

The Immigration Impasse; Why the GOP can't decide if immigration reform will be its death or its salvation.

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Highlight: Will **immigration** Reform Be the Death or the Salvation of the Republican Party?

Body

On Tuesday, William Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard* and Rich Lowry, the editor of the *National Review*, [wrote a rare joint editorial](#) denouncing the Senate's comprehensive **immigration** reform plan. They said it was full of loopholes and exceptions that would do nothing to end illegal **immigration**. Republican Senators had signed on to the bill fueled by a "panic" about attracting Hispanic voters. House Republicans, they argued, should not only refuse to vote on the Senate bill, they should refuse to join a conference committee where their version could be melded with the impure Senate's product. Republicans should shelve **immigration** reform until after the 2014 election, they argued. What's the rush?

There used to be a simple answer: existential dread. After the 2012 elections, Republicans had to get right with Hispanic voters or face another loss as the country's demographics shifted away from the GOP's base of older, white voters. **Immigration** reform was the only solution. This view was so roundly accepted that the Republican National Committee endorsed it in the [party autopsy](#) commissioned after the election: The GOP "must embrace and champion comprehensive **immigration** reform. If we do not, our Party's appeal will continue to shrink to its core constituencies only."

Since that time, the political theory has faced two sustained assaults. The first, argued by Rush Limbaugh and others, is that Hispanic voters will not suddenly find Republicans attractive after **immigration** reform passes. As a voting bloc, they are temperamentally in line with the Democratic Party. The second blow to the political case was the [argument](#), put forward by Sean Trende of RealClearPolitics, [Byron York](#), and others, that Hispanics aren't the key voting bloc for the GOP's future hopes of creating a winning presidential coalition. The GOP can also make a path to the presidency by courting lower-income white voters. Kristol and Lowry added a third reason to slow the political stampede: If Republicans wait, they might take control of the Senate in 2014, which would allow them to pass a more conservative version of **immigration** reform in 2015.

With the political arguments weakened, the slapdash construction of the Senate bill is harder for its proponents to defend. But Hispanics were not the only constituency Republican **immigration** proponents were trying to reach. When I interviewed Arizona Republican Sen. Jeff Flake, a member of the Gang of Eight, last April, he said comprehensive **immigration** reform would also appeal to moderate voters who watched Republicans debating **immigration** and came away with a sour view. "When people see a party that is not rational, they're not going to go with that party," he said.

Republicans don't always look good when debating **immigration** reform. They get emotional, judge each other's motives, and generally provide Democrats with opportunities to point fingers at them. Republicans on both sides of the issue point to the trouble the GOP has had talking about **immigration** in the past. Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado is blamed for years of immigrant bashing that made the party look intolerant. In the 2012 GOP primary,

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the unresolved [immigration](#) issue caused a rolling fracas between Mitt Romney and Rick Perry. When Romney came out for "self-deportation," many in the party believe it defined Romney and the GOP as cold and unwelcoming. This public squabbling not only looks unseemly, it also blocks Republicans from spending time talking about a positive agenda for the future that appeals to a wider range of voters.

This level of public acrimony hasn't defined this debate so far, say Lowrey and Kristol. "During the debate over [immigration](#) in 2006-07, Republican rhetoric at times had a flavor that communicated a hostility to immigrants as such. That was a mistake, and it did political damage. This time has been different. The case against the bill has been as responsible as it has been damning." It's true that the debate has been relatively benign (with the exception of Alaskan Rep. Don Young who [referred to Latino farm workers as "wetbacks"](#) and had to apologize twice), but that's not a condition that is guaranteed to continue.

The risk that an unresolved [immigration](#) debate will define the party in the next few years is the pro-reform crowd's answer to Lowrey and Kristol's question of "why now?"

The public debate over [immigration](#) reform has the potential to erupt into a self-inflicted wound again because it touches on the most sensitive issues of racism, tolerance, morality, and adherence to the rule of law. Both sides have been trying to appeal to the other in order to build a coalition for a final piece of legislation, so the rhetoric has been somewhat tempered. But each side thinks the stakes are enormous. On *Meet the Press* two weeks ago, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham said Republicans were in a "demographic death spiral as a party and the only way we can get back in good graces with the Hispanic community, in my view, is to pass comprehensive [immigration](#) reform." The next week, Rep. Raul Labrador of Idaho made the opposite case. If Republicans support the Senate bill that Sen. Graham is promoting, "politically it's going to be the death of the Republican Party."

Whatever happens, someone is going to need bereavement therapy. All this talk of death may be hyperbole, but a voter not involved in the clubhouse spat might wonder why one side or the other is committing suicide. Whatever this voter decides, the rhetoric from Republicans leaves him or her with the view that half of the party is not simply wrong, but insane.

Waiting for 2015 also means Republicans will have to live with the collapse of [immigration](#) reform for the next year or so. Perhaps voters will applaud that Republicans didn't rush a bill that was bad policy. But given Congress' approval ratings and willing Republicans ready to point fingers, it's also just as possible that the independent voter might conclude that the GOP cannot apply reason to the problems of the day to find a workable solution.

Voters unsure of where to place the blame will have trusted sources like the *Wall Street Journal* helping them. When senators appeared ready to block the effort in that body on the grounds it did not secure the border, the *Journal's* editorial page questioned the motives of senators on the "restrictionist right," arguing that their concerns about security were a fig leaf for their basic disinterest in granting citizenship to undocumented workers. "The real game here is to kill a bill that would create a more pro-growth and humane [immigration](#) system for America and the millions already here or in line to come. If the right succeeds in blowing all this up, one wonders what comes next? Perhaps Republicans can campaign in 2014 on self-deporting the 11 million illegals who are here now. That worked so well for [Mitt Romney](#)."

If House Republicans follow Lowry and Kristol's advice, that kind of tone and language is likely to become more common.

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