

Citizenship Becomes Focus of Immigration Fight

By Laura Meckler

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Both parties are promising to use 2013 to advance long-stalled immigration legislation, but an early dispute on whether to give 11 million people in the country illegally a path to citizenship—or a legal status that stops short of that—could complicate the effort.

President Barack Obama, most Democrats and advocates for the Hispanic community are pushing for citizenship. But many Republicans are wary, saying citizenship would amount to a reward for those who broke the law to come to the U.S.

"You can have a legal process where people know they can be here for a long period of time, renew their visas, but you don't need a pathway to citizenship," said Rep. Raul Labrador (R., Idaho), who supports granting a legal status short of citizenship.

The jockeying comes as the White House and congressional leaders prepare to tackle immigration early in the new year. In the Senate, four Democrats and four Republicans are trying to forge a bipartisan, comprehensive bill. Mr. Obama plans a full-court press soon after fiscal cliff negotiations are resolved, a senior administration official said.

The largest Hispanic advocacy groups said this week that they would issue "report cards" on lawmakers ahead of the 2014 elections, scoring their support for a comprehensive overhaul.

One unresolved issue: whether the president will deliver to Congress a fully formed bill as a starting place for debate, or let lawmakers work on their own. During Mr. Obama's first term, the White House had prepared legislative language at the request of senators but never released it publicly.

Since last month's election, several Republicans have said it would be impossible to improve their support from Hispanics without action on immigration. Republican Mitt Romney won just 27% of the Latino vote.

A poll released Wednesday by Resurgent Republic, a GOP research group, of Hispanic voters in Florida, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada—all important swing states in presidential elections—found overwhelming support for a range of policies that are expected to be part of immigration legislation.

Policy aside, some Republicans worry that offering citizenship would create millions of new Democratic voters, said John Feehery, a Republican consultant, who doesn't subscribe to that view.

Given their political momentum, immigration advocates aren't giving any ground. "Our movement has been very clear: the centerpiece of broad reform is citizenship," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice Education Fund, an immigration advocacy group.

He added that Republicans aren't going to successfully confront their political problem if they oppose citizenship.

"A big part of the imperative for Republicans to do this is to rip the Band-Aid off and put the issue behind them," he said. He added that Republicans run the risk of reinforcing a negative image among Hispanic voters if they hold out for a compromise that provides less than full citizenship.

But even some Democrats recommend removing citizenship as a strategic move to help pass a broader bill. "The American people really value citizenship, and they don't want it to be seen as given away to get a political constituency," said Lanae Erickson Hatalsky of Third Way, a centrist Democratic think tank that found in a postelection poll that half of Obama voters support a path to citizenship, with about a third supporting legal status that is short of citizenship.

Many Republicans say they could support citizenship, but only if those affected wait in line behind those who have been trying unsuccessfully to come to the U.S. legally. With long lines already existing, that would mean many new additions would never reach the front. One option would be to ease the wait for everyone through other changes to the system.

Some in the GOP, including Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), want Congress to pass a series of bills that deal with immigration before ever considering granting legal status to the 11 million people here illegally.

Under this approach, lawmakers would act piecemeal on issues such as border security, a guest worker program, additional visas for high-tech workers, rather than pass a comprehensive bill that would deal with all those issues, as well as the legal status of the 11 million.

"I'm skeptical that you can craft a majority in the new Senate and in the new House for a comprehensive bill," said Republican pollster Whit Ayres, who has long urged Republicans to tackle this issue.

Many Democrats reject a piecemeal approach, saying Republicans may not support elements that Democrats want, such as a citizenship provision, if they have already seen their priorities, such as toughened border security, signed into law.

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