

## Immigration back on GOP agenda

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January 23, 2014 05:36 PM EST

SAN ANTONIO — The same House Republicans who punted on immigration last year are now privately crafting an intricate plan to try to pass it in 2014.

Most people close to the planning expect votes on four bills by the end of the summer, including one that would give undocumented workers legal status.

And though none of the bills is likely to offer a path to full citizenship, the fact Republicans are preparing to take on immigration at all is a sign the party is coming to grips with a political reality: if they want to win elections in the long run, they'll have to face the issue.

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), speaking to local chambers of commerce in San Antonio Thursday, peeled back the curtain on the plans, saying Republicans must help illegal immigrants “come out of the shadows and reintegrate into society.” That would include requiring immigrants learn English, civics, pay taxes and pay a fine — a process that is sure to be decried by opponents as amnesty.

The other three Republican bills would cover legalizing children brought to the country illegally, the tracking of foreign nationals and visas for low-skilled workers. House committees have already passed high-skilled worker and border security bills.

The multi-bill process is equally important as the substance for Republicans. The party is vowing to ignore a Senate bill which took on reform all at once.

Also, the party is now crafting language that would seek to force President Barack Obama to enforce the totality of any law passed. Republicans say they don't trust the president after he has unilaterally waved parts of the health care law.

Ryan said Republicans “have to find a way to write these laws that they are actually enforced.”

“That's very, very important to us,” said Ryan, who is helping craft leadership's immigration strategy.

Speaker John Boehner's team is still wrestling over some of the details. And, of course, just because Republican leadership wants something, doesn't mean it's going to get done — the stormy political waters that prevented an overhaul in 2013 have hardly dissipated. So Boehner and his allies find themselves working two fronts to create a path for reform. First, leadership will begin trying to get half of its conference excited for

some kind of overhaul when it heads to Cambridge, Md., Jan. 29 for its two-day retreat. Its principles for immigration reform will be released by then.

At the same time, top GOP lawmakers have been privately meeting with Illinois Democratic Rep. Luis Gutierrez to try and gain the prominent immigration reform proponent's backing. Republican Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida, Raúl Labrador of Idaho and Ryan have all talked separately with Gutierrez to get his opinion on the direction they are going. Gaining his support would be a big win for Republicans looking to call any House package bipartisan.

Gutierrez spokesman Douglas Rivlin confirmed that his boss is having informal conversations with a number of Republicans and Democrats.

"He hasn't said yes or no to anything because we're not at that point yet," Rivlin said, adding that Gutierrez is "anxious to see concrete proposals put on the table, and the principles will be the first step."

But the inside game is only half of the battle. Becky Tallent, Boehner's top immigration aide, has been meeting with business groups — including technology trade organizations — so they have buy-in to the process.

The remarkable transformation from hesitance and caution to these careful and quiet Beltway maneuvers is another example of establishment Republicans trying to take back the party — and not reflexively bow to their conservative flanks, which have vocally opposed moving forward. It also signals a shift in thinking among some Republicans that taking on immigration reform, a risky strategy at best, before the midterm election would not be electorally disastrous if a deal breaks down.

None of this guarantees that an immigration overhaul will happen — in fact, most top Republican aides contend that all of this is a show, and the fits and starts will simply help prepare the party and its lawmakers for 2015, when dealing with immigration could be easier.

Personalities, too, will dictate the outcome. Boehner is driving this process and — with Ryan's help — is expected to push it across the finish line. Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) is most invested in what has become known as Dream Act Light — a way to legalize children who are in the United States illegally. Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), who recently called for a pathway to legalization in a local television interview, has regional interests that push him toward supporting reform. Agriculture workers in his Central Valley district are eager for more workers — not to mention his state party, which is at a historical low point with minority voters.

Across the Capitol, Sen. Chuck Schumer has also reignited his efforts, irritating most of the House Republican leadership. The New York Democrat, who was a major player in the Senate's comprehensive immigration reform package, has met with high-skilled and low-skilled worker coalitions. Those organizations have agreed to start pushing specific

members in districts where they have a presence to support reform. Schumer also has plans to meet next week with progressive groups.

While the infusion of pressure on House Republicans to move forward isn't surprising, Schumer's meddling in House affairs could backfire.

"This is up to the House now, and they're going to take their own approach and come up with their own set of priorities and solutions," said one GOP downtowner, who has been involved in immigration reform efforts. "Schumer barking orders at the House and its allies on the right is not helpful to overall efforts to pass immigration reform."

Opposition to the House's expected plan is also ginning up their base.

NumbersUSA head Roy Beck said his members are meeting with lawmakers in their district offices and calling this week to reiterate their opposition to immigration reform in its current form going forward.

"If these principles are insufficient that's what we'll continue to be doing, rallying our members to rally their friends," Beck said. "We will continue to do what we have been doing ... to make sure that at least 118 House Republicans don't want to deal with it. Right now, we hope it's 180 to 200."

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