



## Immigration is added atop heavy agenda

By Alexander Bolton  
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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) added yet another huge task to his 2009 agenda, saying the chamber would take up a broad rewrite of the nation's immigration laws in a year already crowded with debates on healthcare, climate change and a Supreme Court nominee.

Passing immigration reform, which has eluded Congress in two of the past three years, is a mighty task and is being led this time by Sen. Charles Schumer (N.Y.), the third-ranking member of the Democratic Conference leadership team.

It also comes with a strong push from Hispanic advocacy groups that want President Obama to take up the highly contentious issue early in his administration, when his popularity and political capital are high.

Reid added another challenge to the mix Thursday by saying he wants a guest-worker program included in the legislation, a move that may win him some Republican votes and support from business groups but alienate liberal Democrats and organized labor.

Taking up a sweeping rewrite of immigration laws this year is ambitious because it is likely to occupy precious time in a year when the window for legislative action is shrinking. The past two efforts took months to negotiate and weeks to debate on the Senate floor.

Senators expect no less this time around.

"That would take significant floor time," Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), a member of the Judiciary Committee, said of immigration reform. "It's a time-consuming issue and it's controversial.

"It depends on how much energy the president puts into [it]," said Cardin. "There is no question in my mind that this will take the president's personal involvement."

President Bush gave a primetime address and traveled to the Senate to lobby members of his party, but failed to get legislation passed during his time in office.

Reid announced his intentions at a news conference Thursday with Hispanic advocacy groups the National Council of La Raza, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

They had gathered to promote Sonia Sotomayor, who is nominated to become the first Hispanic justice on the Supreme Court, but the discussion soon turned to immigration reform.

"As far as I'm concerned we have three major issues we have to do this year, if at all possible: No. 1 is healthcare; No. 2 is energy, global warming; No. 3 is immigration reform.

"It's going to happen this session, but I want it this year, if at all possible."

The effort rests with Schumer, who is pushing immigration onto the fall agenda and stepping into a void left by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.).

Kennedy, who is battling brain cancer, resigned as chairman of Judiciary's Immigration subcommittee to focus his time and energy on healthcare reform.

"The way I see things happening is that it seems Schumer is driving the ball forward at the moment," said Brent Wilkes, the executive director of LULAC. "Once Reid has freed up his calendar on healthcare and energy, he'll turn to immigration reform."

Schumer has held two hearings on immigration reform since the end of April.

He has since told activists that he would like to draft legislation over the summer and pass a bill through the Senate in the fall, if possible.

Obama has invited Schumer and other pivotal lawmakers to attend a meeting devoted to immigration reform at the White House on June 17.

"We're going to try," Schumer said. "If we can get it done, we always try to move when you can. That's why I took the Immigration subcommittee, because I think it's doable."

Schumer said it might be tougher to pass reform next year, an election year. He added that he has "talked to the White House on a bunch of occasions."

To pass a bill, Schumer may look for a Republican partner on the issue, a role that Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) filled opposite Kennedy in 2006 and 2007, the last two times the Senate debated the issue.

Reid said he wants legislation to secure the borders with Mexico and Canada and create a pathway to citizenship for an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S.

He also called for a broad guest-worker program.

The AFL-CIO staunchly opposes expanding guest-worker programs and withheld support from the past two legislative pushes over this issue.

"We have to have a guest-worker program that is meaningful," Reid said. "A guest-worker program is more than agriculture. We need it in the food industry, we need it in the tourism [business]. So we have to have a good guest-worker program."

But an AFL-CIO official reiterated the union's opposition.

"Guest-worker programs in their current form do not accomplish this goal and we continue to oppose expansion of them," said Sonia Ramirez, legislative representative for the AFL-CIO.

Ramirez clarified the labor organization's position, saying it would support a system for admitting foreign workers based on labor shortages determined by an independent commission.

Sen. Byron Dorgan (N.D.), chairman of the Democratic Policy Committee and an opponent of the past two immigration bills, said "immigration has proven to be a very difficult subject."

He said it has been on the list of things to do but that timing has remained unresolved.