

Congress Daily: IMMIGRATION

Dems Resolve To Move Reform Bill Without Republicans

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Key Democrats on Tuesday said they are ready to roll the dice and advance comprehensive immigration legislation without Republican support, gambling that GOP lawmakers will eventually be persuaded to join them.

The lawmakers said they were willing to take a go-it-alone approach as the only Senate Republican trying to forge a bipartisan bill -- Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. -- essentially slammed the door on trying to move legislation this year.

"If I could give a word of advice: Let's go forward with it," Senate Majority Whip Durbin said. "I think there are some Republicans who honestly believe that we need comprehensive immigration reform and if given a chance to vote that they'll support that effort.

"Having been around the Senate and House for a long time, most people will try to avoid a difficult vote if they can," Durbin added. "But if you put them on the spot and tell them you're just going to have to cast a yes or no vote, sometimes you get a more positive outcome."

Across Capitol Hill, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Immigration Task Force Chairman Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., said Democrats should continue to try to reach agreement with Republicans on a bill but go forward alone if they have to.

"What's wrong if it's only Democrats?" he asked. "We certainly got a healthcare bill just like that."

Earlier Tuesday, Graham said he would bet everything he owns that an immigration reform bill would "crash and burn" if it was brought up in the near future. He said it would be "absolutely devastating" to the reform effort.

Majority Leader Reid suggested Tuesday in his strongest terms so far that energy and climate legislation is likely to move before immigration. But he did not budge from his stance that both issues would be taken up this year.

Reid's comments came as he and Graham continued a standoff over Graham's threat to abandon efforts to help Democrats win 60 votes on climate and energy legislation if Reid brings up immigration reform this year.

Reid said he assured Graham as recently as Saturday that he would likely move climate and energy before immigration.

"The energy bill is ready," Reid said. "We'll move to that more quickly than a bill we don't have. I don't have an immigration bill."

Graham earlier Tuesday said his position had not changed either. "It's impossible for me to do energy and climate with immigration on the table," he said.

"That's the gap we're trying to bridge and I don't have a particular answer right now," said Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., who co-authored a climate and energy plan with Graham and Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass.

Graham said the federal government should focus on beefing up border security, especially in light of a new law in Arizona that allows police to determine whether people are in the country legally if there is a reason to suspect they are not.

But in a twist, House Speaker Pelosi made moves Tuesday to try to build bipartisan support for immigration reform. She met privately with several Houston business leaders and encouraged them to help turn up the heat on Graham and other senators, especially Republicans.

"We are grateful to Speaker Pelosi for allowing conservative business leaders the opportunity to share with her their concerns regarding America's broken immigration policies," said Beto Cardenas, executive counsel of Americans for Immigration Reform, a key organizer of the meeting.

About a dozen business leaders emerged from the meeting saying they'd been asked to help push the Senate to action. Also at the meeting were Congressional Hispanic Caucus Chairwoman Rep. Nydia Velázquez, D-N.Y., and other CHC members.

Pelosi "said she hoped we could help encourage both sides of the aisle -- particularly in the Senate -- [and get] support for the bill particularly from the Republican side," said Charles Foster, a lawyer who heads the Greater Houston Partnership.

Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas, said the meeting was arranged after he mentioned to Pelosi that the group had been active for immigration reform. Asked if it were true Pelosi asked the group to help turn up the heat on the Senate, Reyes said: "In general terms, yeah."

A House Democratic leadership aide said business leaders "expressed their willingness to work to garner bipartisan support for immigration reform."

"The speaker agreed that bipartisan support was critical to moving this issue forward. All parties agreed that this should be a nonpartisan issue," the aide added.

Privately, some business leaders fear that a Democratic-only approach to an immigration overhaul in the Senate could doom any chance of passing meaningful reform.

Durbin disagreed.

"I've come to believe after a number of years there never is a perfect moment. And I think there is an overwhelming need for us to move forward," he said.

"I think what happened in Arizona is reprehensible," Durbin added. "But I do have to concede the point that when the federal government fails to act we really empower the states to reach their own decisions. I happen to think this was a very bad one."

Attorney General Holder said Tuesday that the Justice Department may challenge Arizona's new law.

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