

House GOP Cools to Immigration Overhaul

By Laura Meckler and Kristina Peterson

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WASHINGTON—Just days after House Republican leaders backed legalization for most immigrants in the U.S. illegally, opponents in the party are making clear they will resist the push, casting fresh doubt on chances for legislative movement on immigration this year.

The focus of opposition within the House GOP is less on sensitivities over amnesty or a potential flood of unneeded new workers, and more on politics. Opponents say they worry that moving ahead on the issue could divide Republicans and hand Democrats a victory in an election year when the GOP has the advantage. Many Republicans also question whether President Barack Obama would enforce the law if one is passed.

Rep. Raúl Labrador (R., Idaho), a tea-party-backed conservative who has been viewed as a potential backer of immigration legislation, said Wednesday that "there was overwhelming support for the idea of doing nothing this year" when the issue was discussed at last week's GOP retreat. "It's a mistake to have an internal battle this year about immigration," he said.

The pushback comes after the retreat generated a burst of public optimism that House Republicans might advance legislation after months of stalling.

A block of House Republicans opposes the immigration overhaul on policy grounds, but GOP officials say a far larger group is worried about the wisdom of putting forth such a divisive proposal during an election year when the GOP is unified on issues such as health care and the economy. They say Republicans should wait until 2015, when the party might have control of the Senate and more leverage.

Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D., Ill.), who has long worked on immigration issues, said Republicans would be wise to address the issue this year, well ahead of the next presidential race, when the GOP nominee will need to boost the party's sparse support among Latino voters.

GOP waffling on immigration this year will "backfire terribly" in the long run, hurting the party in national and statewide races, Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D., Ariz.), co-chairman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said Wednesday. "You might throw red meat to your base on this one but you've got consequences now," he said. "This back-and-forth stuff is not helping at all."

House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) has yet to commit to any timetable for floor action, but has encouraged an effort by Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R., Fla.) to write a bill that attempts to strike a middle ground by giving legal status to most of the 11.5 million people in the U.S. illegally with the right to access existing pathways to citizenship. It rejects a "special pathway" to citizenship for this group, and envisions a string of hurdles that the government and individuals would have to cross before those provisions take effect.

By all accounts, Mr. Boehner wants to push forward on immigration legislation, knowing he will need a combination of Republican and Democratic votes to do so. Democrats are cautiously

optimistic about the approach Republicans have laid out, but it is unclear whether Mr. Boehner can rally sufficient support inside his own conference.

There is uncertainty even within GOP leadership about the path ahead. Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) has said that midterm politics complicates any effort and that it makes more sense to wait, according to people familiar with the discussions. Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R., Va.) is seen as somewhere in between Messrs. McCarthy and Boehner.

Opponents are stoking concerns about the timing. "Republicans are poised for an historic election this fall," Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas), whose views have influenced House conservatives in the past, said in a recent statement. "The biggest thing we could do to mess that up would be if the House passed an amnesty bill—or any bill perceived as an amnesty bill—that demoralized voters going into November."

A Republican lobbyist who is pushing for the overhaul said he was surprised by the nature of the opposition. "We're not in a fight about the substance but we're losing the 'Why now?' argument far more than I thought we would be," he said. He dismissed those who say the party should wait until next year: "The idea that it is going to be easier as we roll into a presidential election cycle is just preposterous."

Mr. Boehner and his allies have said there is never a good time politically to tackle an issue this controversial, so they might as well do so now.

Some Republicans argue they can't pass legislation because they can't trust the Obama administration to enforce it. They cite as evidence his decision to delay parts of the health-care law. "It's just tough to work with this president when you've seen his track record," Rep. Jim Jordan (R., Ohio), the former chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee, said Wednesday.

A White House spokesman cited the administration's considerable investment in border and interior enforcement, saying it was wrong to suggest that the president is uninterested in those provisions. "We welcome the process moving forward and we look forward to working with all parties to make immigration reform a reality," he said.

That distrust has left Mr. Obama in an awkward position. At the request of Republican immigration supporters, he has taken a low-key approach on the issue, not pushing too hard and encouraging the path House Republicans are taking.

At the same time, the president is frustrated with stalemates in Congress in other areas and has vowed to use executive action to make progress on his priorities. That, in turn, fuels GOP suspicions.

The murky GOP intentions have put immigration advocates in a tough place. Some, such as the AFL-CIO federation of unions, are distrustful of the House and turning their attention to the coming elections and to pressuring Mr. Obama to unilaterally halt deportations of illegal

immigrants. Others have encouraged Republicans and are hopeful, but also wary of making compromises without promise of a floor vote.

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