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Senators Reach Border Security Deal in Immigration Bill

By Kathleen Hunter and Laura Litvan - Jun 21, 2013

The bipartisan coalition backing a Senate proposal to revise U.S. immigration law avoided a change that imperiled the bill's passage as they negotiated an alternative border-security plan.

The agreement to enhance the security elements helped siphon off support for a more stringent border plan offered by [Texas](#) Republican John Cornyn. The bill's co-sponsors warned that Cornyn's proposal would have created insurmountable hurdles for undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens and would have cost them votes for the measure.

The compromise reached yesterday "solved the riddle of how we deal with border security," said [New York](#) Senator Charles Schumer, a Democratic co-sponsor of the bill. "I think it's a breakthrough, and I'm optimistic it can help us get a large number of votes on both sides of the aisle."

The Senate is finishing up a second week of debate on immigration legislation that seeks to balance Democrats' goal of a path to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. with Republicans' insistence on stricter border security. Senate Democratic leaders want to pass a bill before July 4. The last major revision of U.S. immigration law occurred in 1986.

The agreement on border security, described on the Senate floor yesterday by Republican Senators Bob Corker of [Tennessee](#) and John Hoeven of North Dakota, would double the U.S. Border Patrol's size by adding 20,000 agents and would require 700 miles of fencing at the U.S.-Mexico border. It would provide additional unmanned aerial drones to help police the border.

Legal Status

Also, it would require the Department of Homeland Security to certify that the added border-security resources were in place before undocumented immigrants could receive permanent legal status, said South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican co-sponsor of the bill.

All employers would have to be using an e-verify system to check workers' legal status, and all airports and seaports would have to use a visa entry and exit system.

"We believe all of this can be done in 10 years," Graham told reporters. In that case, it wouldn't delay the Senate bill's plan to allow undocumented immigrants to begin receiving permanent legal status in 10 years.

The compromise was praised by Senator Marco Rubio of [Florida](#), a Republican co-sponsor of the bill who had said he wouldn't support the version that emerged last month from the Senate Judiciary Committee without more stringent border control.

'Will Work'

"What this amendment reflects is what we know will work," Rubio said on the Senate floor yesterday. "We know that adding border patrol agents, doubling the size of the border force, will work."

[Arizona](#) Senator John McCain, also a Republican co-sponsor, said the provision "addresses the concerns of many Republicans." He said a "significant" number of Republicans, including all four in the bipartisan negotiating group, agreed to support the plan.

Corker said the proposal "brings on at least 15 Republicans, and I think momentum is building."

Frank Sharry, founder and director of America's Voice, a Washington-based group that advocates citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in the U.S., said the added border resources in the proposal will probably secure the bill's Senate passage. Still, he said, it commits too much money at border security.

"It's terrible public policy, and it's a legislative breakthrough," Sharry said.

'High Price'

While Sharry said his group is heartened that the goal of a pathway to citizenship is in reach, he called the accord on border security a "very high price to pay" to achieve passage of the overall bill.

If enacted, the proposal would mark the biggest investment in border security in U.S. history, dwarfing the largest package so far that was approved in 2010. That \$600 million measure was geared specifically at the U.S.-[Mexico](#) border and provided 1,500 new Border Patrol, Customs and other agents, as well as new communications equipment and unmanned aircraft.

Obama signed the law in August 2010, with the measure seen by Democrats as a way to dislodge the broader debate on revising immigration laws. Republicans won control of the House in that year's November election, and the issue was stuck in a partisan stalemate until this year.

Dissenting Voices

The compromise announced yesterday drew criticism from Republican Senators Charles Grassley of [Iowa](#), Jeff Sessions of [Alabama](#), Ted Cruz of Texas, David Vitter of Louisiana and Mike Lee of [Utah](#), who said it wouldn't do enough to ensure the border is secure.

Vitter told reporters that the agreement was designed "to pass the bill, not to fix the bill."

“I think this is an attempt to pull out of the fire a bill that has been weakening,” Sessions said.

The Senate defeated, by a vote of 54-43, Cornyn’s plan to require the government to show it was apprehending 90 percent of the people illegally crossing the border from Mexico before undocumented immigrants could gain permanent [legal](#) residency.

As initially proposed, the Senate immigration bill, S. 744, would allow undocumented immigrants to gain permanent residency, known as a green card, when the government has a “substantially operational” plan for achieving a 90 percent apprehension rate at the border.

Kirk’s Support

Senator Mark Kirk, an [Illinois](#) Republican, praised the border-security agreement and said he’s prepared to vote for the bill if the proposal is adopted. He was one of 15 senators, all Republicans, who voted on June 11 against taking up the measure that came out of the Judiciary panel.

“This bipartisan compromise will restore the people’s trust in our ability to control the border and bring 525,000 people in Illinois out of the shadows,” Kirk said in a statement.

Nevada Republican Senator Dean Heller told reporters he too plans to support the bill if the security agreement is accepted.

Beyond the border-control debate, Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah is insisting on changes to the conditions under which undocumented immigrants could become U.S. citizens as the price for his support of the bill. Hatch has proposed prohibiting non-citizens who gain legal status from obtaining welfare benefits and requiring immigrants to pay back taxes to qualify for temporary legal status.

Hoeven told reporters yesterday an effort is underway to reach a compromise on Hatch’s proposal and perhaps add it to the border-security amendment.

Reducing Deficit

The Congressional Budget Office [estimated](#) on June 18 that the Senate bill would reduce the federal [budget deficit](#) by about \$175 billion over a decade and by \$700 billion during the second 10 years after implementation. It said increased tax revenue from new U.S. residents would outpace growth in the demand for government services.

The House has yet to take up legislation revising U.S. immigration law. A bipartisan group of House lawmakers may announce a comprehensive plan as soon as next week.

The House Judiciary Committee, led by Virginia Republican Bob Goodlatte, is considering individual pieces of legislation involving aspects of immigration policy.

House Speaker John Boehner, an Ohio Republican, has said he won't bring an immigration proposal to a vote unless a majority of the chamber's 234 most Republicans support it.

Boehner told reporters yesterday that an immigration plan must "have the confidence of the American people that it's done the right way."

"That means confidence that our borders are secure, confidence that those who came here illegally are not given special treatment, confidence that hard-working taxpayers are being respected," and that both parties support the final plan, he said.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-06-21/senators-reach-border-security-deal-in-immigration-bill.html>