

Countdown 2008: ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE; Immigration issue fades, but it may return

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Body

Washington --- When Republican presidential candidates met for the YouTube/CNN debate in November, the first four questions were about illegal immigration.

The focus on that topic reflected its central role in their race, as they repeatedly challenged one another's credentials as defenders of the nation's border with Mexico.

It was also a key topic for the Democrats, as Sen. Hillary Clinton first endorsed, then repudiated then-New York Gov. Elliot Spitzer's proposal to provide driver's licenses for illegal immigrants.

What a difference a presumptive nominee makes.

With immigration reform advocate Sen. John McCain's emergence as the presumptive Republican nominee, the issue has faded from the campaign.

Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that advocates lower levels of immigration, said the Arizona senator and his two Democratic rivals --- Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Clinton of New York ---have no reason to debate the issue.

"All three candidates have identical positions," he said.

McCain angered many conservatives last year by supporting a bill that would have given illegal immigrants a path to citizenship and created a guest worker program. Both Clinton and Obama favor a similar approach.

As the race heated up, McCain shifted his position, saying the defeat of that bill persuaded him that the border must be secured before there are any measures to accommodate the illegal immigrants already in the country.

But in the YouTube debate and in other forums, he also made a point of distancing himself from GOP hard-liners who called for rounding up and expelling illegal immigrants.

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"We need to sit down as Americans and recognize these are God's children as well. And they need some protection under the law; they need some of our love and compassion," he said.

Economy dominates

Beyond the apparent victory of the moderates, the emergence of another issue has helped push illegal immigration out of the spotlight: the economy.

Thomas Mann, a political analyst at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said the three major presidential candidates have no incentive to focus on immigration now that the public is consumed with recession worries.

John J. Pitney, a political science professor at Claremont McKenna College in California, added that at times in American history, bad economic news has prompted citizens to see immigrants as unwanted competitors, but "this downturn is different" --- lacking any obvious causal link with illegal immigration.

"Few people claim that illegal immigration is the main cause of the mortgage meltdown or the collapse of Bear Stearns," he said.

The issue of illegal immigration, however, may soon see a revival effort.

Senate Republicans plan to introduce several immigration-related amendments in the next few weeks, including measures that would make English the nation's official language, require the deportation of illegal immigrants convicted of drunken driving and withhold federal money from cities that have so-called "sanctuary" policies barring police and local officials from checking the immigration status of residents using city services.

The measures also include one by Georgia GOP Sens. Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson that would clarify the authority of state and local police to enforce immigration laws and expand training in the area.

Fifteen immigration measures were introduced together earlier this month in an effort spearheaded by Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala). The plan is to offer them as amendments to larger bills.

Tough choice possible

Such votes could put McCain, both as a candidate and a member of the Senate, in a difficult position. He faces being forced to choose between possibly upsetting Hispanic voters or further alienating the Republican base, with which he has been working to build a relationship after years of bucking them as a party maverick.

The issue could also emerge in congressional races across the country --- though its outlook is cloudy. Immigrant advocates point to the defeat earlier this month in Illinois of Republican Jim Oberweis in a special election to replace Republican former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, who retired.

Oberweis focused heavily on illegal immigration, saying in a television ad that "illegal aliens are coming here to take American workers' jobs, drive down wages and take advantage of government benefits such as free health care."

He lost to Democrat Bill Foster in what had been thought to be a dependably GOP district.

Clarissa Martinez, director of immigration at the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic civil rights organization, said many Republicans are misreading the public on the issue, and "scapegoating" illegal immigrants is not a winning strategy.

But Krikorian said most Republicans remain upset about illegal immigration and it will be a major factor in certain districts.

For example, Lou Barletta, the mayor of Hazleton, Pa., who became famous for pushing through an ordinance cracking down on illegal immigrants, is running for Congress.

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Barletta's Web site says he "brought the city back from the brink" after "an influx of illegal immigration threatened its financial foundation and brought gang violence, drugs and crime to peaceful neighborhoods."

Krikorian also predicted that illegal immigration will be a theme in races for some state offices because in the absence of federal action, many states are enacting their own laws regarding illegal immigration.

"You are going to see state legislative races turn on the issue," he said.

Graphic

Photo: LOUIE FAVORITE / StaffSens. John McCain, (R-Ariz., from left) Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) don't debate immigration, one analyst on that issue said, because their positions on it are now identical./ImageData* ImageData*

Photo: JERRY LAI / Associated PressSens. John McCain, (R-Ariz.) Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) don't debate immigration, one analyst on that issue said, because their positions on it are now identical./ImageData* ImageData*

Photo: RICK BOWMER / Associated PressSens. John McCain, (R-Ariz.) Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) don't debate immigration, one analyst on that issue said, because their positions on it are now identical./ImageData*

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