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Bush Is Facing a Difficult Path on Immigration

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

WASHINGTON, March 23 — In the days before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, immigration policy was going to be President Bush's signature issue. It was central to his thinking as the former governor of a border state, key to his relationship with President Vicente Fox of Mexico and essential in attracting new Hispanic voters to the Republican Party.

Five years later, Mr. Bush has at last realized some momentum on immigration policy, but it is probably not the activity he once anticipated.

He has lost control of his own party on the issue, as many Republicans object to his call for a temporary guest-worker program, insisting instead that the focus be on shutting down the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico. It is not clear how much help he will get from Democrats in an election year.

The issue will come to the floor of the Senate next week, and the debate is shaping up as a free-for-all that will touch on economics, race and national identity.

At the end of next week, Mr. Bush is scheduled to meet with Mr. Fox in Cancún, Mexico. Immigration is likely to be a source of tension in their talks.

In short, Mr. Bush is facing another test of his remaining powers as president.

On Thursday, he called for calm in a White House meeting with groups pressing for changes in American immigration laws.

"I urge members of Congress and I urge people who like to comment on this issue to make sure the rhetoric is in accord with our traditions," the president said.

He added, in a warning to members of Congress, that "the debate must be done in a way that doesn't pit one group of people against another."

The discussion has intensified as Mr. Bush finds himself caught between two of his most important constituencies: business owners and managers on the one hand, conservatives on the other.

Philosophically, the president, whose own sensibility on the issue was shaped by his experience as governor of Texas, says he is committed to a program that meets the needs of business: the creation of a pool of legal foreign workers for industries that have come to rely on low-wage labor.

Mr. Bush also brings to the debate a stated belief that the country benefits from the immigration of hardworking people and their dreams of becoming Americans. He often talks about the United States as a land of immigrants, and on Monday in Cleveland he said that "my only advice for the Congress and for people in the debate is, understand what made America."

But politically, Mr. Bush must satisfy his most conservative supporters. Many of them view illegal immigration as a strain on schools, the health care system and the economy, and some have warned that in their opinion the nation's cultural identity could be washed away by a flood of low-income Spanish-speaking workers.

For now, Mr. Bush is trying to navigate the storm with a proposal that tries to satisfy both groups: a toughened border enforcement plan coupled with a temporary guest-worker program that would allow some of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States to register for legal status and remain here for as long as six years.

"Our government must enforce our borders; we've got plans in place to do so," Mr. Bush said on Thursday. "But part of enforcing our borders is to have a guest-worker program that encourages people to register their

presence so that we know who they are, and says to them, if you're doing a job an American won't do, you're welcome here for a period of time to do that job."

Pollsters say the issue is still fluid among voters, although they expect public opinion to solidify during the coming debate in Congress and as Mr. Bush promotes his plan.

"He's got a very strong position with the bully pulpit," said David Winston, a Republican pollster, "but the dynamic of the issue at this point is that there is consensus around border security, but people have not come to a similar consensus about what to do with the 11 million in the country."

Two years ago, a New York Times/CBS News poll found that two-thirds of those surveyed said immigrants who had entered the country illegally should not be allowed to stay and work in the United States for three years, the initial period of stay in Mr. Bush's proposed guest-worker program. There was also little enthusiasm for any increase in immigration, with a plurality saying immigration should be decreased.

The poll was conducted shortly after Mr. Bush made his first major speech on his immigration plan.

"Many of you here today are Americans by choice, and you have followed in the paths of millions," Mr. Bush told a cheering, chanting crowd packed with Hispanic leaders in the East Room of the White House in January 2004. Every generation of immigrants, he added, "has reaffirmed the wisdom of remaining open to the talents and dreams of the world."

But critics said that Mr. Bush's guest-worker program did not go far enough, and that there was deportation, not a green card, at the end of the process. At the same time, his words angered many conservative Republicans, who said the plan amounted to amnesty.

Mr. Bush dropped his immigration proposals as too risky for his 2004 re-election campaign, but took them up again in 2005. By then, in an effort to calm conservatives, he had switched his tactics, emphasizing the national-security part of the plan.

"We're going to get control of our borders," he vowed in the East Room of the White House in October 2005 as he signed a \$32 billion domestic security bill that had big increases for the Border Patrol.

This year, Mr. Bush has continued to push the issue and is closely watching what happens on Capitol Hill.

The House has passed an immigration bill that includes border security, not a guest-worker program. The action is now in the Senate, where it will resume next week.

There are a rash of competing immigration proposals on both sides, including one from Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, and another from Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts. The majority leader, Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee, has threatened to offer his own border-security-only bill if the Senate cannot come up with legislation on its own.