



## Reid Prepares for Immigration Battle

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*Roll Call Staff*

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) is moving full steam ahead with a politically tenuous strategy to pass comprehensive immigration reform this summer — with or without Republicans — in an effort to inspire Latino voters ahead of the midterm elections.

Reid caught many colleagues and activists off guard with his forceful stance on the need for reform this year during a speech at an immigration rally last weekend in his home state, where Hispanic voters will play a crucial role in his sagging re-election campaign. Reid held 38 percent of the vote compared with 46 percent for former Nevada GOP Chairwoman Sue Lowden, his leading challenger, according to the latest poll.

“We are going to pass comprehensive immigration reform,” Reid told the crowd of thousands Saturday. “We need to do this this year. We can’t let excuses like a Supreme Court nomination get in the way.”

Reid promised his constituents that legislation would include provisions to secure the nation’s borders, a guest-worker program and a path to legalization for immigrants who are already in the country illegally. “There are no excuses. This is something America needs,” he said. “We’re going to do immigration reform just like we did health care reform.”

Senate Democratic aides close to the issue said Reid is planning to try to get a bill to the floor as early as June. In the meantime, Reid will be pressing Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) — who have been fleshing out bipartisan aspects of the issue over the past year — to translate their blueprint for reform into a bill.

Reid is “pretty serious about this,” one aide said. “We’ve got all of June and most of July to get this done, and then September, but that’s less realistic.”

Senate Democratic leaders will have to overcome some major political and logistical obstacles if they are intent on passing reform, as opposed to trumping up the issue for election-year politics.

For starters, Reid will have to carve out time for the debate since a summer push on immigration reform will coincide with the grueling process of replacing retiring Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens. In addition, the Schumer-Graham blueprint lacks support from practically all Republicans and a handful of moderate Democrats.

Even Senate Republican leaders who backed the last major push for immigration reform in 2007 have signaled that they have no interest in touching the issue this year.

"The conditions for immigration reform no longer exist. The consensus that existed before does not exist. And, among other reasons, because ... this current administration has not done what's necessary to secure the border and enforce the law," Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) said Sunday on ABC's "This Week."

Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), who, like Reid, stumped for immigration reform in his home state over the weekend, speculated Monday that some Republicans would get on board after they saw that Democratic leaders were serious about moving forward this year.

"We need help from the other side of the aisle," Durbin said during a conference call. "If they think this is coming, we might be able to win over some Republican support."

Throwing another wrench into matters, Graham recently declared immigration reform dead for the year because of the partisan rancor left over from the health care debate. He has been reluctant to press ahead without at least another GOP co-sponsor on his proposal and, last month, delivered a harsh message to President Barack Obama about the role that he has played in the debate.

"President Obama, lead. ... You do the heavy lifting. You put together a comprehensive immigration reform package. You bring it to the Senate and House and see how many Democrat and Republican supporters you can get," Graham said on ABC's "This Week." "All you have done is talk about what we should do. Now is the time to lead."

Schumer and Graham recently appealed to the president to play a bigger role in immigration reform — they said they wanted him to play a role similar to his role in health care reform — and he agreed to try to nail down a second GOP co-sponsor on their blueprint. Specifically, Obama agreed to meet individually with four or five Republican Senators whom Schumer and Graham identified as potential co-sponsors for their immigration proposal. Those meetings haven't begun yet.

A source close to negotiations said Schumer and Graham have already held their own meetings with a handful of Republicans they thought may be open to the idea of co-sponsoring, including Sen. John Cornyn (Texas), and none of them have panned out. Reactions from those GOP Senators ranged from, "Hell no" to "I'll probably support the bill, but I'm not going to co-sponsor," the source said.

Schumer and Graham may see a new ally in Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas). Hutchison has typically steered clear of immigration reform, but her political calculus may be changing to put more focus on her legacy given her decision to stay in the Senate after recently losing the Republican gubernatorial primary in Texas.

But one Senate GOP leadership aide said the biggest problem Reid faces "is getting members of his party to take more tough, unpopular votes months before an election."

Some Senate Democratic aides emphasized that they don't ultimately need Republicans in order to score a victory on the issue.

The fact that Democrats are taking on immigration reform so close to midterm elections "is not only about securing our base; it's about building our base and taking it away from [Republicans]," the Democrat said. "An all-Democratic bill works better in this case because

the tea party and right-wing will react strongly and permanently alienate Latinos for any significant amount of time.”

Proponents of immigration reform seem supportive of Democrats going it alone if it means it will jump-start the issue.

“One way to encourage Republicans to participate is to threaten going with a Democratic-only bill,” said Frank Sharry, executive director of America’s Voice, an immigration rights group. “It won’t produce a bill, but it will produce a fight that could hurt Republicans. ... Sometimes you have to threaten a fight to get a bill.”