

# **Romney Puts Focus On Immigration; He Hopes to Sting McCain on Hot-Button Issue**

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## **Body**

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MANCHESTER, N.H., Jan. 6 -- Former Massachusetts governor Mitt **Romney** sought on Sunday to revive his party's contentious debate over illegal **immigration**, **hoping** to remind voters in New Hampshire of the **issue** that stoked conservative anger and nearly derailed Sen. John **McCain**'s presidential campaign last summer.

The senator from Arizona returned the fire, telling reporters that **Romney** "has changed his position on almost every major **issue**" and flatly declaring that he "will win" the New Hampshire primary. Manchester's Union Leader, the state's largest newspaper, weighed in with its second front-page endorsement of **McCain**, calling him "the real deal" and "by far the best qualified individual to lead America."

Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, making an aggressive push to finish at least third here, found one of the few evangelical churches in the state to speak to in Windham, where he delivered a sermon that did not touch on politics but called on the congregation to be part of "God's army." He then headed to a rally with actor Chuck Norris, his sidekick at every event here, and went on a seven-mile run in Manchester before heading off to the second Republican debate in two nights.

In that forum, hosted by Fox News Channel, five candidates clashed for 90 minutes over **immigration**, taxes, government spending, terrorism and the need for change in Washington. Fox **did not allow** Rep. Ron Paul (Tex.) to take part.

The most heated exchange came when **Romney** accused Huckabee of raising taxes while governor. Huckabee retorted by asking **Romney** whether he raised \$500 million in fees, and said: "You know, Mitt, let's talk about how stubborn the facts are. Answer the question."

**Romney** retorted: "Mike, you make up facts faster than you talk. And that's saying something."

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But the **focus** of the day seemed to be on **Romney** and the prospect that his big-budget, highly organized campaign may be on the verge of a spectacular collapse if he loses Tuesday's primary.

**Romney** held just one event Sunday, a town hall meeting in Nashua with almost 400 people. He spent part of the day taping a two-minute commercial that the campaign calls its "closing argument" for New Hampshire and will air Monday night.

Struggling to right his campaign with less than 48 hours before the polls open, **Romney** repeatedly accused **McCain** of wanting to allow illegal immigrants to remain in the country even after the southern border is secured.

"What his posture does is, it says that every alien in this country that's here illegally gets to stay here for the rest of their life, and that is wrong," **Romney** said on ABC's "This Week."

He repeated the accusation in Nashua, earning raucous applause when he asserted that **McCain**'s position "will only encourage more illegal **immigration**. It is time to stop illegal **immigration**."

Faced with a **new poll** that shows him trailing **McCain**, **Romney** is betting that highlighting his rival's role in sponsoring an **immigration** bill with Democratic Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (Mass.) will help rekindle the anger that many conservatives felt last summer, when the **issue** dominated conservative talk radio.

But the **issue** may have since lost its volatility. The overhaul bill is no longer pending in Congress, and **McCain** has said he now supports securing the border before implementing the provisions that angered so many in his party. And **Romney**'s recent **immigration** charges have caused him problems as well.

In Saturday's debate, **Romney** said he had never used the word "amnesty" in attack ads against **McCain**. On Sunday morning, after being shown two of his ads that used the word, he admitted that he was wrong. He also has struggled to explain why, in 2005, he called an initial proposal by **McCain** "reasonable." He says the proposal was different from **McCain**'s later **immigration** bill.

**Romney** also continued to hammer **McCain** for voting against tax cuts that President Bush endorsed. And he continued to portray the senator as incapable of shaking up politics.

"Americans are not looking for Washington insiders," **Romney** said. "They are looking for change, and change is what we are going to give them."

In Salem, **McCain** spoke to about 1,000 people who packed the Woodbury School's gymnasium. He **defended his record** on taxes, Iran and Iraq in what amounted to a debate with several critics in the audience.

He even made fun of his earlier gaffes on the campaign trail; when one voter asked him about his policy on Iran, he said, "I certainly wouldn't sing the Beach Boys song ever again," referring to the time in April when he belted out "Bomb Iran" to the tune of "Barbara Ann" before a group of veterans in South Carolina.

Several New Hampshire voters, in Salem and elsewhere, said they were leaning toward supporting **McCain** but had not decided.

Matt Fitzgerald, a Windham resident who attended **McCain**'s town hall meeting, said he appreciates the senator's willingness to reach across the aisle but is not convinced he can repeat any victory he achieves in New Hampshire. "I'm not sure **McCain** can win the whole thing," Fitzgerald said. "I voted for him before, and the whole thing fell apart."

Huckabee also laid claim to the mantle of Washington outsider Sunday morning, explaining to a **crowd of hundreds** in Windham that he is best positioned to reform an ossified federal government.

"I'm not a part of what's wrong, I'm a part of what could be right," Huckabee said. "I'm not part of the Washington scene. That's one of the reasons they are going crazy down there."

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Most of the voters who attended Huckabee's "Chowderfest Meet and Greet" said they came because they wanted to learn more about him. Dan Ryan, who is building a house in Conway, said he prefers **Romney** but would back Huckabee if he got the Republican nomination.

"Our primary **issue** with him is the lack of experience, the lack of business experience, Chuck Norris as secretary of defense," Ryan said.

Staff writers Perry Bacon Jr. and Juliet Eilperin in New Hampshire and researcher Rena Kirsch in Washington contributed to this report.

## Graphic

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IMAGE; By Linda Davidson -- The Washington Post; Mitt **Romney** leaves a town hall meeting in Nashua, N.H., where he criticized John **McCain**'s stance on **immigration**, **hoping** in part to evoke some of the anger from conservatives over **McCain**'s overhaul plan last summer. **Romney** is trailing **McCain** in a new state poll.

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