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Senators open debate on immigration policy

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WASHINGTON -- The Senate Judiciary Committee began its long-awaited effort to combat illegal immigration with a combination of beefed up enforcement of U.S. borders and new legal avenues for the nation's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants to remain in the United States.

The legislation, the most ambitious attempt in decades to overhaul American immigration laws, is expected to spark the most spirited debate of the year on Capitol Hill, Cox News Service reported. The arguments could reverberate in congressional campaigns this fall and, perhaps, the presidential contest of 2008.

Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa., noted he has seen "virtually no agreement on anything" within the committee.

He acknowledged that "emotions are at an all-time high," as activists, lobbyists and reporters jammed the committee's second-floor room in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. The senators came with their scripts, including Specter's 305-page bill and 103 pages of amendments from his colleagues. The stage was set. And the questions are just starting.

What did the Senate Judiciary Committee accomplish Thursday?

In a word, nothing. In three words: blah, blah, blah. For two hours, senators on the 19-member committee unburdened themselves of opening remarks, philosophical disquisitions and recollections of their ancestors.

"Lincoln killed my great-grandfather," drawled Alabama Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions.

So it was a waste of time?

Actually, no. Although senators put off voting until at least next Wednesday, the opening statements clarified the controversies and political fissures that will complicate getting a final bill.

And as the senators systematically exceeded their five-minute speech limits, they revealed likely alliances. Republicans Tom Coburn of Oklahoma and Jeff Sessions of Alabama, for instance, hammered home the importance of strict law enforcement, while Republican Sen. Lindsay Graham of South Carolina pressed a package that includes widespread legalization of illegal immigrants.

How about the Democrats; are they divided, too?

Yes, though not quite as dramatically. Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, who first helped write a big immigration bill in 1965, joins Republican Sen. John McCain in proposing a wide-ranging legalization plan. It would provide additional temporary worker visas and permit illegal immigrants now in this country to pay a fine and remain in the United States.

On Thursday, for the first time, Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California, offered details of her competing plan. It would be more narrowly focused than Kennedy's, covering only agricultural workers. Up to 900,000 farmworkers now in this country illegally could get a "blue card." This would enable them and their family members to work and travel in the United States; if they did keep working, they could seek permanent resident status.

What are key controversies?

There are many details that incite argument. For instance, Specter proposes a \$250 maximum civil fine for illegally entering the United States. Utah Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch will be countering with an amendment proposing a \$5,000 maximum fine.

The biggest conceptual dispute, though, is over the fate of illegal immigrants now in the United States.

Specter's bill establishes a "gold card" for illegal immigrants employed in the United States as of January 2004. This would provide temporary legal residency, but not put the immigrant on a path toward a "green card" providing permanent residency.

Other proposals would go further by enabling illegal immigrants to adjust their status and, in time, attain U.S. citizenship without first having to return to their native countries.

Opponents call such plans amnesty.

"The political reality is that it's going to be very, very difficult to do that and get a bill," Specter warned.

But everyone agrees on law enforcement?

Tougher is better; that does seem to be the political rule of thumb. Again, though, the details pose problems.

The House border security bill passed late last year, for instance, calls for double fencing along big portions of the U.S.-Mexico border. The Senate bill merely calls for a fence study, while an amendment to be considered next week would require double and triple fencing along the Arizona-Mexico border.

What happens next?

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist has promised the full Senate will take up an immigration bill the week of March 27. To meet that deadline, the judiciary panel expects to hold several markup sessions starting next week.

What is being done in North Carolina?

The population of immigrants is growing faster in North Carolina than in most states. The estimated number of illegal immigrants in North Carolina jumped from 25,000 in 1990 to 395,000 in 2004.

When the state legislature reconvenes in May, it plans to take up a bill to make it more difficult for illegal immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. Both chambers passed a bill last year barring the state Division of Motor Vehicles from accepting taxpayer identification numbers issued by the Internal Revenue Service in lieu of Social Security numbers. The House and Senate could not agree on language, but some form of the bill is considered likely to pass.