

Immigration Advocates Push for Overhaul as a Step to Economic Recovery

CQ TODAY ONLINE NEWS – IMMIGRATION

By Seth Stern, CQ Staff

Jan. 26, 2010

Centrist Democrats in the Senate are increasingly reluctant to advance an overhaul of immigration laws this year, in spite of proponents' attempts to portray the effort as the kind of bipartisan legislation that could help them in the midterm elections.

"It's going to be very hard in the next six months to take up that legislation," said Bob Casey, D-Pa. "I think we have to get focused in a very singular way on job creation."

The prospects for an immigration overhaul were uncertain even before Massachusetts voters elected Republican Scott P. Brown to the Senate last week, removing the 60th vote that enabled a united Democratic caucus to block GOP filibuster threats.

"Most members of Congress would rather avoid it," said Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a business coalition that favors a comprehensive immigration bill. "Even before the Brown election, it looked like a risky step they would rather put off. They just took a tough vote [on health care], they just had a root canal – who wants another one so soon?"

Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security, had planned to introduce that chamber's immigration bill in the fall but was delayed by the focus on health care.

Asked after Brown's election when he might introduce the measure, which he is working on with South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham, Schumer responded: "We're exploring everything ... We're looking at the election results and everything else,"

Graham said he and Schumer were still talking about a "comprehensive" solution, but he suggested that the fate of such a bill would depend in part on "how much risk aversion" Brown's victory creates among Democrats.

"I just don't know yet," Graham said.

Immigration overhaul advocates have tried to portray the issue in the days since Brown's victory as something Democrats could benefit from addressing.

"There's going to be a premium on bipartisan legislation going forward and immigration reform meets that threshold," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, which advocates for an immigration overhaul. "We understand the self-protective reflex of some Democrats who are saying, 'Oh my God, we don't want to do anything but name some post offices and say the word "jobs" millions of times,' but I'm not sure that's really going to protect them."

Link to Economic Issues

Advocates also insist that an immigration overhaul could be an important component of any economic recovery effort – an argument that, so far, is not resonating among Senate Democrats, who run the risk of stoking voter outrage by providing a path to citizenship for undocumented workers at a time when many Americans are struggling through the economic crisis.

"The enthusiasm right now is to focus on the economy and job creation," said Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M. "That's what the focus is on."

Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., said she would prefer delaying action on an immigration overhaul while focusing on stricter workplace enforcement.

"We need to give those policies more time to work," she said.

Any attempt to link immigration to an economic recovery runs the risk that Republicans will renew their attacks that undocumented workers are occupying jobs that could otherwise go to unemployed Americans. "The best outcome for low-skilled citizen and legal immigrant workers is the removal of the illegal immigrant population," Lamar Smith of Tennessee, the top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, said in a statement Tuesday. "The very jobs that illegal immigrants occupy rightfully belong to out-of-work citizens and legal immigrants."

Asked Tuesday about the fate of an immigration bill, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said President Obama was likely to mention the issue during the State of the Union address.

"We've started a process on this, and if Congress can put together the way forward, a coalition to get the way forward, then it's something we'll work through," Gibbs said.

Advocates say one of the thorniest issues Schumer and Graham need to sort out is at what level to set the "future flows" of immigrants, particularly those entering the country on work visas.

Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-Ill., said he took the economic climate into account when he joined dozens of liberal House lawmakers last month in introducing their preferred blueprint, which lacked the temporary worker provision favored by business groups that have supported an immigration overhaul in the past.

With the window of opportunity before the midterm election soon to close, proponents say they hope to see a Schumer-Graham bill in February, with a markup in the Senate Judiciary Committee and floor action following in quick succession.

Even if the immigration overhaul effort fails, Democrats could still benefit politically, particularly if GOP criticism helped the Democrats mobilize Hispanic voters in the midterm elections.

But Clarissa Martinez, director of immigration and national campaigns at the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic advocacy group, warned that Democrats will have a hard time placating Hispanic voters unless they make a serious attempt to advance the measure.

"If there is an effort to simply check the box, it's going to be pretty easy to tell," she said. "People are going to see clearly through an effort that is not real."

A version of this article appeared in the Jan. 27, 2010, print issue of [CQ Today](#)