

Over 100 Democrats Push Obama on Immigration Reform

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New America Media
October 30, 2009

Is immigration reform back?

Hoping to jump-start a major legislative drive on immigration reform in the U.S. Congress, more than 100 pro-reform House Democrats signed a letter reminding President Obama of his administration's commitment to overhaul immigration.

The letter was clearly meant to nudge the White House toward engaging an issue it has allowed to languish.

The letter expressed House Democrats' "commitment to fix our broken immigration system" and cited "strong support for moving forward on fair and humane comprehensive immigration reform this year." One of the signees, Rep. Luis Gutierrez, an Illinois Democrat, is gearing up to introduce a major immigration reform bill as early as next month.

Immigration advocates and their allies in Congress believe there is a window for immigration reform to pass early next year, before midterm elections complicate the political calculus.

"The room for doing this is very tight," Gutierrez said earlier this month on the Spanish-language Univision network's political talk program, "Al Punto." "We have to do it in February or early March of next year."

The renewed buzz around reform has raised expectations in the Hispanic community, but since such hopes have been dashed before, there is still an undercurrent of skepticism.

Despite the stirrings in the lower House of Representatives, it's still unclear how much traction an immigration fix has in the Congress

overall. Gutierrez's bill and the letter to President Obama are only opening plays in a long campaign to push immigration to the center of Washington, D.C.'s always crowded agenda.

The recent moves might help Democrats show Hispanic voters that the party is aware of widespread frustration with the current immigration system. But there's still no clear commitment to a timetable for an overhaul, or certainty that it will come.

"The timeline for immigration remains uncertain," acknowledged Rep. Joseph Crowley, the New York Democrat who organized the letter on immigration sent to President Obama and signed by 111 House Democrats.

Time, he went on to admit, is short. Because of the November 2010 elections, "the further we go into next year... the more difficult I think it will be to address this issue" as risk-averse incumbents avoid controversial issues like immigration.

Rep. Crowley spoke during a teleconference call with reporters organized last week by the National Immigration Forum, a nonpartisan pro-immigration advocacy group in Washington, D.C., and New America Media.

Immigrant advocates know that once health care reform is settled, immigration will compete with other crucial issues, including banking regulation and the interrelated climate and energy questions, for political attention, said Ali Noorani, National Immigration Forum's executive director.

That is why pro-immigration groups like his are organizing letter-writing, fax, and email campaigns, to create a groundswell that will inject urgency into their demands that Congress act on immigration.

As always, immigration reform pivots on one sensitive question: What happens with the nation's 12 million undocumented immigrants?

While most pro-reform advocates envision a path to some sort of legal status for undocumented immigrants already in the country,

opponents call such plans an amnesty that would encourage still more illegal immigration.

The cries of “amnesty” sunk Congress’s last serious attempt to reform immigration in 2007, and this time pro-reform advocates want to ensure that they are not drowned out by anti-immigration voices.

“We must keep up the drumbeat,” wrote Tamar Jacoby, head of ImmigratiOnWorks USA, a pro-immigration business group, in an e-mail to supporters. “Many members of Congress still don’t get it. Many are still leery of immigration. And when they go home to their districts, they still hear only the voices shouting ‘No.’ We have to help change that.”

Local groups advocating for immigrants’ rights are striving to be proactive.

“We need to take control of this [reform] timeline,” said Chung-Wa Hong, New York Immigrant Coalition executive director.

Hong, who participated in the teleconference last week with Rep. Crowley, said immigrant voters “are angry – they voted for change and they’re seeing more of the same.” She said that only a surge of voter demands for an immigration overhaul would galvanize Congress into action, and any expectations of a Washington, D.C.-initiated fix were politically naive.

Part of the problem for immigration reform is partisanship. Rep. Crowley could cite only one possible Republican backer by name: Arizona Rep. Jeff Flake.

When pushed to outline a reform plan that House Democrats could get behind, Rep. Crowley emphasized tighter border security and the targeting of “bad actor” employees who exploit undocumented immigrants. These get-tough measures are clearly designed to attract Republican support for a reform bill that would presumably create a path to legalization for those without papers.

President Reagan tried a similar “carrot and stick” plan in 1986, granting legal status to millions of undocumented along with cracking

down on employers who hired unauthorized workers.

But there is little indication that present-day Republicans have an appetite for following Reagan's lead. Michael Steele, president of the Republican National Committee, has long blamed the 1986 immigration law for today's illegal immigration crisis.

More recently, in his own appearance on Univision's *Al Punto* program, Steele said he was sick of politicians exploiting the "hot politics" of immigration. He also advocated for immigrants to assimilate by working hard, eating apple pie and learning the Star Spangled Banner.

But he gave no specifics on what sort of an immigration reform plan Republicans might be willing to hammer out with Democrats.

Noorani, of the National Immigration Forum, believes immigration reform has a "very, very good opportunity to move early in 2010."

But until a substantive debate on immigration begins to build in Congress and nationwide, it will remain unclear whether the deadlock on immigration really is loosening.