

House Republicans set for critical meeting on immigration reform

By Russell Berman - 07/10/13 05:00 AM ET

House Republicans are set for a critical conference-wide meeting on immigration Wednesday, with advocates from across the political spectrum trying to bend their ear on how to handle President Obama's top domestic priority.

Party leaders scheduled the private session to determine a way forward on an issue that has divided the GOP, pitting senior members of the Beltway establishment in favor of a comprehensive overhaul against conservatives opposed to legislation that they deride as amnesty.

The meeting comes as lines are hardening on the issue following the passage of bipartisan Senate legislation, dimming the prospects for a final bill by the end of the year.

Congressional Democrats emerged from their own meeting Tuesday insistent that a path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants be part of any House proposal.

"I think it's less likely today than it was a month ago," said Rep. Raúl Labrador (R-Idaho), a conservative who walked away from a bipartisan House negotiating team in May.

Republican leaders have also laid down more conditions in recent weeks.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) on Monday said that enhancements in border security must be "in place" before the legalization of illegal immigrants begins, taking a new stand on a key point of contention between House and Senate Republicans. Boehner has said repeatedly the House will not take up the Senate bill.

Ahead of the long-scheduled House GOP meeting, both liberal and conservative advocates tried to send messages to the party.

The conservative American Action Network is running ads urging House members to support the "border surge" amendment that was added to the Senate bill, while hundreds of activists from the liberal United We Dream network planned to hold a mock citizenship ceremony to rally support for the children of illegal immigrants.

Other activists are appealing to the GOP's political needs, urging lawmakers to consider the party's national viability with an increasingly diverse electorate.

"We'll be there to remind them that on the agenda, is not just the fate of the immigration agenda, but the future of the Republican Party," said Eliseo Medina, secretary-treasurer of the Service Employees International Union.

In an illustration of the division within the GOP, a group of conservative activists, including Grover Norquist, wrote a letter urging the House to “improve” the Senate bill, while the editors of the rival Weekly Standard and National Review magazines wrote jointly that the House should “kill the bill” entirely.

Mostly, however, close watchers of the immigration debate are eager to learn the outcome of a meeting that could help determine the fate of their cause.

“Oh, to be a fly on that wall,” said Lynn Tramonte, deputy director of America’s Voice.

Leadership aides and lawmakers describe the afternoon meeting as a listening session where rank-and-file members can air their views on immigration and the approach the House should take.

They cautioned that an immediate decision on floor votes is unlikely and is instead expected in the coming days or weeks.

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) told Republicans in a memo last week that immigration bills could come to the floor before the August recess.

After brief introductions by Boehner and other members of the leadership, Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas) plan to outline the five individual immigration bills that have passed out of their panels so far.

The most likely path forward for the House is to bring some or all of those bills to the floor, perhaps with a resolution to form a conference committee on the Senate-passed plan.

The committee proposals deal with border security, interior enforcement, high-skilled visas and a guest-worker program, but they do not address the question of citizenship or legal status for the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants currently in the country. They all advanced largely on party-line votes.

A bipartisan group is still putting the finishing touches on a long-delayed comprehensive proposal, and part — or all — of that bill could also play a role in the House, Boehner said Tuesday.

It was unclear whether the three remaining Republicans in that group — Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart (Fla.), John Carter (Texas) and Sam Johnson (Texas) — would use Wednesday’s meeting to pitch the full conference on their unreleased plan.

Boehner has already vowed that any immigration bill he brings to the floor would have the support of a majority of Republicans, but there remains considerable unease among House conservatives that voting even for hard-line legislation could pave the way for an unacceptable compromise with the Senate.

“There’s a lot of deep-seated concern that anything we pass over here would be used as a vehicle in a conference report to drive home amnesty, which is not something I’m interested in, nor could I support,” Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) said.

As a member of both the Judiciary and Homeland Security committees, Chaffetz has voted for all five of the individual immigration bills, but has said his support for the measures on the House floor is not guaranteed.

“We need some assurances from Republican leadership as to their intention and what they would allow to come back up for a vote on the floor,” he said. “I want to hear that directly from the Speaker.”

Asked if Boehner’s assurance that a final conference report would have majority Republican support was sufficient, Chaffetz said no. “I’d like to have more specifics hashed out,” he said.

That view among conservatives is what makes Democrats skeptical that Republicans can pass any immigration bill through the House without their support.

“They’re going to have to reach across the aisle,” said Rep. Xavier Becerra (Calif.), chairman of the House Democratic Caucus.

“A bipartisan bill [for] fixing the broken immigration system will include a path to citizenship. Otherwise, we did not fix the problem,” Becerra said.

The Congressional Hispanic Caucus is due to meet with Obama at the White House on Wednesday.

<http://thehill.com/homenews/house/310029-house-gop-set-for-critical-immigration-reform-talks>