

Citizenship for Immigrants Divides Republicans

By [SARA MURRAY](#)

Jeb Bush's newly announced opposition to giving illegal immigrants a shot at U.S. citizenship laid bare a fundamental tension among Republicans as they try to find their comfort zone on the divisive issue.

Democrats have largely pushed to include a path to citizenship in the latest campaign to overhaul immigration laws, and while some Republicans want to embrace that position, others would prefer to create a new class of immigrants who would be granted legal residency but have little chance of becoming full citizens.

[Mr. Bush](#)'s views in this arena get particular scrutiny because the former Florida governor is a potential 2016 presidential contender, because his wife was born and raised in Mexico and because his brother, former President George W. Bush, tried without luck to rally the GOP behind the previous stab at a comprehensive immigration fix.

Jeb Bush's reversal on such a central component, then, underscores the difficulty party leaders face as they try to forge a compromise acceptable to various constituencies.

Immigration Law in America

"It is absolutely vital to the integrity of our immigration system that actions have consequences—in this case, that those who violated the laws can remain but cannot obtain the cherished fruits of citizenship," Mr. Bush and his co-author Clint Bolick wrote in a book released Tuesday, "Immigration Wars."

But in media interviews Tuesday, Mr. Bush seemed to soften his tone, saying his goal was to promote an overhaul of immigration laws. "This is a proposal that we attempted to put out prior to the election, to create a consensus for conservatives to actually get in the game," he told NBC News. "I think we need comprehensive reform. And if there is a path to citizenship that has enough of a realization that we have to respect the rule of law, then so be it."

Mr. Bush's comments seemed to reflect that GOP leaders moved more quickly than many expected in considering an immigration overhaul after Democrats won the November presidential election.

A bipartisan plan in the Senate explicitly calls for a path to citizenship for the roughly 11 million people in the U.S. illegally. But many Republican lawmakers, including those working on legislation in the House of Representatives, have been evasive about whether they would support citizenship.

Virginia Rep. Bob Goodlatte, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee that is expected to consider such legislation, is among the Republicans who publicly support some type of legal status for those currently in the U.S. but stop short of embracing a route to citizenship.

It still isn't clear how far apart the two GOP camps will end up. The Senate plan—crafted in part by Republican Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona—would grant probationary legal status to illegal immigrants. To gain a green card, which offers a step toward citizenship, they would need to pay taxes, pass a background check and line up behind people who had applied to the system legally.

The Senate option could ultimately win favor with some Republicans who have ruled out a creating a new or additional path to citizenship but who sometimes say privately that they see promise in the course laid out in the Senate proposal.

"A special pathway to citizenship is off the table," Rep. Raul Labrador (R., Idaho) said in a recent interview. But "when I talk to members of the group in the Senate, they're saying that we're both saying the same thing."

Another possibility is the creation of a new class of immigrants who have legal residency but little or no chance of becoming American citizens. That approach, embodied in Mr. Bush's stance, drew criticism from some Democrats this week.

"His opinion on immigration is not evolving, it's devolving," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D., Nev.) said of Mr. Bush's about-face Tuesday. Mr. Reid pointed to Mr. Rubio, a possible 2016 candidate, as a leader on the issue.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.), the assistant majority leader, who is working on the Senate effort, said he didn't expect Mr. Bush's shifting stance to affect talks on a bill. The bipartisan Senate group, which planned to unveil legislation in March, now appears poised to do so in April, Mr. Durbin said.

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