

Will Boehner's immigration 'principles' help struggling GOP?

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WASHINGTON -- Republican leaders in the House of Representatives, mindful of the changing face of the U.S. electorate, are expected to introduce their own guidelines this week for legalizing millions of undocumented immigrants. And that's reigniting another identity crisis over the future of the GOP.

Some on the right have begun to mobilize against House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, with hopes of quashing plans to introduce a series of immigration-related bills.

Immigration is expected to be a key part of Tuesday's State of the Union address. President Barack Obama has pressed House members to join the Senate by introducing legislation that would provide the nation's 11 million undocumented residents with an opportunity to live and work legally in the United States.

House leaders are expected to release the principles at their annual retreat later this week in Cambridge, Md. Those principles are likely to include tighter border security, an expanded guest-worker program, additional visas for high-tech workers and legalization for many of those people in the country illegally.

It's the latest signal that the House leadership is taking immigration seriously. Boehner also hired a new aide last month, Rebecca Tallent, who's considered a proponent of legalization. She was the director of immigration policy at the nonprofit Bipartisan Policy Center and also worked for Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., one of the proponents of a comprehensive immigration proposal that included a path to citizenship.

Some supporters of an immigration overhaul have questioned Boehner's strategy of introducing principles without a clear indication of when the bills would be released. It might backfire, as opponents surely will seek to use them as ammunition to pick apart the plan, said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the conservative Cato Institute who supports changes to immigration law.

Boehner has been among the Republican leaders who've argued – since Obama was re-elected in 2012 with 70 percent of the Hispanic vote – that it's necessary to solve the immigration issue.

But some efforts to appeal to Hispanics, the fastest-growing voter bloc, would mean reversing course on immigration policies. That hasn't gone over well with some conservatives.

Not surprisingly, Boehner is experiencing pushback.

A group of House aides met last week in the office of Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., to discuss how to prevent such a reversal. Participants were concerned about how increasing the future flow of immigrant workers could negatively impact unemployed Americans.

Some Republicans frame the choice this way: Give Obama a major legislative victory with changes to immigration law or start to regain the trust of struggling Americans who've become disenchanted with the party's direction, by adhering to the base's concern about the rule of law.

Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., warned earlier this month that immigration might be a pitfall that could hurt the party's message. At the retreat, Republicans should focus on what helps working Americans, not hurts them, she said at a meeting with other conservatives.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, added at a meeting this month with those opposed to proposed immigration changes that there's a need to have equal opportunity at the upcoming Republicans' retreat to voice their opinions.

"There have been at least three times in this past legislative year that there had been an intense immigration discussion that has been presented in such a way that those who disagreed with those who presented it had to wait way in the back of the line to try and talk to an empty room," King said.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said Monday that it would be a "huge accomplishment" if the House followed the Senate and proceeded with legislation that the president could sign this year.

"We'll absolutely be glad and the country will benefit if the House moves and follows the path the Senate laid by passing comprehensive immigration reform and the president signs it into law this year," Carney said in his daily news briefing.

Boehner originally was supposed to introduce the principles before the State of the Union address. One reason was to show the American public that Republicans also were serious about fixing an immigration problem.

Now that his unveiling is delayed, supporters worry whether it's still the right strategy. Nowrasteh, who's advised Republican members on immigration, said Boehner should just introduce the bills without talking about the principles first.

Releasing the principles, he said, gives opponents something concrete to criticize, as well as something to use to mobilize supporters.

“I don’t get why we arm our opposition without giving ourselves enough ammunition to fight back,” Nowrasteh said.