GOP senators to introduce toughest-yet immigration package

Bills would mandate prison time for illegal border crossings and compel English in dealing with federal agencies.

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WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans are set to announce today the hardest-hitting package of immigration enforcement measures seen yet -- one that would require jail time for illegal immigrants caught crossing the border, make it harder for them to open bank accounts and compel them to communicate in English when dealing with federal agencies.

Most of the bills stand little chance of being debated in the Democratic-controlled Congress. But the move by some of the Senate's leading Republicans underscores how potent the immigration issue remains, particularly in a presidential election year.

The bills give Republicans a way to put pressure on the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates to take a tougher stance on immigration. They also reflect a shift toward harsher immigration rhetoric and legislative proposals from both parties since Congress failed to pass a comprehensive overhaul in 2007.

The package -- an enforcement smorgasbord assembled by at least eight lawmakers -- consists of 11 bills, but it could expand to as many as 14. Some elements echo House bills, but others go beyond House proposals.

One would discourage states from issuing driver's licenses to illegal immigrants by docking 10% of highway funding from states that continue to do so.

Another would extend the presence of the National Guard on the border, and a third would end language assistance at federal agencies and the voting booth for people with limited English ability.

A bill by Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), who is leading the effort, would impose a maximum two-year prison sentence on someone caught illegally crossing the border a second time.

"The point is to reinforce the idea that most of us here feel that we need to make enforcement and border security a first step to solving the overall problem," said Sen. David Vitter (R-La.), one of the sponsors.

Although Congress usually avoids tough legislation during an election year, Vitter

insisted that he and his colleagues could still get something done. "There are concrete steps we can take. None of us see any reason to waste this time," he said.

Other bills in the package would:

* Block federal funding to cities that bar their police from asking about immigration status.

* Give the Department of Homeland Security the authority to use information from the Social Security Administration to target illegal immigrants.

* Require construction of 700 miles of fencing along the southern border, not including vehicle barriers.

* Impose sanctions on countries that refuse to repatriate their citizens.

* Deport any immigrant, legal or illegal, for one drunk-driving conviction.

* Enable local and state police to enforce federal immigration laws.

Jim Manley, a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), said the Republican proposal "falls far short of what is needed." Democrats want to combine enforcement with a guest-worker program and a way to deal with the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. Reid "continues to support legislation that is tough on people who break the law, fair to taxpayers and practical to implement," Manley said.

But Democrats have also begun embracing a tougher stance on immigration. A confidential study assembled for the Democratic leadership earlier this year urged them to start using tougher language. Democrats have focused on offering opportunity to immigrants, but the study by two public-policy groups urged them to begin speaking in terms of "requiring" illegal immigrants to become legal and about what's best for the United States.

Many House Democrats have gone a step further, endorsing an enforcement-only bill by freshman Democratic Rep. Heath Shuler (D-N.C.) that would bolster border security and require employers to verify their workers' legal status with an electronic verification system.

The SAVE (Secure America through Verification and Enforcement) Act has drawn 140 cosponsors, 48 of whom are Democrats, many of them vulnerable freshmen who won seats from Republicans.

The Democratic leadership dislikes Shuler's bill and has refused to schedule a debate. Republican leaders are considering collecting signatures for a special petition that requires House leaders to bring a bill up for debate if 218 members sign. There are 198 Republicans.

Angela Kelley, director of the Immigration Policy Center, said Senate Republicans might be trying to match their House colleagues. "They might feel they're being upstaged by House Republicans," she said. But she also suggested that the Senate bills could provide political protection to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who has clinched the GOP presidential nomination.

Conservatives consider McCain soft on immigration. McCain, along with Democratic presidential candidates Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois, has backed giving illegal immigrants some form of legal status, which conservatives consider "amnesty."

If McCain endorsed the Senate package, that could "create a platform for McCain to look tough on immigration, create distance from Ted Kennedy [D-Mass.] and erect a shield around the amnesty charge," Kelley said.

Besides Sessions and Vitter, the bills are being introduced by GOP Sens. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, John Barrasso of Wyoming, Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, Jim DeMint of South Carolina, Elizabeth Dole of North Carolina, Pete V. Domenici of New Mexico, James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania.