

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## MILITARY BILL TESTS U.S. IMMIGRATION REFORM

By Barney Jopson  
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Undocumented immigrants serving in the US military who came to the country illegally as children have become the latest test of Republican willingness to support reforms to the immigration system.

A Republican lawmaker from California is promoting a bill to grant legal status to undocumented members of the military, as he and others representing Hispanic populations seek to appeal to a group that voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

Democrats blame Republicans for Congress's inability to pass comprehensive immigration reforms, but pro-reform Republicans are also seeking to defend themselves from attacks by conservatives in their own party.

At the state level, Republican legislators in Florida are on course this week to make it the 20th state to change its laws to reduce college fees for students brought to the US illegally as children.

The White House and congressional Democrats agree with Republican leaders and business groups on the need for broad federal reform, but progress in Washington is being prevented by partisan mistrust and rightwing opposition.

The military bill, known as the Enlist Act, is being pushed by Jeff Denham, a congressman from a district in California's Central Valley where agriculture is the primary industry and 40 per cent of the population is Hispanic.

Ahead of midterm elections in November it is exposing divisions within his party and a rift with Democrats on how to approach reform.

Mr Denham told the Financial Times his bill could be the first element in a step-by-step approach to reform, which would in time include separate bills on issues such as border security and guest worker programmes.

"We're building more and more momentum," he said, adding that he wanted it to be introduced as a standalone bill in May or early June.

Pro-immigration business groups, including the US Chamber of Commerce and a campaign backed by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, have in recent weeks organised local events to support Republicans who have gone out on a limb to back reform.

The military bill's 49 cosponsors are roughly evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, many of them from areas with large or fast-growing Hispanic populations in states including Texas, Florida, Illinois and Nevada.

Mr Denham's message to opponents, who say the bill would grant amnesty to law breakers, was: "There is no greater way to show your patriotism and commitment to this country than serving in our military and putting your life on the line."

The bill's prospects depend on whether Republican leaders in the House of Representatives are willing to take it up.

A spokeswoman for Eric Cantor, the Republican majority leader in the House, said: "We don't have any other updates as we talk to our chairmen, committees and members on the right path forward."

Democratic leaders are opposed to a step-by-step approach. A spokesman for Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic minority leader, said she supported Mr Denham's goal but that it needed to be part of a single, comprehensive immigration bill.

At the heart of the immigration debate is the issue of whether to provide legal residence or a pathway to citizenship to the 11m undocumented immigrants in the US, three-quarters of whom are Hispanic.

In his California home district, Mr Denham said broader reform would remove undocumented immigrants' fear of dealing with the police and help local farms to find workers.

Among undocumented immigrants, people brought to the US illegally as children are viewed as those able to garner the most sympathy. The small subset who serve in the US military are regarded as an even harder target for criticism.

Mr Denham's office did not provide details of how many people would be affected, but there are about 1.8m "unauthorised youth" under the age of 31 who were brought to the US as children, according to the American Immigration Council.

Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a pro-reform alliance of small businesses, said of Mr Denham's bill: "It's the low-hanging fruit. If you are going to support anything, you'd support that."

But she said conservatives could still stand in its way. "The 'hell no' faction, which used to represent the majority, is now just a small minority, but they are still in some ways the tail that wags the dog," she said.

"They can create such a stink by saying that the party is pursuing amnesty that it makes it very difficult to get it done."

Steve King, an Iowa Republican and one of the most vocal opponents of immigration, said last month: "Our nation's military is full of dedicated men and women and to disrespect them by rewarding illegal aliens with citizenship is an insult."