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Separate Bills Focus on Two Pieces of Immigration Puzzle

By **JULIA PRESTON**

WASHINGTON — For many lawmakers in Congress, the immigration issue has become too hot to touch, especially with presidential campaigns starting up and voters, burdened with persistent unemployment, in a volatile mood. But competing bills introduced this week, one by Republicans and another by Democrats, show small but consequential steps on immigration that leaders on both sides think they might accomplish in coming months, before electoral politics overwhelm the debate.

On Tuesday, Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, introduced a bill that would require all employers nationwide to use a federal electronic system, known as E-Verify, to confirm the employment eligibility of new hires. Mr. Smith's bill had only Republican sponsors; a similar proposal was offered the same day in the Senate by Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa.

Also on Tuesday, Representative Zoe Lofgren of California, the highest-ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, introduced a bill that would expand the number of permanent-resident documents, known as green cards, for foreign students graduating in math and sciences from top research universities. Ms. Lofgren's bill, which had only Democratic sponsors, would also create new types of green cards for immigrant entrepreneurs who start businesses with $500,000 in backing from American investors, and for foreigners who create businesses with their own resources that employ at least 10 American workers.

The measures were a sign that lawmakers here are skeptical that President Obama can reach his goal of passing anytime soon a broad immigration overhaul, which would include giving legal status to millions of illegal immigrants. In a speech last month in El Paso, Mr. Obama insisted that he wanted just such a package.

But legislators in both parties are looking to break out pieces of the puzzle, to avoid a caustic debate on proposals to legalize illegal immigrants that would most likely fail in the Republican-controlled House.

Summing up the strategy, Edward Alden, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who follows immigration policy, said: "We are stuck in this position that unless we solve everything, we can't do anything. So let's try something on a small scale."

Both of the new bills focus on businesses, with contrasting approaches to the same goal of creating jobs for Americans.

"Despite record unemployment, seven million people work in the U.S. illegally," Mr. Smith said Wednesday at a hearing on his proposal. "These jobs should go to legal workers."

Mr. Smith's bill would eventually require every worker in the country who applies for a job — not just immigrants — to be checked through E-Verify. The largest businesses would be required to use the system within six months. Mr. Smith left a large exception for agricultural employers, who would not have to use the system for three years.

The bill was immediately assailed by immigrant advocate organizations and unions.

"Main Street businesses and key agriculture and tourism industries know the economic pain this type of legislation can inflict," said Eliseo Medina, the international secretary-treasurer of the Service Employees International Union. "They know the government database does not work and is too costly for businesses, and for taxpayers who will lose billions of dollars in revenues when disqualified workers go off the tax rolls and into an underground cash economy."

But Mr. Smith's proposal picked up some new support, as national associations of home builders, restaurants and human resources managers voiced tentative approval. Leaders of the business groups said they preferred one federal worker verification system to the confusing patchwork of laws that states have adopted or considered in recent years.

Ms. Lofgren offered letters of support for her proposal from the nation's biggest technology employers, including Intel, Oracle and Texas Instruments. That bill includes a provision to give temporary visas to immigrant college students brought by their parents to the United States illegally when they were children.

While pieces of a bargain might be on the table, until now businesses have been shy about stepping forward to press their immigration interests too publicly. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York, an independent, said Wednesday that he would try to bridge the divide between the parties.

Mr. Bloomberg, in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, said the United States was committing "national suicide" if it failed to make its immigration system more friendly to foreign entrepreneurs and highly skilled workers. Congress "can use the stalemate as a wedge issue to score political points in 2012," Mr. Bloomberg said. "Or, they can come together and adopt

changes to our visa system that will spur new companies, strengthen existing ones, and help create jobs for the 13.9 million Americans who are unemployed."