

Senate panel approves sweeping immigration reform bill

By [David Nakamura](#), Published: May 21

A Senate committee approved a sweeping immigration reform bill Tuesday that would provide a path to citizenship for up to 11 million illegal immigrants, setting the stage for the full Senate to consider the landmark legislation next month.

After five days of debate over dozens of amendments, the Judiciary Committee voted 13 to 5 in support of the bill, with three Republicans joining the committee's 10 Democrats. The legislation emerged with its core provisions largely intact, including new visa programs for high-tech and low-skilled workers and new investments in strengthening border control.

"The dysfunction in our current immigration system affects all of us and it is long past time for reform. I hope that our history, our values, and our decency can inspire us finally to take action," committee Chairman Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) said. "We need an immigration system that lives up to American values and helps write the next great chapter in American history by reinvigorating our economy and enriching our communities."

President Obama, who has made immigration reform his top second-term priority, issued a statement praising the committee for approving a bill that is "largely consistent" with the principles he had outlined.

"None of the committee members got everything they wanted, and neither did I," Obama said, "but in the end, we all owe it to the American people to get the best possible result over the finish line."

The comprehensive bill is now headed to the full Senate, where Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) urged fellow Republicans on Tuesday not to block the bill from a floor vote. The Congressional Budget Office will take two weeks to issue an assessment of the fiscal cost of the bill, so Democratic aides said the floor debate could begin around June 10.

The final Judiciary Committee vote represented a victory for the bipartisan group — four Democrats and four Republicans — that negotiated the 850-page comprehensive bill over several months.

Four of the bipartisan group members who are on the Judiciary Committee banded together to fight off the most serious challenges to the core provisions of the bill, including a last-minute attempt by Leahy to add protections for same-sex couples.

In an emotional debate, Sens. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) said they wanted to support Leahy's amendment, but that they would not because Republican

members of the bipartisan group, including Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), said they would drop support if the provision were added to the legislation.

Leahy ultimately withdrew the amendment “with a heavy heart,” amid near silence in the packed Senate hearing room.

Rubio, who is not on the Judiciary Committee, issued a statement after the committee approved the bill praising their work but adding that “work still remains to be done.”

“Immigration reform will not become law unless we can earn the confidence of the American people that we are solving our immigration problems once and for all,” he said.

Schumer, representing the bipartisan group that authored the bill, also negotiated a compromise Tuesday with Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) to relax some restrictions on high-tech companies that seek to hire foreign engineers and computer programmers.

The legislation already would raise the annual limit of high-tech visas, known as H-1B, from 65,000 to as many as 180,000, but Hatch had lobbied to eliminate other restrictions on U.S. companies seeking to hire engineers and programmers from abroad.

The compromise amendment lifts the requirement that companies first offer tech jobs to Americans for all firms except those that depend on foreigners for more than 15 percent of their workforce and relaxes the formula for determining the annual number of foreign high-tech workers.

The high-tech amendments are perhaps the most substantial changes to the immigration bill over five days of hearings on dozens of proposed changes.

Hatch warned he could still drop his support in the full Senate if other concerns aren’t met. “I’ve got to get those or we’ll never pass this bill,” he said.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka called Hatch’s amendments “unambiguous attacks on American workers” and he vowed to press for changes during the full Senate debate.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-panel-approves-deal-on-foreign-workers/2013/05/21/4ac8cfe4-c228-11e2-914f-a7aba60512a7_story.html