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# GOP Optimists Challenge Common Wisdom on Immigration

By [Laura Meckler](#)

It's easy to find people in Washington who say an immigration overhaul is dead, at least for the year. Finding optimists on the matter is harder.

But there are a few Republicans out there who think the Republican House will change course and take up immigration before the November election, despite arguments inside the party that the GOP should remain focused on unifying issues such as health care.

As we note in today's paper, it's a [debate inside the party with enormous implications for the 2016 presidential elections](#), when the Hispanic vote is expected to grow even larger and more influential.

The question is whether the House might be willing to take up the issue this spring or summer, after the bulk of Republican primaries are over. The reasoning is that politically, House Republicans are most worried about primaries, where many fear being challenged by an opponent claiming to be more conservative. Taking up immigration could make it harder to beat back those challenges.

“Once Republican primary season is over, there is an opportunity to tackle immigration reform front and center,” said Republican strategist Ron Bonjean, a former top House aide.

There are political reasons to hold off even longer. Republicans have a tailwind going into the general election in November, and many Republicans don't want to take on an issue that will divide the party and potentially help Democrats. When House Speaker [John Boehner](#) presented House Republicans with his ideas for tackling immigration, few disagreed with him on substance, but several objected to the “timing” of a debate this year.

Others object to the immigration overhaul on policy grounds. Some say the U.S. shouldn't bring in more workers to compete with Americans, particularly at a time of high unemployment. Some say it's wrong to give legal status or citizenship rights to people who broke the law to come or stay in the United States, as backers would like.

Still, a few leading Republicans think there's a chance that Mr. Boehner may change course and bring the issue to the floor this spring or summer. Business, religious and law enforcement interests are among those pushing for the overhaul as a way to rationalize immigration policy and aid those now living here illegally.

People who favor moving ahead this year are “keeping their mouths shut until after the primaries,” said John Feehery, another GOP strategist and veteran of Capitol Hill. “It’s going to happen. Not because lobbyists in Washington say it should happen but because influential people think there’s a broken system that needs to be fixed.”

The strongest political argument for moving forward is demographic. In 2012, President Obama lost the white vote by 20 points — the largest margin on record for a winning presidential candidate. But white voters represented their smallest share of the overall electorate in history, and Mr. Obama won a second term on the strength of the votes of Hispanics and other minorities.

House Republicans are largely insulated from those demographic changes in the country because so many of their districts are overwhelmingly white. As a result, they don’t have a personal stake in national elections, said **Jason Cabel Roe**, a California-based Republican consultant.

“We have created a political segregation from those nonwhite voters,” he said.

He added: “Our clients pay us to get them elected. They don’t pay us to lay a foundation for Republican hegemony.”

So getting the House to change course will be enormously difficult, he and other Republicans say.

“It is not possible for a national political party to get its members in the House and Senate or its candidates to create a governing agenda designed around a race in 2016,” said longtime GOP pollster **Bill McInturff**, who directs the WSJ/NBC News poll along with Democratic pollster Fred Yang. Mr. McInturff thinks the party would be smart to tackle immigration now but doesn’t think that’s likely. “All candidates live in the ‘here and now’ ... We are watching a rational and predictable process of candidates framing an election message designed for only one purpose, to win this November’s election.”

Mr. Feehery agrees that it won’t be easy. He says political short-term thinking is why it’s so difficult to get Congress to tackle all sorts of hard issues, including immigration as well as changes to entitlement programs like Social Security.

“It’s hard to get people to look too far into the future,” he said. “We’re all kind of frogs living in an ever-increasing boiling pot of water. But right now, it’s only kind of hot.”

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