

House group secretly crafts immigration plan

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As a group of Senate stars tries to sell a new immigration proposal, their House counterparts are secretly toiling under the radar to craft their own plan in the next few weeks.

But it will be no easy task to sell it to their colleagues.

Despite the growing Latino population in the country — most of whom are voting Democrat — most Republican members of Congress don't have large Latino constituencies.

"I don't think the national party argument for the bill works in the House," said a Democratic congressional aide. "If a Republican member doesn't have a significant number of immigrants in their district, why do they care about the party's presidential candidate in four years?"

Of course, many Republicans argue that they need to care for the larger good of the party. Mitt Romney was beaten by 50 percentage points among Hispanics in the presidential race, and now, reliably red border states like Texas and Arizona with growing Hispanic populations might eventually turn blue as a result of demographic shifts.

The eight-person immigration House team — which includes four Republicans and four Democrats — had hoped to put forth a statement of principles as early as Friday, but sources say that is unlikely. Now, they are hoping to announce something closer to Feb. 12, the day of the State of the Union.

According to sources, the House working group includes Democrats Zoe Lofgren and Xavier Becerra of California, Luis Gutierrez of Illinois and John Yarmuth of Kentucky. Negotiating for the Republicans are Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida, Sam Johnson and John Carter of Texas and Raul Labrador of Idaho.

On Monday, eight bipartisan senators — including John McCain, Chuck Schumer and Marco Rubio — outlined an immigration bill that clearly reflected a new eagerness by some Republicans to tackle the contentious issue after more than 70 percent of Latinos supported President Barack Obama last year.

But the House is another story. Some conservatives have already started carping about the Senate plan, which proposes a path to citizenship for those in the country illegally, tougher border security, establishing an employment verification system and creating a guest worker program for jobs that employers can't hire Americans.

Wisconsin Republican Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, who in 2005 sponsored a tough House bill to deter illegal immigrants from entering the U.S., said in a statement Monday: "Extending amnesty

to those who came here illegally or overstayed their visas is dangerous waters. We are a nation of laws, and I will evaluate any proposal through that matrix.”

But several sources familiar with the work of the House group said that it has come to a general consensus on a number of issues despite coming from different ideological places.

The biggest sticking point is most likely their differing views on offering illegal immigrants a pathway to citizenship.

In an interview with POLITICO on Monday, Labrador said he supports the principles that the Senate laid out but insisted that “creating a new pathway” to citizenship for undocumented workers “is not a good idea.” It would encourage more illegal immigration, he said.

Asked if he is flexible, Labrador said: “The question that is more appropriate is how flexible are they? We’ve gone a bit to their side. If they’re unwilling to be flexible on that issue, [then] they want political victory not policy victory.”

On the same note, Johnson articulated a fairly tough stance on illegal immigrants on his website: “If you are here legally, you ought to be rewarded. If you are here illegally, you ought to be deported.” “I am strongly opposed to both illegal immigration and a repeat of the 1986 amnesty.”

Still, sources say that the group is closer to agreement than the rhetoric suggests.

Carter might be the only member to actually have publicly admitted to being part of the working group. He told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram this week the House measure is “90 percent there.”

“We address all categories,” Carter said. “Border security and all the things that go to the people who are here illegally. I believe we’ve solved the problem of those concerned with the rule of law,” meaning those opposed to amnesty, “but we’ve done it with compassion.”

“I think what we’re talking about here is language and messaging,” said a Democratic Hill aide involved in the process. “They may all be on the same page and trying to figure out how to sell it back home and to their caucuses.”

<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/house-group-secretly-crafts-immigration-plan-86971.html>