

# Prospects Unclear for Narrow Immigration Bill

By Kristina Peterson and Laura Meckler

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A measure to allow people brought to the U.S. illegally as children to get green cards after serving in the military has sparked debate in both parties as leaders wrestle with the ramifications of bringing the legislation up for a vote.

The bill, which sponsor Rep. Jeff Denham (R., Calif.) calls the Enlist Act, holds appeal for both Democrats and Republicans. It would, Mr. Denham says, extend a historical tradition of providing a path to citizenship for immigrants serving in the military. "There is no better way to show your patriotism, your commitment, your sacrifice and the willingness to earn that citizenship," he said.

But for his party's leaders, bringing up the measure isn't an easy political calculus. It would show that the House is willing to tackle immigration after months of stalling, but it could also kick up opposition from hard-liners while doing little to satisfy advocates for those in the country illegally.

For Democrats, the bill is attractive on its merits, but passing it would give Republicans a measure of political cover on immigration—allowing them to take credit for legislative action while ignoring the broader changes to the immigration system that Democrats seek.

"If the oil is leaking in your car, your muffler has a hole in it and you have a flat tire, you don't change the windshield wipers." Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.) told reporters. "We are not going to go along with minor fixes that fail to address the huge systematic problems of our immigration system today,"

Mr. Denham last week tried unsuccessfully to get his bill attached as an amendment to the defense-policy bill that passed the House. GOP leaders said the measure didn't belong there. The question is whether the House, which returns on Wednesday from a Memorial Day recess, will allow a vote this year on the bill as a stand-alone measure.

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R., Va.) and House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) have said they support the bill's premise. But they have been noncommittal about whether they would bring it the floor in the face of conservative opposition. In last week's debate, Rep. Steve King (R., Iowa), an outspoken immigration critic, argued that the bill wasn't relevant to the defense debate and was also "bad policy."

"It's wrong and it's foolish to reward illegal behavior unless you want more of it," Mr. King said.

Mr. Cantor said Thursday that lawmakers were still "working on the necessary language to see whether it is possible for us to move forward on that issue."

Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D., Ill.), who has worked with Republicans on immigration bills, said he would ask Democrats to support the Enlist Act if it came up for a vote.

"There seems to be no reason why not to demonstrate that there are avenues of cooperation," he said in a recent interview. He noted, however, the bill is "by no means an answer" to all the problems facing the immigration system.

In the Senate, Democratic leaders are also undecided on how to handle the issue, specifically whether to attach a similar measure to their own defense bill. Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.) said his party wants to be careful not to hinder chances of Republicans passing broader immigration legislation between June 10, when most GOP primaries will be over, and Congress's August recess.

"We are trying to keep the six-week period where we have an opportunity to pass comprehensive immigration reform free of controversy" so that opponents of broader changes "can't seize on one vote, one statement and say 'that's it, that's the end of the conversation this year,'" Mr. Durbin said.

Outside Congress, advocates of an immigration overhaul doubt Republicans will bring the bill to a House vote but are divided over whether Democrats should support it if it does come up.

Lorella Praeli, director of advocacy for United We Dream, which was formed to advocate for young people brought to the U.S. illegally as children, said her group supports those who want to join the military but hasn't decided whether it could support a "yes" vote on legislation that only helps them.

She said it is "presumptuous and misguided" for Republicans to think this would suffice when the legislation helps only a sliver of those in the U.S. illegally.

Frank Sharry, who heads the influential advocacy group America's Voice, agreed that the number is tiny but said "it's a good thing when undocumented immigrants get a shot at citizenship."

He also said Democratic support for the measure could serve as a way to pressure Republicans to do more.

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