

Rubio, McCain huddle on immigration reform

By Alexander Bolton - 12/11/12 05:00 AM ET

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) is seen as his party's natural leader on immigration reform, but he will have to share the stage with Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.).

The 2008 GOP presidential nominee is the upper chamber's most seasoned expert on immigration reform, and nearly pushed a comprehensive deal through Congress six years ago.

Rubio has already talked with McCain to iron out a strategy for next year, but the two lawmakers have yet to sit down together to carefully review policy details. McCain has been focused on the defense authorization bill and could shift his attention to the fiscal-cliff negotiations, as he often plays a central role in major policy debates.

The two influential senators don't appear to be on the same page on whether to go big on immigration.

Rubio says it would be a mistake to push a large, comprehensive reform bill, which could draw reflexive opposition from conservatives who are suspicious of sprawling bills that remind them of the 2010 Affordable Care Act.

"One massive piece of legislation, bill, is probably not the right approach, but I do think we need a comprehensive package, several bills," Rubio told The Hill. "Not 10, but maybe three or four that sequentially address these issues in a coordinated way."

McCain is not yet sold on that approach. After all, he and the late Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) managed to push a comprehensive reform bill through the Senate in 2006. McCain, who has a long history of working with Democrats, knows they would resist any effort to split immigration reform into several pieces.

"We'll see. I think that's one thing that needs to be discussed, whether it would be either/or," McCain said when asked about whether immigration reform should be attempted all at once or done piecemeal.

McCain was less involved in the comprehensive package assembled by Kennedy and Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) in 2007, which failed to muster enough support to overcome a filibuster.

Rubio is the only Republican Hispanic in the Senate, and his fluent Spanish makes him an ideal spokesman for any GOP immigration reform plan. Some political insiders view Rubio as the odds-on favorite to secure the Republican presidential nomination in 2016.

But McCain has a better grasp of how to pass major bipartisan legislation. Before pushing immigration reform through the Senate, he formed a coalition to pass campaign finance reform in 2002 — despite long odds.

Democratic leaders such as Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (Ill.) and Sen. Charles Schumer (N.Y.) have made it clear that reform should be pursued through one piece of sweeping legislation.

Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), chairman of the Immigration Task Force of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, worries Republicans will pass legislation to take care of highly skilled immigrants and farm workers, but leave millions of others unaddressed.

“There’s always a desire to take care of certain things, but it doesn’t help millions and millions of people everywhere who work every day and sweep floors and wash dishes,” he said. “For me, they’re all equal.”

While his colleagues focus on avoiding the fiscal cliff or other issues likely to come up in the lame duck, Rubio has been working behind the scenes to lay the groundwork for immigration reform.

He has reached out to House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), another top-tier prospect for the White House in 2016, as well as to Senate Democrats, according to a source close to Rubio.

Rubio and Gutierrez, the Democratic point man in the House, have planned to meet before Christmas, according to Gutierrez.

Senate Republicans say they do not see any one lawmaker taking the lead on immigration reform.

“I think it will be a combination of people,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), one of McCain’s closest allies.

Graham said freshman Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) and Sen.-elect Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) would also play active roles.

Graham, who has resumed long-stalled negotiations with Schumer, the chairman of the Judiciary panel’s Immigration subcommittee, declined to rule out a comprehensive bill.

“We’ll see where everybody comes out on that,” he said.

Rep. Raúl Labrador (R-Idaho), who has been building a coalition of House conservatives to support immigration reform, said he expects the Senate to act first because lawmakers there have significant legislative experience on the subject.

He envisions Rubio and McCain as co-leaders of the effort.

“We will probably see something come out of the Senate pretty quickly,” he said. “You have some members working it for some years.

“I think Marco Rubio and John McCain can work very well together. You have the experience John McCain brings to the table and you have the communication skill that Rubio has. That’s a great way to form a partnership. I don’t think it matters who gets the credit,” he added.

Rubio has focused this year on legislation to grant legal status to illegal immigrants who came to the country at a young age. The freshman senator was expected to unveil it earlier this year, but held off after President Obama announced a major change in deportation policies.

Rubio had been working with Kyl and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas), who are both retiring at the end of the year. The Achieve Act, introduced last month by Kyl and Hutchison, would not create an expedited pathway to citizenship, which Democrats favor. It would limit eligibility to immigrants who came to the U.S. before turning 14.

The legislation being crafted by Rubio is “very, very similar in many aspects to what we have been working on with [Kyl and Hutchison],” he said.

He added, “I’m also starting thinking about ideas about how to strengthen our borders and modernize the legal immigration system so that it’s good for America and its economy, and then of course there’s the issue of what to do with the 11 million people who are in this country now undocumented.”

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