US House votes for more advanced-degree visas (Update)

30 November 2012, by Jim Abrams

The U.S. House of Representatives voted Friday to make green cards accessible to foreign students graduating with advanced science and math degrees from U.S. universities, setting up what is expected to be a turbulent battle over immigration policy next year.

Even this limited step, strongly backed by the high-tech industry, is unlikely to go anywhere this session of Congress, indicating how difficult it will be to find lasting solutions to the nation's much-criticized immigration system.

For Republicans largely shunned by Hispanic voters in the November elections, the vote for the STEM Jobs Act was a way of showing they have softened their hardline immigration policies and are ready to work for more comprehensive legislation. A more sweeping bill presumably would deal not only with legal residents but also with the estimated 11 million people in the U.S. illegally.

In another gesture to Hispanics and other minority communities, lawmakers added a provision that will make it easier for those with green cards to be reunited with spouses and children now living overseas.

But for many Democrats and the Obama administration, Friday's first step was more of a misstep.

Democrats, including members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, assailed the legislation for offsetting the 55,000 new permanent residency visas by eliminating a program that provided green cards to people with traditionally lower rates of immigration, particularly those from Africa. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

A White House statement said it was encouraged that Congress "appears to be ready to begin serious debate on the need to fix our broken immigration system." But it said the administration does not support "narrowly tailored proposals" that do not meet long-term objectives of achieving comprehensive reform.

That comprehensive approach includes dealing with the young people brought into the country illegally, establishing a solution for agriculture workers, creating an effective border enforcement system and worker verification program and deciding by what means those living in the country illegally can attain legal status.

The Democratic-controlled Senate is seen as likely to ignore the House STEM bill in the waning days of the current congressional session.

The idea of retaining foreign students with advanced degrees in the STEM fields enjoys wide bipartisan support and has long been sought by high-tech industries that have seen some of their brightest employee prospects forced to leave the U.S. and work for competitors abroad.

"We should staple a green card to their diplomas," said Republican Rep. Jeff Flake, a proponent of overhauling immigration law. He cited a National Science Foundation study showing that foreign students receive nearly 60 percent of U.S. engineering doctorates and more than 50 percent of doctorates in mathematics and computer science.

The STEM Act visas would be in addition to about 140,000 employment-based visas for those ranging from lower-skilled workers to college graduates and people in the arts, education and athletics.

But the elimination of the Diversity Visa Lottery Program is a "slap in the face to the core value and the position of immigrants to the United States," said Rep. Luis Gutierrez, a leader on immigration policy with the Hispanic Caucus. "If you support this bill, then you are saying that one type of immigrant

is better than the other."

The Diversity Visa Lottery Program, created partly to increase visas for Ireland, has shifted over the years to focus on former Soviet states and now Africa. In 2010, almost 25,000 visas went to Africa; 9,000 to Asia and 16,000 to Europe. Applicants must have at least a high school education.

Critics say the visa lottery program has outlived its purpose because Africans and East Europeans are already benefiting from family unification and skilled employment visas, and the lottery program is subject to fraud and infiltration by terrorists.

The provision on reuniting families allows the spouses and children of permanent residents to come to the United States to wait for their own green card applications to be processed one year after applying. Currently, family members must wait more than two years before being reunited.

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