



Martinez Tries To Preserve Bill

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WASHINGTON - He's the Senate's only immigrant member, chairs the Republican National Committee and is one of 10 senators who shaped a compromise that could bring citizenship for millions of immigrants in the country.

Florida Sen. Mel Martinez played several roles in helping forge a complicated and bipartisan immigration proposal. The measure cleared its first hurdle Monday evening when the Senate voted 69 to 23 to begin debate.

Now, he's juggling those same roles in trying to keep the plan intact.

More than anyone, Cuba-born Martinez represents the "center of gravity" between opposing camps within the GOP in talks over immigration legislation, conservative immigration activist Tamar Jacoby said.

However, the fragile plan Martinez helped craft last week that could grant legal status to some 12 million undocumented immigrants is looking more brittle.

On Monday afternoon, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced he would not push to have the Senate complete work on the bill by Memorial Day, as its drafters had hoped. Reid said that at least two weeks would be needed to finish all that there is to do.

"This is an imperfect piece of legislation," the Nevada Democrat said. "But we're working on it.

"I think the country deserves it," added Reid, who said he wants an immigration bill passed.

In fact, over the weekend, opposition to the deal emerged from the left and right, and from immigrant advocates, business interests and immigration hard-liners who say it does not do enough to improve border security.

Speaking on the Senate floor Monday, Martinez responded to critics who assert that the proposed compromise backed by the White House is unworkable.

"I would suggest to them, what is your answer?" Martinez said. "What do you suggest? What is your solution to this problem that for over 20 years has been vexing our country?"

"It is time we grapple with it. It is time we tackle it. It is time we resolve it," Martinez said.

But Florida's senior senator, Democrat Bill Nelson, summed up the uncertainty, saying in a statement that he is still "reserving judgment."

"Right now, it's still very uncertain what the final measure will look like," Nelson said.

Some of Martinez's fellow Florida Republicans were more direct, making it abundantly clear they want nothing of the plan.

"The Senate's amnesty plan does nothing to secure our borders and is a slap in the face to every law-abiding immigrant who wants to come to America the right way - legally," said Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite of Brooksville. Republican Reps. Tom Feeney of Oviedo and Vern Buchanan of Longboat Key had similar criticisms.

Bill 'Strikes It Down The Middle'

Martinez, who noted that he has been attacked by both sides of the immigration debate in the past, acknowledged the new bill as written may not be perfect.

But he also pointed to opposition from lawmakers as disparate on immigration issues as conservative Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama and Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the Senate Judiciary Committee chairman.

"I'm happy this is a bill that strikes it down the middle pretty well," Martinez said.

John Zogby, a national pollster, said the battles over the bill illustrate "the difficult position" Martinez finds himself in.

He noted that the Florida senator was chosen as RNC chairman by President Bush to help reflect a more-positive GOP image to the sharply rising national trajectory in the number of Hispanic voters. At the same time, some of the angriest people over the deal are from conservative members of his own party.

"It's going to be interesting to see how he navigates through this," Zogby said.

Jacoby, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute who writes on immigration and citizenship, said the opposition to granting citizenship to immigrants now in the country illegally "was a lot louder than I thought it was going to be."

Jacoby said Martinez played a key, centrist role in working with about nine other Democratic and Republican senators in trying to find common ground, as he did last year. She said he will continue to play a crucial role.

"I call him the center of gravity in that Republican group - he exemplifies the feeling that the party wants to do it but also fully understands the resistance in the party," she said.

But she gave passage of the compromise more of an uphill climb if it's delayed past Memorial Day. She predicts opponents will have an even greater chance to build momentum, and pressure to reject the plan could increase when lawmakers go home over the holiday weekend.

Some opponents say the plan to provide at least 400,000 guest-worker visas is too big, and others say it's not fair to immigrant laborers because it would force them to return to their home countries after working in the United States.

Even many of the country's major employers who helped to shape the bill are now unhappy with a proposed point system that would favor letting more highly skilled workers into the country when they say a big chunk of new jobs in the next decade would call for less-educated workers.

Other opponents criticize the point system as prioritizing employability over family ties in deciding who can immigrate to the United States.

'A Step In The Right Direction'

In Florida, undocumented immigrants fill jobs in farms, the tourist industry and construction. One group, the Pew Hispanic Center, has estimated that as much as 5 percent of Florida's population is undocumented.

Blanca Gonzalez, president of Immigrants United for Freedom, a Plant City-based immigrant advocacy group, said her group was among those that staged a vigil this month outside Martinez's Tampa office.

"He feels like we were working against him, but we're not. We're just reminding him, 'Remember where your roots are from?'"

Lawmakers in the Senate, she said, "were dragging their feet on it for so long."

But Gonzalez thinks the compromise plan is "a step in the right direction."

Doug Wheeler, vice president of grass-roots advocacy at the Florida Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber is pleased the Senate is doing "something."

Anthony Olson, a Sarasota immigration lawyer on the steering committee of Florida Employers for Immigration and Visa Reform, a group of business leaders and immigration experts, said the compromise plan is better than the status quo, in which annual visa quotas for certain types of labor needs are met on the day the federal government starts taking applications.

"But it has a lot of rough edges that need to be smoothed out and details that need to be improved. It's going to perpetuate the current backlogs. And that's one of the worst problems buried in this proposal. It's still going to leave employers starved for the workers they need and are not finding on the U.S. market," he said.

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