

GOP-Led House Passes Laken Riley Act With Democrats' Help

The legislation, drafted in response to a murder by an immigrant, tests Democrats' shift after election

By **Xavier Martinez**
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WASHINGTON—The Republican-led House passed a bill with bipartisan support that would impose harsher penalties on some people who are in the country illegally, in an early test of how far right Democrats could shift in the second [Donald Trump](#) presidency.

The Laken Riley Act—named for a 22-year-old nursing student in Athens, Ga., who was [murdered by a Venezuelan national](#) living in the U.S. illegally—requires the Department of Homeland Security to detain certain people in the U.S. illegally who are arrested for burglary, theft, larceny or shoplifting. It would also give state attorneys general standing to sue federal officials for refusing to enforce immigration law.

The proposal would increase the number of people who could be deported by expanding the list of charges that would result in a referral to federal immigration officials.

The measure, the first vote on legislation in the new House, passed 264-159, with 48 Democrats joining Republicans in voting for the bill. That is up from the 37 Democrats who crossed the aisle last year, when Republicans brought up the same bill. The matter now heads to the GOP-led Senate, which is expected to take it up soon.

Trump has promised swift action on immigration, a central issue of his three presidential campaigns. Polls showed voters favoring Republicans' hard line on the border and immigration in the most recent election, following a surge of illegal crossings. Headed into the 2024 election, Democrats toughened their stance on the issue, while a bipartisan border plan backed by President Biden stalled last year.

“As Democrats struggle with their identity now as a party, postelection, we’ll find out there’s no clinging to that open-border policy,” House Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.) said during a press conference Tuesday. “This will be a telling vote.”

Led by border czar Tom Homan, the new Trump border push will include declaring a [national emergency](#) on immigration, which would allow the administration to divert money from the Pentagon for immigration purposes. The president-elect's promised mass-deportation campaign was a major pillar of his campaign, but [logistical and legal challenges](#) threaten its viability.

Democratic party leadership didn't offer an official position ahead of Tuesday's vote, though guidance from Democratic Whip Katherine Clark (D., Mass.) noted that Jamie Raskin (D., Md.), the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, "strongly opposes" the bill.

Some Democrats warned the legislation would cause immigrants to be detained for unnecessarily long periods and could separate parents from U.S.-born children.

"Look, it's very clear that House Republicans are going to push an anti-immigrant agenda. There are serious flaws in this bill," said House Democratic Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar (D., Calif.), who voted against the measure. He said Democrats will "continue to have robust discussions about immigration policy, about border security."

Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R., S.D.) is expected to bring up the legislation in the chamber later this week. The bill is co-sponsored by 53 Republican senators and one Democrat, John Fetterman of Pennsylvania. Other Democrats, including Sen. Gary Peters of Michigan, are expected to support the bill in the Senate. The legislation would require 60 votes to advance.

Jose Antonio Ibarra was found guilty of murder, kidnapping and other charges in the February 2024 [killing of Riley](#). In November he was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole and was set to serve additional shorter sentences consecutively.