

Immigration Reform 2013: Is A Right-Leaning Bill Up Ahead?

By: Laura Matthews – June 12, 2013

With a comprehensive U.S. immigration reform bill garnering more than 80 votes twice yesterday on the Senate floor, there is no doubt about the strong bipartisan consensus to debate the issue. That said, the procedural vote isn't an indication that there is overwhelming support to see the legislation passed by the end of 2013.

What's more, U.S. Sen. Chuck Schumer's quest to attract 70-votes on the measure seems to be making some of his top Democratic colleagues a bit uneasy: they would much rather him play it safe - i.e. go for merely a 60-vote threshold, the total needed to avoid a potential filibuster. A senior Democratic aide said U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., want the "strongest bill possible with as many votes as possible."

However, on Wednesday Reid said he would like to keep the core principles intact.

"[This bill] does not and should not make the path to citizenship contingent on attaining border security goals that are difficult to measure," Reid said. "That could leave millions of people who aspire to become citizens in limbo indefinitely."

But some experts think a more right-leaning immigration reform bill will be leaving the Upper Chamber. This could mean a bill that puts greater importance on border security and enforcement rather than on legalizing the 11 million undocumented immigrant current in the country. That's the prediction of Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst for Cato Institute.

Despite major gains in border security over the years and an addition \$6 billion appropriation in the current bill, some Republicans still insist more needs to be done to curb future illegal entry, particularly on the southern border.

"Politically [border security] is a very strong argument, but factually the number of border crossers is at about a 40-year low as far as we can tell with current statistics," Nowrasteh said in an interview earlier this week. "So the success that additional [resources] will cause on the border in decreasing illegal immigration is very minimal because immigrants are drawn to the

United States because of economic opportunity and what has decreased immigrant crossings is not increased enforcement, but decreased opportunities when they come here.”

According to a 2011 study by the Center for American Progress, the flow of illegal immigrants at the southern border has dramatically decreased. In areas such as the San Diego sector where there were more than 565,000 apprehensions in 1992, there is now 151,000 because of fencing and more boots on the ground.

That’s not to say there aren’t sectors along the southern border that aren’t presenting a challenge. The same study showed that apprehensions in the Tucson sector were more than 616,000 in 2000. Though that figure has dropped significantly (by more than 200,000 between 2000 and 2010), that portion remains a challenge. When looking at these figures researchers say the “numbers tell us that we no longer have a border across which thousands of people traverse illegally every day without our knowledge. Instead we have a border where the vast majority of attempted entries are identified and a far larger percentage of entrants are apprehended than ever before.”

Still, there are some lawmakers in Congress like U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who want to make a path to citizenship contingent on border security. Under his proposed amendment, Cornyn requires 100 percent monitoring of all parts of the Southern border and a 90 percent apprehension rate. Some of his Senate colleagues have called this a “poison pill.”

Whether such an amendment stands a chance is still anyone’s best guess.

“We’re willing to entertain amendments, which don’t damage the core principles of the bill but improve the bill just as we did in committee,” Schumer said Sunday on MSNBC’s “Meet the Press.”

And advocates are hoping the present legislation, which they say isn’t perfect, but is reasonable, won’t be eroded just to pack a punch in the House. They would much rather advance a reformist bill with 60 votes than a bill with its core principles shattered.

“I know within the advocacy community we’d like it to be a strong vote,” said Philip Wolgin, senior policy analyst for immigration at the Center for American Progress. “The stronger the vote the better going into the House, but we are definitely more interested in getting a good bill at say, 65, 60s votes than giving up the core of the deal to get 70 votes.”

