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GOP appears to tap immigration brakes

By Russell Berman

Senior House Republicans appear to be tapping the brakes on their push for immigration reform after rank-and-file members raised questions about the wisdom of tackling the issue in an election year under President Obama.

In interviews and television appearances over the last several days, top GOP lawmakers have repeatedly refused to commit to moving legislation this year, and they have reported that widespread distrust of Obama by their members is a significant obstacle to an immigration overhaul.

Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.), appearing Sunday on CBS, said a lack of trust in the administration to implement a new law passed by Congress was “the takeaway” from an hour-long conference meeting on immigration at the House GOP retreat in Maryland, where the leadership presented its draft principles for reform.

Republicans have long complained about lax border enforcement and the Obama administration’s moves to unilaterally make changes to the Affordable Care Act without congressional approval, but lawmakers said the president’s emphasis on expanding executive orders during his State of the Union address took the problem to a new level.

“That sort of breeds this kind of distrust,” Cantor said on “Face the Nation.” “And I think we’re going to have to do something about that in order to see a way forward on immigration.”

In an appearance Sunday on ABC, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), a leading GOP advocate for immigration reform, said the chances of a bill reaching President Obama’s desk this year were “clearly in doubt.”

Republican aides on Monday said discussions on immigration would continue with members and that no decisions had been made on whether the party would move forward with legislation.

But it is becoming clear that GOP leaders do not expect swift action after the initial feedback from the rank-and-file.

Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.), a leadership ally, predicted in an interview Friday that any move on immigration would be “a longer, slower process” than Democrats want to see. And he suggested that if the House acts at all, it would first be on border security and enforcement measures, which Democrats are unlikely to support without assurances that they will get votes to provide legal status to undocumented immigrants.

In the one-page set of principles released Thursday, the GOP leadership proposed a path to legal

status for immigrants who have met certain requirements and after unspecified “enforcement triggers” have been implemented and independently certified. The endorsement of some legalization marked a major shift for the party in the House, though it did not offer a direct path to citizenship that many Democrats want.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) made clear to members in a closed-door meeting at the retreat that the GOP would not bend further on the issue, and on Monday his office published a document comparing the House draft standards to the more liberal Senate bill that passed last June.

Unlike the Senate bill, according to the comparison, the House GOP would require unauthorized immigrants to “admit culpability for breaking our laws” and support themselves and their families completely without public benefits. The Senate bill is looser on those fronts, the document says, and unlike the House principles, it would start registering immigrants for legalization “virtually immediately after passage, without having to meet any real enforcement requirements.”

Democrats and their allies in the advocate community dismiss Republican complaints about trusting the administration as an excuse for inaction and say the GOP is wrong in accusing the government of lax border enforcement.

“Immigration enforcement-only has been the default immigration strategy of the United States for over two decades,” the immigration reform advocacy group America’s Voice said in a statement Monday. “If we are serious about modernizing the system so that it serves our nation’s interests and reflects our values, enforcement needs to be coupled with a path to citizenship and legal immigration reforms. Don’t believe the Republican rap on an out-of-control border and lax enforcement.”

Read more: <http://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/197311-gop-appears-to-tap-immigration-brakes>