

Senate to vote Monday on plan to reopen government

But Democratic leader Chuck Schumer says there's no deal yet.



Sens. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) talk to reporters as they exit a meeting with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Sunday. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images

Party leaders and rank-and-file senators spent all day Sunday haggling over a deal to reopen the government. But Washington's painful shutdown will nonetheless drag into Day Three.

Shortly after 9 p.m. Sunday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that the chamber would vote on a plan at noon Monday to fund the government through Feb. 8. In an attempted concession to Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, McConnell said he would take up legislation to protect some young immigrants from deportation if a deal to address their status is not reached by the time funding expires in early February.

But Democrats were not ready to call it a deal, even as McConnell implored the

Senate to vote Sunday night to reopen the government. "The shutdown should stop today," he said.

Schumer said further negotiations were needed and spurned McConnell's request, pushing a vote until Monday, when hundreds of thousands of federal employees will be furloughed.

"Talks will continue, but we have yet to reach an agreement on a path forward that would be acceptable for both sides," Schumer said.

The vote Monday is expected to fail absent further progress between the two party leaders before then.

Senate Republicans will have a conference meeting at 11 a.m. Monday to discuss the state of play, aides said.

The late-night exchange capped a furious round of negotiations Sunday between Schumer and McConnell, as well as a group of deal-making senators desperate to reopen the shuttered government. Senators from both parties took a proposal to the party leaders after the centrists met for 90 minutes on Sunday afternoon.

Their proposal would reopen the government through Feb. 8 and have McConnell commit on the Senate floor to holding an immigration vote before that date — a commitment that McConnell approached but did not definitively agree to, in part because Republicans worry they could not complete an immigration debate before the next funding deadline.

Keeping the shutdown going given McConnell's stated goal of an immigration vote would be "counterproductive," said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) as the Senate adjourned for the night. As for Democrats' push for a more firm immigration commitment from the GOP leader, Graham suggested McConnell's Sunday night statement would have to suffice: "I assume if we get a deal, it will be more formal."

Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), who along with Graham is meeting with roughly 20 senators in both parties, said he hoped the group would meet again.

After not speaking on Saturday, McConnell and Schumer met privately for more than 30 minutes on Sunday. Schumer, however, did not talk to the president, an aide said.

Flake said the Senate needs to move independently of the White House at this point to resolve the confrontation that's produced the first shutdown in more than four years.

"The important thing is breaking with the White House on this and not relying on the White House to give its approval," Flake said.

Despite his public thaw after two days of lashing Democrats, it remains to be seen whether McConnell can provide enough reassurance to Democrats to win their votes. Some Democrats said they need to know the House would take action on an immigration bill, too.

"We have to have in our own mind some way to ensure that the House feels a need to bring up the issue as well," said Senate Minority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.).

The centrists are eager to end the brinkmanship that has erupted at the one-year mark of Donald Trump's presidency. Democrats insist that any funding legislation extend Obama-era protections for undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children, while Republicans have said they won't negotiate on immigration until the government reopens.

The group of roughly 20 moderates includes Sens. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), Chris Coons (D-Del.), Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), Susan Collins (R-Maine), Flake, Graham, Mark Warner (D-Va.), Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Tim Kaine (D-Va.) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.).

Some liberals are still wary. They fear that Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) could repeat the exercise of 2013, when the Senate passed an immigration bill and the House didn't take it up.

"It depends on whether it's part of a must-pass bill. That is my strong preference. The goal is to have the [DREAM] Act passed," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) in an interview. "I have no confidence, zero, in Paul Ryan bringing that bill to the floor."

Republican leaders are also skeptical. They believe committing to an immigration vote would just throw Democrats a lifeline and prefer to negotiate on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program only after the government

reopens.

“Does that mean if we have an agreement by [Feb.] 15 that that’s not good enough?” Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-Texas) said of the plan to hold an immigration vote by Feb. 8. “I just think people are nervous because they shut down the government and are looking for face-saving.”

Still, McConnell listened to the presentation by a group of GOP senators to allow such a vote by Feb. 8. He thanked those Republicans on the floor Sunday evening.

So far, House Republican leaders have rejected the idea of committing to holding an immigration vote on the House floor and are refusing to negotiate on anything beyond a three-week continuing resolution. Ryan said Sunday the House will accept a short-term bill through Feb. 8 but will commit only to an immigration bill “that the president supports to fix this problem.”

Lawmakers had hoped to reach a deal before Monday, when federal employees would normally return to work, to lessen the impact of the shutdown.

Though negotiations in the Senate gained some traction, both parties continued to execute their public relations strategies. Democrats blasted Trump, blaming him for walking away from an immigration deal with Schumer on Friday that they say could have prevented the shutdown.

“How can you negotiate with the president under those circumstances where he agrees face-to-face to move forward with a certain path and then within two hours calls back and pulls the plug?” Durbin said on ABC’s “This Week with George Stephanopoulos.”

Schumer offered Trump support for the border wall in exchange for a deal to protect the nearly 700,000 so-called Dreamers facing deportation. But since then, Republicans and Democrats have publicly sparred over whether Schumer was offering full funding for the wall or not.

Republicans, meanwhile, accused Democrats of taking “hostages” in order to strong-arm the GOP into an immigration deal that has eluded Congress for years.

“This is the Democrats trying to hold our military hostage for an issue that has been with us for decades,” House Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows (R-N.C.) said on ABC. “I think we need to resolve it — the president wants to resolve

it — but you don't do that in the middle of a shutdown."

But even Republicans seemed uncomfortable defending a Trump campaign ad saying Democratic leaders would be "complicit" in murders committed by undocumented immigrants during the shutdown. Republican leaders know they will need Democratic cooperation to break the shutdown logjam.

"I don't know if that's necessarily productive," Ryan said of the Trump ad.

So far, Trump has not called for a meeting with the "Big Four" congressional leaders — McConnell, Schumer, Ryan and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) — and Republicans on the Sunday news shows gave no indication he would do so. But White House legislative affairs director Marc Short said Trump has been in touch with GOP leaders throughout the weekend.

"The president has been involved," Short said on NBC's "Meet the Press." "Yesterday he was speaking to Leader McConnell, Leader Ryan. He also spoke to Kevin McCarthy."

John Bresnahan and Rachael Bade contributed to this report.

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