

WALL STREET JOURNAL

GOP COMPROMISE EMERGING ON YOUNG IMMIGRANTS

By Sara Murray
July 11, 2013

House Republicans remain divided about whether to offer a path to citizenship to the 11 million immigrants in the U.S. illegally, but for those who came here as children, a compromise may be emerging.

Two Virginia Republicans, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte, are in the early stages of crafting legislation to create a track to citizenship for children whose parents brought them to the U.S. illegally. Discussions are preliminary, and the lawmakers haven't written legislative text or set out a timeline.

Still, it became clear after a meeting of House Republicans this week that the proposal appears to be gaining traction with GOP lawmakers in the House who want to move forward with immigration legislation but aren't interested in giving all undocumented immigrants an opportunity to become citizens. It is one of the earliest indications that House Republicans are looking for agreement on matters beyond toughening border security and beefing up guest-worker programs—areas where they have focused their efforts so far.

The concept is similar to one introduced by a bipartisan pair of senators in 2001. Since then, various iterations have stalled in Congress. Democrats, including President Barack Obama, tend to be the most vocal champions of such legislation, although some versions have attracted GOP support. Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) has discussed pushing for a similar effort.

Rep. Trent Franks (R., Ariz.), who doesn't support a path to citizenship for most undocumented immigrants, said he would be willing to make an exception for people who were brought to the country as children: "The thing that puts them in a special category is they did not break the law."

Republican leaders plan to craft a bill narrower in scope than the Dream Act, legislation backed by Democrats that would have provided legal residency and eventually citizenship to some undocumented children who attended college or served in the military. It wasn't clear how the GOP plan would differ from the Dream Act.

House Republicans have this week coalesced around a piecemeal approach to overhauling immigration laws, bucking pressure from the Senate and the White House for a more comprehensive approach. A broad immigration bill passed by the Senate, which House Republicans have pledged to ignore, included an expedited path to citizenship for people who came to the U.S. illegally as children.

"When it came to things like the Dream Act...there was broad consensus on that" expressed during this week's meeting of House Republicans, said Rep. David Valadao (R., Calif.). "A lot of kids are here through no fault of their own."

Mr. Goodlatte, meanwhile, has shown a new openness to allowing immigrants in the U.S. illegally to obtain citizenship, so long as it's not through a special path. First, they could get

a temporary legal status, he said. "They could then eventually find themselves permanent residents and ultimately citizens," Mr. Goodlatte said in an interview taped for C-SPAN, according to USA Today. "But none of those are special ways that have been made available only to people who are here illegally."

In the past few months, Mr. Cantor has discussed how children of illegal immigrants represented a good place for the House to start tackling an immigration overhaul. "One of the great founding principles of our country was that children would not be punished for the mistakes of their parents," he said in a February speech.

Such a proposal is unlikely to satisfy House Democrats. "We've been there, done that," said Rep. Luis V. Gutiérrez (D., Ill.), who said any plan to fix the immigration system needs to include a path to citizenship for all unauthorized immigrants. "It's insufficient."

The GOP-controlled House has experienced whiplash when it comes to addressing undocumented children. Last month, House Republicans overwhelmingly supported an amendment designed to stop the Obama administration from halting the deportation of young illegal residents who were brought to the U.S. by their parents.

Republican leadership aides said the vote wasn't meant to be a referendum on how House Republicans plan to deal with undocumented children, but rather a protest over how the president has wielded his executive power to change immigration laws.

Mr. Obama said last year that his administration would stop deporting people under 30 years old who came to the U.S. before they turned 16, among other caveats.

With the immigration debate just beginning in the House, many Republicans are still in the process of crystallizing their views on what to do about undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

"Would you say that all 11 million would be ineligible to ever get citizenship? No," said Rep. James Lankford (R., Okla.). "We have to find a way to, in a compassionate way, work with that group," he said. "We have to respond to a group of people that literally have no home, no country of their own." He said he doesn't have a strong position yet on whether young illegal immigrants should get citizenship, legal status or something else.