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Progress Made on Immigration Bill

Backers of Overhaul Grow More Hopeful After Weekend Talks

By **DAVID ROGERS**

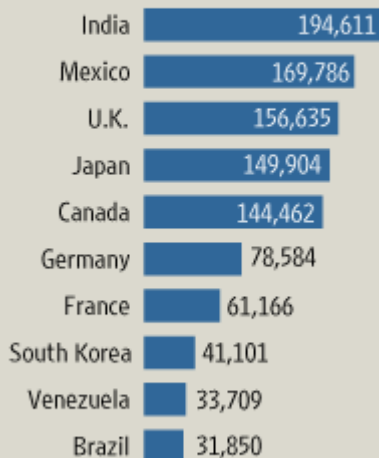
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WASHINGTON -- Anxious to win Senate support for immigration overhaul, the White House is wrestling with how far to go to give future guest workers a shot at becoming permanent U.S. residents and citizens.

The issue illustrates the administration's delicate balance as it tries to bring conservative Republicans aboard without driving off Democrats. Beyond politics, the question also goes to the heart of the legislation and whether the U.S. should invite in foreign labor without giving those workers any real chance of becoming part of this country.

Here Today

Temporary workers and their dependents in the U.S. in 2005, by country of citizenship



Note: Includes territories of each country
 Source: Dept. of Homeland Security

After weekend negotiations, there is increased confidence among lawmakers that enough progress has been made toward an agreement that a partisan procedural skirmish can be avoided tomorrow, when the Senate takes up the immigration issue.


Meetings with Democratic and Republican senators today could produce new roadblocks, but overhaul supporter Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) is bullish enough to spend today shuttling between here and his state, which is hosting a Republican presidential debate tonight. "I've never felt more optimistic," he said. "I've said 50-50. It's now 70-30. I wouldn't be flying up and back like this unless it was serious."

The core bill, like the immigration-overhaul effort that failed in the last Congress, promises millions of undocumented workers now in the U.S. a path to citizenship. Under pressure from Democrats, heavy fines of \$10,000 that would have been imposed on immigrants seeking to legalize their status have been cut in half. It would take from eight to 13 years to qualify for permanent residency under the bill, and conservatives have won restrictions to try to stem the tide of immigrants who may follow this mass legalization.

New border-security measures would be given top priority in the first 18 months after enactment. Current immigration rules that favor families would be replaced by a merit system making it harder for new citizens to bring in siblings and adult children. Even parents would find it harder; the number would be capped at 40,000 a year, less than half the number that typically come in annually.

In the same spirit, the White House has walked a fine line in negotiating a new guest-worker program

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whose Republican motto is "temporary means temporary." The draft plan would create a new temporary "Y" visa for as many as 400,000 people a year, who could come to work in the U.S. for two to three years but then must go home. There would be exceptions in special circumstances for a narrow segment of workers, about 10,000 a year.

In the talks, conservatives such as Arizona Sen. Jon Kyl want to bar most guest workers from reapplying for another Y visa after their time here. Critics say this would create a permanent class of persons coming and going with no chance of ever establishing residency. Democrats argue that U.S. interests are better served if a guest worker can reapply -- after going home -- and be given a chance to earn points toward getting permanent residence.

After seeming to side with Sen. Kyl, the White House has appeared more open to at least elements of the Democratic approach. Mr. Graham and some other Republicans argue that one tour is enough, but it also makes sense for that temporary worker to earn points toward permanent residency. "The goal is to recycle this work force but have enough sense to grab the people you need for your economy," Mr. Graham said. "I don't need Indian Ph.D.s in my state so much as I need skilled craftsmen. If a worker is employer-sponsored, he should get extra points."

The temporary-worker issue is among the last major stumbling blocks to be considered at a senators' meeting today. Giving ground could help win a deal with Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, the lead Democratic negotiator. The administration last night said it was putting no pressure on Sen. Kyl on this issue.

The elaborate point system rewarding specialty or high-demand occupations is still evolving. Much depends on how many green cards the government is prepared to issue annually.

In the first eight years after enactment of legislation, most energy would be devoted to clearing the backlog of pending applications from people abroad or from those living here with a legal work visa. After eight years, the extra cards created to help clear this backlog will shift into the new merit pool, increasing the numbers.

But the administration concedes that figuring out the right number of green cards so far down the road may be too much now politically. The bill taking shape can help solve the legalization problem, officials say, clear the backlog of applications and put in place a more merit-based structure for the future. But going much further may be impossible given the continued divisions over immigration policy.

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