

Immigration Bill Expected to Focus on Work Skills

By [JULIA PRESTON](#) and [ASHLEY PARKER](#)

Published: April 11, 2013

Over time the program, just one piece of the bill, would open up many new opportunities for foreigners to settle in the United States based on their skills, a shift from the focus on family ties that is the main foundation of the current immigration system.

But the bill will also include a host of measures to eliminate, over 10 years, a backlog of 4.7 million immigrants who have applied to come here legally and have been languishing in the system, waiting for permanent resident visas known as green cards. As a result, during the next decade, millions of immigrants who have been waiting patiently for legal documents will be united with their family members here.

The bill, an intricate combination of many interlocking parts, also provides a path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million immigrants living in the country illegally. Under the plan, those immigrants would wait at least 13 years before they could apply to become citizens.

The eight senators who are drafting the legislation, including Charles E. Schumer of New York, a Democrat, and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a Republican, said this week that they had reached broad agreement on its major pieces and hoped to present it early next week.

Mr. Schumer said Thursday that all issues among the senators had been resolved. “All that’s left is the drafting,” he said.

At the crux of the legislation is an effort to bridge the gap between Democrats, who strongly support and are seeking to protect family immigration, and Republicans, who are eager to move immigration toward a system based on work skills that foreigners bring to the United States.

The senators are under pressure to move quickly to introduce the bill. Senator Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, a Democrat who is chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has scheduled a hearing for next Wednesday. This week, tens of thousands of immigrants and their supporters rallied Wednesday on the lawn of the Capitol, calling for a path to citizenship for all illegal immigrants in the country and urging Congress to move swiftly.

One major goal of the bill is to put immigrants who have been living in the country illegally at “the back of the line” behind immigrants who made every effort to follow the rules, so that no one here illegally would become legal residents or citizens until those already in the system have the chance to do so.

Also, at the insistence of Republicans — particularly Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, another member of the bipartisan group — the bill also avoids giving illegal immigrants a separate pathway to citizenship. Under the proposal, no new green cards would be created in the future exclusively for them.

Instead, in a novel compromise worked out in hard-fought negotiations, immigrants who had been here illegally would gain a provisional legal status in which they would remain for at least 10 years. They could work legally and travel, but they would not become permanent residents.

During the first decade, the aim is to clear backlogs. Then, formerly illegal immigrants could apply for merit-based green cards, along with many other foreigners applying legally. After three years with a green card, the formerly illegal immigrants would be eligible to apply to become American citizens.

Some Senate staff members stressed that the final draft of the bill is not complete, and that many details could change, although not the broad outlines and goals.

Among proposals to reduce backlogs is a plan to accelerate green card applications of foreigners living legally in the United States who have been waiting to receive their documents for 10 years or more.

Any immigrants who have been working legally in this country for 10 years would also move rapidly to receive green cards, either through the current system or later through the new merit system.

The plan would also free up additional green cards by eliminating a category of foreigners who are now eligible for those visas: siblings of United States citizens.

The bill would also remove annual limits on the number of green cards for a different category, spouses and minor children of legal permanent residents. The senators estimate that 800,000 immediate family members will move through the backlog and gain green cards over the next decade as a result of that change.

At the end of 10 years, the bill would create a program offering 138,000 merit-based visas each year to foreigners based on their work skills, but also on other considerations including family ties. Green cards will be offered to workers in three categories: high-skilled foreigners in technology and science, employees with a middle range of white collar skills, and low-wage workers. Farmworkers are not included, as they will come under a separate program.

Immigrants who will be eligible for merit green cards would include those formerly here illegally, if they have remained in good standing, learned English and passed other requirements, and remained employed for 10 years.

But other migrants would be eligible for those green cards as well, including agricultural guest workers who had been legally employed in this country for 10 years, and other temporary visa holders. There would be no special, dedicated path to citizenship for immigrants who had once lived in the country illegally.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/us/politics/house-democrats-present-immigration-overhaul-plan.html>