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Dems' tough new immigration pitch

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June 10, 2010

Long pilloried for being soft on illegal immigration<<http://topics.politico.com/index.cfm/topic/Immigration>>, top Democratic officials have concluded there's only one way they can hope to pass a comprehensive immigration bill: Talk more like Republicans<<http://topics.politico.com/index.cfm/topic/Republicans>>.

They're seizing on the work of top Democratic Party operatives who, after a legislative defeat in 2007, launched a multiyear polling project to craft an enforcement-first, law-and-order, limited-compassion pitch that now defines the party's approach to the issue.

The 12 million people who unlawfully reside the country? Call them "illegal immigrants," not "undocumented workers," the pollsters say.

Strip out the empathy<<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0610/38271.html>>, too. Democrats used to offer immigrants "an earned path to citizenship" so hardworking people trying to support their families could "come out of the shadows." To voters, that sounded like a gift, the operatives concluded.

Now, Democrats emphasize that it's "unacceptable" to allow 12 million people to live in America illegally and that the government must "require" them to register and "get right with the law." That means three things: "Obey our laws, learn our language and pay our taxes" — or face deportation.

"We lost control of the message in the 2007 debate," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a pro-immigrant rights group that worked with Center for American Progress founder John Podesta on the messaging overhaul.

"We were on the inside fighting off amendments, and the other side was jacking up their opponents and getting Rush and Hannity and O'Reilly on fire about this. We needed to do a much better job on communications."

President Barack Obama uses the buzzwords. So does the congressional leadership. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), author of the Democratic immigration plan, scolds advocates who refer to illegal immigrants as "undocumented workers."

The revamped message may not face the real-world test anytime soon. The appetite to take on immigration before the November elections has faded<<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0610/38006.html>> as the political environment for incumbents grows increasingly hostile. Supporters of comprehensive reform plan to continue to exert pressure, but privately they say legislative action will need to wait until next year.

Even then, the poll-tested words and phrases will only go so far if Democrats fail to exert discipline and unify behind the get-tough message<<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0610/38345.html>>. And at this point, not all immigration reform advocates have bought into the rhetorical hard line, which aims squarely at winning the political center. Even Sharry, who spearheaded the effort, declines the advice of pollsters to excise “undocumented workers” from his lexicon, saying it feels too much like it plays into conservative efforts to “dehumanize” immigrants.

“When [voters] hear ‘undocumented worker,’ they hear a liberal euphemism, it sounds to them like liberal code,” said Drew Westen, a political consultant who has helped Sharry hone the message through dial testing. “I am often joking with leaders of progressive organizations and members of Congress, ‘If the language appears fine to you, it is probably best not to use it. You are an activist, and by definition, you are out of the mainstream.’”

The shift in language is one of the more dramatic changes in the Democratic strategy since foes of comprehensive immigration outmaneuvered the party in 2007, dealing an embarrassing legislative defeat that set back the cause years. But the tougher tone is only one outcome of a broader effort by Democrats and immigration reform advocates to prepare for the next round of battle.

The country’s largest labor unions<<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0610/38343.html>>, which fought each other the last time around, are now on the same team. The Service Employees International Union mended its differences on the issue with the AFL-CIO, which worked against the bill in 2007 and prompted several pro-labor Democratic senators to vote against it. The upshot is a Democratic message with a more combative approach toward employers that “hire illegal immigrants to drive down wages.”

Lacking a coordinated campaign, advocates organized as if they were managing an election<<http://www.politico.com/2010/>>. Sharry left his post as executive director of the National Immigration Forum to start America’s Voice, which describes itself as the communications and rapid response arm of the movement. Angela Kelley, an authority on immigration, signed on to lead the lobbying effort through the Center for American Progress.

And a network of community organizations, advocacy groups and labor unions organized under three umbrellas to push citizenship and voter mobilization drives, raise money and develop a field campaign. But first, Podesta and Sharry assembled a roster of boldfaced Democratic pollsters — Stan Greenberg, Celinda Lake, Guy Molyneux — to figure out how the party would ever get away from one of the most devastating GOP lines of attack, that a comprehensive immigration plan amounted to “amnesty” for illegals.

The results made Greenberg a convert.

His surveys of swing districts in 2006 and 2007 concluded that Democrats took a political risk by discussing immigration. Greenberg thought frustration with immigrants would spawn an environment similar to the welfare backlash in the 1990s and that Democrats needed to get tough on border security before talking about citizenship.

But polling that Greenberg, Lake and Molyneux conducted in 2008 proved to Greenberg that Democrats could talk in a way that won over voters. It needed to sound tough and pragmatic, but not overly punitive, the pollsters said. The message beat the amnesty charge in their polling.

“There was more and more evidence that there were ways to address the issue,” Greenberg said. “I also came to believe the country wanted to do comprehensive reform. ... People want this to be brought under control, and they know you can’t just expel people.”

The most significant shift in language involves the path to citizenship. Pollsters determined that Democrats sounded as though they wanted to reward illegal immigrants, even though lawmakers almost always laid out that requirements and delays that would precede citizenship.

“It comes back to this idea: We give permission; we set the terms; it’s under our control; and if you meet those conditions, you are us, welcome to America,” Westen said of the new frame.

This time around, the message starts with a pledge to secure the borders and crack down on employers. It then moves to this: “It is unacceptable to have 12 million people in our country who are outside the system. We must require illegal immigrants to register for legal status, pay their taxes, learn English and pass criminal background checks to remain in the country and work toward citizenship. Those who have a criminal record or refuse to register should be deported.”

To get any idea of how the language has infiltrated official Washington, here is what Obama said last month at a Cinco de Mayo celebration at the White House:

“The way to fix our broken immigration system is through common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform. That means responsibility from government to secure our borders, something we have done and will continue to do. It means responsibility from businesses that break the law by undermining American workers and exploiting undocumented workers — they’ve got to be held accountable. It means responsibility from people who are living here illegally. They’ve got to admit that they broke the law and pay taxes and pay a penalty, and learn English, and get right before the law — and then get in line and earn their citizenship.”

Bob Dane, communications director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, predicted the new frame would have limited impact once both sides are fully engaged on the issue.

“They are scrambling to sugarcoat a breakfast cereal that nobody wants to eat,” Dane said.