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GOP'S IMMIGRATION STRATEGY IS AT RISK

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Congressional Republicans, who set up a fight over President Barack Obama's immigration policy this month, said Thursday their options for winning are dwindling.

Republicans locked in a partisan stalemate with Democrats over Mr. Obama's executive action on immigration also face internal tensions over how much they can expect to accomplish with their slim Senate majority.

GOP leaders opted late last year to split off funding for the Homeland Security Department when they funded the rest of the government through September. They hoped to use a Feb. 27 funding deadline for the agency to block the president's move to shield millions of illegal immigrants from deportation.

The strategy has left the GOP in a familiar situation. "Every time that we come up against one of these deadlines where we're talking about shutting down the government or in this case, part of the government, there are never good options," said Rep. Tom Rooney (R., Fla.) "The ironic thing is now we can't even blame it on a divided Congress."

Republicans won control of the Senate in the midterm elections, but control only 54 of the chamber's 100 seats, short of the 60 votes bills usually need to clear procedural hurdles.

On Thursday, Senate Democrats blocked – in the third procedural roll-call vote in as many days – a House-passed bill to fund the Homeland Security Department through September. The measure also seeks to thwart Mr. Obama's immigration executive action and end a 2012 program offering safe harbor to young people brought to the U.S. illegally as children.

Republicans said they weren't sure how they would find a resolution to the standoff. House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) offered little advice to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) over how to proceed. "He's got a tough job over there. You know, I've got a tough job over here," Mr. Boehner said. "God bless him and good luck."

Some GOP lawmakers said they hoped constituents would take advantage of the recurring votes to pressure Democratic senators to change their minds. "Hopefully the American people express their will to the knuckleheads who are blocking progress," in the Senate, said Rep. Mo Brooks (R., Ala.). Many House Republicans said it is up to the Senate to make the next move and send the best bill they can to the House.

But other GOP lawmakers said Senate Republicans were confronting the limits of their power. "I know a lot of people want them to quote fight harder," said Rep. Tom Cole (R., Okla.) "You can fight as hard as you want, you can't turn 54 into 60."

Democrats have said they would only pass a bill extending the agency's funding without any polarizing immigration measures attached to it. "Republicans should not and cannot risk a shutdown of a large part of the government tasked with keeping us safe just to appease the hard right of their party who oppose the president's policies," said Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.)

In the past, Mr. Boehner has turned to House Democrats to help pass spending bills needed to keep the government running in the face of GOP resistance. But GOP aides and lawmakers said Mr. Boehner won't bring a bill just funding the Homeland Security to the House floor now, a move that would be seen as an embarrassing capitulation less than two months after Republicans claimed full control of Congress.

"I don't think the speaker especially thinks that is without political peril for him," said Rep. Matt Salmon (R., Ariz.)

GOP leaders opted late last year to split off Homeland Security funding from the rest of the government, which was funded through September, to use as leverage in the immigration fight once Republicans took over the Senate. But the primary agency implementing Mr. Obama's action – the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services – funds itself through fees and wouldn't shut down if the Homeland Security's funding lapses at month's end.

At the same time, GOP lawmakers and aides said they won't let national security funding expire at a time of global anxiety over attacks from Islamic State extremists and other militants. To avoid a shutdown, lawmakers said they may end up passing a short-term extension of current funding to give them more time to find a way to challenge the administration's immigration policy.