

# McCain Says Immigration Reform Should Be Top Priority

By Michael Luo

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SAN JOSE—In yet another sign of his pivoting toward the general election, Senator John McCain said at a roundtable with business leaders here today that comprehensive immigration reform should be a top priority for the next president.

Mr. McCain's willingness to address the issue was striking given how the topic became something of a third-rail for Republican presidential candidates during the primary.

When Mr. McCain's presidential bid stalled last summer, many blamed his advocacy for the immigration reform bill in the Senate, which included a pathway to citizenship for the illegal immigrants already here in the country.

The measure failed last spring after a firestorm of grassroots opposition. The issue became an important touchstone in the Republican primary, as the candidates scrambled to one-up each other in their tough talk on immigration as they sought to appeal to primary voters.

Mr. McCain largely stopped talking about the issue and repeatedly invoked a mantra that he had gotten the message from voters that the borders needed to be secured first, before any solution for the illegal immigrants already here is addressed.

Since he became the presumptive Republican nominee, Mr. McCain has given major speeches on a broad range of issues but has not given one on immigration.

He found a friendly audience, however, here today at a business roundtable held at a Silicon Valley technology firm that included Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, Meg Whitman, the former chief executive officer of eBay who was a leading supporter of Mitt Romney's but has since begun raising money for Mr. McCain, and a host of executives from Silicon Valley firms.

After several of the business leaders complained about the difficulty in obtaining temporary H1B visas for scientists and engineers, something the Senate immigration bill was supposed to address, Mr. McCain expressed regret the measure did not pass, calling it a personal "failure," as well as one by the federal government.

"Senator Kennedy and I tried very hard to get immigration reform, a comprehensive plan, through the Congress of the United States," he said. "It is a federal responsibility and

because of our failure as a federal obligation, we're seeing all these various conflicts and problems throughout our nation as different towns, cities, counties, whatever they are, implement different policies and different programs which makes things even worse and even more confusing."

He added: "I believe we have to secure our borders, and I think most Americans agree with that, because it's a matter of national security. But we must enact comprehensive immigration reform. We must make it a top agenda item if we don't do it before, and we probably won't, a little straight talk, as of January 2009."

Mr. McCain asked others on the panels for suggestions about how to "better mobilize American public opinion" behind the notion of comprehensive immigration reform.

Mr. Schwarzenegger, a strong supporter of immigration reform, chimed in, saying the effort could not be accomplished "piecemeal" and called for lawmakers to summon the "courage to go forward."

"I think all of us have to keep that pressure on Congress," he said.

Later, Mr. McCain took up the topic again, saying the problem of what to do with illegal immigrants already here needs to be solved, saying "they are also God's children, and we have to do it in a human and compassionate fashion," which drew applause from his audience.