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SENATE APPROVES OVERHAUL OF IMMIGRATION LAWS

By Sara Murray and Janet Hook
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With broad and bipartisan support, the Senate Thursday approved a sweeping plan to rewrite the nation's immigration laws and sent it to the House, where it faces a more difficult path due to opposition from conservative lawmakers.

The 68-32 vote marked a major step forward for the biggest changes to the immigration system in nearly 30 years, and the Senate brought ceremonial flourishes to the occasion. Lawmakers rose from their desk to cast their votes, a rarely used gesture of formality. Vice President Joe Biden presided over the proceedings.

Fourteen of the Senate's 46 Republicans voted for the bill, joining all of the Senate's Democrats and two independents. Only six years earlier, a similar measure had imploded in the same chamber.

The legislation, long awaited by many among the nation's growing Hispanic population, would grant legal status to many of the estimated 11 million immigrants living in the U.S. illegally. It would also rewrite the rules for how future generations of foreigners are allowed to come to the U.S.

"We are on the verge of historic change," said New Jersey Sen. Robert Menendez, a Democrat who helped write the bill. "Now I say to my friends in the other body: Do the right thing."

Opponents denounced the Senate bill as a deal that lacked meaningful law-enforcement measures and had been cooked up by special-interest groups.

"The bill before us rides here on a high ideal but is nowhere close to what it promises," said Sen. Jeff Sessions, an Alabama Republican who was one of the bill's chief opponents. "It is fatally flawed."

The bill now moves to the House, where GOP leaders have pledged to chart their own path, which is sure to diverge sharply from the Senate's broad, bipartisan approach.

"The House is not going to take up and vote on whatever the Senate passes," Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) said just hours before the final Senate vote. In a sign of how split his party is on the issue, Mr. Boehner dodged all questions about what he wants to see in the bill.

House Republicans meet to discuss the issue on July 10, following a week-long Independence Day recess in which many members will hear from voters. "We're going to wait to see what our constituents say next week," Mr. Boehner said.

Mr. Boehner has said that he would bring no bill to the House floor without support from more than half of his party's members.

Advocates for a broad overhaul of immigration laws hoped that the Senate, by passing its bill by a wide bipartisan majority, would put political pressure on the House to act. But the House GOP seems prepared to shrug off the Senate vote.

Most House Republicans represent districts that are deeply conservative, and so the immigration issue presents a different political proposition for them than it does for many senators and presidential aspirants, who must appeal to a broader constituency.

Many Republican leaders have argued, in the wake of the party's poor showing among Latino voters in 2012, that the GOP faces grave risks if it doesn't embrace an immigration overhaul. In 2012, 71% of Latinos supported President Barack Obama. Many Republicans fear that the party's opposition to changing immigration laws have helped drive Latinos away.

But individual House members see greater personal risk—a primary challenge from the right—if they do vote for an immigration overhaul that is disliked by most conservative voters.

Supporters of an immigration overhaul remained optimistic Thursday, in spite of the effort's uphill odds in the House.

"We surprised people getting it off the floor of the Senate with a large number," said New York Sen. Charles Schumer, a Democrat who helped write the bill. "We're going to surprise people in the House, too."