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McCain: 'We Are Not Winning' Push for US Immigration Reform

by Reuters



FILE - U.S. Senator John McCain, flanked by fellow senator, Robert Menendez (R), speaks to the media after the Senate passed the immigration reform bill, on Capitol Hill, June 27, 2013.

U.S. Senator John McCain admitted on Thursday that he and other backers of immigration reform “are not winning,” and must boost efforts to get the House of Representatives to pass such a bill.

McCain said proponents - who include businesses, churches and labor - will wage an aggressive campaign in selective congressional districts next month to make the case for a comprehensive overhaul of U.S. immigration laws.

“Here is a fact: We are not winning,” the Arizona Republican told reporters. “So we have to wage a campaign. That doesn't mean a negative campaign. It

means a positive campaign.”

“You need to respond to things that are said. You need to build support. You need to network,” McCain said.

The Democratic-led Senate last month overwhelmingly passed a bipartisan bill crafted by McCain and seven of his colleagues, but it was declared dead on arrival in the Republican-led House.

Most of the opposition to the White House-backed bill is over a provision that would provide a pathway to citizenship for up to 11 million illegal immigrants now in the United States.

Backers say the pathway would draw undocumented immigrants out of the shadows and make them productive and tax-paying members of the American way of life, improving the U.S. economy.

Critics argue that the pathway would amount to “amnesty,” and attract more illegal immigrants into the country.

The economic factor

McCain and two fellow co-authors of the Senate bill, Democratic Senator Charles Schumer and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, recently met with tech giants, including Google, Intel and Microsoft, to discuss the campaign for immigration reform, aides said.

They plan to target more than 100 House Republicans who are seen as at least open to the possibility of voting for immigration reform, which would help provide business with needed high- and low-skilled workers, aides said.

“There are many members of the House who don't want to take up any bill at all,” said McCain.

McCain and others initially predicted that if the Senate passed an immigration bill with strong

bipartisan support, it would pressure the House to consider it.

Hoping for compromise

The comprehensive bill passed 68-32, but House Republican leaders have refused to even bring it up. Backers are now hoping that the House simply passes a limited bill.

That would trigger a House-Senate conference where negotiators could try to combine the two measures into a single new piece of legislation.

Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, another co-author of the Senate bill, said, "I wouldn't say we are losing. But when you have a battle, you are constantly engaged."

Menendez said even though Congress will be on recess in August, it will be a pivotal month for immigration reform.

"We need the entire universe of people who care about immigration reform to be active next month," Menendez said. "If we do that, we will be well positioned for the fall in the House. If we don't, we will run a risk."

Republican Senator Jeff Sessions, a leading foe of the Senate bill, dismissed the effort as "an act of desperation."

"The problems with the Senate bill can't be fixed with new TV ads," he said.

Religious groups mobilize

On Thursday, more than 90 Catholic college presidents sent letters to all Catholic House members, including Speaker John Boehner, urging them to support a comprehensive immigration bill.

"We hope that as you face intense political pressure from powerful interest groups, you will draw wisdom and moral courage from our shared faith tradition. Catholic teaching values the human dignity and worth of all immigrants, regardless of legal status. We remind you that no human being made in the image of God is illegal," they wrote.

In a telephone conference with reporters, University of Notre Dame President John Jenkins was asked about other actions the university presidents would take to get House members to pass an immigration bill.

"We thought about revoking their degrees," Jenkins joked before admitting, "We don't have a lot of authority over them."

Catholic organizations are planning radio ads, telephone "town halls" with local Catholic leaders, newspaper op-eds and other events to rally support.

Boehner, at his weekly news conference, stood firm on his position that the House would pass "common-sense" legislation.

"Americans expect, as a nation of laws, that we'll enforce them - starting at the border," Boehner said. "They expect that no one who broke our laws will get special treatment."