



GOP proposes legal status for undocumented immigrants

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CAMBRIDGE, Md. — House Republican leaders on Thursday proposed legal status for most undocumented immigrants, a stance aimed at helping the party appeal to Hispanic voters but also likely to further divided an already-torn Republican Party.

“There will be no special path to citizenship for individuals who broke our nation’s immigration laws,” said the draft statement of standards presented to House of Representatives Republicans at a retreat at a Maryland resort.

But it quickly added, “these persons could live legally and without fear in the U.S., but only if they were willing to admit their culpability, pass rigorous background checks, pay significant fines and back taxes, develop proficiency in English and American civics, and be able to support themselves and their families without access to public benefits.”

Not eligible would be criminal aliens, gang members and sex offenders.

And, the statement says, “none of this can happen before specific enforcement triggers have been implemented to fulfill our promise to the American people that from here on, our immigration laws will indeed be enforced.”

The draft is similar to points introduced in the U.S. Senate around this time last year before they became legislation. The Senate then passed a comprehensive measure, with bipartisan support, that provided a 13-year path to citizenship and tougher border security and enforcement.

The House plan suggested potential progress toward some immigration overhaul, more progress than this issue has enjoyed in months.

Unlike the senators who passed one sweeping bill, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, wants to address the principles through a series of proposals. But the key House-Senate difference is that the House Republican principles do not include a path to citizenship. While that mollified opponents of an overhaul, some advocates for undocumented immigrants expressed concern.

“The Republican principles would in effect create a permanent underclass without the full access and benefits of American society,” said Kica Matos of the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, which advocates for a path to citizenship for the undocumented.

Nonetheless, the principles got a warm response from a key Democrat.

“While these standards are certainly not everything we would agree with, they leave a real possibility that Democrats and Republicans, in both the House and Senate, can in some way come together and pass immigration reform that both sides can accept,” said Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, chairman of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. “It is a long, hard road but the door is open.”

The next steps remain uncharted. Boehner said Thursday that the standards are as far as he’s willing to go.

“I have been clear that I oppose the massive, flawed immigration reform bill passed by the Democratic-controlled Senate. I’ve been clear that the House will not take it up or engage in negotiations with the Senate on it,” he said. “We will address this issue in a step-by-step, commonsense fashion that starts with securing our nation’s borders and enforcing our nation’s laws.”

Introducing the principles is one thing. Passage is another. Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, on Wednesday told the Spanish-language television network Noticias Telemundo that it was “impossible” that the House would pass an overhaul in 2014. Labrador, who was a key negotiator in failed efforts to introduce bipartisan legislation, said Republicans have no faith that President Barack Obama will enforce laws that they pass.

Immigration has been a fiercely emotional, divisive issue for Republicans. For years, the party has been split between hardliners who insist on tough border security and are reluctant to offer breaks for illegal immigrants and those who want a path to some sort of legal status.

House Republican officials are reluctant to speak publicly about any political motives, but the message from the Republican National Committee has been clear. “Hispanic voters tell us our party’s position on immigration has become a litmus test,” an RNC study group said last year.

It strongly recommended the party “embrace and champion comprehensive immigration reform. If we do not, our party’s appeal will continue to shrink to its core constituencies only.”

Most Republicans at the Maryland conference spoke carefully about immigration.

“It’s a major concern for those who experience job losses to see new folks come in and be competitors for those jobs,” said Rep. Patrick McHenry, R-N.C. Any remedies, he said, are “complicated, as it has always been for the last 200 years in America and it continues to be.”

But lawmakers know they can’t ignore the issue.

“It’s a challenge for us, for everyone. And it’s not a problem that’s going to go away,” said Rep. Aaron Schock, R-Ill.,

Supporters of an overhaul gave mixed reviews. Those with ties to the business community, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, praised the release. Tamar Jacoby, the president of ImmigrationWorks USA, which represents employers, called it a “historic breakthrough.”

Those who advocate directly for undocumented families said they were encouraged. But they said the principles fall short because it has no path to citizenship. While there will be no special path to citizenship under the proposed principles, it’s unclear whether those who attain legal status will be forever prevented from attaining citizenship

The principles made no mention of the Strengthen and Fortify Enforcement Act, also known as the SAFE Act, or other, stricter enforcement measures discussed in recent months.

“It’s a sign that immigration enforcement bills will be crafted by GOP moderates instead of the extreme immigration restrictionists,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Many conservatives argued that it’s up to Obama to enforce tough border security, and then the discussion about legal status can become serious

“The president needs to show good faith, that he’s going to enforce the law of the land,” said Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., chairman of the Republican Study Committee, a coalition of House conservatives. Stronger border security, he said, “helps us get to the next level” so other immigration issues can be considered.

The House template also calls for tighter border security and interior enforcement, a new electronic worker verification system, and a path to citizenship for those who were brought to the country illegally as children.

“One of the great founding principles of our country was that children would not be punished for the mistakes of their parents,” it said.