

Boehner Sticks With Step-by-Step Approach on Immigration

By Roxana Tiron and Kathleen Hunter on July 11, 2013

House Speaker John Boehner said he's sticking to his plan to take up piecemeal changes to the U.S. immigration system while shunning a Senate-passed comprehensive measure.

"Moving through this in a methodical, step-by-step approach allows members to read the bills, understand the bills" and helps build public support, Boehner, an Ohio Republican, told reporters today following yesterday's two-hour private meeting by party members to discuss immigration.

"Securing our borders and having the ability to enforce our immigration laws are the first big steps in this process," Boehner said. He wouldn't say whether he thought the House could pass legislation including a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Democrats insist such a provision must be part of any immigration plan.

Immigration legislation is President Barack Obama's highest domestic priority thus far in his second term, after he won 71 percent of the Hispanic vote in November. Republicans, in turn, want to boost their party's appeal with Hispanics after 2012 presidential nominee Mitt Romney promoted self-deportation as the answer to illegal immigration.

The president met today at the White House with two authors of the bipartisan Senate bill, Arizona Republican John McCain and New York Democrat Charles Schumer. Afterward, both senators said they were encouraged following yesterday's House Republican meeting.

'Strong Future'

"A large percentage of the House realized that doing nothing was not an option," Schumer said. "Immigration has a strong future this year in Washington."

McCain said the senators' message to "colleagues in the House is 'we are ready to negotiate.'"

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California said immigration overhaul must be enacted this year because "it's unlikely that it's going to happen in an election year."

Boehner said today that he "made the strong case" to fellow Republicans that the immigration system "needs to be fixed and Republicans ought to be part of the solution."

"My job is to do everything I can to facilitate a process for solving this problem," the speaker said.

Boehner and other House Republican leaders said in a joint statement following yesterday's meeting that they don't trust Obama's administration to secure the border as part of a broad "Obamacare-like" immigration plan.

Citizenship Path

The Democratic-led Senate's immigration bill, S. 744, combines a path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the U.S. with a \$46 billion border-security plan. While 14 Senate Republicans joined Democrats in passing the bill June 27, House Republicans have repeatedly said that they won't take up the Senate legislation.

"There is a broad consensus that we have to get border security first and then deal with a guest-worker program," Representative Charles Boustany, a Louisiana Republican, told reporters after yesterday's meeting.

Obama has said he wants to sign immigration legislation by the end of this year. McCain said the president's challenge is "to get Republican members on board" and that he must operate in a way so they "do not feel that they've been unduly pressured by the president."

"We are in no way big-footing" members of the House, McCain said.

August Recess

Representative Trey Gowdy, a South Carolina Republican and chairman of the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, said today he wasn't sure the House would vote on any measures before lawmakers' recess begins in August. He suggested that Republicans would tackle the issue through the fall.

The House may be ready to negotiate with the Senate by year-end on final legislation, Gowdy said in an interview on Bloomberg Television's "Political Capital With Al Hunt," airing this weekend.

Still, he said, Republicans should "be prepared to walk away at some point if our principles are not being honored and not being followed."

Other lawmakers also expressed doubt that the House will vote on any immigration-related bills before the five-week recess.

Action in July is "100 percent unlikely," said Representative John Fleming of Louisiana. Lawmakers want to hear from their constituents during the break in their home districts, he said.

No Strategy

Representative Bob Goodlatte of Virginia, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said yesterday that Republicans' closed-door meeting didn't produce a clear strategy for how the House will proceed.

"There is definitely a question about what the right pathway forward is," Goodlatte said.

House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin during yesterday's meeting "made a very strong statement that we need to do something," said Representative Tom Cole of Oklahoma. Ryan was the 2012 Republican vice-presidential nominee.

Ryan said revising immigration laws would improve the U.S. economy "based on the fact that we have a slowing population growth and there's a population growth that would pick up with immigration," Fleming said.

Senate Democrats have said they hoped that the bipartisan 68-32 vote for that chamber's immigration bill would persuade the House to vote on something similar.

50-50 Odds

Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, the top Democrat on the Budget Committee, said today on CNBC that after the Senate voted on its bill, he put the odds for House passage of legislation at "something like 70 percent. Now I would say it's 50-50."

While "a fair number, a good number" of House Republicans favor the idea of a comprehensive overhaul, Van Hollen said, "the politics in their district are driving them to fear voting for it" because of concerns they will be "attacked by someone on the Tea Party right."

House Republicans are divided over whether to grant legal status to undocumented immigrants. Iowa Republican Steve King, who opposes any form of legal status, said his sense was that about half of the House Republicans oppose legalizing undocumented immigrants, even if they aren't granted citizenship.

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2013-07-10/house-republicans-seek-border-security-first-in-immigration-plan>