

# In D.C., a Push to Aid Irish Migrants

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WASHINGTON - Congress may have finally found an immigration issue it can agree on in an election year: letting in more Irish people.

At a time when the volatile issue of comprehensive immigration reform is hopelessly stalled in a divided Congress, senators of both parties are rallying behind legislation that would allow 10,500 Irish nationals to come to the U.S. to work each year.

The legislation by Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass., has been attacked by critics as a cynical ploy to win Irish-American votes as Brown battles for re-election in a state where one in four residents is of Irish descent. It also has been decried by both pro-immigration and anti-immigration groups as an example of favoritism toward European immigrants over Hispanics and Asians.

But supporters of the bill, including Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, say they are trying to help reverse discrimination against Irish nationals that was inadvertently created by a 1965 overhaul of the U.S. immigration system.

That overhaul, designed to end a bias against immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Africa, made it difficult for Irish immigrants to obtain visas despite their strong cultural ties to the U.S., say supporters of Brown's bill. Hispanics and Asians have been the dominant immigrant groups to the U.S. since 1965 and, as they become citizens, their close family members have been given priority for U.S. visas as part of the U.S. government's emphasis on family reunification.

About 40 million Americans identify themselves as being of Irish descent, or about 13 percent of the U.S. population of more than 313 million. Hispanics make up about 16 percent of U.S. residents. The number of Irish immigrants granted permanent legal status in the U.S. has plunged from nearly 38,000 in the 1960s to about 16,000 in the 10 years from 2000 through 2009.

Frank Sharry, founder and executive director of the immigrant-rights group America's Voice, has no quarrel with the Irish visa bill but resents Brown's opposition to measures that would benefit Latinos and other immigrant groups.

Brown opposes any measure that would provide a pathway to citizenship for the nearly 11 million illegal immigrants already in the United States.

The senator also has opposed the Dream Act, which would allow undocumented children to gain legal status if they enrolled in college or served in the U.S. military.

"The (Irish) bill is actually a modest and sensible measure, and the Irish-American community has fought very hard for immigration reform that would benefit everyone," Sharry said. "We consider them close friends. But I think what Scott Brown is doing smacks of shameless opportunism. He's pandering to the Irish to say, 'I'm your candidate,' and he's pandering to the 'tea party' by showing that he'll fight for white immigrants but not brown ones."

Brown's spokesman says the senator cares about all immigrants and supports a bipartisan House-passed bill that would primarily benefit non-European immigrants facing long waits to come to the U.S. to work in high-skilled jobs or reunite with family members who are U.S. citizens.

That bill, sponsored by Republican Reps. Lamar Smith of Texas and Jason Chaffetz of Utah, would tweak the U.S. visa system to allow more highly skilled immigrants from India and China to become legal permanent residents. The legislation would eliminate caps on the number of

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employment-based visas that are available annually to each country. The bill also would more than double the family-reunification visas available for Mexicans and Filipinos, the two groups facing the longest backlogs for that type of visa.

Generally, a foreign citizen who wants to apply for an immigrant visa to the United States must be sponsored by a prospective employer or by a relative who is a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident of the United States.

"For decades, the Irish have been unfairly shut out by our immigration laws while immigration from many other countries has sharply increased," said Brown's spokesman, John Donnelly. "Senator Brown remains engaged in serious, bipartisan talks about the Irish (visa) legislation as well as a broader, House-passed legal-immigration bill that affects a wide range of other countries."

Brown's bill would make Irish nationals eligible for a special visa program created in 2005 to allow up to 10,500 high-skilled Australians to come to the United States on temporary work visas known as E-3 visas. The program grew out of a trade pact with Australia, but it was also seen as a reward for a country that supported U.S. military action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The program allows skilled workers with job offers from U.S. employers to get a two-year work visa that can be renewed indefinitely.

Workers with an E-3 visa can bring their spouses and children with them. Their spouses also can work legally in the United States.

While the broader visa-reform bill has stalled in the Senate, Brown's bill appears poised to move forward. After initially opposing the legislation for favoring just one country, Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, the senior Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, has decided to stop blocking it, provided that Brown makes a few changes in the bill. Those changes are being negotiated among Brown, Grassley and Schumer, who chairs the immigration subcommittee.

Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, which wants to reduce immigration, said Brown's bill will end up hurting American workers of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

"Why would you want to bring in 10,500 more foreign workers at a time when we've got 20 million Americans who either can't find jobs or are forced to take part-time jobs when they want to work full-time," Beck said. "Brown's bill is about pandering. It's a form of pork-barreling. Once one special interest gets their pork, the others will all be lined up. In the meantime, Americans of every ethnicity are looking for a job."

The fact that Brown's bill has a good chance of passing shows that the clout of more established immigrant groups remains stronger than the fast-growing Hispanic community, said David North of the Center for Immigration Studies. The center favors reduced immigration and opposes Brown's bill.

"Political power typically comes long after the population numbers suggest that you should have clout," North said. "The Irish are still coasting on their political power from 50 years ago. The Hispanics haven't reached that yet, but they will."

It also shows that Congress is grasping at smaller, piecemeal bills because it has given up on trying to tackle the much bigger and politically explosive issue of what to do about the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants, said Mary Giovagnoli, director of the Immigration Policy Center, an immigrant-rights group.

"Congress is still not addressing the fundamental issues," she said. "It's pretty sad." Still, the fact that Congress is willing to look at increasing the number of immigrants who can come here legally -- either through Brown's Irish bill or the broader House bill -- shows that lawmakers still see the value of immigration, one think-tank analyst said.

"Even during the biggest recession since the Great Depression, no one in Congress is seriously disputing our continued commitment to legal immigration," said Muzaffar Chishti of the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute, which analyzes immigration trends. "We still see ourselves as a nation of

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immigrants. We haven't turned away from that ideal."

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