

Immigration: Complex Test For 2 Parties

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Body

WASHINGTON -- Senator John McCain of Arizona took to the Senate floor the other day to embrace a tough new Arizona law giving the police the authority to detain people they suspect are illegal immigrants. Mr. McCain, long an outspoken champion of giving illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, is facing a primary challenge this summer from a conservative who backs tough immigration measures.

This week, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic majority leader, abruptly announced that the Senate would take up an immigration bill to address both enhanced border security and citizenship, even in the face of daunting odds. Mr. Reid also faces a tough re-election battle, and his advisers believe that Hispanic voters in Nevada could prove key to his re-election.

The immigration flare-up that has engulfed Washington has emerged as a political challenge for Republicans and Democrats alike as they struggle to deal with the complexities and emotions of an issue that is scrambling party and geographic lines.

On Tuesday, two prominent Republicans in Florida, another state with a big immigrant population -- Jeb Bush, the former governor, and Marco Rubio, a candidate for the Senate -- expressed reservations about the Arizona law, even as other Republican lawmakers supported it.

In the short term, Mr. Reid's vow to tackle immigration legislation this year could hurt some Democrats in the fall elections, causing problems with voters who view immigrants as competition for tough-to-find jobs and illegal immigration as a drain on social services, analysts from both parties said. That could especially be a problem for first- and second-term Democrats representing blue-collar states particularly hard hit by the recession.

But the Republican Party could face long-term risks if it is identified with legislation cracking down on illegal immigration at a time when Hispanic voters are emerging as an increasingly large and engaged part of the American electorate. The Arizona law has enraged many Hispanic groups, who see it as a form of racial profiling.

"Immigration is the most explosive issue I've seen in my political career," said Mark McKinnon, who was a senior adviser both to Mr. McCain and to President George W. Bush, who also supported giving illegal immigrants a path to citizenship.

"This is an issue on which Republicans salivate over short-term gains without much thought to the longer-term damage it will do the party," Mr. McKinnon said.

But, he said: "Arizona may force the Democrats' hand to push for immigration reform. Unfortunately, an election year is the worst time to move good public policy on this issue."

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Both parties agree on the need for better border security. But each also has to balance how to deal with illegal immigrants already in the United States against the desires of powerful constituencies. These include Hispanics who would like to see many illegal immigrants given a chance to become legal, employers who rely on the cheap labor they provide and working-class voters who see undocumented workers as threats to their jobs and wage levels.

For all the recent talk about moving ahead on an immigration bill, it appears unlikely that Congress will act this year, especially since no Senate Republican now seems willing to work with the White House on the issue. Mr. Reid said he would bring up energy and climate change legislation first, leaving it unclear whether the Senate would have time to tackle immigration this year.

And there is no evidence that Democrats have the votes to get anything through. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who has been the leading Republican advocate for changing immigration laws -- filling a gap left by Mr. McCain -- announced the other day that he would not support acting on immigration this year. He said Mr. Reid was making a mistake in trying to push something through.

The Arizona law has brought the issue to the fore more than any other factor. President Obama has denounced it, as have many civil liberties groups and a smattering of Republicans. In an interview with Politico on Tuesday, Jeb Bush said: "It's difficult for me to imagine how you're going to enforce this law. It places a significant burden on local law enforcement and you have civil liberties issues that are significant as well."

To a certain extent, the White House has reason to be glad Mr. Reid is pushing an issue of such concern to Hispanics, a critical part of Mr. Obama's base in states like Nevada in 2008 and a group Democrats hope to energize in the fall. Even if no bill gets through the Senate, the Democrats can highlight their support for dealing with the issue.

"It's easy for Democrats to demagogue and try to use this as a wedge issue," said Senator John Cornyn, the Texas Republican who is chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. "It's a very sensitive subject. A third of my constituents in Texas are Hispanic."

"But what I've found is that my relationship with them is not based on a single issue," Mr. Cornyn added.

Mr. Obama, traveling through Iowa on Tuesday, said that the Arizona law amounted to harassment and that it raised the urgency for a new national immigration policy. But he said any plan needed to have bipartisan support. "The only way it's going to happen is if Democrats and Republicans come together and do this," Mr. Obama said.

But the obstacles to passing legislation are substantial, particularly at a time of high unemployment and violence on the Mexican border involving drug dealers.

"I think it's going to be extremely difficult for an immigration bill to pass this year," said Senator Mary L. Landrieu, Democrat of Louisiana.

Some Democrats said the prospects for a legislative deal might be better in 2011, particularly if the jobless rate drops and Hispanics continue to mobilize and grow as an electoral force.

"We're going to work very hard to get comprehensive immigration reform as soon as possible," said Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York, the No. 3 leader of the Senate.

Mexico Warns Citizens

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) -- Mexico warned its citizens living in or traveling to Arizona that they could be "harassed" there because of its new immigration law.

The foreign ministry issued a statement saying that Mexicans there should contact their consular representatives if they are unlawfully detained. "Until it is clearly defined under what criteria, when, where and who the authorities will

check, you should assume that every Mexican citizen could be harassed and questioned without cause at any moment," the statement said.

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Graphic

PHOTOS: Harry Reid, above, the Senate majority leader, and John McCain, who has embraced his state's tough new **immigration** law. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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