

Dallas Morning News:

Immigration measure hits a wall in the House

By Todd Gillman

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Whatever momentum an immigration overhaul had coming out of the Senate, it hit a wall in the House. And gentle prodding from George W. Bush made little difference last week as House Republicans plotted strategy.

Only a handful face political pressure in their own districts to cave on the most contentious elements of immigration policy. Thus the thud that met Bush's plea for a "benevolent spirit" and progress.

"We care what people back home say, not what some former president says," Kansas Rep. Tim Huelskamp said.

If demands from business groups and evangelical leaders haven't turned it around in the House, the 43rd president wasn't likely to either. Still, immigration advocates welcomed Bush's input.

"He was restrained in how he talked about it, but it garnered huge attention," said Frank Sharry, executive director at America's Voice Education Fund. "The party's reputation for intolerance has hurt them in elections. Immigration reform is an important part of the modernization project."

The White House and Senate want a "comprehensive" deal that allows eventual citizenship and immediate legal status for millions of people in the country without permission.

Republican leaders, including elder statesmen such as Bush, understand the party's existential risk should their side quash progress. In Wednesday's House GOP strategy session, Speaker John Boehner made clear that inaction is a bad option, a point echoed by the party's last vice presidential nominee, Rep. Paul Ryan.

But hard-liners wouldn't be swayed.

"You know House Republicans — we're a pretty independent group," said Iowa Rep. Steve King, a leader among the security-first, amnesty-never bloc.

Immigrant advocates argue that those who resist immigration reform are on the wrong side of history. The Hispanic population is growing fast. In Texas, Democrats eagerly await the day when demographics combines with GOP alienation to put the state within their grasp.

But in a sense, Obama and Bush have been on the wrong side of history. Rather than an anomaly, failure to achieve "comprehensive immigration reform" has been the norm for decades.

"A lot of us worked hard to see if we couldn't find common ground. It didn't work," Bush said six years ago last month, conceding defeat after the Senate killed his second push for an overhaul.

Bush set aside an early attempt in 2001 after the Sept. 11 attacks. His push for a guest worker program in 2004 fell victim to election year politics and a conservative backlash.

An effort the next year by Sens. John McCain and Edward Kennedy failed. Then as now, House members insisted on putting enforcement first.

Bush's 2007 effort likewise fell flat, even though it hinged on a crackdown at the border and in the workplace.

Many Republicans shun Bush's advice, blaming some of their political troubles on his departures from conservative dogma on issues such as spending and immigration.

As for Obama, he was quick to shelve his first-term campaign promise to pursue reform. Yet hope springs eternal.

"The laws governing the immigration system aren't working. The system is broken," Bush said Wednesday in Dallas, in a rare foray into current events. "I don't intend to get involved in the politics or the specifics of policy, but I do hope there is a positive resolution to the debate."

Days earlier, in Africa, he asserted that the timing was ripe for a deal because "good policy yields good politics."

Immigrant advocates welcomed his voice, even if it had little impact where they most need it, among House conservatives.

"The House Republicans are under enormous pressure from the right, from the center and from the left," Sharry said.

The White House certainly welcomed the advocacy from Bush.

"That's a position he has long held, to his credit, and that he pushed for as president," Obama spokesman Jay Carney said.

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