House defeats latest immigration bill, turns focus to keeping families together at border

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July 2, 2018

The House soundly defeated a compromise immigration bill Wednesday that Republican leaders had hoped would unite warring factions within their party to fund President Trump's border wall and dramatically decrease legal immigration.

In a dramatic defeat for GOP leaders, House members voted 121-301 to approve the bill, falling far short of the 218 votes needed to pass the legislation. No Democrats voted for the bill.

The House is now likely to try to pass a narrow bill that would allow migrant parents and children to be detained together when the adults are taken into custody for crossing the border illegally. A current court ruling says that children can only be held in detention facilities for up to 20 days, even if that means they must be separated from their parents.

It was not immediately clear if the House would act on that bill before it leaves for a week-long Fourth of July recess.

The narrow measure would attempt to address the current crisis that has separated more than 2,000 children from their parents as part of a "zero tolerance" initiative against illegal immigration by the Trump administration. Amid public outcry, President Trump issued an order last week to stop separating families at the border, but there is still confusion about how to reunite the families that have already been split apart.

A federal judge in California on Tuesday ordered U.S. immigration authorities to reunite separated families on the border within 30 days, describing the Trump administration's handling of the crisis as an attempt "to address a chaotic circumstance of the government's own making."

The defeat of the broader immigration reform bills reflects just how difficult it has been for House Republicans to agree among themselves on the fractious issue – let alone come up with a bipartisan bill that could pass in the closely divided Senate. Congress is now unlikely to pass any major immigration bill before the November election.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., and other GOP leaders had worked up until the last minute to change the bill to add incentives to try to convince both conservatives and moderates to vote for the bill. They pinned their hopes on the compromise legislation after House members narrowly defeated a more conservative bill last week.

"This bill is even stronger than the last bill at building the wall," said House Majority Whip Steve Scalise, R-La., on Fox News on Wednesday morning. "Front-loading the money so that President Trump can have the money he needs to build the wall. Close loopholes, reunite families – it does all of those things. But clearly, we haven't been able, as Republicans, to get an agreement on how best to do this. And that's where the divide is."

The bill that the House voted down Thursday would have provided nearly $25 billion to build Trump's border wall and allowed young "Dreamers" brought to the U.S. as children to apply for a program that would give them legal status for six years and allow them to work in America and travel abroad. It also would have given at least some of them a pathway to citizenship.

At the same time, it would have decreased legal immigration by an estimated 40 percent by overhauling the visa system.

On Tuesday, House leaders added provisions to create a new visa program to bring in migrant workers for farms and ranches. They also added a mandate for employers to use E-Verify, an electronic database run by the federal government, to ensure that they hire people who are legally eligible to work in the U.S.

However, groups that oppose increased immigration denounced the bill as "amnesty" for people who entered the country illegally.

The Center for Immigration Studies sent out an email Wednesday morning declaring: "House to Vote on One of the Largest Amnesty Bills in U.S. History." The group estimated the bill could potentially provide a path to citizenship for more than 2 million people over the next 15 years.

However, the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, estimated that eligibility restrictions in the bill would result in only about 12 percent of the estimated 3.6 million "Dreamers" currently in the U.S. earning citizenship.

The bill also would have allowed children to remain with their parents in detention rather than being taken to separate facilities.

Trump has sent mixed signals on congressional efforts to pass an immigration bill, initially supporting the House GOP effort and then advising lawmakers that they were "wasting their time" trying to pass legislation before the November election. On Wednesday morning, just hours before the vote, he tweeted his support for the bill.

Donald J. Trump
✓ @realDonaldTrump

HOUSE REPUBLICANS SHOULD PASS THE STRONG BUT FAIR IMMIGRATION BILL, KNOWN AS GOODLATTE II, IN THEIR AFTERNOON VOTE TODAY, EVEN THOUGH THE DEMS WON'T LET IT PASS IN THE SENATE. PASSAGE WILL SHOW THAT WE WANT STRONG BORDERS & SECURITY WHILE THE DEMS WANT OPEN BORDERS = CRIME. WIN!
8:39 AM - Jun 27, 2018