

Act now, or wait two years for reform

OUR OPINION: WHITE HOUSE SHOULD TRY PRAGMATIC IMMIGRATION APPROACH

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The U.S. Senate has a limited time to advance immigration reform -- and it should seize the moment. A bipartisan group of lawmakers, including Sens. Arlen Specter, R-Pa, Harry Reid, D-Nev., Mel Martinez, R-Fla., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass, will be key to shaping a bill with pragmatic fixes for the dysfunctional U.S. immigration system. The result could be spoiled by hard-line senators who insist on punitive provisions that won't resolve the current stalemate.

Elusive agreement

Senate President Reid set aside two weeks beginning next Monday for floor debate on the issue. The problem is, there has to be a bill to debate. A bipartisan agreement on legislation remains elusive after weeks of closed-door negotiations.

If the Senate doesn't act now, the country is unlikely to see immigration reformed for another two years as presidential-election politics dooms its chances. The result would keep 12 million-plus undocumented immigrants in the shadows. Without fear of penalty, employers would continue to hire illegal workers. The United States again would lose an opportunity to shape immigration flows to meet labor needs and stay competitive globally.

In other words, by doing nothing, Congress makes matters worse.

There is hope, however, for breaking the impasse. Sen. Reid has signaled that he will file a version of the immigration bill debated by the Senate last year as early as today and would consider substituting a compromise measure if it is reached. Sen. Kennedy has been trying to negotiate those compromises. Sen. Reid also has asked Sen. Specter to help recruit moderate senators of both parties to support comprehensive reform.

There is broad agreement on some points. President Bush and many senators, Democrats and Republicans, support a legalization plan for undocumented immigrants and temporary-worker program. The legalization plan would require paying fines, learning English and keeping a clean record, among other conditions.

Unrealistic fines

But the plan floated by the White House contains some harsh, impractical provisions. One would dismantle policies that have long allowed U.S. immigrants to bring their relatives. Others could delay the legalization plan for more than a decade and levy unrealistic fines. The proposed system doesn't appear to consider U.S. labor conditions, either.

Part of the problem is that such extreme and punitive policies seem to drive much of the White House plan. Sen. Martinez is in a position to help rein in the extremes, and we urge him to do so. If President Bush is to leave an immigration legacy, the White House plan must be open to pragmatic changes. The sooner, the better.