

The GOP's Immigration Dilemma

By Laura Meckler

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Sen. Lindsey Graham had just explained how his immigration overhaul plan would secure the border and crack down on employers who hire illegal residents.

But when he asked a luncheon of the Cherokee County Republican Party what should happen to the millions already in the U.S., one woman yelled back, "Send them home!"

It is the kind of response that Mr. Graham, an architect of a bipartisan plan that would provide a path to legal status for undocumented workers, has come to expect in his home state. It is also the kind of reception that neatly encapsulates the dilemma the Republican Party faces as it shapes its future: Make the GOP more welcoming to the nation's swelling—and decisively Democratic—Hispanic population and risk the ire of a chunk of its most fervent supporters; don't and watch Democrats keep winning elections on the strength of Latino votes.

"Can we just be honest with each other?" Mr. Graham responded to the woman. Most people here illegally have established roots, many with children and grandchildren who were born in America, he said. "How many of you would sit on the sidelines and watch your grandmother get up and go?"

Sen. Graham has become one of the leading proponents of overhauling the immigration system and, inside his party, sometimes a lonely voice. He is up for re-election next year in one of the most conservative states in the union, where efforts to let the 11 million people in the U.S. illegally stay here—a cornerstone of overhaul plans—are often seen as misguided amnesty.

Of the eight senators who helped craft the leading bipartisan immigration framework, Mr. Graham is the only one seeking re-election this cycle. A GOP primary challenge against the senator has long been expected, and now the group Numbers USA, which advocates reducing immigration, says it plans to run several hundred thousand dollars in anti-Graham TV and radio ads beginning this week.

Working to advance the legislation, Mr. Graham and Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.) plan to meet with President Barack Obama to discuss immigration on Tuesday.

Mr. Graham's experience has implications for his party. GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney, who staked out a hard line on immigration during the Republican primaries, won the non-Hispanic white vote by 20 percentage points. But he lost the White House because he did so poorly with the growing share of minority votes, garnering just 27% of the Hispanic vote.

After that, the political calculus shifted fast for Republicans. The day after the election, House Speaker John Boehner said that a comprehensive approach to immigration legislation was "long overdue" and expressed confidence that he could find common ground with Democrats. Last month, Sen. Marco Rubio, son of Cuban immigrants and a favorite of the tea-party movement, signed onto the bipartisan Senate plan and began working to sell it to conservatives.

But the party is hardly unified on the matter. "We know that a ready amnesty tends to be an invitation to more illegal entries," Sen. Jeff Sessions (R., Ala.) said in an interview. A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll last month found just 33% of Republicans support a proposal to let workers in the U.S. illegally apply for legal status.

For House Republicans, the issue is particularly treacherous. Attracting Hispanic votes is an imperative for presidential candidates, but most House Republicans represent overwhelmingly white districts safely in GOP hands; the most serious political threat they will face is a primary challenge from someone more conservative.

Mr. Graham tries to counter the vulnerability his immigration stance creates by repeatedly emphasizing his points of disagreement with President Obama. He has been Congress' most vocal critic of the administration's handling of the murder of the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi, Libya, and he has played a key role in delaying the confirmation of defense secretary nominee Chuck Hagel.

He also has tried to toughen up his immigration stance. He has in the past proposed amending the Constitution so that babies born in the U.S. are no longer automatically citizens, though he hasn't pushed for such a step in current negotiations with his colleagues.

His balancing act reflects the broad pressures within a Republican Party that has long wavered between those who see immigration offering social and economic benefits to the country, and those who see illegal immigration threatening American jobs, security and culture.

Washington's last comprehensive overhaul, which included legal status for some three million illegal immigrants, was championed by conservative icon President Ronald Reagan in 1986. Less than a decade later, California's Republican Gov. Pete Wilson ignited an enduring backlash among Hispanic voters by championing a ballot initiative that barred illegal immigrants from health care, education and other social services. President George W. Bush, who attracted 44% of the Hispanic vote in 2004, tried to repair the damage to his party in his second term, pushing unsuccessfully for immigration overhaul.

Now, in the wake of last year's election, more Republicans are arguing anew that they will never make political inroads with Hispanic voters if the party doesn't ease anti-immigrant rhetoric and embrace legislation that this rapidly growing community wants. They say that Hispanics are conservative on other issues, such as abortion, and would vote Republican if the GOP wasn't seen as a barrier on immigration. But other Republicans fear the long-term politics of granting citizenship will cut against them, arguing that legalized Hispanics are likely to become Democratic voters.

Mr. Graham, 57 years old, came to the immigration issue through the back door. Most Republicans involved in the issue hail from border states, but Mr. Graham's involvement came by virtue of his friendship with Sen. McCain, the GOP point man in the Senate during the Bush push for an immigration overhaul.

Mr. Graham realized early how hard it would be for any Republican to win the White House without substantial Latino support. He said in a recent interview he thought passage of an immigration bill would help Mr. McCain win in 2008, when he was the GOP presidential nominee.

But then, he said: "I started getting interested in the issue from an intellectual proposition, the different moving parts. And I saw how broken our immigration system was when it comes to economic growth. We've got the dumbest immigration system."

