

Divide Is Sharpening Among Republicans

Senate Compromises Irk House GOP

By [Jonathan Weisman](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, May 15, 2006; Page A04

From immigration policy to energy to emergency spending, House Republican leaders are publicly breaking rank with their counterparts in the Senate, fearing that Senate efforts at compromise are jeopardizing the party's standing with conservative voters.

The breach in congressional leadership has been especially stark in the past two weeks. As the Senate returns to the immigration issue this week, House Majority Whip [Roy Blunt](#) (R-Mo.) said House Republicans will not agree to any plan granting illegal immigrants a path to citizenship that does not require them first to return to their home countries. House Majority Leader [John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) dismissed Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's proposed \$100 rebate for gasoline as "insulting" and "stupid." And House Speaker [J. Dennis Hastert](#) (R-Ill.) declared a Senate-passed, \$109 billion bill to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, hurricane relief and a bevy of home-state pet projects "dead on arrival."

Hastert even parted company with Frist (R-Tenn.) last week on President Bush's nomination of Gen. Michael V. Hayden to head the CIA. Hastert asserted, "I don't think a military guy should be head of CIA, frankly," even as Frist called him "the ideal man for the job."

"People are frustrated. They really are," said [Rep. Tom Price](#) (R-Ga.), who noted he is constantly hearing from conservative constituents who question why a Republican Party that controls the White House, House and Senate so often repudiates conservative goals.

Congressional leaders say recent clashes were individual policy disputes, not a sign of broader friction between the two bodies. "There is no tension," Boehner said. "You have got two different institutions, two different rhythms, and while there are always going to be some differences, if you look at Senate Republicans, you will see us agreeing on many of the same principles."

However, some House leaders privately acknowledge the tension as an inevitable byproduct of record low approval ratings for Congress and the president -- a disaffection that recently has spread to self-described conservative voters.

House members understand their constituents' anger. They rattle off bills the House has approved, to tighten border controls, repeal the estate tax, expand gasoline refineries and cap damages on civil lawsuits and medical malpractice cases. But voters want laws, not votes, and the Senate has not moved on any of those, Price said.

"I understand sometimes how [voters] get frustrated with the Senate and the way we do the things we do, but I don't think it's constructive," said [Sen. Trent Lott](#) (R-Miss.), whose home-state projects in the emergency spending bill have drawn conservative ire. "And I have pleaded with the House, 'Let's not be shooting shots back and forth at each other, within our own party.' Whatever hurts us hurts them in the end."

The tension, in some sense, is built into the system, said [Sen. Sam Brownback](#) (R-Kan.), a former House member. Because they represent an entire state, senators must reflect a broader range of opinions and tend toward compromise. Because senators stand for reelection every six years, only 15 Republicans are facing this year's stiff headwind, compared to all 231 Republicans in the House. That is leading House Republicans to believe their Senate colleagues are insensitive to their political difficulties.

Indeed, some of the disputes may be political gamesmanship, Senate leadership aides suggested. The House leadership's firm stance against additional pork-barrel spending in the emergency spending bill was just what Frist wanted to press his spendthrift colleagues to relent on some of their pet projects, said Frist chief of staff Eric Ueland. Their stand on immigration could keep Senate Republicans from drifting too far toward the Democrats before a final bill comes up for passage.

But recent redistricting has exacerbated those natural tensions, said a member of the House leadership, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to not heighten the strain. House districts have grown increasingly partisan, more liberal in Democratic districts and more conservative in Republican districts. So when Senate Republicans tack to the center to placate their broader spectrum of voters, conservatives concentrated in Republican House districts are quick to anger.

To stop the hemorrhaging of conservative support, House leaders have taken a hard line against Senate compromise. Appealing to small-government conservatives, they have vowed not to accept any final emergency appropriations plan that spends a penny more than Bush requested for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, hurricane relief and prevention of avian flu. That would mean blocking the construction of a new railroad and a veterans retirement home in Mississippi, erosion control in California, flood relief in Hawaii and billions for drought-stricken farmers.

Massive street demonstrations by illegal immigrants and their supporters against a House-passed bill to get tough on undocumented workers appear to have struck a sympathetic chord with most Americans. A New York Times/CBS poll last week found that 66 percent oppose the House's measure to build hundreds of miles of fences along the southern border. Sixty-one percent said illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years should be given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status. Just 35 percent agreed with the House's position that they should be deported.

But House members say they are convinced that their voters came to a very different conclusion from the marches -- the problem of illegal immigration is even more troubling than they thought, and House Republicans must stand by their position.

House Republicans are also listening to conservatives who were infuriated when GOP leaders reacted to rising gasoline prices by proposing tax increases to pay for gasoline rebates and by suggesting the problem lay with price-gouging by the oil companies.

"I think you're seeing the pressures of the upcoming election really coming to the fore," Brownback said. "But I also think we'll be seeing the troops begin rallying and coming together, I hope real soon."