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IMMIGRATION SPLITS TEXAS REPUBLICANS

By Kristina Peterson
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WASHINGTON—In the Senate, John Cornyn of Texas has become a leader of Republicans who are skeptical of a bipartisan immigration bill, proposing an amendment that Democrats say would drive their party away.

In the House, Texas Republicans John Carter and Sam Johnson also are playing a central role in the immigration debate. But they are working closely with Democrats to craft a far-reaching immigration measure.

Texas lawmakers say it shouldn't come as a surprise that the state with the longest border with Mexico would find its representatives in Washington playing a large role in the immigration debate. But the different strategies of the state's 26 Republicans on Capitol Hill, and their divergent views, are providing an unusually vivid illustration of the challenge GOP party leaders face in trying to corral unified support for a rewrite of immigration laws.

Messrs. Carter and Johnson, with their bipartisan House group, have been crafting a bill expected to eventually grant legal status and allow citizenship for many of the 11 million illegal immigrants now in the country.

But Sen. Ted Cruz, a fellow Texas Republican, has aligned with some of the Senate bill's most vocal critics by maintaining staunch opposition to a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants, a top Democratic priority. Mr. Cruz joined talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh's show Wednesday to blast the Senate bill as a "disaster."

Messrs. Cornyn, Carter and Johnson all say they want strict border-security measures. But the two House members appear confident they can accomplish this while working with Democrats on a single legislative package. That could put them at odds with some of their GOP colleagues, who are calling for a set of individual bills covering discrete parts of the immigration system.

By contrast, Mr. Cornyn finds himself drawing opposition from Democrats, and rallying conservative Republicans, by proposing stiffer border-security measures that Democrats say would cause them to abandon the bill.

Sens. John Hoeven (R., N.D.) and Bob Corker (R., Tenn.) were expected to introduce a compromise amendment to the Senate bill on Thursday that would double the number of border-patrol agents, according to two aides familiar with the talks. While the measure falls short of what Mr. Cornyn sought, it was expected to garner the support of at least half a dozen GOP senators, aides said. The amendment, which Democrats were vetting with outside groups on Wednesday, could incorporate proposals from other GOP lawmakers.

Mr. Cornyn said Texans in both the House and Senate share a pragmatic perspective on immigration, even if their strategies differ.

"We're trying to both navigate very treacherous terrain to get to a solution," he said in an interview Wednesday.

But Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D., Ill.) saw distinctions: House Texan Republicans have put in the time and lent credibility to the continuing negotiations to write bipartisan legislation, said Mr. Gutierrez, one of seven House lawmakers working on the bill.

"It is night and day," Mr. Gutierrez said of the difference between the House and Senate Texans.

"I don't want you to think they're some patsies—they're tough," he said of Messrs. Carter and Johnson. The two House members, he added, "see immigrants as an important factor in the economy and the day-to-day life of Texas."

Texas is one of just four states where non-Hispanic whites are in the minority, and it is home to nearly 1.8 million illegal immigrants. State GOP leaders say those demographics helped nudge Texan Republicans into grappling with immigration before many in the national Republican Party accepted an overhaul as a political imperative, in the aftermath of last fall's elections.

The Texas Republican Party changed its platform last June to remove references to automatic deportation for illegal immigrants and propose a new temporary-worker program.

"We adopted that position before we lost the national election—and in Texas, we were not losing elections," said Steve Munisteri, chairman of the Republican Party of Texas.

"I really am in a tough boat," said Texas GOP Rep. Blake Farenthold, who said constituents in his Gulf Coast district are "very mixed" on the topic of immigration. "We've got some very conservative folks, and then we've got some more moderate folks, and it puts me in a very unique position of trying to find the right thing to do that as many as possible of my constituents can get behind."

Some 51% of his constituents are Hispanic, the largest share of any House district held by a Texas Republican and fifth among House Republican lawmakers overall, according to 2010 Census figures.

Though they differ in the details, the House and Senate bipartisan bills are expected to create a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already living in the country, a necessary component to keep Democrats on board. But that could be tough for many Texas Republicans to swallow.

"I could be for a comprehensive bill, but I will not vote for a bill that puts a citizenship path for people who came here illegally as adults," said Rep. Joe Barton.

That range of ideas could make life difficult for House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio), who said this week that he would only bring an immigration bill to the floor supported by a majority of Republicans. But House leaders, who have scheduled a special meeting on immigration for mid-July, seem unhurried in forging a Republican consensus just yet.

"Texas is bigger than France, and—as De Gaulle noted—France has 246 kinds of cheese," said Michael Steel, a spokesman for Mr. Boehner. "So, it's not surprising Texas members have different views and priorities on a range of issues, including immigration."