

## **Martinez: GOP has work to do**

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### **Body**

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ST. PETERSBURG - Sen. Mel **Martinez** said Thursday that Congress - and specifically Republicans - will suffer at the polls if lawmakers fail to pass a comprehensive immigration bill by the November election.

"I think politically Republicans pay a price for not solving a difficult national issue," **Martinez** said. "That's not a good thing going into the election cycle on top of everything else ... That recognition is there. We have a charge to keep."

In a wide-ranging interview with the St. Petersburg Times editorial board Thursday morning, the Republican senator from Orlando discussed the threat of oil drilling off Florida's coast, the war in Iraq and statewide races in Florida.

**Martinez** confined most of his remarks to immigration on a day when President Bush continued his effort to urge Congress to find agreement on an immigration overhaul in a speech to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Congress is debating sweeping immigration legislation this year, but lawmakers are divided on some key issues, the main one being what to do about the 12-million illegal immigrants already in the United States.

Last week, the Senate approved a landmark overhaul of the nation's immigration laws that would allow millions of illegal immigrants to become citizens after paying fines and penalties, expand guest worker programs and increase security on the Mexican border.

The Senate must reconcile its bill with legislation the House approved last year, which focuses on strengthening enforcement of immigration law and offers no plan to allow current illegal immigrants to become citizens. The House bill would make entering the United States illegally a felony and would increase penalties on businesses that employ undocumented workers.

"I hope we can get past the noise and get down to business," **Martinez** said. "I think it's important for the party in power, a responsible party like us ... to be able to tackle the most difficult issue the nation is facing ... and do something with it."

Senate and House leaders are expected to appoint negotiators to hash out a compromise this summer, though there is no guarantee they will reach a deal. **Martinez**, a Cuban immigrant who had a lead role in writing the Senate bill, said he hopes to be named one of the negotiators.

But he acknowledged the road ahead is tough, especially since the lead House negotiator, House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner, has repeatedly said he opposes any plan allowing illegal immigrants to become citizens.

"If we cannot budge him, then we're going to have a problem," **Martinez** said. "He is a force in the House."

## Martinez: GOP has work to do

His fellow Senate Floridian, Bill Nelson, said Thursday that he's pessimistic. After a fundraiser in Tampa, Nelson said he thinks the pressure of the election will make finalizing a deal too difficult this summer.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we're not in a lame-duck session after the election," Nelson said, "trying to forge an agreement between the House and the Senate."

**Martinez** said he is encouraged that Rep. Adam Putnam of Bartow, the fifth-highest ranking Republican in the House, has said he is willing to compromise. Putnam voted for the House bill but has since said he wants to address more than just border security.

"It's going to take a commitment to comprehensive immigration, something more than border enforcement," **Martinez** said. "We can't deport 12-million people. We have to find a way to deal with people."

**Martinez** also said:

n<!-- 2002(unknown) -->He hopes and expects that some U.S. troops will be able to come home from Iraq by the end of the year, though he acknowledges that violence has escalated in the last month. "Things are not going as well as I had hoped by now they would be, based on the new government being in place," he said. "What we cannot do is leave Iraq as a dysfunctional place. ... We've got to see it through."

n<!-- 2002(unknown) -->Although he initially said he's "conflicted" about whether Donald Rumsfeld should remain as secretary of defense, **Martinez** said he supports the embattled defense chief. "I have great personal affection for the guy," said **Martinez**, who served in the Bush Cabinet as housing chief. "I'm not going to join the beat-up-on-Rumsfeld bandwagon."

n<!-- 2002(unknown) -->He and Nelson, a Democrat, continue to negotiate with other lawmakers to keep oil drilling off Florida's coast. **Martinez** said he knows some Florida House members are disappointed he did not support a deal late last year in the House to establish a drilling buffer of 120 to 150 miles into the gulf but stands by his decision not to take the deal. The House proposal fell apart before reaching the Senate after late-night negotiations fell apart over a deal.

"I don't do business that way," he said. "That was too flimsy, up in the air, too middle-of-the-night."

n<!-- 2002(unknown) -->He plans to help Attorney General Charlie Crist in the governor's race and Rep. Katherine Harris in the Senate race. "She's going to be the nominee of our party, and I'm going to support her," he said.

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## Graphic

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TIMES PHOTO - JAMES BORCHUCK

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