

Analysis

In Speech, A Balancing Act of Policy And Politics

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President Bush once saw the immigration issue as an opportunity to expand the Republican Party by attracting more Hispanic voters with a message of tolerance and inclusion. His nationally televised speech last night was an admission that the issue has now become a problem that, if not managed carefully, could quickly become a historic liability for his party.

The immigration debate that reopened in the Senate yesterday offers Republicans an unpalatable political trade-off. Disappointing conservative, anti-illegal-immigration forces could demoralize a crucial constituency and depress turnout in the November elections at a time when every vote appears important to the GOP. Energizing only those conservatives risks destroying the president's long-sought goal of building a durable Republican majority by normalizing his party's relations with the rapidly growing Latino community.

Bush sought to reassure both sides with his speech last night, and in doing so he attempted to define the middle ground in a debate where consensus has been difficult. By ordering National Guard troops to the border, he was determined to show conservatives and House Republicans his belief that border security is a prerequisite to any legislative solution. But on the most contentious issue before Congress, Bush came closer to the approach now on the Senate floor, saying he favors a path to citizenship for some illegal immigrants while rejecting either mass deportation or automatic amnesty for those now here illegally.

"America can be a lawful society and a welcoming society at the same time," he said. "We will fix the problems created by illegal immigration, and we will deliver a system that is secure, orderly and fair."

That he found himself in such a position, on an issue about which he has spoken passionately ever since he bucked anti-immigration voices within his own party as governor of Texas, reflects the power and passion of those opposed to comprehensive legislation. It also underscores that he comes to the debate at this moment in a weakened position, particularly among conservatives in his own party.

"I think the president would really like to do the right thing here and pass a responsible bill, but his own weakness in his own party has made that much more difficult," said Simon Rosenberg, founder of the centrist New Democrat Network. "In many ways, he lost control of this debate late last year, when Republicans [in the House] passed a bill that was really one of the more extreme bills passed in American history. He's never regained control of the debate."

A Republican strategist with close ties to the White House, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to talk candidly about the president's problems, blamed Bush for not standing up forcefully to supporters of a House bill that would make felons of the 12 million illegal immigrants in the country as well as anyone who tries to help them. "The president responded to that House bill rather passively," he said. "Leadership is standing

up to demagoguery." This strategist said last night's speech was less about immigration than "about the total collapse of the president's numbers among conservatives."

GOP internal survey data show that the immigration issue does not cut the same way in all competitive districts, and therefore neither party can confidently predict how the politics of this debate will play out in November. Adding to the uncertainty is the question of what kind of legislation, if any, ultimately emerges from Congress.

The House and Senate now appear to be on a collision course, with the Senate aiming at comprehensive legislation that would include a path to citizenship for many of the illegal immigrants already here, and House Republicans determined to block anything that they believe smacks of amnesty. Bush insisted last night that what he supports is not amnesty.

Three in four Americans -- 74 percent -- supported using National Guard troops to patrol the U.S. border with Mexico, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll conducted before the president spoke. The results are based on interviews with 508 randomly selected adults who were interviewed Friday through Sunday for this survey, with a margin of sampling error of plus or minus five percentage points.

Republican pollster Bill McInturff said Bush was wise to take on issues of enforcement -- with his plan for sending troops to the border and his renewed call for tougher sanctions against employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants -- as part of his call for comprehensive legislation.

"From all the various data I've looked at, there are two constants," he said. "One, that people do not believe we are adequately defending our border, and two, that they want employers held accountable. . . . You can't get to a guest-worker program until people believe you're securing the borders and you're cracking down on employers."

Polling data underscore that immigration is a political issue whose impact stretches far beyond the states on the Mexican border, igniting passions in the Rocky Mountain West, the farm belt in the Midwest, and wherever there are poultry or packing plants. Passions run deepest among those alarmed by what they see as a flood tide of illegal immigrants and by what they fear is a movement that is changing the culture and identity of the country.

Those who say immigration is the issue upon which they are likely to base their vote in November disapprove of the kind of comprehensive plan favored by Bush and strongly support sending all illegal immigrants back to their home countries. They are both Republicans and Democrats, they tend to be less educated and less affluent, and many of them are older than 65, surveys suggest.

Democratic pollster Peter D. Hart, who with McInturff conducts the NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll, said that makes appealing to them exceptionally attractive for a Republican Party worried about minimizing its losses in November. "You look at this group and say, 'We can motivate our base, we can pick up an important group of old Americans . . . and maybe we can begin to cut down the differential' "in November, he said.

But the stakes are even greater on the other side, more now than even a few months ago. The House bill has inflamed opinion within the Hispanic community and mobilized a nascent political movement, one that over time will grow in size and strength as younger Latinos begin to register and vote in larger and larger numbers. Their political allegiance is now up for grabs, and the great danger that Bush and his advisers see in a stalemate is that the Democrats will be able to claim much of that vote.

"It's become an emotional issue," said Sergio Bendixen, who has polled extensively on Latino issues. "It's no longer an immigration issue, it's whether the United States welcomes Hispanics, whether they appreciate the contribution of Hispanics."

Political strategists may debate which of those forces could be more important in deciding close races in November -- the anti-illegal-immigrant activists who were encouraged by conservative talk radio and rallied behind the Minuteman movement, which sprang up as a citizen border security corps, or the huge throngs of immigrant supporters who were mobilized by Hispanic radio and protested in the streets last month. But there is little disagreement that in the longer term, a party seen as hostile to immigrants, legal or illegal, could pay a stiff price.

The negative role model cited universally is former California governor Pete Wilson (R), who used the anti-illegal-immigration issue to win reelection in 1994 only to see his party suffer in subsequent elections. "California went from being a swing state to a solid Democratic state, mainly because of the overwhelming support of Hispanics," Bendixen said.

Bush's instincts on immigration are well known and long stated, but his political standing has reduced his leverage just as the congressional debate is nearing its most difficult moment. White House officials believe that the prime-time address reinserts the president when he is needed most, but his most challenging test will come later this summer, when House and Senate negotiators are likely to try to compromise their differences. Juggling short- and long-term political goals will make his task all the more difficult.