At the same time, Mr. Graham says he sympathizes with immigrants who came to the U.S. for a better life and are struggling to make it. His parents, who owned a bar, died when he was in college, leaving him to raise his 13-year-old sister.

"Any time you've been knocked down as a person and life kind of throws you a curve ball, it certainly puts you in a position of understanding," he said. "I don't think you have to have much of a stretch as a human being to understand that the illegal immigrant life is a tough life."

Angela Maria Kelley, an immigration expert at the Democratic-leaning think tank Center for American Progress, says she has long admired Mr. Graham's stance on immigration but was baffled when he spoke out for changing the birthright citizenship law. Now, she said, "I feel like the old Lindsey is back."

In South Carolina, the Hispanic population is growing but still is only about 5%, compared with 17% nationally. Still, the state is home to big international manufacturers who tend to be supporters of more open immigration. And parts of the state rely on tourism and agriculture, industries that often lean on immigrant labor.

But many in the state have been hostile to immigration and, particularly, efforts to legalize undocumented workers. During the Bush years, talk radio host Rush Limbaugh derided the Bush plan as "Graham-nesty," a term that caught on with home-state bloggers.

It became an issue in Mr. Graham's 2008 re-election race, though he easily beat back a poorly funded challenger in the GOP primary. With only token Democratic opposition in the general election, Mr. Graham spent much of 2008 traveling with Mr. McCain, who lost the White House to Mr. Obama.

After Mr. Obama took office, Mr. McCain prepared to face a serious primary challenge in 2010 as he ran for re-election to the Senate. Mr. Graham found himself the only Senate Republican left willing to work on a bipartisan immigration bill.

"I wanted to let people know who gave me such crap that they weren't going to intimidate me," he says. "Part of it was just being prideful. Once you get scared of your job, then you're no good to anybody."

He held months of talks with Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, but the issue never advanced, partly because Mr. Obama was focused on other matters and partly because there was no apparent GOP support beyond Mr. Graham.

Then came the 2012 presidential race, where GOP primary candidates clashed over who was tougher against illegal immigrants. Mr. Graham saw trouble ahead.

He said he tried to create an opportunity for his party's nominee, Mr. Romney, to shift his position. The plan was for prominent Republicans to put out a set of principles for immigration legislation that would be attractive to the Hispanic community. Mr. Romney would be asked, and he could endorse them. It didn't work.

"The campaign didn't want to go down that road. They didn't want to be seen as flip-flopers, I guess," Mr. Graham said. Mr. Romney couldn't be reached for comment.

Now Mr. Graham faces political challenges of his own. Back home, he has opened himself up to attacks from the right, and not just on immigration. He was also the only Republican working on a Senate climate change bill during Mr. Obama's first term. He speaks freely about his admiration of the late liberal lion Sen. Ted Kennedy, and what he learned from him about legislating. And he voted to confirm Mr. Obama's two Supreme Court nominees, arguing that the president is entitled to his picks unless they are unqualified.

It all feeds skepticism of him in a state where tea-party conservatives have promised a primary challenge for 2014.

"It's just a real betrayal. We thought when we sent him from the House to the Senate that we were electing a real conservative, and he's proved to be anything but," said Dan Cassidy, a political consultant from Taylors, S.C.

Numbers USA, the group pushing for less immigration, hopes its South Carolina ad campaign on immigration, along with a campaign of encouraging protest faxes to Mr. Graham's office, will either persuade him to change his mind or imperil him in next year's election. "All of this makes Graham very vulnerable with South Carolina voters," said the group's founder, Roy Beck.

Nobody has emerged yet to challenge Mr. Graham, and he caught a break when South Carolina's other senator, Jim DeMint, also a Republican, resigned, giving Graham opponents an alternate seat to target. But Mr. Graham says he assumes he will face a serious race and had \$4.3 million in the bank in September.

Preparing for his race, Mr. Graham has spent a lot of his time working to persuade conservatives in South Carolina to see the immigration issue differently. En route to Gaffney in his 2005 Ford Crown Victoria, where papers are strewn about and snack remnants lie on the floor, he said his chief goal is to make "the politics of problem-solving on immigration acceptable" to conservatives.

Upon arrival, he pitched his immigration plan in two local TV interviews. He then worked the room, greeting local Republicans, including one man who handed him a paper that he said was "Obama's birth certificate from Kenya." "Well, I don't agree with you," Mr. Graham said, quickly moving on.

Mr. Graham got some help from Glenn McCall, a South Carolina representative to the Republican National Committee who spoke first. Mr. McCall serves on a five-person RNC committee examining the party's failings in the last election.

He was once an opponent of the immigration bill Mr. Graham is pushing but told the luncheon group that change is imperative if the party is to compete in future elections. He also warned against talk radio that seeks to keep "us all riled up."

In his own remarks, Sen. Graham stressed his conservative credentials on other issues, in addition to discussing immigration. Not everyone was persuaded, including Rae Gilmore, 70, the woman who shouted "send them home." She said she would like to see a challenger to Mr. Graham next year.

"I'm sorry, why should these people, because they're Hispanics, be given special privileges?" she said. "If you do something illegal, you go to jail."

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