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Immigration Idea Offers Compromise

One Congressman's Concept Could Lead to Common Ground

By LAURA MECKLER and KRISTINA PETERSON

WASHINGTON—Supporters of a broad overhaul of immigration law want the 11 million people in the country illegally to be given a chance for citizenship. Others say it would be wrong to give them such treatment.

Now, some members of Congress from both parties say there may be a way to satisfy both sides, offering the possibility of a common ground in the contentious debate.

Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.), the conservative chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, has floated an idea that would rely partly on existing law to allow many people here illegally to gain citizenship. People in both parties say it has the potential to win backing from some Republican House members who say those here illegally shouldn't get special treatment unavailable to other foreigners.

Under Mr. Goodlatte's concept, Congress could grant illegal immigrants a provisional legal status, similar to the probationary legal status available under legislation that cleared the Senate in June. Then they could use existing laws that allows foreigners who are legally in the U.S. to seek green cards—also known as permanent legal residency—and eventual citizenship if they meet strict criteria. Illegal immigrants are barred from doing so.

No illegal immigrant would gain legal status before efforts were in place to secure the border with Mexico and tighten enforcement of immigration law, Mr. Goodlatte has said. He has sketched out his idea, which is still evolving, in various public appearances.

Any proposal to provide legal status—much less citizenship—to people who came to the U.S. illegally will be sharply opposed by the most conservative Republicans on this issue. Already, Mr. Goodlatte is encountering resistance for offering legalization to people brought to the U.S. as children, and for considering legalization for others who are in the country illegally.

Mr. Goodlatte hasn't proposed changing the current criteria for gaining a green card, such as marrying a U.S. citizen or having an employer say that an American couldn't be found for the job an immigrant seeks. Once a person has a green card, he or she becomes eligible to apply for citizenship under existing law, usually after a period of required continuous residency.

"All of those are ways they [illegal immigrants] could then eventually find themselves permanent residents and, ultimately, citizens," Mr. Goodlatte said on C-Span last month. "But none of those would be special ways that have been made available only to people who have come here illegally."

Because existing law makes it difficult to qualify for a green card, only a sliver of the 11 million people now here illegally might actually make it to citizenship under the concept. That is why Mr. Goodlatte's idea also is encountering resistance from some advocates for immigrants on the left.

"What we want is something that works. It can't be a path to a dead end," said Rep. Xavier Becerra (D., Calif.).

Meantime, Rep. Cory Gardner (R., Colo.) said he didn't want to consider such an approach until the issue of border security had been resolved.

"The important part of this debate is to get the security enforcement provisions up front first, and then discussions of what the 11 million looks like [can occur] after that's in place," Mr. Gardner said.

On Sunday, former GOP vice presidential nominee Rep. Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) seemed to back an approach in line with Mr. Goodlatte's. Mr. Ryan said on CBS News that House Republicans are looking for ways to give the 11 million illegal immigrants "a chance to get right with the law," once border security and other measures are in place and the immigrants have paid back taxes, fines and undergone a background check. He, too, emphasized that there would be "no special pathway" for them.

Some Democrats say the Goodlatte concept may be feasible. "It is possible to create a path forward to legal permanent residence for all of the undocumented who are not ineligible for other reasons without creating a special path," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren of California, the top Democrat on the House immigration subcommittee.

The approach may be what is needed to get an immigration bill through the House, said Rep. Devin Nunes (R., Calif.), who supports the Senate method of handling those here illegally but fears it can't gain House passage.

Supporters also say Mr. Goodlatte's idea could solve a political conundrum facing people who want to rework immigration law.

"I do think it is a way for Democrats to say it's a path to citizenship and Republicans to say it isn't one," said Lanae Erickson Hatafsky of the centrist Democratic think tank Third Way.

Charlie Spies, who runs the advocacy group Republicans for Immigration Reform, agreed. "Over the past week, there has been buzz about this approach, especially among Republicans who want to get something done," he said.

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