

For House Republicans, new momentum on immigration reform

By [David Nakamura](#), Published: January 24

Recent signals from House Republican leaders that they will pursue their own vision of immigration reform have presented the White House with an opening to achieve a major legislative deal this year that has eluded lawmakers for decades.

Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) is expected to release a brief outline of [immigration principles](#) to his caucus as soon as its annual retreat next week. The goals would include strengthening border security and creating new visas for foreign workers, while providing a path toward legalizing the status of the nation's 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants, according to people briefed on the deliberations.

Obama administration officials and congressional Democrats expressed optimism that new momentum in the House could yield results after months in which the issue languished in the lower chamber. But they cautioned that it is far too early to determine whether a compromise could be reached between the House and Senate, which approved a [bipartisan plan](#) to overhaul border-control laws last June.

"It's a very big deal, and there's a path here that could get it done," Cecilia Munoz, the White House's director of domestic policy, said of the potential for an immigration agreement.

White House officials view immigration as the best chance President Obama has to pass a major piece of domestic legislation in his final three years in office, largely because some GOP leaders believe their party must broaden its appeal to Latinos and Asian Americans. Obama won reelection in 2012 with the support of more than 70 percent of those voters.

At the same time, the president is facing mounting pressure from immigration advocates to halt deportations, which are on pace to soon top the 2 million mark during his tenure — more than the George W. Bush administration deported in eight years.

Five House Democrats from Obama's home state of Illinois, led by Rep. Luis V. Gutiérrez, announced they will each bring an immigration advocate as their guest to the president's State of the Union speech in the House chamber Tuesday. The AFL-CIO, which has supported Obama's immigration push, called on him to use the speech to announce administrative action "to ease the deportation crisis that is wrecking workforces, families and communities."

But White House aides and Democratic allies said that Obama is mindful of the challenge Boehner faces in coalescing his caucus around an immigration plan and that the president is unlikely to harshly criticize House Republicans or make unilateral demands. Instead, he is expected to highlight [the economic benefits of immigration reform](#), tying it to his broader goal of

boosting the middle class and framing the debate in a light that might appeal to Capitol Hill conservatives.

“The White House understands that the House is moving in a positive direction, and they’re playing this very smart. They’re not going to be heavy-handed,” said Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), a key architect of the Senate’s immigration bill.

Carlos Gutierrez, a commerce secretary during the George W. Bush administration who is leading a GOP immigration reform group, said he is “encouraged” by signals from the House.

“They’re coming up with principles, and both parties are saying the right thing,” Gutierrez said during an immigration discussion in Washington on Friday that also included former New York mayor Michael R. Bloomberg (I), Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) and U.S. Chamber of Commerce Vice President Randel Johnson. “This is the right time, and we hope that they seize the moment.”

The next steps are largely up to Boehner, who has continued to insist that the [House will pursue small-scale immigration bills](#) that independently address many of the major components of the Senate’s comprehensive plan.

Democrats and immigration advocates said they are cautiously optimistic that Boehner and other House leaders are serious about trying to get bills onto the House floor for a vote in late spring, after the filing period for most of the Republican primaries in congressional races.

The question, however, is what Republicans are prepared to propose on the critical question of how to treat immigrants who entered the country unlawfully.

Last year, House committees approved five bills to increase border security, add visas for high-skilled foreign workers and agricultural workers, and improve verification systems to ensure companies do not hire undocumented immigrants.

Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) and Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), chair of the House Judiciary Committee, have said they are working on a proposal called the Kids Act, which would offer a path to legal status and, potentially, citizenship for young immigrants brought to the country by their parents as children. That population is estimated to be up to 1.7 million.

House Republicans have not said how they would address the remaining undocumented immigrants, but Boehner’s “principles” are expected to call for trying to find a way to legalize their status under conditions that could include paying taxes and fines, learning English and ensuring the federal government meets increased border-security benchmarks.

The crux of the issue for Democrats is how many of those immigrants would be able to earn citizenship. The Senate plan would put undocumented immigrants on a path to achieving legal status, known as a green card, within 10 years and citizenship three years later. Federal agencies have estimated that 7 million to 8 million immigrants would reach that goal.

But that number could be reduced significantly under the House proposals, immigration advocates said.

Obama and congressional Democrats have said they want as many immigrants as possible to have a chance at an “earned path” to citizenship.

“The question is, are Democrats willing to kill legalization without a special path to citizenship?” said Alfonso Aguilar, executive director of the Latino Partnership for Conservative Principles, which supports immigration reform.

Aguilar pointed to a [Pew Hispanic Center poll](#) last month that which found 61 percent of immigrant Latinos believe ending deportations is more important than a path to citizenship.

If Democrats oppose a Republican offer to legalize most undocumented immigrants under the belief that Latino voters will blame the GOP, Aguilar said, “that could backfire.”

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/for-house-republicans-new-momentum-on-immigration-reform/2014/01/24/1c48e25e-8509-11e3-bbe5-6a2a3141e3a9_story.html