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Senate, 68 to 32, Passes Overhaul for Immigration

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WASHINGTON — The Senate on Thursday approved the most significant overhaul of the nation’s immigration laws in a generation with broad support generated by a sense among leading Republicans that the party needed to join with Democrats to remove a wedge between Republicans and Hispanic voters.

The strong 68-to-32 vote in the often polarized Senate tossed the issue into the House, where the Republican leadership has said that it will not take up the Senate measure and is instead focused on much narrower legislation that would not provide a path to citizenship for the 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the country. Party leaders hope that the Senate action will put pressure on the House.

Leading up to the final votes, which the senators cast at their desks to mark the import of the moment, members of the bipartisan “Gang of Eight,” who drafted the framework of the legislation, took to the Senate floor to make a final argument for the measure. Among them was Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, who is one of his party’s leading Hispanic voices. When Mr. Rubio finished, the other senators in the group surrounded him on the floor, patting him on the back and offering words of encouragement. “Good job,” one said. “I’m proud of you,” another offered.

The future will show whether voters in Republican presidential primaries share that pride.

After Mitt Romney’s loss in November, top Republicans immediately began formulating a way to improve the party’s standing with Hispanics, who have flocked to Democrats. A group of top Republican political and business officials who support an immigration overhaul met at the downtown Washington office of the anti-tax leader Grover Norquist on Jan. 17 with memories of Mr. Romney’s poor showing in their minds.

Optimism ran high at the session, which included Mr. Norquist, the former national party chairman Ed Gillespie and representatives of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Republican “super PACs.” Reeling from a second consecutive presidential loss and with Mr. Rubio taking the place of Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, as the face of the immigration reform movement, the strategists were hopeful that the wall of conservative opposition that blocked immigration legislation under President George W. Bush could be breached.

Now, even after the lopsided Senate vote, the prospects appear grim for the pro-overhaul Republicans. And Mr. Rubio, the 42-year-old Cuban-American who is seen as a prime White House contender in 2016, is confronting rising criticism from conservatives for pushing

legislation with Democratic boogeymen like President Obama and Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York.

“Before the Gang of Eight and the immigration debate, I think many conservatives as well as some establishment Republican folks saw Senator Rubio as a possible bridge candidate between the conservative Tea Party base of the G.O.P. and more establishment G.O.P. voters,” said Greg Mueller, a conservative public relations executive who opposed the Senate bill. “That position is on much shakier ground today because conservatives and the Tea Party see the immigration bill as a big-government piece of legislation resembling Obamacare.”

Republicans strongly opposed to the immigration bill said they had little sympathy for Mr. Rubio.

“I don’t think we’re doing any damage to him,” said Representative Tim Huelskamp, Republican of Kansas. “I think he’s done damage to himself with the amnesty bill.”

Alex Conant, Mr. Rubio’s spokesman, said: “Immigration is a personal issue for Senator Rubio, and he took it on because he thought it was the right thing to do. There may be some political implications, especially in the short term, but it wasn’t an issue he believed he could ignore. We don’t expect any parades for our work on this.”

On Thursday, Mr. Rubio had little cover from his party’s right flank, much less a parade. Not wanting to tempt primary opponents next year, the top two Senate Republican leaders — Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and John Cornyn of Texas — cast “no” votes. And a potential 2016 presidential primary rival for Mr. Rubio, Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, also voted against the legislation, despite making a show of announcing his general support for an immigration overhaul earlier in the year.

The Senate bill provides a 13-year path to citizenship for the 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the country, as well as tough border security provisions that must be in place before the immigrants can gain legal status.

The legislation — drafted largely behind closed doors by the group of eight senators — brought together an unlikely coalition of Democrats and Republicans; business groups and labor unions; farmworkers and growers; and Latino, gay rights and immigration advocates. Along the way, the legislation was shaped and tweaked in a series of back-room deals and negotiations that, in many ways, seemed to mirror its inception.

As late as Wednesday night, several members of the bipartisan group, including Mr. McCain and his Republican colleague Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, as well as Mr. Schumer, found themselves calling Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, trying to shore up support. In separate calls, the senators urged Mr. Christie to help persuade Senator Jeffrey S. Chiesa, Republican of New Jersey — newly appointed by Mr. Christie — to vote for the bill. (Mr. Chiesa was one of the 14 Republicans who voted “yes” on Thursday.)

The first big deal on the legislation came at the end of March, when the nation's top labor and business groups reached an agreement on a guest worker program for low-skilled immigrants. Disagreements between the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the A.F.L.-C.I.O. had helped doom a 2007 attempt at a similar overhaul, but the two groups came together to create a program that would expand and shrink based on economic indicators — like unemployment and job openings figures — and offer a maximum of 200,000 guest visas annually.

The group of senators who wrote the legislation had originally hoped it would receive overwhelming bipartisan support — as many as 70 votes, some senators suggested — to help propel it through the House, and when the bill moved to the Senate Judiciary Committee, the group took pains to win bipartisan support there, too.

The bill passed through the committee, in a process that stretched over five days and included the consideration of more than 300 amendments, on a strong 13-to-5 bipartisan vote.

The bill's largest, and perhaps most critical, change came in a package that promised to substantially bolster security along the nation's southern border. The proposal, by Senators Bob Corker of Tennessee and John Hoeven of North Dakota, both Republicans, would devote about \$40 billion over the next decade to border enforcement measures, including adding 20,000 Border Patrol agents and 700 miles of fencing along the southern border.

The amendment, which passed Wednesday with broad bipartisan support, helped bring along more than a dozen reluctant Republicans. But even that measure does not seem to have altered firm House resistance to the Senate bill. Speaker John A. Boehner threw cold water on any hope that the House would vote on the Senate plan, and he insisted that whatever immigration measure his chamber took up would have to be supported by a majority of his Republican conference.

“I issued a statement that I thought was pretty clear, but apparently some haven't gotten the message: the House is not going to take up and vote on whatever the Senate passes,” he said Thursday morning. “We're going to do our own bill.”

As daunting to the pro-overhaul Republicans as Mr. Boehner's apparent opposition is the structure of the Republican House majority, strategists say. More than 70 percent of districts held by House Republicans have a population that is 10 percent or less Hispanic, National Journal reported. And the Republican districts where there is a significant Hispanic population are in heavily conservative terrain in California and Texas.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/us/politics/immigration-bill-clears-final-hurdle-to-senate-approval.html>