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Republicans Push Bill to Help Foreign Science Graduates Stay

By JULIA PRESTON

Republican leaders in the House of Representatives, hoping to pass a measure before the November elections to improve legal [immigration](#), are pushing for a vote this week on a bill that would increase the number of permanent resident visas for foreigners graduating from American universities with advanced degrees in science and technology.

The largely partisan bill was introduced on Tuesday by Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. It would allocate up to 55,000 visas, known as green cards, each year to graduates with master's or doctoral degrees from American universities, by means of a trade-off. The bill would abolish a lottery run each year that distributes the same number of green cards randomly to applicants from countries that do not have large immigrant populations in the United States.

The nearly 50 other sponsors of Mr. Smith's bill include only one Democrat — Representative Henry Cuellar of Texas. Mr. Smith and Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the majority leader, have said the House will vote on Thursday.

A partisan fight broke out over Mr. Smith's approach, which would not increase the overall number of green cards issued annually. On Friday Representative Zoe Lofgren of California, a Democrat whose district is home to many technology companies, introduced a measure that would create 50,000 new green cards for advanced graduates in the so-called STEM fields: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. That bill would not reduce the visas available to the lottery.

On Tuesday, Charles E. Schumer of New York, the Democrat who is chairman of the Senate Judiciary immigration subcommittee, introduced a bill that was close to Ms. Lofgren's measure, creating a two-year pilot program to give 55,000 new green cards each year to foreign graduates.

Democrats in both houses, especially Hispanic and black lawmakers, are reluctant to end the lottery without some compromise, for example giving additional green cards to family members of legal immigrants already here. Many winners of the lottery, which was created in 1990, come from African countries.

Behind the partisan maneuvering over details, there was notable bipartisan accord — rare in this polarized Congress — on the broad goals of the legislation: to offer visas so science and technology graduates could remain here and start businesses to create jobs.

“In a global economy, we cannot afford to educate these foreign graduates in the U.S. and then send them back home to work for our competitors,” Mr. Smith said on Tuesday.

Currently, when foreign students finish their graduate studies they either have to leave or head into a labyrinth of temporary visas, where it can take years to get a permanent green card.

Last week, 165 leaders of American universities [sent a letter](#) to President Obama and to Congress warning that the lack of visas for advanced science graduates was “a critical threat to America’s pre-eminence as a global center of innovation and prosperity.” Among those signing were presidents of Stanford, Harvard, Cornell, the California Institute of Technology and M.I.T.

According to the university leaders, in 2009 foreigners made up about 45 percent of all graduate students in engineering, math, computer and physical sciences, and they earned 52 percent of all new doctoral degrees in those fields.

All three of the new proposals include labor market tests that would require employers to show they could not find a qualified American worker before they sponsored a foreign graduate for a green card and a job.

With Congressional lawmakers expecting this to be their last week in session before they head out to campaign, Republicans said they want to show they are working to make good on pledges made at their convention last month. The Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, said he would focus on fixing the system for legal immigration.

President Obama has also said he supports more green cards for science graduates.

Technology groups watched the partisan jockeying with worry, fearing that no legislation would pass.

“We have a new class graduating in December and we don’t want to lose those people,” said Keith Grzelak, a vice president of the [Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers](#), a group with more than 200,000 members. “If we bring one superstar from another country who starts a company here, there could be thousands of jobs that didn’t exist before.”

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York, a strong advocate of high-skilled immigration, urged lawmakers not to miss the moment. “There are real options for immigration reform on the table now, and from both sides of the aisle,” he said on Tuesday.

It was not clear Republicans had enough votes to pass the bill this week.

“Republicans are only willing to increase legal immigration for immigrants they want by eliminating legal immigration for immigrants they don’t want,” said Representative Luis Gutierrez of Illinois, a leading Hispanic Democrat. But if Mr. Smith’s bill passes, Mr. Schumer’s measure may point to a compromise in the Senate when Congress reconvenes after the Nov. 6 election.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/19/us/republicans-push-bill-to-help-foreign-science-graduates-stay.html?emc=tnt&tntemail0=y&r=0moc.semityn.www>