

McCain Retools Immigration Stance

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WASHINGTON — John McCain faces a dilemma on immigration as he works to persuade conservatives he's tough enough on the issue without erasing his historic appeal to Hispanic voters. Once a crusader for offering the nation's roughly 12 million undocumented immigrants a way to get legal status, McCain now says his first priority is fortifying U.S. borders.

The metamorphosis reflects McCain's intensifying effort to consolidate his support among conservatives, who deride the Arizona senator's past proposals on immigration as offering amnesty to lawbreakers, and bitterly resent his work with Democrats, including Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, on the issue.

Coming off a primary season where his immigration stance was seen as a major liability and GOP opponents hammered him for having an overly permissive approach, McCain is remaking his image with an eye toward the general election.

If he goes too far in the other direction, though, he could alienate the Hispanic voters who he's counting on to siphon support from a Democratic rival in states like Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and to be competitive in California.

"He's focusing on enforcement, and in this community, enforcement means deportation, and that means separating more families, and more racial profiling and more of the incredible hardship that is affecting not just immigrants, but native-born Latinos," said Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza.

McCain infuriated the Republican base when he teamed with GOP moderates like Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa. and Democrats led by Kennedy in 2006 to push legislation -- with strong backing from President Bush -- that would have given illegal immigrants a path to citizenship. That measure died after the House, then dominated by conservatives, passed a bill that dealt only with border security and refused to consider provisions to address undocumented workers who are already in the United States.

The bipartisan group tried again last year -- but this time, McCain kept his distance from the negotiations as he campaigned for president. He rarely showed up for the marathon round of meetings where the plan was shaped and seldom spoke publicly on the effort until a deal had been cut.

That bill, too, ultimately died in the Senate after being branded as amnesty by conservatives and condemned as too punitive by liberals.

Listen to McCain's speeches or look on his campaign web site now, and there's little mention of the fight to give illegal immigrants a way to stay in the U.S. lawfully. He instead emphasizes border security -- the catch phrase of conservatives who scorned his earlier proposals.

It's a difference of emphasis, not a change in stance, Republican strategists say.

"He's in an excellent place with conservatives who are concerned about immigration, because his position -- that he'll secure the border first and have that security certified by the border-state governors, and then we'll go back and deal with the 12 million -- seems to have satisfied most people," said Charlie Black, a McCain adviser.

"He says, 'Look, we got the message -- the American people do not trust us when we say we'll secure the border,'" Black added.

McCain told congressional Republicans in a closed-door meeting recently that he had been badly bruised by his push for immigration reform and had learned the hard way that sealing the border should be his priority.

Republicans who support McCain say he has no choice but to abandon his past approach on immigration in favor of one that causes less consternation among conservatives virulently opposed to providing undocumented people with legal status.

"What kind of an idiot can't figure out the route that you took didn't work? You don't keep charging the center line when you're getting your head bashed in, and John was on this," said former Sen. Trent Lott, R- Miss.

Persuading Republicans that he can be trusted on immigration has been a slow process for McCain, and it's not over yet, Lott added. "I don't know if they're happy yet, but they'll get happier."

Specter predicted that immigration, a main theme of the Republican primaries, wouldn't have much influence on the broader presidential race, and that GOP voters -- even those angry about McCain's immigration stance -- ultimately will turn out to support him.

"I think conservatives will, because the alternative of either Senator Obama or Senator Clinton will persuade Republicans of all political views to support McCain," Specter said.

Tamar Jacoby, who has worked with McCain on immigration overhaul efforts, said he has positioned himself well on the issue, taking the get-tough stance the party faithful espouse while stopping short of repudiating a broader solution that could address the legal status of those who are already here illegally.

"McCain is promising conservatives to do what conservatives most want done, which is

to secure the border. Does that mean he will never go further than that to rationalize the system? No, but he doesn't have to say that," said Jacoby, the president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a coalition pushing for a broad overhaul.

McCain has won re-election in Arizona with large majorities of Latino voters. He has drawn backing from 45 percent of Hispanic Republicans this year -- slightly better than the 39 percent support he got from whites -- according to exit polls from 22 states that have held Republican primaries.

Only one in five Republicans name illegal immigration as the country's top problem, half the number who name the economy but about the same proportion as those who named Iraq. But fewer than three in 10 of those have voted for McCain this year, his worst showing based on issues that concern GOP voters.

"He is obviously aware of where the base is on this issue," said Sara Taylor, a former top political aide to Bush. "His challenge is bridging a communications gap that the base perceives they have with him."

At the same time, Taylor said, McCain's position on immigration has a silver lining for Republicans: "His stance and the way he's communicated it potentially puts a state like California in play."

Hispanic voters there and elsewhere, though, are listening with concern to the same change in tone that has gained McCain points with the GOP base.

"His rhetoric has absolutely shifted, and people have noticed," said Munoz of La Raza, "He's going to have to figure out a way to talk to this community."