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Immigration Bill Will Pass in Senate If Changes Avoided

By Kathleen Hunter and Laura Litvan - Jun 24, 2013

It's crunch time in the U.S. Senate, as backers of the most significant revision of immigration law in a generation seek to pass the bill this week by avoiding changes that could cost them votes.

Advocates of the legislation, which includes a path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants in exchange for tougher border security, struck a bipartisan deal last week to double the U.S. Border Patrol's size and require 700 miles of fencing at the border with [Mexico](#).

The accord, on which the Senate will take an initial vote today, is designed to attract Republican support there and make the bill more acceptable to the Republican-controlled House, where opposition to citizenship for undocumented immigrants runs deep. It replaces a more stringent border plan Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid called a "poison pill" that would have imperiled passage.

"It's a step forward, but it doesn't cross the goal line," said John Pitney, a political scientist at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, [California](#). "The Republican base is deeply skeptical of any immigration bill, and it faces real challenges in the House."

The Senate is starting a third week of debate on immigration legislation. Senate Democratic leaders want to pass a bill before the one-week break scheduled to begin June 28. The last major revision of U.S. immigration law was in 1986.

House Prospects

Even if an immigration bill passes the Senate, its prospects in the House are dim. The House Judiciary Committee, led by Virginia Republican Bob Goodlatte, is considering individual pieces of immigration legislation, and Goodlatte has said he doesn't favor the Senate's comprehensive approach.

Senators waited until this week to consider the most contentious proposed changes to the bill. In addition to the border-security proposal, which is opposed by some Republicans who say it's still not strong enough, they may debate proposals to limit benefits for immigrants who gain legal status and provide equal protection for same-sex couples.

“This is so typical of the Senate. It’s hurry up and wait,” said Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin of [Illinois](#), a Democratic co-sponsor of the bill. “When the pressure starts to build, it’s more likely that we’re going to have some results.”

President [Barack Obama](#) is scheduled to meet at 2 p.m. today at the White House with business leaders, including Steve Case, chairman, chief executive officer and founder of Revolution LLC; Sunil Puri, founder of First Rockford Group Inc.; and Hamdi Ulukaya, chief executive, founder and president of Chobani Inc., to push for Senate passage of the bill.

Border Compromise

The agreement on border security would add 20,000 Border Patrol agents and require 700 miles of fencing at the U.S.- Mexico border. It would provide additional unmanned aerial drones to help police the border.

All employers would have to be using an electronic verification system to check workers’ legal status, and airports and seaports would have to use a electronic visa entry and exit system, before undocumented immigrants could be granted permanent residency, known as a green card.

Republican opponents, including Senators Ted Cruz of [Texas](#) and Mike Lee of Utah, backed a proposal from Texas Republican John Cornyn that would have required the government to show it was apprehending 90 percent of the people illegally crossing the border from Mexico before undocumented immigrants could gain permanent residency. The Senate rejected that amendment on June 20, voting 54-43 to table the measure.

Security Investment

If enacted, the compromise would mark the biggest investment in border security in U.S. history, dwarfing a package approved in 2010. That \$600 million measure was geared to the U.S.- Mexico border and provided 1,500 new Border Patrol, Customs and other agents, as well as communications equipment and unmanned aircraft.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said in a statement that the amendment would “devote important additional resources” to the border-security system and is “in line” with Obama’s goals for an immigration measure.

The immigration bill’s sponsors are optimistic that with the border changes, they could win at least 70 votes. They say that vote margin would put pressure on the House to act.

“With these massive border resources, a vote ‘no’ looks like they really just don’t want Latinos who are here to become U.S. citizens,” Frank Sharry, founder and director of America’s Voice, a Washington-based group that backs a path to citizenship, said regarding House members.

Republican Efforts

Republicans are trying to reconnect with Hispanic voters after Obama won 71 percent of the votes cast by the fast-growing voter group in the 2012 election.

Beyond the border-control debate, Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of [Utah](#) is insisting on changes to the conditions under which undocumented immigrants could become U.S. citizens as the price for his support of the bill.

Hatch, considered a swing vote on immigration, won inclusion in the amendment versions of his proposals to prohibit non-citizens who gain legal status from obtaining welfare benefits and to specify that unauthorized jobs can't count toward eligibility for Social Security benefits.

Hatch said in a statement that he will push for a separate vote to require immigrants to pay back taxes before they can qualify for temporary legal status.

Official Language

Republicans also want votes on amendments that promote English. Senator James Inhofe of [Oklahoma](#) backs a proposal to declare English the official language of the U.S. and allow employers to require English be spoken in the workplace.

Senator Marco Rubio of [Florida](#), one of the bill's Republican co-sponsors, has proposed an amendment to bar undocumented immigrants from gaining permanent legal residency until they can read, write and speak English.

Meanwhile, Judiciary Chairman Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, hasn't said whether he will demand a vote on his proposal to grant married same-sex couples equal treatment with heterosexual couples in the immigration bill. The proposal is opposed by many Republicans.

House Speaker John Boehner, an Ohio Republican, has said he won't bring an immigration proposal to a vote unless a majority of the chamber's 234 Republicans support the bill.

Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a network of business groups that favor legal immigration, said it was unrealistic to expect the House to take up the Senate bill, even with the enhanced border-security provisions.

"Will it be strong enough?" Jacoby said. "Will it cover all the bases? We don't know yet."

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