

GOP pounds out a platform

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Byline: By Ron Harris POST-DISPATCH WASHINGTON BUREAU

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Body

Congressional Republicans push legislation on two hot-button items as the elections approach:

IMMIGRATION Republicans call for stricter detention policies for illegal immigrants, penalties for tunnel-builders and voter IDs.

TERRORISM Republicans want to enable the president to hold trials of suspected terrorists and to allow warrantless wiretapping.

Congressional Republicans revealed their strategy going into the November elections as they pressed hard last week on immigration and anti-terror bills, some of which are unlikely to ever become law but which have dominated the nation's headlines.

Pollsters and political analysts say the two subjects -- immigration and terrorism -- are hot-button items that Republican Congressional candidates hope will rev up their base of supporters, resonate with swing voters and boost their sagging numbers.

"Immigration is emotional; terrorism is emotional," said Frank Luntz, a Republican strategist and communications specialist. "People have an emotional response as well as an intellectual response. When your heart and your head are affected equally, that's a powerful issue."

In the House, Republicans pushed through bills to increase penalties for those who build tunnels into the country and to impose stricter detention policies for illegal immigrants.

In the most heated debate, House Republicans passed legislation that would require residents to produce government-issued photo identification to vote in federal elections by 2008 and proof of citizenship to vote in 2010.

Republicans claimed they needed the laws, in part, to keep illegal immigrants from voting.

"This boils down to whether Americans should have their vote counted and not watered down by an illegal alien," Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., said.

Republicans, however, couldn't produce any evidence of illegal immigrants attempting to vote.

Despite the flurry of legislation in the House, no similar bills are before the Senate, so passage into law is highly unlikely.

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Meanwhile, Senate Republicans were considering the installation of a 700-mile fence along the 2,100-mile border between the United States and Mexico and grappling with legislation that would allow President George W. Bush to hold trials for suspected terrorists.

Democrats say Republicans are using the legislative process to distract the public's attention from issues like Iraq and Hurricane Katrina, subjects that do not bode well for Republicans, while focusing on the two subjects upon which Republicans have a historical advantage.

"It's clearly an effort to do several things," said Fran Farmer, senior policy advisor to Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald, D-Calif., the ranking Democrat on the committee that passed the voter ID requirement and one of its harshest critics. "To show that you are tough on terror, show that you are tough on immigration, show that you are tough on voter fraud.

"If we pierce the veil, nothing could be further from the truth. It's a very cynical manipulation of public opinion."

Drawing distinctions

Republican leaders have turned up the rhetoric on the issues of terrorism and immigration in recent weeks.

Earlier this month, House Majority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, told reporters, "I wonder if (Democrats) are more interested in protecting terrorists than protecting the American people."

And during a Senate Judiciary Committee debate on a warrantless wiretapping bill, Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, riled Democrats on the committee when he made similar comments.

Republicans are using the two issues to draw a clear and attractive distinction between them and Democrats, Luntz said.

"I think there's a clear difference in policies toward terrorism between Republicans and Democrats," he said. "In the end, the public will make a choice."

The new focus is a departure from the party's summer strategy, when Republican leaders in the House unveiled an election-year "values agenda" that included a ban on gay marriage, abortion restrictions and legislation preserving the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Senate spent days debating a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage and the desecration of the American flag. Neither proposal succeeded.

But with the public preoccupied with soaring gas prices and the deteriorating situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, those issues never took hold.

No sea change

Republicans' recent efforts, however, may be succeeding in focusing the public's attention on terrorism.

When asked in a recent Pew Research Center poll what was the number one problem facing the country, the percentage of people who said "terrorism" had tripled compared to a previous poll in May, said Carroll Doherty, the center's associate director.

"It's certainly focused more public attention on terrorism," he said.

And President Bush has seen his poll numbers inch up in recent weeks as gas prices have fallen and the public is more optimistic about the economy.

But House and Senate Republicans don't appear to have shared in those gains, Doherty said.

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"There hasn't been a real sea change in the race for Congress," he said. "In most polls the Democrats have a fairly sizable lead."

That may be in part because while 14 percent of Americans cited terrorism as the No. 1 problem in the Pew poll, 25 percent said it was the war in Iraq, Doherty said.

"And the people who cited Iraq," he said, "tended to vote Democrat while the people who said terrorism tended towards Republicans."

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