

The Washington Post

House GOP skeptical of Trump's framework on immigration, dreamers

Erica Werner

January 30, 2018

House Republicans voiced skepticism and outright opposition Tuesday to President Trump's immigration plan, a warning sign of the tough path ahead for any deal regarding the nation's young undocumented immigrants.

The concerns came from a range of lawmakers, not just immigration hard-liners, as they emerged from a closed-door GOP meeting where the issue was discussed.

The White House framework released last week would offer a 10- to 12-year path to citizenship to well over 1 million "dreamers" who have been in the country illegally since they were children, in exchange for \$25 billion for a U.S.-Mexico border wall and other changes.

"The president's suggestion is going to be difficult for a lot of us," said Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.). "I think all of us want the DACA problem solved. But it may be a bridge too far."

DACA refers to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program created by the Obama administration to offer temporary work permits to dreamers. Trump has ended the program, and the bulk of work permits will begin to expire in March, exposing hundreds of thousands of young immigrants to deportation unless Congress acts first.

Senate Democrats forced a three-day partial government shutdown earlier this month over the immigration issue. In its wake, lawmakers in both parties have been trying to reach a deal, but the obstacles are enormous, given entrenched positions on both sides.

Democrats were outraged about the White House proposal because it would severely limit legal immigration by family members of citizens and others. Now opposition from the right threatens to leave the plan with scant support from any quarter. Lawmakers face a Feb. 8 deadline to avert another government shutdown and are trying against the odds to strike a deal before then.

Roe said that he is open to allowing legal status for the dreamers, but that he does not support granting them citizenship, which he argued would put them ahead of others trying to enter the United States legally.

Others had similar concerns. Rep. James B. Renacci (R-Ohio) said: "The devil's always in the details. . . . I have some stipulations in there, just not automatic citizenship."

Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), head of the conservative Freedom Caucus, said that Trump's plan would take major adjustments and that afterward, "there might be some support."

"How do we perfect that to make sure that there's not a special pathway to citizenship? How do we perfect that to make sure that indeed we're not dealing with it today and dealing with it again

in 10 years?” Meadows asked. “At this point, to suggest we have enough definition to that would be inaccurate.”

The White House plan also would limit legal immigration by eliminating a visa lottery program that awards 50,000 green cards annually to countries with low immigration rates. And it would curb citizens’ ability to sponsor relatives to come to the United States, limiting such sponsorship to nuclear-family members.

A study by the libertarian Cato Institute on Monday found that the White House plan would reduce legal immigration rates by 44 percent this year.

Many House Republicans instead support a hard-line bill by Rep. Bob Goodlatte (Va.) that would grant current DACA recipients a three-year renewable legal status but no chance of citizenship. Earlier this month, trying to stave off a government shutdown, House GOP leaders agreed to demands from the Freedom Caucus to seek support for the measure and potentially put it on the floor for a vote.

“I’ve read the Goodlatte bill. I like the Goodlatte bill. I think that’s something I could support,” said Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.).

But the Goodlatte measure appears likely to fail on the House floor because of opposition from Democrats and moderate Republicans, and it has no path forward in the Senate.

Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), the leading immigration hard-liner in the House, said the president’s plan amounts to “amnesty” for dreamers. King said the dreamers should return to their native countries “and rebuild their home countries. I mean, it would be many times greater than any force of the Peace Corps we’ve ever sent out around the world.”

In the Senate on Monday night, a bipartisan group of senators trying to reach its own framework on immigration huddled in the office of Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine). Leaving the meeting, Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) praised the White House proposal but acknowledged that one element has been a hurdle for many lawmakers.

“The one thing about the proposal I don’t think there’s much support for: Very few people believe we should cut legal immigration in half and take all the green cards and put them in one area of the economy,” Graham said. He said he wanted “more legal immigration, not less,” and green cards available to support all parts of the economy.

Heading to the meeting, Sen. Christopher A. Coons (D-Del.) said he was advocating for “the narrowest responsible deal we can do, given that we’ve got about a week.” He said he was “trying to focus colleagues on border security for DACA, but a number of Republican colleagues have just told me that’s a stone-cold loser.”

Coons said Republicans are demanding far-reaching changes on family immigration and the diversity visa lottery.

Also Monday, Trump administration officials briefed the second-ranking House and Senate Democrats and Republicans on the White House framework but appeared no closer to reaching an agreement.