

Roll Call

PROSPECTS STILL DIM FOR IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION DESPITE UPCOMING EVENTS

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Democrats will try to revive a stalled immigration overhaul effort this week, but even supporters view the effort as largely symbolic.

On Monday, President Obama is scheduled to speak to the National Council of La Raza, the largest Latino civil rights organization in the country. Later in the week, Charles E. Schumer of New York, chairman of the immigration subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee, will hold a hearing on the economic contributions of immigrants.

Those efforts come as a poll from Latino Decisions finds Hispanic voters increasingly frustrated with the party even though they continue to support the president. Obama vowed on the campaign trail to overhaul immigration laws in his first year in office but he has not been able to deliver on that promise, and many immigration advocates are disappointed he has not leaned harder on Congress.

“Let’s be realistic, there is no appetite here for legislative vehicles to bring success,” said Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-Ill. “If Sen. Schumer wants to have another opportunity to showcase the futility in the Senate for comprehensive immigration reform he should, but I’m not going to go out there to tell the public, ‘Oh look, there’s a ray of hope out there, the clouds are parting, the sun is coming and pretty soon you might get some justice.’”

An effort to allow young people who were brought to the country illegally as children to apply for legal status if they enroll in college or join the military fell five votes short of overcoming a filibuster late last year. And although Democrats have reintroduced the measure, known as the Dream Act, as well as a broader immigration overhaul bill this year, there is little expectation that this divided Congress will reach an agreement. All this leads to mounting frustration among Hispanic voters just as the 2012 election cycle gets under way.

Schumer, who cosponsored a wide-ranging immigration bill last month, said there have been talks “behind the scenes” to draft legislation that might be palatable to all sides. The hearing scheduled for July 28, he said, would be devoted to the economic contributions made by immigrants, rather than to a particular piece of legislation.

“The idea is, it’s an economic plus to have a strong, smart immigration policy,” he said. A 2009 study by the libertarian Cato Institute found that the benefits of legalizing illegal immigrants would outweigh the costs, pumping roughly \$180 billion a year in the U.S. economy by increasing the productivity of immigrants, reducing their costs and creating new openings for higher-skilled workers. A

2010 study by the left-leaning Center for American Progress reached a similar conclusion, finding that legalization would generate \$1.5 trillion over 10 years.

Following in Arizona's Footsteps

At the same time, House Republicans have been active in proposing bills that would restrict immigration. House Judiciary Chairman Lamar Smith of Texas has introduced one bill (HR 2497) barring the Obama administration from exercising prosecutorial discretion in deportation proceedings, and another (HR 2164) to require all employers to check the work status of new employees using an online database called E-Verify. Aides said they expected the E-Verify bill to be marked up before the August recess, but it is not on the committee's calendar this week.

At the state level, South Carolina, Alabama, Utah, Georgia and Indiana have followed in Arizona's footsteps and enacted tough new measures that call on state and local authorities to enforce federal immigration law. That has emboldened immigration advocates to press Congress and the administration to intervene to protect certain groups of undocumented people from deportation.

"It's important that issue remain on the front burner because the Latino community and the immigrant community are living in a state of emergency," said Clarissa Martinez of the National Council of La Raza. Last month, the administration indicated it would refrain from targeting students who might be eligible under the DREAM Act when prosecuting and deporting illegal immigrants. That prompted Smith to file his bill barring the administration from using its discretion. But it has not done much to satisfy immigration advocates, who point out that the administration is deporting roughly 400,000 people a year.

They want a stronger commitment from the administration that it will not deport young people eligible for the DREAM Act or people with American spouses.

"We know the political climate is difficult. We recognize we may not be able to get to full comprehensive immigration reform, but we believe he has the authority and the inherent responsibility to do everything a president can do," said Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas.