

Roll Call

IMMIGRATION OVERHAUL EMISSARIES WAIT IN HOUSE

By John Gramlich
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With an immigration overhaul on next year's agenda, House Republicans must decide which members of their conference will play a visible role in the negotiations – an important consideration for a party that is struggling to attract Latino voters.

Speaker John A. Boehner, R-Ohio, said after the Nov. 6 elections that he is confident that Congress and President Barack Obama “can find the common ground to take care of this issue once and for all.” But House Republicans have not yet indicated which of their members will help lead the high-profile effort to find compromise with Democrats; by contrast, the membership of a bipartisan Senate working group on immigration is known.

“At this point in time, the conference is really looking for someone to hold the flag, someone who has a combination of experience and a passion to fix the immigration system,” said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, which advocates on behalf of immigrants.

Incoming Judiciary Chairman Robert W. Goodlatte, R-Va., will by default be a central figure in any immigration proposals that advance in the House, if only because the legislation will run through his panel. Goodlatte, a former immigration attorney, is no stranger to the issue. But he is better known on Capitol Hill for his expertise in agriculture and Internet policy, and he emphasized job creation – not immigration – when he was selected as chairman last week.

Goodlatte has yet to name a new chairman of Judiciary's immigration subcommittee, a vacancy created by the retirement of Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Calif. Goodlatte's choice to head the subcommittee is seen by immigration advocates as an important indicator of the House GOP's intentions on the issue.

One contender is GOP Rep. Steve King of Iowa, who is one of the chamber's most conservative members on immigration and who ran, without success, for the subcommittee chairmanship two years ago. But Democratic aides say the selection of King would be a sign that House Republicans are not serious about finding common ground with Democrats, and few other names have surfaced.

Meanwhile, a bipartisan working group in the House has quietly started discussions on an immigration overhaul that both parties can support. A similar bipartisan group is holding discussions in the Senate; it includes Republicans Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Mike Lee of Utah and incoming Sen. Jeff Flake of Arizona.

The membership roster of the House group, however, is being guarded closely by lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, underscoring the political sensitivity – particularly among Republicans – surrounding an immigration overhaul in that chamber.

"I can't discuss that," Rep. Zoe Lofgren of California, the ranking Democrat on the immigration subcommittee, said when asked about the working group Nov. 30. "It's not a secret that there have been confidential discussions, [but] if I discuss it, they will no longer be confidential."

Rep. Raúl R. Labrador, R-Idaho, also declined to comment on the size of the working group or whether he serves on it. Labrador spent 15 years as an immigration attorney before being elected to the House in 2010 with tea party support. He is seen by some advocacy groups as a natural choice to take a more public role on immigration, and he confirmed in an interview that he would seek to do so next year.

"I've been doing this behind the scenes for two years, and now obviously it's a golden opportunity to start being a little more public about it," Labrador said. He added that he "would love" to join the Judiciary Committee next year, "but we'll see what happens."

Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Fla., is also considered a potential leader on immigration for his party and is widely believed to be part of the House working group. Diaz-Balart said in a Nov. 16 statement that he "has restarted the process of moving a comprehensive immigration bill through Congress as soon as possible" and that he "has been meeting with his colleagues from both political parties."

In choosing their emissaries on immigration, House Republicans must walk a fine line between retaining their conservative policy preferences and doing more to reach out to Latino voters, who voted overwhelmingly for Obama in November. New Republican voices on immigration are likely to emerge from closely contested House districts where Latinos represent a growing share of the electorate, said Angela Maria Kelley of the liberal Center for American Progress.

"I think that's where you would get the list of Republicans who are going to be sweating bullets and biting their nails over this issue," she said.

But Kelley and others also said House leaders, led by Boehner and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., ultimately will drive the negotiations, even though lower-ranking members may gain prominence during the debate.

"I think the real conversation among Republicans on this issue is not going to happen in the public eye of a Judiciary subcommittee hearing or markup. The real debate is going to happen behind closed doors," Kelley said. "It's at such a high level."