

Immigration reform could emerge again in the fall

Contributed by Steve Stoddard and J. Taylor Rushing
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Senate Democrats may be close to 60 votes on a measure that would represent the first step towards immigration reform under President Obama.

The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is a concept dear to Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin's (D-Ill.) heart, and while health care reform may get this summer's headlines in Washington, the DREAM Act may be a sleeper.

Defeated in Oct. 2007 on a cloture vote of 52-44, the Senate's new math appears to approach the necessary threshold of 60 votes based on the 2007 votes, election results and co-sponsorship.

The White House has scheduled a June 8 meeting among members of Congress on immigration reform. And President Barack Obama, a close ally of Durbin, has publicly declared his commitment to the overall idea.

Introduced in the Senate on March 26 and co-sponsored by Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the DREAM Act has so far largely escaped notice. It would offer a path to U.S. citizenship for undocumented immigrant children who meet various criteria such as having lived in the U.S. for five years and completing classes at a U.S. high school. If accepted, applicants would obtain temporary citizenship for six years, during which they must obtain a two-year college degree or spend two years in military service to obtain permanent residency.

Currently, immigrant children can only obtain permanent residency through their parents, not independently.

Strategically, the legislation is likely to be rolled into an overall immigration bill to attract votes. Durbin says he has the votes to pass the bill, for example, but prefers to do it as part of a comprehensive immigration package.

"I think it could pass if called. And of course Sen. Lugar's co-sponsorship gives me some confidence that a few Republicans will support it," Durbin said. "But it's highly unlikely that anything major on immigration like that, on its own, would be considered. It's more likely that it would be part of a more comprehensive bill."

Durbin said he is "impatient" to pass the bill and that Democratic Conference Vice Chairman Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) has agreed to hold hearings on the bill. Schumer chairs the Immigration, Refugees and Border Security Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee.

"I've got so many young people who are counting on me for the eight years I've been working on this, and I feel morally bound to do my best to get this done as quickly as possible," Durbin said.

The only sticking point appears to be timing and logistics. Democratic leaders are unsure if a comprehensive bill can be drafted before the end of the year. Schumer's subcommittee will insist on input, as well as possibly other committees, and the looming fight over health care reform may push the issue into 2010.

Still, advocates such as the National Immigration Law Center are cautiously optimistic, and share Durbin's preference for a comprehensive approach. Several Democratic fence-sitters may be more likely to support a package that includes the act, as opposed to a stand-alone version.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) appears on board with the idea, telling the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in a recent speech that he is "committed to offering this year comprehensive immigration reform that is strong, practical and fair."

The Senate's new math has put an overall immigration package within reach: At least 57 senators from both parties are likely to support such a comprehensive approach, with another 7 on the fence.

Newly converted Democrat Arlen Specter (Pa.) is "reviewing the legislation and considering his position" but is "in favor of comprehensive immigration reform in general," according to a spokesman, and in other cases election results or appointments have put the necessary 60 votes within reach.

Former Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) voted for the bill in 2007, for example, making it possible that his successor, GOP Sen. Roger Wicker (Miss.), may follow suit.

In other cases, Republicans who voted "no" in 2007 have since been replaced by Democrats such as Jeff Merkley (Ore.), Mark Begich (Alaska), Kay Hagan (N.C.), Mark Warner (Va.), Tom Udall (N.M.), Mark Udall (Colo.) and Jeanne Shaheen (N.H.).