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McCain: Visa Overhaul Key Hurdle in Immigration Talks

By Sara Murray

Arizona Sen. **John McCain** said Wednesday that working with labor to revamp visa programs has emerged as one of the toughest issues in the bipartisan Senate group overhauling immigration laws.

Unions have been “pretty adamant about some of their positions,” related to visa programs for high-skilled workers and agricultural workers. “It’s hard to guarantee that we will succeed,” Mr. McCain said of the Senate effort to secure the borders and provide legal status with a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million immigrants living in the U.S. illegally.

Even [as others in the GOP remain unsettled about the path to citizenship](#), Mr. McCain said compromising with unions could be one of the biggest challenges for the Senate group. The group of eight senators is also engaged in a “major debate” over who would be eligible to apply for legal status, depending on when they entered the U.S. Still, he is cautiously optimistic that comprehensive immigration changes could pass and said the plan is unlikely to be sidetracked by the broader argument over the sequester and budget.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Wall Street Journal, Mr. McCain said he thinks an upcoming fight this spring to extend the federal government’s borrowing limit could be the most significant budget battle. The constant wrangling over budget issues could spur renewed calls for a grand bargain, he said.

“Even we are tired...of lurching from one cliff to another,” Mr. McCain said. “I think that’s lending some pressure towards trying to come up with some kind of a grand bargain.”

After recently meeting with President [Barack Obama](#) at the White House, Mr. McCain said he believes the president has an appetite to do a big deal. But there are still scars between Mr. Obama and GOP leaders from their series of failed fiscal negotiations.

“There’s a huge level of mistrust,” he said.

Mr. McCain also said he’s hopeful that background-check legislation proceeds in Congress but disavowed any chance of passing a ban on assault weapons.

“I think everybody knows how this is going to turn out,” Mr. McCain said. “There is not going to be a ban on assault weapons. They don’t have the votes for that.” Instead he urged a focus on expanding background checks and prosecuting background-check violations.

While some had hoped Mr. McCain might join a Senate group working on the background check issue, he shied away from that possibility Wednesday, in part to keep his focus on immigration.

Even as other Republicans express uncertainty, or even outright opposition, to immigration changes, Mr. McCain said it's one of the few shots the party has to mend ties with Hispanic voters.

"Republicans from a pure practical standpoint have to understand that right now many of our Hispanic citizens believe we don't like them," Mr. McCain said. "If we did comprehensive immigration reform it would not gain a single vote from the Hispanic community...it would put us in a position to compete for the Hispanic vote."

As the Arizona senator faces a tough sell to some constituents in his own state, he's focused on reminding Americans that a final plan will include measures to effectively secure the border and will require those who gain provisional legal status to get in the back of the line for a green card, behind those who applied legally.

"That rings authentic to my constituents in Arizona," he said. He stressed that, while it's true immigrants committed a crime by coming to the U.S. illegally, it doesn't mean they should be punished indefinitely.

"There's very few of us that haven't done something illegal at some point in our lives," Mr. McCain said. "We pay the fine or do whatever it is and then we move on."

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