

ROMNEY TAKES ON HOT TOPIC

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Highlight: At a Tampa stop, he tries to score points on GOP rival Rick Perry over immigration.

Body

With Rick Perry proving to be a serious threat to Mitt **Romney**'s presidential campaign, the former Massachusetts governor swung through Tampa on Friday to exploit what some Republicans see as Perry's Achilles' heel: immigration.

"We must stop providing the incentives that promote illegal immigration," **Romney** told more than 100 people attending a Republican Hispanic conference. "As governor, I vetoed legislation that would have provided in-state tuition rates to illegal immigrants and I strengthened the authority our state troopers had to enforce existing immigration laws."

Romney, 64, never mentioned by name the Texas governor, who leads **Romney** in most national polls as well as in early primary and caucus states. But immigration is a new issue of focus for **Romney** this election cycle, and his campaign knows Perry, 61, is already facing criticism from conservatives for not taking a hard-enough line.

For instance, in 2001 Perry signed a version of the "DREAM Act" that made Texas the first state to allow in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants - much like the bill **Romney** boasted of killing in Massachusetts.

Last year, Perry said he had no interest in passing a tough Arizona-style immigration law for his border state. He also has questioned the effectiveness of building a massive border fence, something **Romney** said Friday should be a priority.

Illegal immigration remains a **hot**-button issue among Republican activists, but leaders in Texas - where 38 percent of the population is Hispanic - have tended to take a more moderate approach to the issue.

"As governor of Texas, a state that has more than 1,200 miles of border with Mexico, Gov. Perry understands firsthand the need to secure our border, something the federal government has failed at," said Perry campaign spokesman Mark Miner. "Because of the federal government's inaction, Texas has spent more than \$400 million on border security since 2005. Before you discuss comprehensive immigration reform, the border has to be secured."

Tough talk on immigration can backfire in states like Florida, where Hispanics are heavily courted swing voters, if the rhetoric comes off too harsh. **Romney** took a hard line on immigration in 2008 and wound up winning just 9

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percent of the Cuban vote and 21 percent of the non-Cuban Hispanic vote in Florida's Republican primary. Arizona Sen. John McCain won 54 percent and 53 percent respectively, and won Florida's primary.

Speaking Friday to the Republican National Hispanic Assembly, **Romney** was careful to differentiate between immigrants and illegal immigrants.

"I am a great proponent of legal immigration. Many of you are living proof of the unique strength of America that is constantly renewed by new Americans," **Romney** said, arguing that Republicans should do a better job winning over Hispanic voters.

"The Republican Party is the party where Hispanic citizens should reside. Our party is the place where their values and their aspirations will be fulfilled. The other party has a good pitch, but not a good delivery," **Romney** said. "President (Barack) Obama and his party are about handouts and welfare and the redistribution of wealth. That is not what brought us to these shores. Our party is about freedom and opportunity."

Romney was enthusiastically received, but not nearly as much as underdog Republican candidate Herman Cain, who spoke several hours later and drew repeated standing ovations.

"As I look around this room I see beautiful faces, beautiful people. I see people of light complexion, brown complexion, brown complexion," said Cain, a former radio talk show host and self-made millionaire who used to be chief executive of Godfather's Pizza. "Let me tell you what I don't see in this room today: I don't see minorities, because we are all patriots, which puts us in the majority."

After a speech in which he criticized Obama as inept and a threat to America's freedom, Cain was vague about his views on the DREAM Act. It should be up to states to decide, Cain said, declining to offer an opinion on the merits of such legislation.

After his speech at Tampa's Grand Hyatt hotel, **Romney** traded his suit and tie for jeans and an open-collar Brooks Brothers shirt to greet supporters and officially open his statewide headquarters at Bayshore Boulevard and Platt Street.

He noted that he was just across the river from where he hopes to accept the Republican nomination a year from now.

"Florida's huge," **Romney** said, referring to the significance of Florida's primary expected to be early next year. "I think probably you will be the state that sets the final compass."

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Graphic

PHOTO - CHERIE DIEZ - Times: **Romney** waves to supporters at his campaign headquarters. He told the Republican National Hispanic Assembly, "We must stop providing the incentives that promote illegal immigration." PHOTO - CHERIE DIEZ - Times: Mitt **Romney** signs the American flag on a T-shirt for veteran Mike Freese, 62, of St. Petersburg at Friday's official opening of the Republican presidential hopeful's campaign headquarters at 142 W Platt St. in Tampa.

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