

Roll Call

GOP SENATORS OFFER A 'STARTING POINT' FOR IMMIGRATION DEBATE

By David Harrison
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Senate Republicans took a first step Tuesday toward a compromise on immigration by proposing to allow young illegal immigrants brought to this country as children to remain permanently.

Sens. Jon Kyl of Arizona and Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas – both of whom are retiring at the end of the year – unveiled legislation that would create three new visa categories for young immigrants who enroll in college or join the military.

A draft bill the senators have been working on for months would not grant young undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship, an omission designed to head off Republican opposition but a move likely to cost the measure Democratic support. For more than a decade, Democrats have pushed the Dream Act (HR 1842, S 952), which would give young illegal immigrants a direct route to gaining citizenship.

Hutchison described her proposal with Kyl as a “starting point” in an immigration debate during the months ahead. “We wanted to put down a well-thought-out position that would give people a chance to look at it and possibly debate it during the lame duck. If not, certainly as a starter for next year,” she said.

The Republican proposal comes as the GOP seeks to improve its image among Hispanic voters, who overwhelmingly supported President Barack Obama’s re-election.

“Most of this has been in the works for a long time,” said Tamar Jacoby, president and CEO of ImmigrationWorks USA, which advocates for immigration policy from a business perspective. “The election has intensified things and accelerated them, but Republicans have been thinking about changing the dynamics on immigration and thinking about solutions toward fixing the legal immigration system. This is the fruit of that process.”

The election has emboldened Democrats, who are now more forceful in their demands for a comprehensive immigration overhaul. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has said he will push for a comprehensive overhaul that would grant citizenship to many of the 11 million people living here illegally.

The proposal by Kyl and Hutchison would apply to people younger than 28 who have lived in the country for the previous five years. Applicants would have to show they have lived here since age 14, stayed out of legal trouble, learned English and know about U.S. history and government.

Applicants would have six years to complete a post-secondary degree or enlist in the military under a new “W-1” visa category. They would have to check in with authorities every six months and would not be eligible for federal welfare benefits. Once they

completed their studies or completed their military obligation, applicants would receive a "W-2" visa allowing them to work legally for four years. After that, they would be able to apply for a "W-3" visa granting permanent residency and work authorization, but without the possibility of becoming a citizen.

The bill is similar to a proposal discussed earlier this year by Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., his party's point man on immigration in the Senate. Rubio, who helped Kyl and Hutchison with their measure, said he would get behind it if it gains traction in the Senate.

Rubio's own proposal never materialized into a bill but attracted tentative support from Democrats and immigration advocates. He ended up shelving his plan after Obama announced in June that he would grant administrative reprieve to young undocumented immigrants, making it possible for them to live and work legally in the country. Rubio said Tuesday he plans to introduce a new version of his proposal early next year.

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., said Tuesday that although he had not studied the latest Republican proposal, he was not inclined to support it because it does not include a pathway to citizenship. "It falls short," he said. "Without that pathway, it isn't really about achieving a dream."

Lorella Praeli, policy director at United We Dream, which advocates for passage of the Dream Act, called the proposal a "cynical political gesture."

"We can't take seriously legislation that does nothing to provide a road map to citizenship," she said in a statement. "We won't stop fighting until we win citizenship for every single new American. We need Sens. Hutchison and Kyl and the rest of their party to come to the table and sit down with Democrats to come up with a real solution."

Menendez said he is encouraged by the new Republican tone in the aftermath of the election. "I'm always optimistic when they move in a better direction," he said, adding that the GOP has now realized it needs to reach out to Hispanic and immigrant groups. "The Republican Party needs to do a better job of listening to their concerns, and they fell far short of that."