

Immigration Bill Uncertain in House

By Patrick O'Connor and Corey Boles

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The last time House Republicans passed a broad immigration overhaul, they called for expedited deportations and tougher criminal penalties, but did nothing to expand guest-worker programs or address the millions of immigrants in the country illegally.

Now, more than seven years later, many lawmakers who backed that bill are vowing another tough stand if the Senate passes a bill to expand work visas and create a pathway to citizenship for people now in the country illegally. "It will have to be killed in the House," said Rep. Steve King (R., Iowa). "We are ready."

At the same time, there are reasons to believe Republicans there will be more receptive this time to provisions rejected in 2005. Most Republicans serving today weren't around during the earlier fights of 2005 and 2006 and didn't experience the conservative backlash that arose to the effort driven by then-President George W. Bush to liberalize immigration laws.

Some 107 of the 233 Republicans in the House started this Congress with less than three years of experience.

The newcomers include Rep. Blake Farenthold (R., Texas), who represents a district where Hispanics account for nearly 50% of the population. He tells constituents he's "game for a pathway to legal residency" for undocumented immigrants already in the country, but remains leery of granting them citizenship. "Whether that's where I end up, I've got to see what the whole deal is," he said in an interview.

Even some who voted for the 2005 package remain open to granting some form of legal status to those in the country illegally. "I'm not necessarily using the word 'citizenship' yet...but there could be a parole period or adjudication period" for undocumented immigrants already in the U.S., said Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R., Texas), whose district is 35% Hispanic. "Whether that leads to citizenship or not, I don't know the answer."

That openness is a stark departure from 2005 and 2006, when GOP leaders responded to Mr. Bush's call for an immigration overhaul by staging field hearings to highlight problems associated with illegal immigration and passing legislation to crack down on it.

By contrast, House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) was one of many Republicans to signal support for an immigration overhaul after his party's election losses in November. Days after the election, he told ABC News that "a comprehensive approach is long overdue" and expressed confidence the two parties would find "common ground."

House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan (R., Wis.), an influential conservative who was the Republican vice-presidential nominee in 2012, has been stumping in support of an immigration-law overhaul. The third-ranking House Republican, Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.), has started holding listening sessions to gauge members' support for a broader overhaul.

A bipartisan group of House members is expected to unveil a comprehensive overhaul proposal soon, and their talks have spurred other conversations as the group tries to bring members of both parties on board.

One of the Republicans involved in the broader discussions is first-year Rep. David Valadao, whose district in California's Central Valley is more than 70% Hispanic. He argues that even districts with small Latino populations would benefit from expanded legal immigration, because their constituents benefit from economic activity elsewhere in the country. "We buy a lot of tractors and other equipment, and those aren't built in our district," Mr. Valadao said. "There's always something that ties us together."

Other outside groups predict that any immigration bill will have a challenge in the House. Rosemary Jenks, director of government relations for NumbersUSA, an advocacy group that opposes many of reforms in the Senate bill, points to her group's membership, which has swelled from 350,000 in 2007 to 1.6 million today. She said the shaky economy has created even more unease about attempts to create new avenues for foreign workers to seek employment in the U.S.

The House Judiciary Committee, which has jurisdiction over the issue, remains a major hurdle for overhaul advocates. Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.) is expected to announce Thursday that he plans to move forward with a series of smaller bills—a nod to conservative activists who want Congress to tackle border security, not a pathway to citizenship.

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