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# Veteran Senator Emerges as Player on Immigration Overhaul

By [ASHLEY PARKER](#)

WASHINGTON — As proponents of a new [immigration](#) overhaul cast about for a Republican ally to help give their bill an extra boost, they have focused on a 79-year-old lawmaker with new hipster glasses (from Costco), black Nike sneakers (for his bad arches) and, perhaps most important, a deep and complicated relationship with immigration policy: Senator [Orrin G. Hatch](#) of Utah.

Members of the bipartisan group of eight senators who [drafted an overhaul of the nation's immigration laws](#) see Mr. Hatch as a potentially influential partner. He was an original co-sponsor of the Dream Act for younger immigrants and has shown a willingness to embrace other immigration legislation as well. Though he ran to the right during a primary challenge in the 2012 election, they believe he might be brought back into the fold now that he is safely ensconced in his seventh Senate term.

“Senator Hatch is somebody who understands these issues well, has a long history, and it would very valuable to have him support our bill, both in committee and on the floor,” said Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York and a member of the bipartisan group, who also sits on the Judiciary Committee with Mr. Hatch.

In an effort to increase Mr. Hatch's investment in the legislation, Mr. Schumer and other members of the bipartisan group on Monday threw their support behind a Hatch initiative to begin collecting biometric information like fingerprints at airports to register immigrants when they leave the country.

With the exception of two Republican members of the bipartisan group who also sit on the Judiciary Committee — Senators Jeff Flake of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina — Mr. Hatch is considered the other Republican member most likely to support the bill, which would give it some conservative gravitas as it heads to the Senate floor.

The bipartisan group is hoping for a large Senate vote in support of the bill — some members have suggested as many as 70 votes — to place pressure on House Republicans to also get behind the legislation. And Mr. Hatch's “yes” vote is seen as a driver for what they hope will be a groundswell of support. Mr. Hatch, who hails from a state with a dynamic immigration culture, meanwhile finds himself with a final chance to help pass a broad immigration overhaul, something in which he has both publicly and privately expressed a genuine interest.

But Mr. Hatch's “yes” vote in committee comes with a major caveat — the acceptance of provisions of his that would, among other things, help technology companies by [increasing the number of temporary visas available for high-skilled workers](#) (known as H-1B visas) and ease

restrictions around the hiring and firing of workers. He also is offering some provisions on the finance side, including one that would require immigrants to show they have paid back taxes and are staying current with them as they proceed toward legal status.

“I personally believe we need immigration reform,” said Mr. Hatch, adding that his tweaks to the bill are “amendments that clean it up and make it a better bill, and may even be able to get it more votes.” The provisions are also, he explained, an all-but-ironclad requirement for earning his vote: “They know my point is I’ve got to have those,” he said, referring to the message he has communicated to the group.

And so last week, as the committee met twice to discuss the bill publicly, the behind-the-scenes negotiating and arm-twisting picked up in earnest, with Mr. Schumer’s office taking the lead in trying to work out an agreement with Mr. Hatch.

“He’s made it clear that having his support will be dependent on the committee accepting his proposals to improve the bill,” said Alex Conant, a spokesman for Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, one of the Republican authors. “We think accepting his improvements and having his support is critical to getting the broad Republican support we want.”

A particular source of tension is Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat and another member of the bipartisan group, who opposes many of Mr. Hatch’s amendments because he thinks they would hurt American workers.

“Some of them are absolutely unacceptable,” Mr. Durbin said. “What he wants to do is make it easier for firms seeking H-1B visas not to hire Americans.”

Still, Mr. Durbin acknowledged the delicate political realities: “We want all the support we can get, but if the price of support of any Republican member is for us to turn this carefully crafted, politically balanced deal on its head, it’s not worth it.”

If Mr. Hatch succeeds in getting what he wants, it would be a coup both for the senator and the technology industry. Mr. Hatch can fall back on the high-tech community to strengthen his hand, as he did in a committee meeting last week when he warned, “There’s a whole tech world that’s getting up in arms if we don’t do this right, and they alone can make this bill very difficult to pass.” And the tech industry will have found a strong advocate in Mr. Hatch to further push their cause in Congress.

By late Monday night, Senate aides said, Mr. Hatch was closing in on a deal with the bipartisan group, and was expected to offer his high-tech amendments on Tuesday.

“Senator Hatch has a long history of leadership on high-tech issues,” said Dan Turrentine, the vice president of government relations and business development at TechNet, a trade group that advocates for a range of Silicon Valley companies. “His interest in immigration and efforts to ensure the workability of well-intentioned high-skilled reforms proposed by the Gang of Eight makes him a natural to be at the center of negotiations as he seeks to strengthen the bill and broaden support.”

Utah has been nicknamed the “Silicon Slopes” for the more than 5,000 high-tech companies that populate the state, and in some ways, Utah itself is as diverse on the topic of immigration as its two senators. In contrast to Mr. Hatch, Senator Mike Lee, a Republican who also sits on the Judiciary Committee, has advocated breaking up the legislation into smaller pieces and does not necessarily support a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the country.

In 2010, the state’s business, political, religious and law-enforcement leaders got behind the Utah Compact, a document intended to offer an open-minded and holistic approach to immigration. The Mormon Church, of which Mr. Hatch is a member, also endorsed the compact and has offered a similarly broad view toward immigration.

In addition to being one of the original co-sponsors of the Dream Act, a bill that surfaced more than a decade ago and would create a formal path to citizenship for young people brought to the United States illegally as children, Mr. Hatch has worked on other components of the immigration debate. He helped draft the agricultural workers program that is part of the Senate bill.

Though he backed away from immigration reform when he faced a tough primary challenge in 2012, many immigration advocates believe he is now ready to come around to their side.

“I think there is the political space now for Senator Hatch to talk about these issues that he has a track record of being supportive of,” said Ben Johnson, the executive director of the [American Immigration Council](#).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/us/politics/senator-hatch-emerges-as-key-player-on-immigration-reform.html>