

Roll Call

HOUSE GOP SETS VOTE ON MODIFIED VISA BILL

By John Gramlich
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A House vote Friday on a measure that would grant more visas to foreign graduates of American universities will provide an early test of the momentum toward a bipartisan immigration overhaul in the wake of the Nov. 6 elections.

Republican leaders set up the vote on a modified version of the bill (HR 6429) that would abolish a program that currently awards 55,000 visas through a lottery system and redirect those visas to immigrants who graduate from American universities with degrees in science, technology, engineering and math, also known as the STEM fields. Doctoral degree holders would receive preference for the visas, with leftovers going to those with master's degrees.

The House rejected a similar version of the measure in September, when it picked up 257 votes – including the support of 30 Democrats – but failed to reach the two-thirds threshold, or 290 votes, needed to pass the bill under suspension of the rules.

The Rules Committee meets Wednesday and is expected to approve a rule requiring only a simple majority to pass, a threshold that aides and advocacy groups expect to be easily met.

Republican leaders also stressed they have included new language to make the bill more appealing to Democrats.

Among the changes, the bill would make it easier for family members of green card holders to move to the United States while they await green cards of their own. Relatives currently must wait in their home countries and away from family members for up to two years, but the amended version would cut that period in half.

"This is the first step forward toward doing something concrete and delivering results on immigration reform," said House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va. "This is a bill that both sides support. There's no reason for any of the Democrats to vote against this bill."

Matt Sparks, a spokesman for House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said the revisions show "the seriousness of House Republicans in getting this piece of immigration reform through both chambers."

House Democrats say they support the concept of the Republican bill but prefer bigger changes as part of a comprehensive overhaul of the immigration system, rather than handling policy changes through the "step-by-step" approach that Speaker John A. Boehner, R-Ohio, has advocated since the elections. A House Democratic aide said the changes that Republicans have made to the measure amount to "crumbs."

The measure's prospects in the Senate, meanwhile, are bleak, at least during the lame-duck session. Floor time is limited, and Senate Democrats have expressed their own reservations,

both about the details of the House bill and the piecemeal approach favored by House Republican leaders.

A White House official echoed the position of congressional Democrats on Tuesday.

"We support expansion of STEM visas in general as part of a broader immigration reform, but any legislation that moves should be part of a balanced approach to fixing the immigration system, and this proposal does not meet that standard," the official said. "We are encouraged that House Republicans appear ready to start this conversation, and we look forward to working with them, as well as with House Democrats and members of the Senate on a more comprehensive approach to fixing our immigration system that includes an expansion of STEM visas as well as other important priorities."

But Republicans are eager to show that they are serious about advancing immigration changes, particularly after an election year in which nearly three-quarters of Hispanic voters backed President Barack Obama over GOP nominee Mitt Romney.

While behind-the-scenes work on the visa legislation has carried on for more than a year, the election has "accelerated" the desire of Republicans to tackle the issue, said Tamar Jacoby, president and CEO of ImmigrationWorks USA, a business coalition that lobbies for less restrictive immigration laws. Jacoby said that was evident not only in the House's upcoming vote on the visa measure, but also by the separate introduction Tuesday of a Republican Senate bill that would expand pathways to legal residency for some children of illegal immigrants.

A question ahead of Friday's vote, besides the level of Democratic support it will garner, is whether conservative and moderate Republicans will be united. All but five Republicans voted in favor of the House bill in September, but that was before the assistance for family members was added.

The updated measure also has left some who voted against the initial version unsatisfied. Rep. Walter B. Jones, a North Carolina Republican who voted against the bill in September, is likely to do so again "due to his opposition of importing labor when so many in our country need jobs," Catherine Fodor, a spokeswoman, said in an e-mail. Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., also intends to vote no for the second time, a spokeswoman said.

Advocates agree that the House bill is unlikely to advance in the Senate this year and characterized Friday's vote as a test of the House's mood heading into a year in which immigration debates are expected to feature prominently on Capitol Hill. "This is the preamble to a longer story," Jacoby said.