

February 5, 2013

# House G.O.P. Open to Residency for Illegal Immigrants

By [ASHLEY PARKER](#)

WASHINGTON — House Republicans on Tuesday staked out what they cast as a middle-ground option in the debate over [immigration](#), pushing an approach that could include legal residency but not a path to citizenship — as their Democratic counterparts favor — for the 11 million illegal immigrants already in the country.

Republicans also signaled that they are open to the idea of breaking immigration legislation into several smaller bills, which would allow them to deal with the question of highly skilled workers, as well as a farmworker program, without addressing what Democrats and immigration advocates say is the larger issue of potential citizenship. Immigration advocates favor a comprehensive measure to enable them to use elements that have bipartisan backing to build support for broader legislation.

At a House Judiciary Committee hearing exploring an overhaul of the immigration system — the first of several such hearings expected in the House — Representative Robert W. Goodlatte, Republican of Virginia and chairman of the committee, tried to frame what he called the question of the day: “Are there options that we should consider between the extremes of mass deportation and a pathway to citizenship for those not lawfully present in the United States?”

It was a question later echoed by Representative Lamar Smith, Republican of Texas and the former chairman of the committee, when questioning Mayor Julián Castro of San Antonio. “Do you see any compromise area between the current status quo and a path to citizenship for virtually all the 11 million who are illegal immigrants in the country today?” he asked.

Mr. Castro, whose twin brother, Representative Joaquín Castro, is a newly elected Democrat from Texas, said he saw the compromise as “a recognition that a path to citizenship will be earned citizenship,” meaning that illegal immigrants would be forced to learn English, and pay fines and back taxes before they could become citizens.

Representative Spencer Bachus, Republican of Alabama, turned to the question of how to approach an overhaul of the system when he said he thought the panelists could all agree that “it’s going to be a much easier lift to solve the problem of highly skilled workers.”

“When you take comprehensive, then we’re dealing with certain issues like full citizenship,” Mr. Bachus said. “And whatever else we disagree on, I think we would agree on that that’s a more toxic and contentious issue, granting full amnesty.”

But Representative Cedric L. Richmond, Democrat of Louisiana, countered that the only way to tackle immigration is through comprehensive legislation. “Why don’t we just get the skilled

labor part done first?" Mr. Richmond asked. "Well, politically, and just being very practical about it, if we got the skilled labor part done first, do you think we would ever come behind it and finish the job? I think it has to be a comprehensive approach or we'll never get to the hard part."

Immigration advocates, who had been eagerly awaiting the hearing for an early hint of the tenor of the debate on immigration as it unfolds in the House, said the use of the word "amnesty" would most likely be a bad sign for those in favor of a comprehensive overhaul.

Representative John Conyers Jr., Democrat of Michigan, tried to set the tone early — "I hope no one uses the term 'illegal immigrants' here today," he said in his opening remarks. But the a-word, as immigration advocates have called "amnesty," came up twice. In addition to Mr. Bachus, Representative Trey Gowdy, Republican of South Carolina, also used the phrase: "This is not our country's first foray into amnesty." He expressed concern for "respect for the rule of law."

Meanwhile, Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the No. 2 House Republican, used a speech on his legislative priorities beyond the fights over deficit reduction to try to soften his party's position on immigration. Speaking at a research group downtown, he explicitly embraced offering illegal immigrants brought to the United States as children a pathway to legal residency and citizenship, a position he had opposed. And he endorsed in broad terms a comprehensive overhaul of the nation's immigration laws.

"I'm pleased these discussions make border security, employment verification and creating a workable guest worker program an immediate priority. It's the right thing to do for our families, for our security, and for our economy," Mr. Cantor said. But he warned, "There are some who would rather avoid fixing the problem in order to save this as a political issue."

Representative Raúl R. Labrador, Republican of Idaho, also challenged immigration advocates on the question of a political versus policy victory.

"If we want a political solution, you guys are going to insist on a pathway to citizenship," he said. "You're going to beat Republicans over the head on this issue. But if we want a policy solution, I think there's good will here in the House of Representatives for us to come together, actually pass a pragmatic solution to the current problem that we have, and solve and modernize the immigration system for years to come."

In a flurry of immigration legislation offered in recent days in the House, a bipartisan group of lawmakers, led by Representative Jerrold Nadler, Democrat of New York, introduced a bill on Tuesday that would allow American citizens with foreign-born same-sex spouses or partners to obtain permanent resident visas, known as green cards, for them. Mr. Nadler's proposal would allow a well-established same-sex couple to apply for a green card, avoiding any direct challenge to a federal law that bans recognition of gay marriage.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/us/politics/house-gop-explores-immigration-changes-short-of-citizenship.html>