

## **For 'Dreamers,' this week could bring a breakthrough – or a new nightmare**

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The long struggle over the young unauthorized U.S. immigrants known as "Dreamers" is entering a critical stretch as lawmakers open an unusual debate on their fate.

After months of failed deal-making, dozens of presidential tweets and one government shutdown, the immigration policy debate in the United States has arrived at a crucial juncture.

On Monday afternoon, the U.S. Senate began a free-wheeling discussion to attempt to reach a legislative compromise for the Dreamers, immigrants who arrived illegally in the country as children and have lived in the United States most of their lives.

Back in September, U.S. President Donald Trump decided to terminate the Obama-era program shielding about 700,000 such immigrants from deportation. Since then, an estimated 20,000 people have seen their protections expire. On March 5, the pace of expirations is expected to increase dramatically.

Lawmakers from across the political spectrum agree that the immigrants in the program, which is known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, deserve some kind of protection. But Republicans and Mr. Trump have made a series of demands in exchange for a deal – including billions of dollars in funding for a border wall and cuts to legal immigration.

U.S. lawmakers have not held a broad debate on immigration policy since 2013. And this week's action in the Senate promises to be "wild and woolly," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group. That's because the debate will not have a particular bill as a starting point. Instead, lawmakers from both parties can offer proposals as amendments. If such proposals earn the bipartisan support of 60 senators, they can move forward.

With such an open-ended process, even experts say they cannot predict where the debate will go. "We're kind of heading into the great unknown here," said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. But if the Senate fails to reach a compromise in the next few weeks, the legislative effort to find a fix for the Dreamers

will be at a "dead end," said Mr. Bier. "It would be entirely up to President Trump to figure out how to proceed."

Can a polarized Congress strike a compromise? Here are three possible scenarios.

#### Scenario 1: Finding a fix

Likelihood: Low

Several groups of senators have been working to hash out different versions of a deal. One route forward might be a relatively narrow compromise which pairs a path toward citizenship for Dreamers with funding for border-security measures, including some kind of barrier on the border with Mexico. Legislators are also expected to introduce a version of Mr. Trump's proposal, which includes cuts to legal immigration that Democrats have said are out of the question.

Assuming senators can reach a compromise, the next hurdle would be the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, where passage is far from certain. But if House Speaker Paul Ryan allows a bipartisan proposal to come up for a vote, it could win approval. Then Mr. Trump would have to sign it into law.

#### Scenario 2: Getting halfway

Likelihood: Medium

If senators do manage to reach a deal, there is no guarantee that it can clear the House of Representatives, where the prospects for success are even tougher. Mr. Ryan has hedged his bets, saying he would hold a vote on a proposal if it had Mr. Trump's support. Any deal that wins approval in the Senate is likely to alienate a small but significant group of immigration hard-liners in the House. So Mr. Ryan would have to bring a proposal up for a vote over the objections of members of his own caucus. It is not clear he is willing to take that step.

If a deal passes in the Senate but dies in the House, it would follow a recent pattern. In 2013, senators reached a broad compromise to overhaul the immigration system, which included establishing a path toward citizenship for Dreamers. That effort collapsed in the Republican-controlled House.

#### Scenario 3: Hitting a wall

Likelihood: Medium-High

Among the many unanswered questions about the current debate is how long it will last. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he is willing to continue discussion for at least a week and potentially longer. But it is entirely possible that the freewheeling process will end with no deal and plenty of recriminations. The midterm elections are nine months away and both parties will be leery of making compromises that risk alienating their most energized voters.

Meanwhile, the March 5 deadline is approaching. A recent ruling by a federal court in California allowed DACA recipients to apply to renew their status, but the Trump administration is challenging the decision and it could be reversed within months.

If the Senate fails to reach a deal, then Mr. Trump will have to decide whether to use his executive authority to protect the Dreamers, at least temporarily. In the past, he has hinted that such a move might be possible, but it remains highly unlikely and would face intense opposition from within his own administration.

Mr. Trump "remains a wild card," said Molly Reynolds, an expert on Congress at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "One thing that we've learned is what he says one day may not be what he says the next day."

For immigration advocates, the paths ahead are unambiguous. Mr. Trump "can either sign a bill that protects Dreamers and the border, or allow [immigration authorities] to deport nearly a million Dreamers," said Mr. Noorani of the National Immigration Forum. "It's a pretty clear choice."