



House committee squares off on aggressive immigration bills

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Democrats and Republicans on Thursday faced off over immigration policy as a House committee began considering a set of immigration bills that Democrats say would amount to the creation of a "mass deportation force."

Proponents of the first bill under consideration by the House judiciary committee -- named after two law enforcement officers who were allegedly murdered by an undocumented immigrant -- advocated for the bill as important to public safety and rule of law.

But Democrats on the committee decried the bill as an unnecessarily harsh anti-immigrant push by President Donald Trump.

"Proponents of this bill say that it's necessary to keep us safe, but what the bill really does is pander to the noxious notion that immigrants are criminals and should be dealt with harshly," said immigration subcommittee ranking member Zoe Lofgren, a California Democrat. "This bill gives Trump and (adviser Steve) Bannon the legislation to establish their mass deportation force. ... This bill should really be called the 'Mass Deportation Act,' because that's what it is."

Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte said the bill was not intended to target immigrants, but to "respect the rule of law."

"This is simply a bill that gives any administration, the current one and future ones, the authority to enforce our laws properly, and gives to state and local governments ... the ability to participate in that enforcement," Goodlatte said.

The committee is set to mark up three Republican bills related to immigration -- one that would vastly expand the role of state and local jurisdictions in immigration enforcement and two others that would authorize immigration components of the Department of Homeland Security. By early afternoon, the committee had only begun work on the first, largest bill, and it was unclear if there would be time for the authorization bills with the large number of amendments prepared by Democrats.

The biggest bill, the Michael Davis Jr. and Danny Oliver in Honor of State and Local Law Enforcement Act, was introduced by Republican Rep. Raul Labrador of Idaho, and closely resembles similar legislation that the House judiciary committee has advanced in the past and that now-Attorney General Jeff Sessions introduced in his time in the Senate.

The Davis-Oliver Act would substantially increase the capabilities of federal and local immigration enforcement, including empowering state and local law enforcement to enact their own immigration laws and penalties. It also would give the government powers to revoke visas, beef up Immigration and Customs Enforcement's ability to arrest and deport undocumented immigrants, increase criminal penalties for undocumented immigrants and punish sanctuary jurisdictions.

The two parties went back and forth on the bill, with Democrats decrying it as demonization of all immigrants, as an increase in mass incarceration and as a promotion of racial profiling and as unconstitutional federal overreach. They noted that local law enforcement in sanctuary cities say their policies are important for victims and witnesses of crimes to feel comfortable coming forward.

Democrats began introducing amendments to strike parts of the bill, doomed to failure on the Republican majority panel, prompting lengthy debate on the nearly 200-page bill.

But Labrador said the notion that the bill harms public safety is "the most preposterous and outrageous argument I've ever heard."

"For too long we have allowed individuals to enter our country illegally and in many cases do us harm," he said. "While other reforms are needed, this bill is vital to a long-term fix."

The other two bills, introduced by Goodlatte, a Virginia Republican, would serve as authorizations for ICE and US Citizenship and Immigration Services, codifying the mission statements of both entities. The USCIS bill would focus the agency, which oversees the issuance of visas and grants immigrants the ability to enter the US, on preventing fraud and security threats and on protecting American jobs from being taken by immigrants.

The ICE bill would increase the number of deportation officers and ensure that each one is granted, among other armament an M-4 rifle. Both bills would likely be packaged with a broader Homeland Security authorization being worked on by the House homeland security committee, which has jurisdiction over most of the rest of the department.

It's unclear if any of the bills will make it to the full House floor. It is a virtual certainty that Democrats will unanimously oppose the bills, and a substantial number of moderate Republicans could balk at such an aggressive approach to immigration enforcement.

Even if the bills were to pass the House, they would need at least eight Democratic votes in the Senate to pass there, assuming all Republicans support the bills.

Pro-immigration groups were quick to decry the legislation in advance releases Wednesday.

"If enacted, the bills would raise a host of constitutional concerns, undermining public safety and harming immigrants and U.S. citizens alike," said Ronald Newman, policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union. "They would also lead to significant, unnecessary federal spending and erode US values and norms. They would provide rocket fuel for President Trump's mass deportation agenda."

The CATO Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank, also offered a statement criticizing the bill.

"(H.R. 2431) purports to empower states and localities to take action against serious criminals who have violated immigration law," CATO's analyst David Bier wrote. "In reality, the bill is a

vehicle for a massive expansion of the federal government and of federal power over states and their citizens."