

Roll Call

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Specter Cautiously Optimistic on Immigration

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When Senate Judiciary Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) takes up immigration reform late next month, he will face one of his most difficult political tasks of his already challenging tenure as chairman: grappling with a bill on an issue so highly charged that it has essentially split his own party.

The internal GOP dispute has made public long-simmering tensions between conservative activists who make up the party's base during election contests and the party's supporters in the business community. The activist base is pushing hard for tight measures on border security and deterrence of illegal immigration, while business interests want to see programs that enable "guest workers" to work in the United States, at least for fixed periods of time.

While Specter has won praise from many Republicans for shepherding class-action reform, two successful Supreme Court nominations and the expected reauthorization of the USA PATRIOT Act this month, he acknowledged in an interview Friday that the immigration bill will spark a difficult fight.

He added, however, that he is confident that Congress will pass an immigration bill this year.

"We've got some very tough issues, [but] our committee can handle it," Specter said. According to Specter, the bill will have significant compliance provisions, which often is lost in discussion of border security.

"Beyond the issue of border security, we have the issue of compliance with the law, so the borders are going to have to be responsible for checking the legitimacy of working papers," Specter said.

Specter also said that unlike the House bill - which focused exclusively on border security and immigration enforcement - the Senate will also take up the tough guest worker issue.

"I believe we have to have a much broader bill than the House has, so we have to take up the guest worker program. ... We have upwards of 11

million aliens. We have to figure out a realistic way to get them out from under the shadows," Specter said.

Although Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) had initially planned on a leadership-driven process to move the legislation, continued divisions within his leadership team as well as the party at large stymied those efforts last fall.

Senate Republicans said the biggest divisions within the party remain over the status of illegal immigrants who are already living and working in the United States. With a general amnesty considered off the table, Senate Republicans are considering changes to the guest worker program that would make illegal aliens return home and apply for guest worker passes before returning to the U.S.

GOP aides said that several plans have been put forward, ranging from, on the stricter end of the scale, requirements that immigrants remain in their home country for a period of time, to less-stringent policies, such as a largely ceremonial return proposal backed by business interests.

If an immigration bill is to pass this session, said one Republican aide involved in the negotiations, Specter will have to broker a deal that falls somewhere between a de facto deportation policy and "just requiring them to go over the border to Juarez [Mexico] and sign a paper before going back to work."

Specter agreed, saying the difficulty will be to avoid "amnesty on the one hand, and a penal system which will drive them further underground."

A deal that manages to keep both sides of the debate content is considered particularly critical this year because of the looming House and Senate elections, GOP aides said.

Seeming to treat existing illegal workers too lightly could erode GOP support among conservatives, many of whom have increasingly become frustrated with the lack of social policy activity in Congress. On the other hand, harsh new restrictions could in turn result in unhappiness within the business community and possibly impacts to the larger economy.

Specter said that while he supports a guest worker program, he, like many Republicans, is still concerned with not giving such workers an advantage over immigrants who came to the U.S. legally.

"You can't put these illegal immigrants ahead of people who came in legally and are in the citizenship line," he said. "We're going to debate long and hard the issue of whether the illegal immigrants have to go back

to their native country and then come back in to be in the citizenship line.
... One of the things we have to deal with in realistic terms is, if you decide to send people back, how do you do it?"