

House Republicans offer piecemeal approach on immigration

April 25, 2013, 6:59 p.m.

WASHINGTON — House [Republicans](#) announced the first in a series of immigration-related bills that would attempt to reshape the system one piece at a time, a contrast with the comprehensive approach the Senate is pursuing.

The chairman of the [House Judiciary Committee](#), Rep. Robert W. Goodlatte of Virginia, was careful Thursday to say the two bills he would unveil this week — and "several" more after that — were simply starting points for debate. The effort does not preclude the broader overhauls being drafted by bipartisan groups in both chambers, he said.

"We think we can help move the process forward by beginning to examine the legislative details," said Goodlatte, an immigration lawyer. "No one should take the limited bills we're introducing this week to be in any way an indication of our overall interest in solving all of the various aspects of [immigration reform](#) that are before the House and Senate."

Nonetheless, some immigration reform advocates warned that the move in the House, where bipartisan negotiations on comprehensive legislation have stalled, could complicate efforts to pass an immigration bill this year. House members who oppose a comprehensive approach but who want to be able to say they voted for something could fall back on these more limited pieces of legislation, they said.

The array of measures from the House would provide an easier choice for conservative Republicans than the complex 844-page bill from the Senate, which involves a series of political trade-offs including enhanced border security, new guest-worker programs and the eventual chance for citizenship for most of the estimated 11 million people in the U.S. who entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas.

At the same time, however, the House bills could provide an important educational exercise for many newer GOP lawmakers as they learn the complexities of the immigration debate. Many Republicans represent congressional districts that have very small Latino or immigrant populations, leaving them unfamiliar with the issue. Republican leaders, however, believe that passing immigration reform legislation is vital to their future electoral strategy of attracting Latino voters.

Goodlatte and others have been conducting study sessions attended by 100 Republican lawmakers to bring them up to speed on immigration issues.

"I represent a district with less than 2% Latino voters, so this is not a political exercise for me," said Rep. [Trey Gowdy](#) (R-S.C.), a former prosecutor, who has been helping to lead the sessions. "I would like a remedy that sustains us for the remainder of my lifetime."

Details of the House bills were not fully aired Thursday, but the first two would deal with an agricultural guest-worker program and a requirement that employers confirm the legal status of workers using the E-Verify system. Other bills would probably involve border security, a top priority of Republicans.

Senators who helped negotiate the immigration reform package in their chamber warned against a piecemeal approach.

"The idea of doing separate bills is just not going to work — it's not worked in the past, it's not going to work in the future," said Sen. [Charles E. Schumer](#) (D-N.Y.), an architect of the Senate bill.

Republican Sen. [John McCain](#) of Arizona said there was "no way" an immigration overhaul could pass [Congress](#) and be signed into law unless it included a path to citizenship for those living in this county without legal status.

"It's totally unnecessary to have 11 million people — human beings, God's children — in our society without any of the rights or protections of citizenship, or at least a legal status," McCain said.

Goodlatte has said he would prefer not to provide a "special pathway" to citizenship.

Outside groups and lawmakers reacted coolly to the House action.

"I don't know if it helps or hurts," said Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), a member of the House group drafting a bipartisan bill. "The only thing I'm glad about is immigration is on the agenda."

Rep. [Luis V. Gutierrez](#) (D-Ill.), another member of the bipartisan House group, said Goodlatte's move confirmed "the new tone and new interest among Republicans. They want to solve the immigration policy issue and not just exploit it for partisan politics."

But one longtime immigration reform advocate, Frank Sharry of America's Voice, suggested the House move "makes it easier for opponents of broad reform to oppose comprehensive reform while claiming they support something."

Congress is about to take a weeklong recess. Immigration reform is scheduled to move to the forefront when lawmakers return in May.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-house-immigration-20130426,0,6677852.story>