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## Gang of Eight' Revival Unlikely on Immigration Overhaul

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Trump Open to 'Gang of 8' Immigration Bill, Sort Of Trump's Criminal Deportations Idea: Complex but Doable What Went Wrong With the Polls?



Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., talks with reporters before the Senate Policy luncheons in the Capitol, January 31, 2017. (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

BY DEAN DeCHIARO AND BRIDGET BOWMAN, CQ ROLL CALL

President Donald Trump may want senators to re-form a “Gang of Eight”-style group focused on passing comprehensive immigration legislation. But a hyper-partisan atmosphere in Congress combined with the bitter legacy of the last failed overhaul means Trump’s wish will likely go unfulfilled.

On Thursday, Trump told lawmakers gathered at the White House he was open to reviewing efforts to revive a comprehensive overhaul bill like the one that passed the Senate 68-32 in 2013. But White House officials said Trump opposes the bill as written. It would have granted most of the 11 million people living in the U.S. illegally a path to legal status.

Despite the president’s opposition to any immigration policy granting “amnesty” to undocumented immigrants, Trump seemed intrigued by the 2013 bill’s initial success before it died in the House amid a wave of conservative opposition, according to West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin III, who attended the meeting and later relayed the conversation to reporters.

“He didn’t walk away from it. He engaged,” said Manchin. “And John Cornyn and I were there. And he said, ‘You guys get together.’ He said, ‘John you voted against it.’ He said, ‘Joe you voted for it.’ He says, ‘Find out, let’s see.’”

But by Thursday night, Cornyn, the Senate’s No. 2 GOP leader and new chairman of the Judiciary immigration subcommittee, had quickly thrown water on the idea.

“I’ve never seen a story spin out of control so quickly,” he said. “There was a discussion about immigration, and the president did express an interest in the topic and that was a little bit of a surprise.”

Democrats, including Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, seemed initially hopeful yet hesitant when asked about the discussion. Schumer placed the onus for action on the Republican majority.

“If our Republican friends step up to the plate, we could do something good,” he said.

But without buy-in from Republicans like Cornyn and Judiciary Chairman Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa — not to mention a sizable number of House conservatives staunchly opposed to any measures that include a pathway to legal status for the undocumented — the path toward passing comprehensive overhaul legislation is murky and wrought with obstacles.

The typical definition of a comprehensive immigration overhaul consists of bolstered border security, increased enforcement of immigration laws within the United States, new or revamped guest worker programs, and a path to legal status or full citizenship for otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants.

Reality check

Most Republicans have long-maintained that a legislative package dealing with all four components is a non-starter, instead opting to tackle border security first, then interior enforcement and, somewhere down the line, the possibility of legal status for some — but never all — of the 11 million undocumented immigrants.

But the 2013 Gang of Eight bill, drafted by four Democrats and four Republicans, sought to tackle all the components at once. Schumer was among the Democrats in the group.

Confidence was high following its passage in what was then a Democratic-led Senate, but hope dissipated after then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia lost a Republican primary to conservative Dave Brat, who ran on a staunch anti-immigration platform.

While several factors contributed to Cantor’s defeat, Brat said immigration was a key issue that crystallized the differences between the two Republicans. Then-Speaker John A. Boehner declined to bring the Senate bill up for a floor vote.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., a Gang of Eight member who no longer supports a comprehensive bill, said Thursday a piecemeal approach advocated by many Republicans remains the best strategy.

“I still don’t think the votes exist for that [2013] bill, the way it was structured. And ultimately, in order for that to become law, I think we’ll have to in steps. It would be very difficult to pass an immigration law that does it all at once,” Rubio said.

With Trump easily swatting away establishment candidates like Rubio in last year’s Republican presidential primary, the legacy of Cantor’s defeat and its effect on willingness to take up comprehensive immigration overhaul seemed intact.

At least until Thursday.

Nevertheless, some Republicans in favor of immigration overhaul, including Gang of Eight member Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, still believe in taking on extremists in their own party in order to fix an immigration system widely seen as broken. Graham has said he's prepared to use the 2013 bill as a jumping off point for a new effort to write a comprehensive bill.

Some Democrats are willing to work with Graham — and with Trump.

New Jersey Democratic Sen. Robert Menendez, another Gang of Eight member, said the president's anti-immigrant campaign rhetoric and executive order temporarily barring immigration from seven predominantly Muslim nations should not deter lawmakers from working with him on immigration.

"Just because I don't care for his Muslim ban doesn't mean I'm not willing to work with him," Menendez told reporters Thursday. "I realize he's going to be here for four years. I want to get something done on immigration reform, and we're going to need him."

Ryan Lucas and Niels Lesniewski contributed to this report.

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