

Inside the House GOP's immigration push

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House Republican leaders are within weeks of releasing their principles for immigration reform — a blueprint that will detail positions on everything from border security to legal status.

The document, which has been kept under wraps until now, will call for beefed-up border security and interior enforcement, a worker verification system for employers and earned legal status for the nation's undocumented immigrants, according to multiple sources familiar with the discussions. It will also call for reforms to visa programs and a system to track those in the country legally.

The draft principles will also include a promise that immigration reform will be done on a step-by-step basis and will foreclose the possibility of entering into conference negotiations using the Senate's comprehensive package — pledges that could soothe some Republicans.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), who is driving the process, wants these principles released before President Barack Obama's State of the Union on Jan. 28.

The secret talks are taking place even as leaders doubt that such efforts will be fruitful, in part because of opposition from conservatives who sank the prospects for reform last year. That dynamic hasn't changed. But Republicans think stating their position is important and could help chart a path forward for reform in 2015 after the midterm elections.

There are some signs that top Republicans are taking the process seriously. There have been discussions among senior Republicans about trying to trade some form of legalization for increased state and local enforcement of immigration laws — a move, depending on how it's crafted, that could run into resistance from Democrats.

Beyond top GOP leadership, the discussions also include senior members of the Judiciary Committee and pro-immigration reform Republicans like Reps. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida.

The most recent set of principles was discussed Wednesday morning during a meeting of Boehner, Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.), Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) and Republican Conference Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington.

Immigration reform is an issue fraught with land mines for Republicans. Public polling shows hefty support for cleaning up what most consider a broken system. But among a House Republican Conference that has had difficulty rallying around complex legislation, the issue has run into resistance. If Republicans ignore the issue, they risk the wrath of Wall Street, Main Street, K Street and Silicon Valley.

The 2014 push, though, has its skeptics. Oregon Rep. Greg Walden, who chairs the National Republican Congressional Committee, said he thinks the political climate is more difficult this year.

“I think so,” he said, when asked whether it will be more difficult in 2014 to pass any pieces of reform. “It doesn’t mean there aren’t things we need to do, but I think it’s been made more problematic because now people can say the president waives parts of laws he doesn’t like. And he has.”

Among rank-and-file House Republicans, there is an appetite to take up immigration reform despite skepticism about whether consensus on the issue is possible.

“Politically, it has always been a very difficult issue — very difficult, very controversial, very emotional, very difficult issue,” Diaz-Balart said. “So it’s a big ask, but I think there’s a lot of people here who are willing to do what they believe is right for the country even above personal, political considerations.”

House committees several months ago cleared five separate bills to overhaul the nation’s immigration laws. Those pieces have not moved to the floor. None of them deal with the most complicated issue of reform: what to do with the millions of immigrants living in the United States illegally.

Democrats will not support any immigration bills without assurances Republicans will pass legislation to address status of those undocumented immigrants.

Since it is unlikely the House will be able to pass any legislation with only Republican support, Democrats need to be brought into this process.

House Republican leadership has ruled out the Senate’s approach: a minimum 13-year pathway to citizenship for most current undocumented immigrants.

Diaz-Balart has been working on a legalization bill to address current undocumented immigrants in the United States. The legislation, still in the works, will most likely use border-security and interior-enforcement triggers on the legalization path, with a probationary period along the pathway.

Texas Rep. Henry Cuellar, a Democrat who has indicated some flexibility on the legalization issue, has been talking with key House Republicans on immigration and said the contours of plan being written by Diaz-Balart could win support in both parties.

“Will it be a grand deal? No,” Cuellar said of immigration reform this year. “But I think we will put enough pieces there to have a good agreement ... that I think we can go in and get most of the things done.”

Trading legalization for an uptick in state and local enforcement — as some Republicans are discussing — will most likely be met with skepticism by Democrats. Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) passed legislation calling for that last summer, but Democrats vehemently rejected the bill, arguing that it would criminalize millions of undocumented immigrants already in the country.

There could be some ways to make the provision more palatable for Democrats. For example, Congress could empower state and local law enforcement officials only after current undocumented immigrants start their legalization process. This would put the focus on future illegal immigration.

House Democrats tried to pressure Republicans by releasing their own comprehensive legislation last fall, but it garnered support from just three House GOP lawmakers. For now, Democrats are mostly in a wait-and-see mode, eager to learn the details of the principles from Republican leadership.

White House chief of staff Denis McDonough came to Capitol Hill on Wednesday to meet with the New Democrat Coalition, a group of more centrist, pro-business House Democrats. Though the meeting focused primarily on trade issues, some New Democrats pressed McDonough on the administration’s strategy for immigration reform this year.

“He said that he was definitely looking forward to the speaker bringing out his principles,” Rep. Suzan DelBene (D-Wash.), who attended the meeting, said of McDonough. He “felt like that was an indication that there is moving conversation on immigration.”

Key senators who drafted a sweeping immigration bill and have been talking with House Republicans since their legislation passed last June are optimistic on the chances that the lower chamber will move forward.

“I get the sense that there’s a mood that is at least open to options,” said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), whose former chief of staff, Becky Tallent, is now Boehner’s top immigration aide. “Part of it is the business community, part of it is the evangelicals, part of it’s organized labor. It’s the largest coalition ever behind any piece of legislation.”

<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/01/house-gop-republicans-comprehensive-immigration-reform-bill-102244.html>