

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

AFTER SENATE FAILURE ON DREAMERS, IMMIGRATION FACES UNCLEAR PATH IN HOUSE

As a feud over immigration intensifies, centrist House Republicans work on new solutions to provide legal protections for Dreamers

By Natalie Andrews and Kristina Peterson
February 16, 2018

The Senate's failure to pass immigration legislation this week has alarmed some centrist House Republicans who have been pushing their leaders for months to bring up a bill that would provide legal protections for Dreamers.

Many of them represent the most competitive districts, where the outcome of November's midterm elections could determine whether the GOP retains control of the House next year.

Florida Rep. Carlos Curbelo, a Republican in a district that Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton won in 2016, said Thursday he is working to draft a new solution that followed President Donald Trump's requests to pair legal protections for the Dreamers with tighter border security, including funding for a wall. The president has also called for curbs to family-based migration and an end to the diversity visa lottery, which admits 50,000 people chosen at random from countries that are underrepresented in the U.S.

"I think it's pretty obvious that whatever becomes law is going to track the White House outline closely, so that's what we're working with here behind the scenes to try to build some consensus," he said.

Mr. Trump on Friday posted a tweet that blamed Democrats for the Senate's inability to pass a measure, claiming they'd "totally abandoned" the Dreamers, young undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents.

Yet, the president had issued a strong statement opposing a bipartisan compromise measure just before Thursday's vote, and the legislation preferred by the White House failed in the Senate by an even greater margin, with 14 Republicans opposing it.

In the House, Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) is under pressure from his party's most conservative faction not to bring up a centrist-backed immigration bill, narrowing the path for any immigration legislation to pass the chamber. He has said he would bring up a bill that Mr. Trump backs, which could boost GOP support in the chamber.

Lawmakers have been feuding since September, when Mr. Trump ended an Obama-era program, known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, but gave Congress until March 5 to pass its replacement.

DACA protects young immigrants from deportation and allows them to temporarily work legally in the U.S. With no consensus on a long-term solution, senators said Thursday they might try to attach to a spending bill next month a short-term patch shielding the young immigrants, known as Dreamers.

Federal judges have blocked the administration from winding down the DACA program for now. The Justice Department is appealing those rulings. The Supreme Court could announce as early as Friday whether it will take up the issue. Some Republicans say these court rulings mean lawmakers have more time to continue negotiations.

The number of Dreamers who would be aided by legislation being considered varies by proposal. Modeling by the nonpartisan think tank Migration Policy Institute released Friday shows that the most conservative Senate proposal, backed by the White House, would have offered legal permanent residence to at most 1.25 million unauthorized individuals, and not all of those would have applied for citizenship. In a proposal by Sens. John McCain (R., Ariz.) and Chris Coons (D., Del.), as many as 1.73 million individuals would meet the requirements for legal permanent residence, it said.

The White House turned its focus Thursday evening to a conservative immigration bill in the House. "The next step," press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in a statement, "will be for the House to continue advancing the proposal from Chairman Goodlatte and Chairman McCaul."

That bill, crafted by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.) and three other GOP lawmakers, would provide \$30 billion to build a wall and tighten border security, as well as crack down on so-called sanctuary cities, cities and other jurisdictions with policies that don't permit them to take extraordinary steps to assist federal agents seeking to pick up illegal immigrants. It would also require employers to use E-Verify, which allows them to check workers' immigration status, and provide Dreamers three years of renewable legal status.

The bill currently doesn't have enough GOP support to pass the House, aides said.

"I have many concerns with all different aspects of the bill," said Rep. Jeff Denham (R., Ca.), whose district is almost 42 percent Hispanic and was won by Mrs. Clinton in 2016. Mr. Denham said he was most worried about how the implementation of E-Verify would affect his region's agricultural industry. If passed, the bill would "either shut down our ag industry, or force people to go further underground," he said.

Some House Democrats who had sought to hold up the government spending bill last week until Mr. Ryan promised an open immigration debate, remain upset that their party didn't stand together. Because conservative Republicans didn't support the spending bill, Democratic votes were needed.

"I've thought it was a mistake that we didn't use it as leverage," said Rep. Nanette Diaz Barragán (D., Calif.). Focusing on the Senate, she said: "Sometimes it feels that it's not realistic that they even want to do something about this."

Lawmakers from both parties are gathering the 218 signatures needed to force a House vote on an immigration bill. That move, known as a discharge petition, was last successfully used in 2015, to dislodge legislation reauthorizing the Export-Import Bank.

But crossing GOP leaders on an issue as contentious as immigration may be more difficult for rank-and-file Republicans.

A petition to bring up the Dream Act, which offers a path to citizenship for the young immigrants but no conservative elements of the bill, has 196 signatures. It is unclear if the president would sign a bill that didn't include the funding for border security.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ryan faces pressure from conservatives, who want to hold him to a promise from when he first ran for speaker in 2015 that he wouldn't bring up any immigration bill that didn't have the support of a majority of House Republicans.

"If he adheres to that, then I have no right to be upset with the speaker's bringing up whatever bill he brings up," said Rep. Mo Brooks (R., Ala.), who holds some of the chamber's most conservative views on immigration.

But he said he would be less pleased if Mr. Ryan were to bring up an immigration bill that relied on a coalition of Democrats and a smaller number of Republicans, long thought the most likely path to passage in the House.

"I am never happy with anyone who breaks their word," Mr. Brooks said.