

Immigration reform gaining support in Congress

Gary Martin

Published 7:40 pm, Thursday, March 28, 2013

WASHINGTON -- A [Republican Party](#) in desperate search for relevance to Latino voters. An expanded Democratic advantage in the Senate. A second-term President with his legacy on the line.

Does all that add up to enough to break decades of impasse and produce comprehensive immigration reform? As expectations -- and tensions -- rise, the answer won't be long in coming.

A bipartisan bill could be filed in the Senate as early as next week, followed in relatively short order by a House bill, also crafted by a bipartisan group, aiming at a compromise on the key issue of citizenship.

The efforts are being applauded by President [Barack Obama](#), who is using every ounce of his political clout to try to get comprehensive reform.

Obama said the time has come "to work up the political courage to do what's required to be done."

"I expect a bill to be put forward. I expect a debate to begin next month. I want to sign that bill into law as soon as possible," Obama said at a White House naturalization ceremony.

In addition to the issue of eventual citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants, Congress is expected to address the need for temporary or guest worker programs.

Congress last passed comprehensive bipartisan reform legislation in 1986, when President [Ronald Reagan](#) signed a law that granted citizenship to several million undocumented immigrants and created a guest worker program.

Up until now, Republicans have opposed citizenship programs as an "amnesty" for lawbreakers who entered the country illegally, and labor has chafed at guest worker programs.

But Republican losses in the 2012 elections and increased public support for reform have many in the GOP talking compromise.

"If there is one issue that the two parties could produce something meaningful on in this Congress, it would be immigration," said [Stephen Hess](#), a political expert at [The Brookings Institution](#).

Hess said an eventual bill "will have lots of provisos, and it will go back and forth, but it would be hard not to produce something given the general feeling that something has to be produced."

More and more Republicans are moving toward immigration-reform measures as the party seeks to reach out to Latinos, the nation's largest -- and growing -- minority voting bloc.

Public opinion is behind them.

A recent poll showed 63 percent of Americans supported a path to citizenship for undocumented workers provided they meet certain requirements, according to a survey by the [Public Religion Research Institute](#).

Notable Republicans who have recently spoken in favor of compromise on citizenship proposals include Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky.; former Mississippi Gov. [Haley Barbour](#); and Rep. [Paul Ryan](#), R-Wis.

And a March report by the [National Republican Committee](#), considered a "post mortem" on the 2012 elections, recommended the GOP embrace comprehensive immigration reform to shore up its shaky standing with minorities -- Latinos, in particular.

[Roy Beck](#), executive director of [Numbers USA](#), which advocates lower numerical numbers on immigration, predicted a majority of Republican senators would oppose citizenship.

Groups like Numbers USA are working to hold GOP senators in line. They sent 13,000 emails to Kentucky voters that claimed Paul's position was "more radical and pro-immigration than anything proposed by President Obama."

The group has targeted Sen. [Lindsey Graham](#), R-S.C., one of the "Gang of Eight" senators writing the Senate bipartisan bill, as a lawmaker who favors foreign workers over unemployed South Carolinians.

[Democrats](#) from conservative-leaning states could also feel political heat.

Beck said if five to 10 Democrats in the Senate oppose a bill, proponents would need 10 to 15 Republicans to reach the 60 votes needed to cut off debate and vote on legislation.

"You do the math," Beck said.

In 2007, an effort to cut off debate on a Senate immigration reform bill died on a 46-53 vote.

But immigrant reform proponents, such as America's Voice, say there is a "tectonic shift" in the GOP, and the Democrats also have expanded their Senate majority to 53-45, plus two independents who caucus with them. They predict the Senate will muster the votes necessary to pass a reform bill.

Still, it won't be easy.

"We will have not only a few potholes, but a few near-death experiences along the way," said [Frank Sharry](#), America's Voice executive director.

All eyes are on Texas Sen. [Ted Cruz](#), a Republican who like Paul was elected with Tea Party support.

Cruz joined Sen. [John Cornyn](#), R-Texas, who is up for re-election in 2014, in a measure to stall the fast-moving process in the Senate. Both say they oppose "amnesty."

In a letter to Sen. [Patrick Leahy](#), D-Vt., the [Texas Republicans](#) urged the chairman of the [Judiciary Committee](#) to open up the legislative process with hearings.

The "Gang of Eight" senators -- four Democrats and four Republicans -- are expected to introduce their bill when Congress returns from Easter recess.

Overall, the new Senate bill is expected to grant undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship within 13 years, similar to a proposal put forth by the White House, according to those familiar with the discussions.

Undocumented immigrants would have to pay fines, back taxes, learn English and have no criminal record to work legally and become eligible for naturalization.

Although no specific details have been released, senators involved in the process say the citizenship proposals would be contingent upon border-security benchmarks and high-tech measures to curb illegal crossings.

Congress will return to an expected throng of thousands of immigrants, labor and immigrant rights supporters on the West Lawn of the Capitol next week.

Advocates are also holding more than 200 events in 35 states during the congressional recess to rally support, said [Sue Chinn](#), campaign manager for [Alliance for Citizenship](#).

Read more: <http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Immigration-reform-gaining-support-in-Congress-4393187.php#ixzz2PDpIMvnJ>