

McCain, Flake lead way on immigration-reform proposal

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McCain and Flake, a former six-term U.S. representative, were both previously known as high-profile supporters of proposals for a guest-worker program and a pathway to legal status for illegal immigrants already in the country.

However, in recent years, under pressure from enforcement advocates, they had pivoted to take a position that would postpone actions on those reforms until the U.S.-Mexican border was sufficiently secured.

But McCain and Flake, who on Thursday replaced former GOP Sen. Jon Kyl, are now part of a bipartisan group of eight senators that is pressing forward on a new comprehensive plan.

Other senators who have taken part in the talks include Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.; Dick Durbin, D-Ill.; Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.; Robert Menendez, D-N.J.; Michael Bennet, D-Colo., and Mike Lee, R-Utah.

“John McCain, the immigration reformer, is back, and Jeff Flake is right with him,” said Frank Sharry, executive director of America’s Voice, a national organization that supports immigration reform. “It’s huge. Let’s be honest: Immigration reform isn’t going to happen without the two Republican senators from Arizona providing leadership.”

McCain was the GOP sponsor of a major immigration bill that passed the Senate in 2006 but died in the then-Republican-controlled House.

He also backed 2007 immigration legislation authored by Kyl and the late Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass. That bill also failed.

“A group of us are working on immigration reform, and we expect to have an overall proposal soon,” McCain told *The Arizona Republic*. “I think the environment is appropriate now to move forward on immigration. ... All I can say is we’re making progress. Certainly, Jeff will be part of any solution.”

Flake acknowledged his role in the emerging immigration compromise.

“I still think now’s the time,” Flake said. “We have motivation on both sides for different reasons.”

GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s weak showing with Latino voters in his unsuccessful race against President Barack Obama has prompted some Republicans to rethink their hard-line stance on immigration policy.

Sharry said McCain's and Flake's return to comprehensive immigration reform shows how the immigration debate has evolved in Arizona since Gov. Jan Brewer signed the controversial 2010 immigration law known as Senate Bill 1070.

"Both McCain and Flake have been courageous immigration reformers in the past," Sharry said.

"They know this issue inside and out. They understand how hard it's going to be, and the fact that they have both stepped up to lead the way is huge."

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