

## Latino Groups Play Key Role on Hill

Virtual Veto Power in Immigration Debate

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When [Sen. Edward M. Kennedy](#) (D-Mass.) declared last week that unnamed "stakeholders" would decide whether Congress overhauls immigration law this year, Latino organizations in Washington understood exactly what he meant.

After laboring in obscurity for decades, groups such as the National Council of La Raza, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the National Immigration Forum are virtually being granted veto power over perhaps the biggest domestic issue coming before Congress this year. Organizations that represent what is now the nation's largest minority group are beginning to achieve power commensurate with their numbers.

"There's a real sense that the Latino community is key to the solution in this debate, so now they are reaching out to us more than ever," said Eric Gutierrez, lead lobbyist for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, or MALDEF. "Neither party wants to make a misstep politically."

Such groups were practically in the room yesterday, maintaining contact as Democratic and Republican senators tried to hammer out a new immigration bill before a deadline set by Senate Majority Leader [Harry M. Reid](#) (D-Nev.) for today before he moved it last night to Monday. The contours began to emerge for a bill that would couple a tightening of border controls with a guest-worker program and new avenues for an estimated 12 million undocumented workers to work legally.

Negotiators agreed yesterday that illegal immigrants would be granted a new Z Visa, allowing legal residency for eight years. During that time, the head of an undocumented household would have to temporarily go back to the home country to apply for permanent [U.S.](#) legal status for his or her family. Holders of Z Visas would then have to pay a fine and back taxes, undergo a criminal background check, and begin to work toward citizenship.

But Republicans and Democrats were still trying to bridge a deep divide over two remaining issues: Whether 400,000 foreigners entering the country as temporary workers would have to leave the country after three years or be granted a chance to stay permanently, and how extended family ties should be weighed in granting visas to those seeking to enter the country.

A deal on those tough issues could depend on the assent of Kennedy's "stakeholders," Democratic negotiators agreed. Democratic leaders, who are fighting for the loyalty of the fast-growing Latino electorate, have no desire to embrace legislation that could end up alienating the voters they are trying to woo.

The early word from the groups is not promising.

"Some of the proposals that are coming from the negotiations in the Senate and [White House](#) are measures that the immigrant community advocates are wholly against, particularly the elimination of some aspects of family reunification," said William Ramos, a spokesman for the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

The groups also oppose a policy that would force immigrants to return to their home countries for an extended period and to petition for reentry.

Latino organizations know well that they have muscle to flex. A bill passed by the House last year that would have made illegal immigration a felony drove millions of Latinos into the streets in cities across the country last spring.

When the current immigration law was written 21 years ago, the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, tacitly approved the legislation, even though it provided no direct path to citizenship for most temporary workers. But the Latino community was much smaller then, and illegal immigration was a regional issue, confined mostly to [California](#), [Texas](#) and New York.

Today, U.S. citizens of Latino descent, having eclipsed African Americans as the nation's largest minority, are far more organized and politically active. "We're not going to let them screw it up," said [Brent A. Wilkes](#), LULAC's national executive director.

LULAC, MALDEF, La Raza and the National Immigration Forum are part of a broad network of immigrant rights groups that hold nightly conference calls and strategy sessions on the legislation. The groups speak daily with top aides in Reid's and Kennedy's offices.

The White House, well aware that immigration may offer [President Bush](#) his last best chance at a major domestic achievement for his second term, has worked hard to keep the groups on board, even as Bush has shifted to the right with a new plan that is tougher than the proposals he embraced last year.

The White House held a meeting 2 1/2 weeks ago with Latino advocates, labor unions and civil rights organizations in which an adviser outlined an administration's policy based on increased border security and a temporary-worker program. Homeland Security Secretary [Michael Chertoff](#) and [Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez](#) have also met with some of the groups.

"At least they are paying attention to us," said MALDEF President John Trasviña.

The groups have also made it clear to Republicans that they are willing to press hard this year.

"Power is not handed over. To get your place at the table, you have to fight for it,"  
Wilkes said