

# 'Not Easy': Senate's Tricky Border Talks Get a Christmas Extension

*Leaders say negotiations are making progress but final language will take more work*

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WASHINGTON—Democratic and Republican leaders in the Senate said [talks on border policy](#) remain on the right track but now see them dragging into next year. Their reason: Any deal is just too complicated to hash out quickly.

A bipartisan group of Senate negotiators has been working for weeks to strike a deal on the [southern border](#), demanded by Republicans as a condition for backing Democrats' [\\$110.5 billion security package](#) for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. Leaders of both parties said Tuesday that they would aim to vote on a deal early in the new year.

"Negotiators are going to be working very, very diligently over the December and January break period. And our goal is to get something done as soon as we get back," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.). "This is going to be not easy," he said, adding, "Everyone understands that we have more work to do and that it's going to take more time."

The Senate wrapped up its final business for the year on Tuesday evening, confirming a slate of four-star generals and admirals and passing a short-term reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration. While border talks are expected to continue on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, most senators are leaving for Christmas break. They are scheduled to return to Washington on Jan. 8.

Even if negotiators reach a deal and agree on language, any legislation would face a precarious path due to the contentious nature of border and immigration policy, particularly headed into an election year. Congress hasn't made a serious bipartisan effort to change immigration laws since a failed effort a decade ago, and the last major reforms were signed into law in 1986.

Negotiators worked through the weekend but missed a self-imposed deadline to announce a framework for a deal by Sunday afternoon. The negotiators, who include Sens. James Lankford (R., Okla.), Chris Murphy (D., Conn.) and Kyrsten Sinema (I., Ariz.), along with representatives from the Biden administration, continued talking this week.

“We are closer than ever before to an agreement,” said Murphy, the lead Democratic negotiator. But, he said, “we need to get this right.” Murphy said he would take a day and a half off for Christmas but would otherwise be at the negotiating table.

Lankford, the lead Republican negotiator, said the [talks have gotten harder](#) as lawmakers make more progress and delve into more detail. “Our commitment is to keep going until we get it done,” Lankford said. He also said there was still “no final agreement, much less legislative text.”

Democrats had hoped to pass additional assistance for Ukraine before the end of this year, when the White House has said existing military aid is set to run out. Many Republicans also support aid for Ukraine but have demanded border policy changes as the condition for their vote.

Republicans in recent days had made clear that talks hadn’t progressed enough to their satisfaction to vote on any deal before the end of the year, emphasizing that they remained far apart with Democrats on several issues, and it would take time to draft provisions they did agree on.

“We haven’t passed a significant immigration bill since [President Ronald] Reagan’s second term, and so this is not easy,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) on Tuesday.

He and Schumer put out a rare joint statement late Tuesday saying they were committed to addressing the border and approving foreign aid and “will not let these national security challenges go unanswered.”

The U.S. is planning one more aid package for Ukraine this month, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Monday. He said that after that round, “we will have no more replenishment authority available to us, and we’re going to need Congress to act without delay.”

The border talks are taking place as the number of migrant crossings is surging, fueling rhetoric on the presidential campaign trail. This week, U.S. immigration authorities [closed several bridges and ports of entry along the border](#) with Mexico, an unusual measure to contain a surge in migrants that is overwhelming many border communities in Texas, Arizona and California.

Former President [Donald Trump](#), the current front-runner in the 2024 GOP field, has repeatedly decried the number of immigrants in the U.S. illegally, saying they are “poisoning the blood” of the country. Democrats condemned the remarks as echoing Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf,” and some Senate Republicans expressed displeasure with what Trump said. Trump on Tuesday night repeated the remark and said he had never read Mein Kampf.

Sen. Mike Rounds (R., S.D.) called Trump's rhetoric inappropriate and unacceptable. But he said the Biden administration's border policies are feeding into it.

"I think we should celebrate our diversity," Rounds said. "But we need legal immigration. Not everybody just simply overrunning the borders."

Asked about Trump's comment, McConnell responded: "It strikes me, that didn't bother him when he appointed Elaine Chao Secretary of Transportation," a reference to McConnell's wife, who was born in Taiwan.

The border discussions have faced skepticism from conservative lawmakers, who have said they would need to see the actual language of the deal before getting on board. In a letter to Senate Republican leadership, 15 GOP senators objected to the closed-door nature of the talks and said they couldn't sign onto any agreement until they had a chance to examine it in detail.

The negotiations picked up this month when representatives from the White House, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, became more involved. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Tuesday that Biden "has been in regular touch" with lawmakers.

Democrats have already made major concessions on immigration policy, including endorsing a new expulsion authority at the border that would deny migrants a chance to ask for asylum, akin to the pandemic-era Title 42 policy. But the concessions, while worrying many progressives, haven't gone far enough to satisfy Republicans.

One sticking point, according to people familiar with the matter, is Republicans' insistence on curtailing an existing immigration power called humanitarian parole, which allows the government to let people into the country without a visa. The Biden administration has used the authority extensively—to evacuate 80,000 Afghans, provide a path for more than 10,000 Ukrainians fleeing war and, most recently, admit tens of thousands of asylum seekers a month who make appointments with the government in advance.

One program the administration has stood up, which allows up to 30,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans a month to move to the U.S. so long as they have a private sponsor to take them in, is being challenged in court by a group of GOP-led states, and a decision in the case is expected imminently.

*Alex Leary and Ken Thomas contributed to this article.*