

Immigration reform may be on horizon

By Jason Buch

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Boosted by the overwhelming support of Hispanics for President [Barack Obama](#) on Election Day, activists on both sides of the political divide see an opportunity to reform the nation's immigration laws.

Prominent voices in both parties say immigration was the issue that pushed Hispanic voters away from former Massachusetts Gov. [Mitt Romney](#), and that coming to the middle on the sticky subject is important to winning their support.

“It's not the main issue with Latinos, but it is the core issue that allows a candidate to either be friendly or unfriendly to the Latino population as a whole,” said [Lionel Sosa](#), a San Antonio Republican consultant who has worked on a number of high-profile campaigns, including Arizona Sen. [John McCain](#)'s 2008 presidential bid and the campaigns of [George H.W. Bush](#) and [George W. Bush](#).

Latinos' top issues tend to be things like education, jobs and opportunity, Sosa said.

“If you have a strident, tough immigration policy that seems unfriendly, then it's very hard to get Latinos to listen to you about anything else,” he said. “If you're saying that young Latinos who lived here most of their lives ... cannot stay, then you are saying, ‘Latino, I don't really want you around.’”

Obama's decision to grant temporary work permits to hundreds of thousands of young immigrants in the country illegally, a program announced this summer called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, helped make up for his broken promise to pass comprehensive immigration reform, Sosa said.

That position was bolstered this week when [Lake Research Partners](#) and the [Tarrance Group](#) released a poll that found 77 percent of Latino voters support deferred action.

Fifty-seven percent of all voters favor the policy, the poll found.

Sosa joins a chorus of Republicans who say Hispanics tend to side with the GOP on issues like abortion and fiscal responsibility, but are turned off by harsh anti-immigration rhetoric that's perceived as racism.

Conservative pundit [Sean Hannity](#) and House Speaker [John Boehner](#) last week said it's time for the country to change its immigration laws, at the same time calling for more money to be spent along the border.

As they celebrated Obama's re-election and the news that they'll still be able to apply for work permits under deferred action, young immigrant activists also took credit for giving the president a bump with the Latino electorate.

“We think that immigration, especially dreamers, who are fighting for the Dream Act and fighting for administrative relief, was a big reason for Latino, low propensity voters, to turn out for this election,” said [Carolina Canizales](#), a 22-year-old native of Mexico and a [University of Texas at San Antonio](#) graduate who has become a national coordinator for the United We [Dream Advocacy](#) group.

Romney's harsh immigration rhetoric during the primary — vowing to veto the Dream Act should Congress pass it and saying he would cancel deferred action — and his different but vague stance in the general election — Romney said young immigrants should be allowed to stay but he didn't say under what circumstances — sunk him with Latino voters, Sosa said.

The election results apparently have emboldened [Democrats](#). On Wednesday, Obama predicted an immigration overhaul will happen in his second term.

Not all Republicans are convinced. In a statement this week, House Judiciary Chairman [Lamar Smith](#), R-San Antonio, downplayed the importance of immigration to Hispanic voters.

“The issues of primary importance to Hispanic voters are the economy and jobs,” he said. “The [Republican Party](#) needs to make inroads with Hispanic voters by emphasizing our shared interests in job creation and economic growth.

“Hispanics should be treated as the patriotic, values-oriented, and family-minded Americans that they are.”

Congressman [Henry Cuellar](#), D-Laredo, has been optimistic about immigration reform since before the election, when he said some Republicans told him they'd consider voting for the Dream Act in 2013.

Extremists in both parties have made it difficult to pass immigration reform in the past, but the growing power of the Latino electorate makes it more likely, Cuellar said.

“I was hopeful that after this election that people would see an impact from Hispanics,” Cuellar said. “After an election, there's always a window where people talk about doing things together. And we'll have a window between July and let's say next year, 2013, where people will talk about doing things together. But that window will close.”

The fact of the matter is, Republicans who are moderate on immigration will have a hard time in party primaries, Sosa said.

The type of tough talk it takes to sway party faithful who turn out for primary balloting can kill a candidate with Latino voters in the general election.

“Right now, we're between a rock and hard place, and the hard place is the extreme right,” Sosa said. “The tea party should go back to concentrating on fiscal responsibilities and tearing down the debt, and it should stay away from other issues.

“They started from a good place, but they became too broad and taking on too many other superconservative issues that are unfriendly to the Latino.”

The good news for Republicans come in the form of rising Hispanic stars like Texas' Sen.-elect Ted Cruz, who didn't respond to a request for comment, and George P. Bush, a nephew of former President George W. Bush who's said to be considering a run for land commissioner, Sosa said.

Cruz “is our best hope for turning it around, and it's really primarily up to him in Texas,” Sosa said. “If he carries the banner for fair immigration policies, he could be the leader.”

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