

Dems Raise Stakes on Immigration

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Going into November's elections, House and Senate Democrats are outbidding the White House on spending for immigration enforcement, with a special emphasis on deporting people convicted of major drug offenses and violent crimes.

Immigration remains a highly divisive political issue - especially in the House Democratic Caucus. But targeting convicted criminals is seen as safe ground for the party and a pressure point to highlight shortcomings in the current enforcement system.

A Homeland Security budget bill now moving through the House Appropriations Committee specifies that at least \$800 million be spent after Oct. 1 to identify and remove the most violent and dangerous criminals from the U.S. And Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) is expected to take an even more aggressive approach Wednesday in his own plan, adding more money for Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations within Homeland Security.

The maneuvering comes as Congress and the White House remained at odds Monday over a wartime spending bill in which Democrats have also sought to position themselves on the popular side of two other domestic issues: aid to the unemployed and a new GI Bill for veterans returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Compromises seem possible in each case, but in this election year atmosphere, both sides are skittish of giving up too much, and tactical decisions by Democrats indicate it will be at least another week before a resolution will be possible.

In the case of immigration enforcement, an April report to lawmakers from ICE estimates that between 300,000 to 450,000 illegal immigrants convicted of a crime are detained each year in federal, state, county and local facilities - all subject to deportation. But it was only last winter that ICE finally reached a point where it had 100 percent screening of state prisons, according to data submitted by the agency. And huge information gaps remain regarding prisoners in an estimated 3,100 county and local jails around the country.

Homeland Security officials say any long-term solution rests on investing in new technologies and improved interoperability to give ICE a virtual presence throughout prisons and jails nationwide. And although it has not been as fast as lawmakers want, there has been a steady escalation in the number of prisoners identified and charged for removal.

"It is absolutely a top priority," says Kelly Nantel, a spokeswoman for ICE. But after the new Democratic Congress added \$200 million to the agency's 2008 budget for this purpose, the White House didn't continue the funding in its 2009 request, and ICE has yet to spend most of the money.

In its April report, for example, the agency committed only \$25.5 million for 2008 and \$174.5 million in 2009. This explains some of the frustration by Rep. David E. Price (D-N.C.), who manages the Homeland Security budget in the House. In his new bill, which won subcommittee approval last week, Price would require that ICE submit quarterly reports on meeting the committee's goal. Price complained that too much emphasis is going to worksite raids rather than deporting criminals.

For example, ICE's worksite enforcement arrests for noncriminal charges jumped from 445 in 2003 to 4,077 in 2007 - a better than 800 percent increase. In the same five-year period, the number of criminal deportations rose by 16 percent, from about 82,868 to 96,018.

Nantel counters that these percentage comparisons are misleading, and says that ICE - with some credit to Congress - has been stepping up its processing of convicted criminals for deportation. In 2006, for example, just 67,000 had been charged for deportation; by 2007 that number had doubled to 164,000, and the goal is to begin proceedings for 200,000 persons this year.

ICE estimates that it would require between \$2.1 billion and \$3.4 billion each year to remove all illegal immigrants convicted of crimes - an impossible sum given the budget today. But about \$907 million would be sufficient to target those Level I prisoners convicted of major drug offenses or violent crimes.

This is the rationale behind the House bill allocating \$800 million for this purpose; with the unspent funds left from 2008, the agency could then have as much as \$950 million available.

The details of Byrd's approach aren't yet known, but the West Virginian will commit more money and is more aggressive than the House on enforcement, including the worksite raids that have angered many Hispanic lawmakers.

Thus, the House's approach is more one of shifting priorities within ICE's \$4.8 billion budget. The \$800 million commitment represents 17 percent of the total, and only about \$60 million in new money is added. By comparison, Byrd is expected to take an approach

of providing more robust funding generally, with possibly \$160 million in new money for the purpose of targeting major criminals for deportation.