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House GOP draws line on immigration

The Boston Globe

Leaders won't back Senate's citizenship plan

By Rick Klein, Globe Staff | May 27, 2006

WASHINGTON -- House Republican leaders yesterday refused to yield on immigration, insisting that any bill to emerge from upcoming House-Senate negotiations will contain no provisions for undocumented immigrants to become citizens.

House leaders' refusal to budge could make President Bush's goal of passing comprehensive immigration reform impossible to achieve this year. Senate leaders, backed by Bush, favor a plan to allow some undocumented immigrants to apply for guest worker visas, but they contend that denying such workers an eventual path to citizenship could create a permanent underclass.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., the top House negotiator on the immigration issue, said yesterday that the bills passed by the House and Senate are "moons apart." He said a compromise bill will be possible only if senators drop their requirement that undocumented immigrants be offered a path to citizenship, which he and other House opponents call "amnesty."

"If the Senate gets off of the dime of pushing for amnesty -- even though they call it something different -- then I think there's room for negotiation," said Sensenbrenner, a Wisconsin Republican. "I would like to see a bill passed and signed into law. However, I'm a realist."

The House bill approved late last year focused exclusively on securing the nation's borders. But the Senate bill that passed Thursday included both border security measures and a path to citizenship for most of the estimated 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants who are in the country. The Senate bill also includes a new "guest worker" program for those who are living in other countries.

Sponsors of the Senate bill say a final measure must include a citizenship provision, a position that also has the support of the White House. They say only a measure that takes a realistic approach toward undocumented immigrants can have a meaningful impact on the problem of illegal immigration.

Key Republicans, including Senators John McCain of Arizona and

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Lindsey O. Graham of South Carolina, have joined Democrats in making clear that taking out a path to citizenship would be a deal-breaker.

“It won't come out of conference [negotiations] if this isn't part of it," said Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat who helped draft the Senate bill. If House members won't back down, he said, “it's gone."

House leaders insist that the senators must back down. But Kennedy expressed hope that massive public demonstrations by immigrants can work in tandem with pressure from Bush, McCain, and other conservatives to persuade skeptical House Republicans to support a bill that's closer to the Senate approach.

“This has touched the soul of America," Kennedy said. “This is an opportunity for the president to really galvanize the national spirit and this national movement."[Continued...](#)

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"This has touched the soul of America," Kennedy said. "This is an opportunity for the president to really galvanize the national spirit and this national movement."

But House leaders appear adamant against anything they perceive as forgiveness for those who entered the country illegally.

"I am totally opposed to any legislation [that allows undocumented immigrants to become citizens], and I think the clear majority of the Republican caucus agrees with that," said House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King, a New York Republican. "People would rather see no bill than to see 11 million illegals legalized."

The Senate bill would allow an estimated 8 million to 9 million undocumented immigrants -- those who have been in the United States more than two years -- to get on a path to citizenship.

Despite their distaste for leniency on undocumented workers, many Republican lawmakers say they recognize that it is important for them to pass an immigration bill this year, given the importance of the issue to the public. Graham and others have suggested that Republicans will be judged harshly if they fail to deliver a sweeping immigration reform bill to Bush's desk.

"Passing no bill keeps the status quo, and that is unacceptable," said House Government Reform Committee chairman Thomas Davis of Virginia, a former chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee. "It is in our interest to get a bill."

"It's must-do," agreed Representative Jack Kingston of Georgia, vice chairman of the House Republican Conference. "This issue is everywhere, and the American people expect us to act."

Given that sense of urgency, moderate House Republicans, led by Representative Mike Castle of Delaware, have begun meeting to discuss possible compromises. And some conservative House Republicans have expressed support for a middle-ground approach.

One such proposal -- floated by Representative Mike Pence of Indiana, chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee -- would allow some undocumented immigrants to become guest workers, but would not give them an automatic path to citizenship. Undocumented workers would have to leave the country and apply for guest worker visas. They would also have to apply for citizenship under current rules.

Pence and other Republicans say they think the party can coalesce around his idea since it fulfills the president's goal of establishing a guest worker program without offering amnesty to those who entered the country illegally. The White House and Senate Republicans praised the proposal as a signal that House conservatives are willing to engage in negotiations, but emphasized that it is strictly a starting point for further talks.

Kingston said Pence's proposal could also include a blue-ribbon commission that would make further recommendations about the fate of undocumented immigrants who stay in the United States.

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“We've got to consider things like this,” said Representative Bill Shuster, a Pennsylvania Republican. “To even talk about a path to citizenship is premature until we take care of our borders.”

Pence's proposal, however, drew a harsh response from some hard-liners in Congress.

“It is an amnesty with a twist: touch base [in home countries], then come back,” said Representative Tom Tancredo, Republican of Colorado.

Sensenbrenner said a proposal such as Pence's could have merit because it does not contain a special path to citizenship.

“A guest worker program I think can be on the table if it does not contain an amnesty,” he said. “I think the American public is entitled to having a vote on a compromise before the elections, so that the voters can go to the polls assessing how their representatives and senators have done on this issue before they decide who to send back.”

If a bill excluding a path to citizenship were to come out of the conference committee, Democrats would have to decide whether it's worth the political risk of opposing such a measure.

Senate Democrats say the onus is on Bush to see that a comprehensive bill is achieved.

“Dark clouds are forming on the horizon,” Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, said of the possibility that House leaders will gut the Senate's immigration bill. “In any great action movie, there's a final scene where the leading man or woman saves the day. It's now that time for President Bush.” ■

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