



Q&A: On immigration, bridging partisan gap will be hard

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WASHINGTON (AP) — It's beginning to look as though Congress' election-year battle over immigration could end up in stalemate or a narrowly focused bill, not broader legislation like President Donald Trump has proposed.

The reasons: deep divides between the two parties; internal divisions, particularly among Republicans; and political incentives that might leave each side content with a minimal compromise or even nothing at all.

A look at where things stand:

Q: How did this start?

A: The struggle began as an attempt to find a bipartisan way to protect some young immigrants from deportation. About 690,000 “Dreamers” are currently shielded by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, created by President Barack Obama to protect people who were brought illegally to the United States as children.

Trump, whose anti-immigrant rhetoric was a keystone of his 2016 campaign, said last year he was ending the program, claiming that Obama exceeded his legal authority to create it. Polls show wide public sympathy for these immigrants. Trump said he wanted to protect them, and he gave Congress until March 5 to find a way to extend the program. A federal judge has blocked Trump's rollback indefinitely, pending a Supreme Court ruling.

Q: What does Trump want to do?

A: He's proposed giving up to 1.8 million people protected by DACA, or potentially eligible for it, a 10- to 12-year path to citizenship. In exchange, he wants \$25 billion to construct a wall along the Mexican border and otherwise fortify the border.

He also wants new restrictions that the conservative-leaning Cato Institute estimates could cut legal immigration by one-half million people annually. Legal immigrants could sponsor only spouses and minor children, not siblings, parents and others. A visa lottery for people from diverse countries would end, with its visas redistributed to other programs to slowly reduce their backlogs.

Q: Where is Trump's plan going on Capitol Hill?

A: Nowhere. Democrats hate its cuts in legal immigration and can easily block it in the Senate. They say it would give Trump everything he's sought for border security, leaving Democrats with no chits to trade for future efforts to help millions of other immigrants in the U.S. illegally but not under DACA's protections.

Conservative Republicans despise the idea of letting DACA recipients achieve citizenship. GOP moderates don't like its legal immigration restrictions. His plan would stand virtually no chance of getting the 218 House votes it would need.

Q: Does that mean Congress won't vote on Trump's plan?

A: Not necessarily. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has opened the door to an immigration debate starting Feb. 8, with both parties offering amendments. He's not said what the initial bill will be, and some speculate it could be Trump's proposal or something like it. If it's not, it might be offered as an amendment. Any measure will need 60 votes to pass, which will be difficult.

Q: What other proposals are there?

A: Numerous lawmakers including several bipartisan groups are meeting or have produced alternatives. Nothing's surfaced yet with a clear shot at approval.

Trump rejected a compromise suggested by six Democratic and GOP senators. A deeply conservative bill with tough restrictions on legal immigration so far lacks the votes to win in the GOP-run House, where Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., has little interest in pushing legislation that would lose or lacks Trump's backing.

While Democrats are united over wanting to renew DACA and seek citizenship for those covered by it, they have tactical differences over how to move ahead. Many in the House want to withhold support for must-pass budget legislation until immigration is addressed, while many Democratic senators have no taste for repeating last month's three-day government shutdown over the issue.

Q: Then where does this go?

A: With elections for congressional control just 10 months off, Democrats have no incentive to alienate liberal and minority voters by accepting a deal that limits legal immigration. Many

Republicans don't want to enrage conservative backers by allowing what they call "amnesty" by permitting citizenship for "Dreamers."

Trump's recent comments haven't helped bridge that gap. He used last week's State of the Union address to equate immigrants in the U.S. illegally with gangs, drugs and competition for jobs. He angered Democrats by saying, "Americans are dreamers too," a line some likened to "All Lives Matter," a conservative rejoinder to the "Black Lives Matter" movement.

Republicans will need Democratic votes to get anything through the Senate. That seems to leave a less ambitious bill as the most achievable middle ground.

It might focus on a one-year extension of protection for DACA recipients in exchange for a year's worth of money for the wall and border security, about \$2 billion or \$3 billion. If such a measure could clear the Senate with Trump's support, that would boost its chances in the House.

Q: If not?

A: Gridlock is possible, an outcome the dysfunctional Congress is used to.

Trump believes he can argue his offer was entirely reasonable, ceding Democrats a big victory by making citizenship possible for nearly 2 million immigrants. "Democrats are AWOL" on immigration, he told a GOP gathering. He could try defusing the issue by extending the program beyond the November elections, though that risks irritating conservative voters.

As much as Democrats say they want a bill, they could be willing to take the issue to Election Day and use anger over Trump's halt to the program to drive voters to the polls.