

5 of 276 DOCUMENTS

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GOP Senators Trying to Shape a Compromise on Immigration;
Disagreement over providing a path to citizenship for illegal laborers may prevent Republicans from meeting a Friday vote.

BYLINE: Maura Reynolds and Nicole Gaouette, Times Staff Writers

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:

Facing a self-imposed Friday deadline for reaching agreement on the thorny issue of immigration, GOP senators worked Monday toward a possible compromise that would permit some illegal immigrants to remain in the country and apply for citizenship but would deny that opportunity to others.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) launched what participants said would be a series of closed-door negotiations to bridge a divide between Republicans who favored providing a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants and those who opposed it.

"What we're looking for is a middle ground, something that will appeal to a broader base" in the Republican Party, said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

One option being discussed would allow illegal immigrants who have been in the United States for more than five years to apply for a green card and eventual citizenship. More recent arrivals could not.

Another option would be to create a distinction between those who entered the United States by crossing the border illegally and those who arrived legally but overstayed their visas.

Yet another idea on the table, participants said, was to force some illegal arrivals to return to a port of entry to legalize their status, but not to require them to return all the way to their country of origin.

Senators said the Republican negotiations would continue today, and they expressed determination to pass a bill before the two-week Easter recess, which is scheduled to begin when the Senate adjourns Friday.

"We want to make sure we get a bill before the week's out," said Sen. Mel Martinez (R-Fla.). He said that if he and Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) could get adequate support from their GOP colleagues, they might offer a compromise that embraces the idea of distinguishing between immigrants who entered the country illegally and those who overstayed visas, as well as between recent arrivals and those who have been in the United States for a relatively long time.

A number of Republicans who oppose options that would legalize illegal immigrants already in the country went to the White House on Monday for a meeting with Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove. Participants included Sens. John Cornyn (R-Texas) and Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), who have offered an alternate proposal that would require illegal immigrants to return to their countries of origin before applying for a temporary visa or permanent residence.

A spokesman for Cornyn said the senator had not been convinced to back any of the compromise ideas under discussion.

THE NATION; GOP Senators Trying to Shape a Compromise on Immigration; Di

"Sen. Cornyn is focused on the Cornyn-Kyl bill," said Don Stewart, adding that the senator didn't back the idea of allowing those here for more than five years to gain citizenship. "A lot of people are pitching him a lot of different ideas. He's not pitching that idea."

Republicans remain deeply divided over the various proposals under debate, and it is not clear whether either side has the votes needed to end debate and hold a final vote by the end of the week.

The Kyl-Cornyn bill proposes a limited guest-worker program, with no path to legalization, and repatriation for the undocumented.

The two senators strongly oppose the approach taken by Specter and the Judiciary Committee, which offers guest workers and the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship.

"For some people, if you deal with the 12 million at all, people will call it amnesty," said Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) who favors both a guest-worker program and a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Brownback said senators' discussions were making progress and he was hopeful they would reach a deal. "We're on a short time frame," he said. "We've got to get this done by Friday."

On the Senate floor, lawmakers resumed debate on the issue Monday and voted to approve three amendments.

One would award financial grants to law enforcement in border states.

Another would put English-speaking legal immigrants on a fast track to citizenship.

The third, offered by Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and approved by a 91-1 vote, would standardize the oath of allegiance said by newly minted citizens and also allow legal permanent residents who gain English fluency to become citizens in four years instead of five.

Senators passed the amendment to support state and local law enforcement by a vote of 84 to 6. Brought by Sen. Jeff Bingaman (R-N.M.), the measure would authorize the Department of Homeland Security to give border law enforcement agencies up to \$50 million in grants a year, over the next five years, to fight crime related to illegal border crossings.

"We see the situation in my state of New Mexico all the time and have for many years," Bingaman said. "This is the smuggling of drugs, the stealing of automobiles, a variety of criminal activity that occurs by virtue of the federal government's inability to properly secure our international borders."

Crime related to illegal border crossings is estimated to cost border communities \$89 million a year, Bingaman said.

While Republicans worked on their divisions over immigration, the day's debate revealed a fissure among Senate Democrats, who had appeared largely united in favor of legislation that would create a guest-worker program.

Sen. Byron L. Dorgan (D-N.D.) became the first Democrat to take a public position against the bill, arguing that it would hurt low-wage American workers.

"Who is going to talk about American workers?" Dorgan asked. "I know the subject is immigration, but it impacts American workers.... What we need employers to do is pay a decent wage."

A handful of the chamber's 44 Democrats are believed to oppose the current guest-worker legislation, largely because of concern that immigrant labor depresses wages for American workers.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: A PLAN: "What we're looking for is a middle ground, something that will appeal to a broader base" in the Republican Party, said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), Judiciary Committee chairman. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Pete Souza Chicago Tribune

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