



Republicans weigh immigration options

AP Associated Press

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Searching for a bipartisan deal on immigration, Republicans are backing off from strict conditions they floated earlier this year for allowing illegal immigrants a crack at citizenship.

Deep rifts are keeping the two parties from agreeing on a broad overhaul, however, with only a couple of weeks left to reach a compromise under a self-imposed Senate deadline.

An intense round of closed-door talks among Cabinet officials and Senate Republicans and Democrats has reached a critical bargaining stage, congressional officials and lobbyists said. Senior lawmakers from opposite sides of the spectrum — led by liberal Sen. Edward Kennedy (news, bio, voting record), D-Mass., and conservative Sen. Jon Kyl (news, bio, voting record), R-Ariz. — hope to draft a bipartisan measure as early as this week that could come to a Senate vote in May.

The White House and some GOP allies now say they are willing to lower the steep fines and shorten the waits the nation's roughly 12 million illegal immigrants would face if they sought legal status, said sources close to the talks, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to outline the negotiations.

Penalties as high as \$10,000 and extended waiting periods for undocumented immigrants seeking legal status were part of a draft the White House circulated last month in hopes of capturing the support of conservatives who shunned President Bush's more permissive plan last year.

By easing both, Republicans would be moving toward a measure passed by the Senate last year — over the objections of most in their party — that would have allowed illegal immigrants who had been in the country five years or more to remain, continue working and eventually have a chance at citizenship after paying at least \$3,250 in fines and fees and meeting other conditions.

Many conservative Republicans are still wary of the softer approach, making its prospects uncertain.

"The notion that they're willing to concede something that the public overwhelmingly supports is an encouraging sign," said Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza, an advocacy group for Hispanic Americans.

Still, the proposal remains tougher on both illegal immigrants and temporary workers than last year's Senate measure.

Democrats have backed off their opposition to requiring immigrants to return to their home countries before applying for citizenship, and are discussing so-called triggers that would have to be met before a new plan could take effect. Both are provisions they rejected last year.

But key sticking points remain. Democrats oppose Republican proposals to make it harder for temporary workers to stay in the country, bar them from bringing family members to the U.S. and end visa preferences for citizens' relatives.

The White House declined to comment on details of the negotiations, saying Bush is working to strike a balance between the extremes of the immigration debate.

"Comprehensive reform should account for the immigrants that are already here, and do so in a way that is without amnesty and without animosity," said Scott Stanzel, a White House spokesman.

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