

Roll Call

HOUSE, SENATE PULLING IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS WITH IMMIGRATION EFFORTS

David Harrison
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Senate Democrats on Tuesday continued to push for new laws making it easier for immigrants to stay in the country, while House Republicans discussed a bill to restrict the Obama administration's discretion in prosecuting immigration violations.

Meanwhile, hundreds of young people protested outside the White House urging passage of legislation (HR 1842, S 952) known as the DREAM Act that would grant legal status to young people brought to the country illegally as children who enroll in college or join the military.

On the day after President Obama appealed once again to Hispanic voters in a speech, the congressional hearings and the White House protest underscore deep partisan divides over immigration, which will surely doom any legislative attempt to overhaul immigration laws. But Tuesday's events also reinforce the uncomfortable position Obama finds himself in, with both opponents and advocates of looser immigration rules criticizing his administration.

A bipartisan group of mayors from three cities told the Senate Judiciary immigration subcommittee that immigrants, whether legal or illegal, contribute to local economies and help revitalize moribund downtown areas.

"They keep the dollars circulating locally, and are beginning to weave themselves into our community," said Laurent Gilbert, mayor of Lewiston, Maine, which has seen a recent influx of Somali refugees and immigrants.

New York Democrat Charles E. Schumer, an advocate of an overhaul, said low-skilled immigrants create economic benefits much like high-skilled immigrants who come on special visas.

"What we're trying to do with comprehensive reform is stop the flow of illegal immigration, rationalize the policy of legal immigration so that we can benefit in terms of jobs all up and down the line," he said.

Critics on Both Sides

The House Judiciary immigration subcommittee is considering a different bill (HR 2497), one that would bar the Obama administration from exercising discretion in enforcing immigration law.

Judiciary Chairman Lamar Smith, R-Texas, who sponsored the bill, said he wants to prevent the administration from granting "backdoor amnesty" by targeting for deportation only illegal immigrants who commit crimes.

"If the Obama administration has its way, millions of illegal immigrants will be able to live and work legally in the United States," Smith said, referring to those who would get green cards if they attended college or served in the military. "This unilateral decision will saddle American communities with the costs of providing education and medical care to illegal immigrants."

But Democrats have also found fault with Obama's deportation policy, noting the administration deports almost 400,000 people per year.

"There have been more deportations and less grants of parole and deferred action under the Obama administration than under the Bush administration," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif. "I personally wish it were more, but it's less."

One of the administration's harshest pro-immigration critics, Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-III., helped organize Tuesday's White House rally. He was arrested there for civil disobedience after he and several others sat down next to a perimeter fence and refused to leave.

In a speech to the National Council of La Raza on July 25, Obama said he sympathized with people who say deportations hurt families and cause undue suffering, but that he has to enforce the law on the books.