservatives in his bid for the White House. McCain aides and his Democratic allies on immigration say he is simply too busy to take the lead and has handed it off to a close ally, Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.).

Add to all that tumult the growing animosity between Bush and congressional leaders over other issues, from Iraq to the firing of U.S. attorneys, and the prospects for the president's immigration proposals appear faint.

"I think he's going to have an uphill battle," Boyda said.