

G.O.P. Opposition to Immigration Law Is Falling Away

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WASHINGTON — Republican opposition to legalizing the status of millions of illegal immigrants is crumbling in the nation’s capital as leading lawmakers in the party scramble to halt eroding support among Hispanic voters — a shift that is providing strong momentum for an overhaul of immigration laws.

Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, a Tea Party Republican, on Tuesday became the latest to embrace a more welcoming approach, declaring to the nation’s 11 million illegal immigrants that if they want to work in America, “then we will find a place for you.”

While he never uttered the word “citizenship” and said a secure border must come first, Mr. Paul strongly implied that citizenship would eventually be available to them.

Republican sentiment for a more liberal immigration policy has been building in the aftermath of last year’s election. But Mr. Paul’s comments provided strong new evidence that the rising generation of conservative leaders is turning against the Republican argument that those who enter the country illegally should be denied the chance to become permanent residents.

“Prudence, compassion and thrift all point us toward the same goal: bringing these workers out of the shadows and into becoming and being taxpaying members of society,” Mr. Paul said in a speech before the [United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce](#).

The remarks are a departure for Mr. Paul, who as a Senate candidate in 2010 called for an electronic fence and helicopter stations to help secure the border with Mexico. His new message follows the publication on Monday of a blistering report from the Republican National Committee that urged the party’s members to champion an immigration overhaul that Hispanics can embrace or risk seeing the party shrinking “to its core constituencies only.”

The report left vague, however, just what that “comprehensive” overhaul would include.

Mr. Paul joins Senator Marco Rubio of Florida in a growing list of leading conservatives to urge a new approach on immigration. Mr. Rubio is part of a bipartisan group of eight senators who are working to create an immigration overhaul that can earn support from both parties.

Some Republicans, including Mr. Paul, remain wary of any plan that would move illegal immigrants ahead of those who are in the country legally when it comes to getting full citizenship.

That view is particularly strong in the House, where Speaker John A. Boehner on Tuesday dodged the question of whether a separate, bipartisan group in his chamber working on immigration legislation would back a path to citizenship. But the House plan is expected to include some way for illegal immigrants to gain legal status.

Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama, released a letter on Tuesday urging the Senate Judiciary Committee to move slowly, explaining to a group of reporters that there is no “moral or legal responsibility to reward somebody who entered the country illegally.”

But the new political landscape in Washington contrasts sharply with just a few years ago, when most Republicans derided the idea of legalized status for illegal immigrants as a form of amnesty that would simply encourage more people to cross the border illegally.

The overall shift in sentiment means that four months after Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, made “self-deportation” the party’s official position on immigration — and lost decisively to President Obama, especially among Hispanic voters — top party strategists and lawmakers of all ideological stripes are racing to change course.

“Now, you have the standard-bearer of the Tea Party saying that we should welcome undocumented immigrants as Americans,” said Frank Sharry, executive director of [America’s Voice](#), a pro-immigration group. “It’s one of the fastest turnarounds I’ve seen on any issue. It’s mind-blowing.”

Bob Dane, a spokesman for the [Federation for American Immigration Reform](#), which opposes a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, conceded Tuesday that “it certainly appears to be settled if one assumes that the inside Republican elite strategists represent the core of the [Republican Party](#).”

But it remains to be seen how Republican voters and conservative activists across the country will respond to proposals that allow illegal immigrants to live in America and compete legally for jobs. Mr. Dane’s group is meeting with 52 talk radio hosts in Washington next month for a two-day session intended to bolster opposition to the idea.

“Amnesty is that which rewards lawbreaking,” Mr. Dane said. “An amnesty bill is going to split the party. Workers are going to go crazy.”

The fact that Mr. Paul never used the word “citizenship” in his nearly 18-minute speech on Tuesday reflects the narrow line that many Republicans appear to be walking in supporting a major immigration overhaul.

When initial reports about Mr. Paul’s speech suggested that he was backing full citizenship for illegal immigrants, his staff quickly corrected the record, saying that he supports “a quicker path to normalization, not citizenship.”

But the political climate has moderated, and many Republicans are being forced to accept, if not outright embrace, some form of legalization for the illegal immigrants already in the country.

“I think they’ve found themselves on the road to Damascus, or they understand that this issue is very, very important,” said Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, who is part of the bipartisan group in the Senate working on immigration legislation.

Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina and another member of the Senate group of eight, put it more bluntly: “I just think the 2012 election was a bit of a wake-up call.”

The group of eight senators is finalizing a provision that would allow the 11 million illegal immigrants to reach full citizenship in 13 years — with a 10-year wait for a green card and 3 more years until citizenship.

No formal immigration legislative proposal currently exists, and members of Congress have yet to really sell their constituents on a pathway to legalization or citizenship. Lawmakers, aides and immigration advocates say that the citizenship component will be the largest obstacle to gathering support for a final bill, particularly among the conservative base.

Mr. Boehner, referring to the bipartisan group in the House working on immigration legislation, described it as “essentially” ready.

“This is just the beginning of the process,” he said. “There’s a lot of education to be done.”

Though the House group, like the one in the Senate, has yet to release its legislation, Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, the No. 2 House Democrat, said Tuesday that the group would announce it “in the near term” and that it would include a path to citizenship. Democrats in the group say they would refuse to sign on to any plan that does not include an eventual path to citizenship.

The Senate group is aiming to release its proposals in the second week of April, after lawmakers return from Easter break. A week later, as part of Mr. Dane’s event, activists, sheriffs, cattle ranchers and others will fan out across Capitol Hill to lobby against the legislation.

Their message, he said, is aimed directly at lawmakers like Mr. Paul: “Forget about politics. Forget about trying to win voters. Stand on principles.”

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