

# Immigration Bill Clears Test Vote in Senate

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WASHINGTON, June 26 — A bill to overhaul the immigration system, all but given up for dead two weeks ago, cleared a crucial test vote in the Senate today, bolstering its chances for passage by the Senate within days.

The senators voted, 64 to 35, to invoke cloture, or move to consideration of the bill itself. Since 60 votes are required for cloture, and only 45 voted for cloture two weeks ago, the measure's supporters were heartened by today's vote. Had the cloture vote failed today, the bill would have been dead for the foreseeable future.

The Senate's next step is to consider a batch of amendments, some designed to be easier on illegal immigrants, some meant to be tougher. The amendments' differing intentions underline the fragility of the coalition behind the bill.

Another make-or-break cloture vote could come before this weekend, and it is by no means certain that those who voted for cloture today will vote for the bill itself.

"This bill puts 12 million people on a pathway to legalization," said Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic majority leader, who pulled the bill from the floor on June 7 after a previous attempt to invoke cloture received only 45 votes.

President Bush repeatedly urged Republican senators (only seven of whom had voted for cloture the first time) to give the legislation another chance. Mr. Reid, who was sharply criticized for pulling the bill, relented and said he was willing to take it up again.

Many conservatives, both in Congress and across the country, have vowed to block the legislation, which calls for the biggest change in immigration law in more than 20 years.

Putting 12 million people on "a pathway to legalization," as Mr. Reid put it, is anathema to a number of conservatives, who say the idea amounts to amnesty, even though the bill's supporters have emphasized that the pathway to legalization would be open only to those who pay penalties and go to the back of the bureaucratic line.

Mr. Bush was optimistic before today's vote and pledged that the White House would stay involved. "Our view is, if the status quo is unacceptable, we need to replace it with something that is acceptable and have been working toward that end with both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate," he said. "We'll be moving our attention to the House when the Senate passes a comprehensive piece of legislation."

“I view this as an historic opportunity,” Mr. Bush said, reiterating a favorite theme: “Our spirit is invigorated when people come here to realize the blessings of America.”

Mr. Reid said the White House must deliver about 25 Republican votes to ensure Senate passage of the bill. “This is not a Democratic bill, it’s the president’s bill,” he said.

On the cloture roll-call today, 39 Democrats joined 24 Republicans and an independent in voting to take up the bill again. Twenty-five Republicans, nine Democrats and an independent voted no.

The president and Senate supporters of the bill say it would go a long way toward securing America’s borders, helping illegal immigrants without granting them amnesty and organizing a guest-worker program that would benefit American businesses while helping immigrants. The bill’s opponents, including many Republicans conservatives, contend that it would grant amnesty no matter what its supporters say, and would not do enough to protect security.

Even if the Senate does pass an immigration bill, it will have to be reconciled with whatever measure the House passes. Putting together enough support for a bill in the House could be at least as difficult as it has been in the Senate, a political fact underscored by Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio, the Republican minority leader.

“There are large numbers of House Republicans who have serious concerns about the Senate bill,” Mr. Boehner said today. Just hours before the Senate vote, the House Republican Conference took up a resolution declaring that it disapproved of the Senate bill. The measure lost, 83 to 28.

The Senate debate before today’s cloture vote followed the lines that it has for weeks.

“It may not be perfect,” said Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts and a key backer of the bill. But over all, he said, it is “a good bill” and perhaps the last best chance for a long time to fix a broken system.

But a prominent critic of the bill, Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas, urged his colleagues to “slow down and read this bill.” If Americans knew what was really in it, he said, they “could be forgiven for doubting the commitment of the federal government” about border security.