

Why Republicans Are Suddenly Pro-Immigration Reform

By Molly Ball

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Republicans lost the election in part because Mitt Romney drew record-low support from Hispanic voters, who made up a record-high proportion of the electorate. Within days, top Republicans have figured out what to do about this: Support immigration reform!

The chorus of prominent voices has been stunning: From Sen. Marco Rubio to former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, from television and radio host Sean Hannity to columnist Charles Krauthammer. To some on the left, this looks like the most craven sort of opportunism -- the GOP scrambling for a quick PR fix to its deep-seated demographic problems.

But many Republicans aren't flip-flopping at all. In fact, there's long been a significant amount of latent support for immigration reform in the GOP, particularly among the Republican establishment. The business community, including the Chamber of Commerce, has long wanted to fix the broken immigration system that creates so many problems for employers. Top Catholic and evangelical Christian conservatives also want to create a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants living in the shadows.

Immigration reform has a tortured history of being used as a political football by both parties. But what gives advocates so much hope at the current moment is that both parties' incentives finally seem to be aligned. Republicans are desperate to make a gesture of inclusion to minorities; Democrats face pressure to fulfill a campaign promise. Meanwhile, the counterpressures that have doomed action in the past -- chiefly the anger of a noisy but small segment of the Republican base -- have faded in the past few years.

"We're feeling pretty good about this," says Frank Sharry, the longtime immigration-reform advocate who heads a group called America's Voice. In the week since the election, he's been pleasantly surprised by the outpouring of Republican support for the issue. "The tectonic plates are shifting."

In 2006, Sharry points out, a comprehensive reform bill coauthored by John McCain and the late Ted Kennedy passed the U.S. Senate with 62 votes, 23 of them from Republicans, including then-Majority Leader Bill Frist. It was only after House Republicans, seeking to gin up their base, began attacking it as an "amnesty bill" -- and pro-reform activists took to the streets by the tens of thousands in cities across the country -- that the issue became politically toxic.

The Republicans' ploy to use immigration as a wedge didn't work; in November 2006, they lost the House and Senate. Then-President George W. Bush sought to push the issue again in 2007; advocates blame Democrats who didn't want to hand Bush a political win for stalling the bill.

McCain, running in the 2008 Republican presidential primary, moved away from his prior support for reform. After losing the 2008 general election, he moved even farther to the right to keep his Senate seat against a conservative challenger in Arizona in 2010 -- campaign ads featured McCain saying, "Complete the dangd fence!" All this saddened immigration advocates, who saw McCain as embittered by losing the presidential election and getting just 31 percent of the Hispanic vote in the process.

But now, McCain may be coming back around: On Friday, he [tweeted](#), "I agree with the calls for comprehensive immigration reform." And in Rubio, a Cuban-American darling of the Tea Party who has made immigration reform a personal cause, advocates have a new, formidable GOP champion.

Meanwhile, Democrats have undergone a parallel journey of reaping the rewards for taking what they originally saw as a risk on immigration.

Hispanic voters were feeling disappointed and distrustful of Obama prior to June, when the president took executive action to protect young undocumented immigrants from deportation. The Obama campaign was terrified the move would provoke a backlash from independents -- "the black dude can't help the brown people without pissing off the white people," is how Sharry describes leery Democrats' thinking -- but it never came.

"Progressives loved it. Hispanics loved it. Swing voters said, 'Somebody's finally doing something,'" Sharry said "Mitt Romney couldn't come up with a coherent response, and Republicans were divided. That was a turning point."

An Election Day poll [released by America's Voice on Tuesday](#) found 57 percent of voters approved of the executive action, including 75 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of independents. Perhaps more important for skittish politicians, less than a quarter said the issue mattered to their vote, and most of the ones that did were supporters of it. In exit polls, 65 percent of those who voted in the presidential election nationally said they favored immigration reform, including a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Other elements of the immigration-reform coalition are mobilizing as well, including the faith community. Some very politically conservative religious voices, including the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention, have joined with their more liberal brethren to apply pressure on the issue and build support among Christians. "We certainly didn't vote the same way on election day," the Southern Baptists' Barrett Duke said on Tuesday. "Yet we share some core convictions about the values our nation should reflect. We are united in the belief that all people are created in the image of God, worthy of respect and dignity regardless of where they came from and how they got here."

After so many close losses in the past, the immigration reformers aren't celebrating yet. Though many Republicans are coming on board, there are still plenty of [voices on the right opposing](#) any type of so-called "amnesty." But among those favoring reform, there is a sense of excitement at the momentum that's building.

"There is a political space and a political urgency that has never existed on this issue," Sharry says. "This may be the issue where mainstream conservatives stand up to the Tea Party and say, 'You are not going to keep us out of the White House.'"

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