

POLITICS: THE ISSUES;

Dole's Immigration Stance Splits G.O.P.

The New York Times

September 13, 1996, Friday, Late Edition - Final

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Distribution: National Desk

Section: Section A; ; Section A; Page 23; Column 1; National Desk ; Column 1;

Length: 695 words

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Dateline: WASHINGTON, Sept. 12

Body

A bill that would crack down on illegal immigration has exposed deep divisions among House and Senate Republicans, many of whom calculate that the best course for them might not serve the best interests of Bob Dole's struggling Presidential campaign.

Many Republican lawmakers, particularly those facing close races in states with large number of illegal immigrants, are eager to pass the bill, which toughens enforcement on the border and in the workplace. They want to show constituents that Congress is tackling the issue.

But Mr. Dole is loath to hand President Clinton an opportunity to claim credit for a politically popular bill.

"The Dole campaign doesn't want to have Clinton having more bills to sign," said Michele Davis, a senior aide to Representative Dick Armey, a Texas Republican who is the House majority leader.

Mr. Dole sent his campaign manager to Capitol Hill today to tell Republicans to insist that the bill include a provision almost certain to doom it in the Senate. The provision, included in the House version of the bill but not in the Senate's, would allow states to deny a public education to children who are illegal immigrants.

Mr. Dole and Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia strongly support the provision, but Democrats do not, and Senate Democrats have vowed to filibuster any bill that contains it. President Clinton has indicated that he wants to sign the immigration bill, but not if it includes the education provision.

Republicans for weeks have been trying to decide whether it is better to have a bill without the education provision or stick to their guns and blame the Democrats for blocking the overall legislation.

This morning, the two main authors of the Republican immigration bill, Senator Alan K. Simpson of Wyoming and Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, met with the manager of Mr. Dole's campaign, Scott Reed, to plead for dropping the education provision to win credit for passing the bill. One official familiar with the discussions said the two legislators even offered to amend the bill to provide funds to reimburse some of California's education costs if Mr. Dole would endorse dropping the offending provision.

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Mr. Reed did not budge, Congressional officials said. "They don't want an illegal immigration bill," Mr. Simpson said in an interview, arguing that his longtime friend and former Senate majority leader, Mr. Dole, had been poorly served by the advice of his top campaign aides.

When the debate on immigration began months ago, the Republicans were united -- but no longer.

Mr. Gingrich is worried that several Republicans in Southern California who are facing tight contests need an immigration bill that contains the education provision to demonstrate concern for their state's budget problems. But Mr. Armev recently canvassed six or seven of these Republicans and, to his surprise, Ms. Davis said, found that roughly half now believe it is better to have a bill in hand than a dicey political issue to wage against Democratic opponents.

In the Senate, Trent Lott, a Mississippi Republican who is majority leader, does not feel strongly either way about the education provision, but would like to put the immigration bill in his legislative win column before Congress adjourns later this month.

The immigration bill would double the number of Border Patrol officers, increase workplace inspections and restrict public benefits to legal aliens. But much of this is already financed or included in the recently passed welfare bill, so the fight has been largely symbolic for Mr. Dole and the Republicans.

House and Senate negotiators are set to meet next Tuesday to discuss the immigration bill. The outcome of their report is preordained. House and Senate Republicans have already completed the process, which is usually bipartisan, without the Democrats' help. House leaders now plan to bring the conference report to a floor vote next Thursday.

"A likely outcome will be no bill and the attempt to blame Clinton and the Democrats will have backfired badly," said Frank Sharry, the executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a pro-immigration group in Washington.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: US REPUBLICAN PARTY (92%); IMMIGRATION (91%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); LEGISLATION (90%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2012 (89%); FILIBUSTER (89%); POLITICS (78%); US CONGRESS (78%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (78%); US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (78%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (77%); MUNICIPAL FINANCE (77%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (77%); TALKS & MEETINGS (75%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (73%); INTERVIEWS (70%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (66%)

Company: TEXAS REPUBLICAN (62%); TEXAS REPUBLICAN (62%)

Industry: EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (77%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (73%); BUDGETS (70%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (66%)

Person: BILL CLINTON (88%); NEWT GINGRICH (58%); LAMAR SMITH (58%)

Geographic: TEXAS, USA (92%); CALIFORNIA, USA (92%)

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Load-Date: September 13, 1996

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