

July 10, 2013

Republicans in House Resist Overhaul for Immigration

By [ASHLEY PARKER](#) and [JONATHAN WEISMAN](#)

WASHINGTON — Meeting for the first time as a group to hash out their approach to [immigration](#), House Republicans on Wednesday came down overwhelmingly against a comprehensive overhaul of the nation's immigration laws, putting in jeopardy the future of sweeping legislation that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

Despite the resistance, Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) warned about the steep price of inaction, telling House Republicans that they would be in a weaker political position against a bipartisan Senate coalition and President Obama if they did nothing to answer the immigration measure passed by the Senate last month.

House Republicans huddled in a crucial two-and-a-half-hour session in the basement of the Capitol as their leaders tried to devise some response to the demand for immigration legislation, especially the Senate provision that would grant a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the country. The bill also mandates tough border security provisions that must be in place before the immigrants can gain legal status.

The bottom line was clear: The Republican-controlled House does not plan to take up anything resembling the Senate bill, which many believe is bad policy and smacks of an amnesty strongly opposed by the conservatives who hold sway over much of the rank and file. The House also does not intend to move very quickly, and some Republicans are wary of passing any measure at all that could lead to negotiations with the Senate, talks that could add pressure to the House to consider a broader plan.

The Republicans met just hours after former President George W. Bush added his voice to the immigration debate during a naturalization ceremony at his new presidential center outside Dallas. His speech was a reminder to Republicans that he had long believed it necessary to overhaul the system in a way much as the Senate bill outlined.

“The laws governing the immigration system aren't working,” Mr. Bush said. “The system is broken. We're now in an important debate in reforming those laws. And that's good.” Mr. Bush said he did not intend “to get involved in the politics or the specifics of policy. But I do hope there is a positive resolution to the debate, and I hope during the debate that we keep a benevolent spirit in mind and we understand the contributions that immigrants make to our country.”

House Republican leaders struck a defiant tone after the meeting, issuing a joint statement declaring the Obama administration “cannot be trusted to deliver on its promises to secure the border and enforce laws as part of a single, massive bill like the one passed by the Senate.” Mr.

Boehner repeatedly reassured Republicans that he would pass nothing through the House that did not have the support of a majority of his party, and lawmakers left the meeting certain that nothing significant would move through the House until September — and possibly much later.

“ ‘Comprehensive’ has always been a swear word in the House of Representatives, but having a step-by-step approach that deals with the issue comprehensively, I don’t think that’s dead,” said Representative Raúl Labrador, Republican of Idaho, a Hispanic legislator who until recently had been part of a bipartisan group in the House working on a broad immigration proposal.

Instead, House Republicans will consider a piecemeal approach, passing several individual bills rather than one large package, as the Senate did. Any immigration proposal, members said, is likely to concentrate on border security and enforcement; a path to legalization or citizenship, they stressed, must come later — if at all.

Though they may pass one or two modest bills before the August recess, many members said they felt no urgency to deal with an immigration overhaul, with the fall likely to be dominated by fights over the budget and the federal [debt ceiling](#).

House Republicans find themselves in a difficult spot on immigration, caught between the needs of the national party to broaden its appeal to Hispanics, and the views of constituents in gerrymandered, largely safe conservative districts.

Many returned to Congress this week after hearing from constituents in their districts who do not trust the federal government to overhaul the nation’s immigration laws, as well as mounting evidence that conservative opinion is beginning to harden against a broad immigration push.

House Republicans largely believe that the concerns of their national party elite are overblown, and that their political future and 2016 prospects do not hinge on passing an immigration bill this year.

“Is this an issue that people care about? Yes. Is it one that keeps them up at night? Probably not,” said Representative Charlie Dent, Republican of Pennsylvania, who is among the more moderate Republicans who could be part of a compromise.

Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, a respected voice in the [Republican Party](#) who has been working behind the scenes to help push an immigration overhaul, spoke during the meeting in favor of immigration generally. He said fixing the nation’s broken system would be good for both economic growth and national security.

Emotions ran high, with members lining up 10 deep at each of two microphones waiting to speak their piece. Representative Mo Brooks, Republican of Alabama, read an obscure line from “America the Beautiful” to make his point that respect for the rule of law must be inviolable: “Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law,” he intoned.

Participants portrayed a Republican conference still divided over the question of citizenship. Some said they were open to a path to citizenship, or at least legal status; others said they

worried about even going to negotiations with the Senate, where, they fear, any bill to emerge would constitute amnesty.

Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, took the lead for stalwart opponents of any legislation that could lead to what they view as amnesty. “You can’t separate the Dream Act kids from those who came across the border with a pack of contraband on their back, and they can’t tell me how they can do that,” Mr. King said, referring to the undocumented immigrants brought here by their parents as young children and known as “Dreamers.”

“Once you start down that line you’re destroying the rule of law.” But the response to his pitch was not as robust as it had been in the past: “It was not a standing ovation,” he conceded.

In fact, the one area where the legislators showed signs of some consensus was around the “Dreamers,” who many agreed should not be punished for the mistakes of their parents. Hours before the meeting, hundreds of young immigrants who had grown up in the country without legal papers held a mock citizenship ceremony on a Senate lawn. “We have come today to claim our citizenship,” said Lorella Praeli, a leader of United We Dream. But she insisted young immigrants would not agree to any plan that included only them and not all undocumented immigrants. “2013 is not the time for separate but equal.”

Representative James Lankford of Oklahoma, a member of the Republican leadership, said after the meeting that whatever the House did would not mirror the Senate’s bill: “They will both deal with the topic of immigration,” he said. “That may be the only common ground they have.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/us/politics/gop-in-house-resists-overhaul-for-immigration.html>