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MCCONNELL'S TRICKY DANCE ON IMMIGRATION

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The Senate is expected to approve on Thursday or Friday a big immigration overhaul bill, an important move toward what could become the most sweeping change in the immigration system in a quarter of a century.

And it's hard to avoid concluding that the reaction of Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) will be: Good riddance.

No senator has appeared as conflicted over the course of the debate as Sen. McConnell has. Nor has anyone so deftly avoided being pinned down on the contentious issue.

On the one hand, Sen. McConnell is one of the leaders of a Republican party in which many believe GOP support for a new immigration system is essential to rebuilding the party's frayed relationship with Hispanic voters. On the other hand, many of the party's conservatives remain dead set against the immigration overhaul that's taken shape, and they've made clear they are capable of taking aim at Sen. McConnell over the issue when he seeks re-election next year.

This has left Sen. McConnell in a pickle. So, on Monday he issued a statement saying he would vote against the key amendment to the legislation, which beefed up border security, and essentially came out in opposition to the bill itself. But he didn't say he was against passing immigration reform; he said instead there needed to be more time devoted to debate. "The American people deserve effective reform, but they will not get it without a full and open debate," he said.

Now the bill is nearing completion anyway, and appears ready to pass with more than a dozen GOP votes. So Sen. McConnell told reporters this week that he now hopes Republicans in the House, on the other side of the Capitol, will come up with a different and better bill he can support: "So, I look forward to seeing what the House can do."

Meantime, he has adopted a low profile during the long and difficult debate, letting a deputy, Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, take the lead in critiquing the legislation.

None of that, though, has been enough to stop Sen. McConnell from feeling some heat on his right. The Senate Conservatives Fund, a political action committee, issued a statement this week chiding Sen. McConnell for working with President Barack Obama on three other fiscal bills earlier, and declared: "The big question conservatives are asking now is if Senator McConnell will help President Obama enact a fourth deal that grants amnesty to 11 million illegal immigrants...A simple 'no' vote is not enough from a leader. We need him to deliver results by defeating the bill."