



Senators wrangle over English's status in U.S.

Lawmakers debate 'national' vs. 'unifying' language in immigration bill
MSNBC News Services

Updated: 5:53 p.m. PT May 19, 2006

WASHINGTON - A prominent congressional opponent of sweeping immigration legislation conceded Friday the measure is likely to pass next week, adding, "The Senate should be ashamed of itself."

At the same time, Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., predicted that without significant changes, no final compromise would emerge from House-Senate negotiations this year.

Sessions indicated little chance of a filibuster, a tactic that would require supporters to amass 60 votes to prevail.

The Alabama Republican made his remarks at the end of a week of maneuvering on the Senate floor that left the fundamental provisions of the legislation intact. The bill calls for tougher border enforcement, new guest worker programs and an eventual chance at citizenship for most of the estimated 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., declined to say whether he intends to vote for the measure, although he added, "It's certainly moving in that direction." As leader, Frist has played a major role in making sure the legislation reached the Senate floor, although he also has voted for some of the amendments sought by the bill's foes.

White House caught in 'linguistic snare'

President Bush has expressed support for the general approach taken in the legislation but has not said whether he favors its passage.

The White House voiced support for two provisions that cleared on Thursday. One declared English to be the national language of the United States. The other deemed it the "common unifying language"

"What the president has said all along is that he wants to make sure that people who become American citizens have a command of the English language," said White House press secretary Tony Snow. "It's as simple as that."

But Attorney General Alberto Gonzales added to confusion over Bush's stance, telling a meeting of state and local officials in Texas that "the president has never supported making English the national language."

Gonzales said Bush has instead long supported a concept called "English-Plus," believing that it was good to be proficient in more than one language.

The White House later stepped in to clarify Gonzales' remarks, saying the president does not believe in English as an "official" language.

"The attorney general got caught in a linguistic snare. He took 'national' language to mean what we describe as 'official' language," said White House spokeswoman Dana Perino.

"We have no problem in identifying English, our common linguistic currency as a national language; we

also view it more expansively as the 'common and unifying language,'" Perino said.

Language assistance threatened?

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., the sponsor of the proposal to declare English the national language, warned senators it was inconsistent to support both measures, adding, "You can't have it both ways."

Two dozen senators joined with Bush in doing so.

Supporters agreed that both measures are largely symbolic.

"We are trying to make an assimilation statement," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., one of two dozen senators who voted Thursday for both proposals.

Inhofe disputed charges that making English the national language was racist or aimed at Spanish speakers. Eleven Democrats joined Republicans in voting for his measure.

The provision makes exceptions for any language assistance already guaranteed by law, such as bilingual ballots required under the Voting Rights Act or court interpreters. It also requires immigrants seeking citizenship to demonstrate a "sufficient understanding of the English language for usage in everyday life."

But critics argued the move would prevent limited English speakers from getting language assistance required by an executive order signed by President Clinton. So the Senate then voted 58-39 on saying that English is the nation's "common and unifying language."

Part of heated immigration debate

The Homeland Security Department is in the midst of redesigning the citizenship test and some groups have been concerned about efforts to make the test more difficult.

Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., offered the alternative. The only Republican to vote solely for Salazar's "common and unifying" language option was Sen. Pete Domenici of New Mexico, whose home state's constitution prohibits discrimination on basis of inability to speak, read or write English or Spanish.

Both provisions will be included in an immigration bill the Senate is expected to pass and send to conference with the House, where differences will be resolved.

President Bush, who often peppers his speeches with Spanish words and phrases, toured an unfortified section of the border in the Arizona desert Thursday, where he endorsed using fences and other barriers to cut down on illegal crossings. The Senate on Wednesday voted to put 370 miles of fences on the border.

Bush's border visit was part of his efforts to win over conservatives balking at his support for a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants and a new guest worker program.

Bush asked Congress for \$1.9 billion Thursday to pay for 1,000 Border Patrol agents and the temporary deployment of up to 6,000 National Guard troops to states along the Mexican border.

Lawmakers' displeasure

His request was not warmly welcomed by some key senators.

Sen. Judd Gregg, chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, delayed a vote on Bush's promotion of U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman to White House budget director to show his displeasure. He said Bush's request calls for using money for proposed for border security equipment to pay for operational

exercises.

Sen. Robert Byrd, the Senate Appropriations Committee's top Democrat, complained that he had offered amendments providing for border security nine times since 2002, only to have the Bush administration reject them as extraneous spending or expanding the size of government.

"If we had spent that money beginning in 2002, we would not be calling on the National Guard today," Byrd said.

A bipartisan coalition of lawmakers supporting the immigration measure continued to hold through the week. The group was able to reverse an amendment that denied temporary workers the ability to petition on their own for legal permanent residency, a step to citizenship.

Bill supporters restored the self-petitioning with the condition the federal government certifies American workers were unavailable to fill the jobs held or sought by the temporary workers.

The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.

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