

## **Democrat Lofgren hopes for consensus on key House panel**

**By Dave Montgomery - McClatchy Newspapers**

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WASHINGTON -- As an immigration lawyer in Northern California, Zoe Lofgren helped struggling immigrant farmworkers keep their families together and stay in the United States.

Now, years later, the Democratic congresswoman from San Jose is poised to take over the House subcommittee on immigration. Those experiences from the front lines likely will resonate anew as she helps direct the next congressional debate over the nation's shadow population of illegal immigrants.

With her liberal credentials and pro-immigrant views, Lofgren embodies what many believe is a new day in the immigration debate as Congress, now under Democratic control, again confronts one of the nation's most contentious issues. The shifting dynamics are strikingly evident in the House of Representatives, which was the burial ground for immigration legislation when Republicans were in charge.

During the last session of Congress, conservative House Republicans effectively killed President Bush's call for comprehensive legislation that, among other things, would grant eventual legal status to millions of undocumented immigrants. Proponents of the failed legislation -- as well as Bush himself -- believe the plan now has a substantially improved chance of passage in the Democrat-controlled Congress.

"I like to believe that if everybody can lower their voice, just stop yelling and go through the issues one by one, that we can come to consensus," said Lofgren, whose subcommittee will serve as a starting point for the immigration debate. "I have this hope that we can produce a practical and bipartisan bill that gets broad support."

Lofgren, in an interview, said she's been approached by moderate Republicans -- whom she declines to name -- eager to work with her.

"One Republican told me he's been more included by me than he was in 10 years by his own leadership," she said.

A potential Republican ally is Arizona Rep. Jeff Flake, a House co-sponsor of the McCain-Kennedy bill, which served as the basis for a comprehensive immigration bill passed by the Senate last year. Senior Republicans last week removed Flake from his seat on the House Judiciary Committee, and he believes his stance on immigration may have been a contributing factor.

"I have a contrary view to my own party," Flake said. "I was an easy target."

Flake said he hopes to work with Lofgren and other "reasonable" Democrats. Proponents of an immigration overhaul, he said, have "a better shot than we've had in a long time."

Nevertheless, Republican opponents of Bush's plan -- which includes a controversial temporary guest worker program -- say they intend to battle as aggressively as ever, even though they're now in the minority.

"One big hell of a fight," said Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., who heads a diminished anti-immigration coalition, in projecting House Republicans' strategy in the new Congress. "At least, I hope it's a fight. I hope it's not just a rollover."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco and key Democrats such as Lofgren have embraced some of the main concepts of Bush's immigration proposal. But Democrats by no means are of one mind, ensuring friction when lawmakers begin addressing the issue.

One trouble spot is the proposed guest worker program being pushed by American businesses to bring in thousands of foreign workers each year to address what they say is a chronic shortage in low and unskilled labor.

The 53-union AFL-CIO, which helped Democrats take over Congress in the November elections, is pushing to defeat the guest worker program on the grounds that it could take jobs from U.S. workers.

Some conservative freshman Democrats also may be as tough in calling for a crackdown on illegal immigration as the Republicans they unseated. Rep. Allen Boyd of Florida, a leader of the conservative Democratic organization known as the Blue Dogs, said colleagues in that group are "all over the map" on immigration.

Freshman Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., who defeated Republican J.D. Hayworth, a leader of anti-immigration forces in the House, backs the McCain-Kennedy approach and says he came to Washington expecting the measure would have "a pretty easy" glide path with Republicans no longer in power.

But after hearing misgivings among some of his fellow freshmen, Mitchell said, he's lowering his expectations.

"Just because Democrats are in," he said, "I wouldn't say it's a slam dunk."

Lofgren said the House version of the McCain-Kennedy bill will be the starting point to begin building consensus.

Sponsored by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., the bill would grant legal status to undocumented immigrants who pay fines and back taxes, meet English and civics requirements and pass criminal background checks. It also proposes a guest worker program to bring up to 400,000 foreign workers into the country each year.

The mother of two grown children whose husband, like herself, is a lawyer, Lofgren brings a firsthand familiarity to the issue that few of her colleagues can match.

She handled immigration issues as a staff assistant to Rep. Don Edwards, her predecessor, in the 1970s, and specialized in immigration law. She also taught immigration law at the University of Santa Clara School of Law.

Although Lofgren says it's too early to forecast the details of an eventual immigration bill in the House, she clearly comes down on the side of those who believe that the more than 11 million illegal immigrants in the country must be placed on a path toward legalization.

"We can have all kinds of discussions about how we get them out of the shadows and into the sunlight," she said, "but ultimately, that's got to happen."