

Emerging immigration deal receives House leaders' bipartisan backing

By Russell Berman and Mike Lillis - 03/20/13 05:00 AM ET

Leaders in both parties voiced confidence in an emerging House immigration agreement, giving momentum to an issue that has been a bright spot early in President Obama's second term.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) praised a bipartisan group for coming up with "a pretty responsible solution" on immigration, the first public endorsement the Speaker has made on the substance of secretive talks that have gone on for more than four years.

A group of eight lawmakers — four Republicans and four Democrats — has been meeting privately to craft a comprehensive immigration overhaul, and they told Boehner and other Republican leaders last week that they were close to a deal.

"They're essentially in agreement over how to proceed," Boehner told reporters at a press conference. "But this is just the beginning of the process. There's a lot of education that needs to be done, because more than half of our members have never dealt with the issue of immigration reform, both on the legal side and on the illegal side."

"There's a lot of issues here that have to be dealt with," he added. "I think what the bipartisan group came up [with], frankly, is a pretty responsible solution."

House Democratic leaders received a similar briefing, and the party's second-ranking member, Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), said that the group was "very close to an agreement" and that an announcement could come in the "near term."

Hoyer said Democratic leaders have had "a long discussion" with the Democrats on the informal panel, including Reps. Xavier Becerra (Calif.) and Luis Gutierrez (Ill.).

"They are close," he said. "I think they've made real progress."

The building momentum for immigration reform coincides with several setbacks for Obama in other areas of his second-term agenda, including his push for gun control legislation and a major deficit-reduction agreement.

The House group has kept a tight lid on details of the legislation they are drafting, but Hoyer said it would include a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., which is perhaps the most contentious issue in the immigration debate.

Gutierrez spoke separately to reporters across town, where he cheekily said he could not confirm or deny his participation in the House group or even its existence.

The comment drew laughter, and then the longtime immigration reform advocate detailed the state of play.

“I do not anticipate the announcement of a bill or bipartisan principles in the next week,” Gutierrez said at a breakfast sponsored by The Christian Science Monitor, “but I am hopeful that after recess, after Easter, the process will move forward quickly in both the House and the Senate.”

He said reform advocates are under a “time pressure,” not from Obama or congressional leaders, but because of the politics of the moment. “We are under a time pressure to resolve this issue because the moment is politically ripe,” he said. “The further, I believe, we get away from Election Day — Nov. 6 of 2012 — the less urgency there will be, and the less likelihood of success.”

He made clear that he would not put his name on a bill that prohibits a path to citizenship, and he voiced confidence the divisive issue could be reconciled between the two parties.

“I think there is an overlap between the Republican position and the Democratic position that we do not prohibit citizenship, which makes me optimistic that the policy to satisfy these two overlapping demands can be crafted,” Gutierrez said. “I would like a clean, clear, quick path to citizenship and I think a lot of people on my side would, but we are working to find bipartisan agreement, and I don’t get to write the bill all by myself.

Advocates of comprehensive immigration reform hailed a speech on Tuesday by Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), in which the Tea Party favorite backed the contours of a path to citizenship, although he stopped short of embracing what he described as a loaded phrase.

The House immigration group has received far less attention than its counterpart in the Senate, in part because of its members’ own desire for secrecy.

“They’re keeping the conversation very much under the cone of silence,” said Angela Kelley, vice president for immigration policy at the liberal Center for American Progress.

Still, Kelley said that any day on which “John Boehner and Rand Paul are basically singing off the same song page, that’s a good day.”

People familiar with the House negotiations say the lawmakers are not stuck on one or two points but are merely working through the many details that need to be addressed in drafting a complicated legislative text. “Immigration code is more complex than the tax code,” Kelley said.

House lawmakers are in contact, but not coordinating, with the Senate group, an aide said, and the amount of progress achieved by the “Gang of Eight” in the Senate is expected to factor into when and how the House group releases its proposal.

The bipartisan Senate coalition announced its principles for reform in January and it is hoping to introduce legislation in April following the two-week Easter recess.

Read more: <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/289169-emerging-immigration-deal-receives-house-leaders-bipartisan-backing>