



Alabama left behind on immigration, GOP now courting Latino voters with talk of reform

Published: Tuesday, November 13, 2012, 2:43 PM Updated: Tuesday, November 13, 2012, 4:13 PM

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In the days since the election, national GOP leaders appear to have turned away from Alabama and Arizona, no longer promoting a pair of high profile experiments in aggressive immigration enforcement.

And while Republicans in Congress are suddenly talking about immigration reform, for the first time in two years no one in Alabama politics is calling for tougher state statutes.

Sen. Bill Holtzclaw, R-Madison, said Alabama lawmakers accomplished their goal with the state law. "I truly believe if Alabama had not passed HB 56, the U.S. Supreme Court would not have taken up immigration law," said Holtzclaw late last week.

"As far as from the political standpoint, I don't see any other movement with HB 56 or any other plans," said Holtzclaw.

Rep. Mike Ball, R-Madison, said the legislative debate has run its course in Alabama. "Even before the election, the general consensus was 'We've done enough, let the courts work it out,'" he said "It's time for the Congress to have that discussion."

"We've done the best we can. It was a complicated issue."

President Obama last week earned record support among Latino voters, a key demographic in swing states such as Florida.

Two days after the election, House Speaker John Boehner said he was confident Congress could reach a solution, telling **ABC News** that comprehensive immigration reform was "long overdue." Those comments marked a decidedly different approach than the one espoused by presidential hopeful Mitt Romney.

Romney instead during the second debate said: "Self deportation says let people make their own choice." The idea that undocumented immigrants unable to find work would voluntarily leave the country had become popular in Alabama last year.

In Alabama, legislative sponsors Rep. Micky Hammon, R-Decatur, and Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, both used the phrase "self deport" to describe the intent of Alabama's 72-page anti-immigration law. Neither Hammon nor Beason returned calls regarding their plans for immigration law in the coming year.

Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who helped write Alabama's law, also served the Romney campaign as an informal adviser on immigration.

In the end, exit polls showed Romney received just **27 percent of the Latino vote**. In 2004, President George W. Bush won with 44 percent of the Latino vote. **One poll** showed that 31 percent of Latino voters said they were more likely to back Republican candidates if they advocated comprehensive immigration reform.

Even Fox News pundit **Sean Hannity reversed course** two days after the election, saying his position had "evolved" and he was open to a plan that secured the border and also created a pathway to legal status for those already here.

On Sunday on CBS's "**Face the Nation**," Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said "self deportation" is unpopular and will not work. He said if the federal government can secure the border, then undocumented immigrants could "come out of the shadows, get biometrically identified, start paying taxes, [and] pay a fine for the law they broke."

Meanwhile, Jennifer Ardis, spokesperson for Gov. Robert Bentley, said Bentley stands by **comments** made on election day, during a stop in Huntsville, before the presidential results were known. "He's not going to have anything else on immigration," said Ardis late last week. "If you live and work in Alabama, you must do so legally."

Bentley had said he expected no further revisions to state law. "It is illegal to work in any state if you're illegal. It is illegal to be here," said Bentley, who said the "essence" of the state law remained intact.

The U.S. Supreme Court in June did rule on the similar Arizona law, largely finding against the law and holding that immigration policy is primarily the responsibility of the federal government. That ruling enabled the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals to rule on the Alabama law.

Alabama mostly lost in court, too, although key provisions survived in both states. Alabama can order employers to check immigration status of employees through a federal database and local police can conduct immigration checks during traffic stops.

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard called the police checks a victory for Alabama at the time, and has since called Obama's re-election the continuation of a "nightmare." Hubbard spokesman Josh Blades said there were no plans to address immigration in the next session.

In blocking much of the state law, the federal appeals court found that Alabama cannot establish a ban on contracts with illegal immigrants and cannot criminalize harboring and transporting illegal immigrants. Last month, the appeals court rejected Alabama's request for a rehearing on those points.

A second state request for a rehearing is still pending. That challenge involves the collection of immigration data on new public school students, a provision the federal court had blocked. Even Bentley had opposed that section during legislative revisions earlier this year.

In a conversation last month that was initially off the record, then later reported, President Obama told **The Des Moines Register**: "Should I win a second term, a big reason I will win a second term is because the Republican nominee and the Republican Party have so alienated the fastest-growing demographic group in the country, the Latino community."

Mark Kennedy, chairman of the Alabama Democratic Party, last week said he didn't believe that Alabama had been used as an experiment by national Republicans, but rather that the state GOP had been "compromised by the extreme right wing."

"Whether or not members of the Alabama Republican party are going to back up and back down remains to be seen," said Kennedy, adding: "The more attacks on state employees and women and the Latino community, the more opportunities it creates for us in the Democratic Party."

"They may want to continue to be the party of angry white men," he said, "which opens the door for us."

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