

Conservative groups back immigration reform

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High-profile conservative groups are taking on an unexpected cause: passing immigration reform.

A diverse mix of the Washington consultant class is cutting TV ads, revving up the grassroots and advising lawmakers on messaging and strategy in hopes of getting a bill across the finish line this year.

The surprising effort is a new element to the immigration debate — and one that could influence Republican lawmakers reluctant to support the cause.

The next few weeks will be a critical phase for the immigration fight, as lawmakers return to Washington from a two-week recess to face mounting pressure from advocates on both sides.

“We’re doing it to make sure...that Republican congressman and senators feel comfortable,” said American for Tax Reform’s Grover Norquist in an interview. “They look out and hear the guys on talk radio, and they go ‘Oh my goodness, everybody out there thinks this. That’s not necessarily where I was, but I guess if everybody thinks that way, I’ll either be quiet or go along, or I’ll listen to them so they can convince me.’ They’re now hearing the other side of the issue.”

Conservatives say the strongest case in favor of immigration reform is an economic one, not values-based, arguing that an expanded pool of legal workers will boost the economy — the message that tests best in focus groups.

The Hispanic Leadership Forum is in on the action. In March, the group [aired ads](#) promoting an immigration overhaul. A new campaign will be on televisions across the country in the coming months.

Jennifer Korn, the group’s executive director, formerly George W. Bush’s director of Hispanic affairs, has been meeting with House Republican lawmakers to explain the benefits of an immigration overhaul.

“We believe immigration reform is a conservative issue and we’re heartened to see a significantly improved dialogue and growing conservative support base,” Korn said.

The downtowners say meetings have been well received. Meanwhile, Senate and House aides continue to iron out details of their immigration packages. Senior House aides said they didn’t

expect to see a bill next week and it's unclear when the Senate Gang of Eight will unveil its package.

The legislation has faced bumps this week. The construction industry balked at a provision for future low-skilled worker visas, which was hashed out by labor groups and the Chamber of Commerce. Other outside business groups are also showing frustration at the size of the visa program.

But the familiar Washington set isn't waiting for legislation.

U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, and the Hispanic Leadership Network, an offshoot of the American Action Network, the Boehner-aligned super PAC, have been huddling on how best to play on their inside the Beltway and grassroots network. Business coalition ImmigrationWorks USA and National Immigration Forum are also in on the effort.

Representatives are meeting weekly, cutting advertisements and helping grease the skids for a massive overhaul of the nation's immigration laws.

The push comes as conservative critics have also begun to ramp up their campaign to scuttle the immigration overhaul, which makes efforts like these key if Congress is going to succeed in passing immigration legislation. Numbers USA is already up with ads in Alaska and South Carolina targeting Sens. Mark Begich and Lindsey Graham and they expect to go up with more ads in the near future.

Among Republicans, skepticism abounds when it comes to tearing up the nation's immigration laws, and giving a new pathway to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants.

New groups like Republicans for Immigration Reform, the super PAC started by former U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez have also sprung up. The super PAC is focused on supporting pro-immigration reform Republicans.

And in Washington, they're coordinating with groups like ATR, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, ImmigrationWorks USA and the National Immigration Forum on how to help Republicans get a bill passed.

The National Immigration Forum, for its part, is helping ramp up conservative grassroots support in the Southeast, West and Midwest. As part of their efforts, ATR's Norquist has added a helping hand, being on a coalition panel in Austin, Texas, earlier this year.

"Through this work an entirely new front has been opened up of support from the right on immigration reform," the Forum's Ali Noorani said. "In the past it's been dominated by the extremists. Now you have rationale conservatives talking about what the right thing to do is."

The coordination among these groups is so deep that when Resurgent Republic, a conservative polling group, hosted immigration focus groups in South Carolina and Iowa, Hispanic Leadership Network had a representative there to hear what Republican primary voters think of key policy items like the pathway to citizenship. Resurgent Republic briefed others following the release of its results.

Resurgent Republic's Luke Frans said the big takeaway in the focus groups was the need to focus on the economic arguments, the process for legalization and respecting the values of the Hispanic community are important for Republicans talking about immigration reform.

"Republican voters in our groups strongly supported legal immigration, which is significant regardless of where Republicans are on this," Frans said, who said immigration reform is on top of the group's priority list right now.

<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/conservatives-immigration-reform-89649.html>