

POLITICS-U.S.: FOX IMMIGRATION CHALLENGE POSES RISKS FOR BUSH Analysis By Jim Lobe

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Body

To win Congressional passage for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, former President Bill Clinton was forced to rely on a majority of Republican lawmakers -- alienating some of his most fervent Democratic supporters, particularly in the labor movement.

Eight years later, President George W. Bush may be facing very much the same kind of dilemma on immigration.

If he supports the immigration reform program pressed on him this week by visiting Mexican President Vicente Fox, he will have to rely on the Democrats, particularly the labor movement, to get it through Congress.

His own Republicans are deeply split on the issue, with many of his strongest right-wing loyalists bitterly opposed.

"This is an incredibly complex issue," Bush noted yesterday, shortly after Fox pushed his well-orchestrated campaign for the "regularization" of the immigration status of an estimated three to four million undocumented Mexican citizens living in the United States.

"It is complex to the point where my administration is going to spend a lot of time resolving that type of question," he said. "But to make matters even more complicated, we've got to work with the Congress, and we've got to come up with a solution that Congress can accept."

It is in that state of perplexity that Fox left Bush today, concluding a three-day state visit -- the first by a foreign leader since Bush became president almost nine months ago.

While the two leaders approved a number of smaller agreements on law enforcement, border safety, health standards, avocado imports, and other matters, Fox's visit was dominated by his unexpected challenge to conclude an accord the status of the undocumented Mexicans by the end of the year.

It was a challenge that clearly caught the Bush administration, which had been systematically lowering expectations about quick action on a new immigration agreement for weeks, by surprise.

While Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, told reporters after the first face-to-face meeting of the "two amigos," as the two presidents are being called, that a swift accord would be "terrific," she cautioned that it was more important that it "be done right, not just quickly."

The stakes are extremely high, far beyond the immigration status of the millions of undocumented Mexicans living here. Control of both the **White House** and the Congress may well be determined by how parties and individual candidates, including Bush, come down on the question.

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That is because the political preferences of the nation's estimated 33 million Hispanics, the country's largest and fastest-growing ethnic minority, are seen as key to the electoral fortunes of both parties. Mexican-Americans constitute about two-thirds of all Hispanics.

Bush's chief political aides, according to published accounts, believe that he must increase his share of the Hispanic vote from 35 percent last year to at least 40 percent in 2004 to win re-election. Their assumption is that by delivering a favorable immigration accord with Fox, who has himself avidly courted Mexicans here, Bush can pick up the support he needs.

At the same time, Democrats, historically the main beneficiary of Hispanic votes, have been not been idle. Their position on immigration -- providing amnesty to most undocumented aliens working and paying taxes in the United States, permitting reunification for immigrant families, and guaranteeing workplace rights for immigrants entering under temporary work programs -- has become a major feature of their political platform.

And they have become increasingly solid in their support for sweeping liberalization since 1999, when the AFL-CIO, the country's largest labor union federation, endorsed amnesty for illegal immigrants for the first time in its history.

The AFL-CIO had found that its members' organizing efforts were most successful in sectors employing low-paid workers, many of whom have been or still are undocumented immigrants. With threat of deportation removed, these workers will be far more likely to join unions.

During their first meeting at Fox's ranch in Guanajuato in January, Bush agreed to take up immigration as a priority.

Subsequent talks between the two sides raised expectations of a major breakthrough. But strong opposition from within Bush's own party to a "blanket amnesty" for undocumented Mexicans forced the White House to back off the idea in recent weeks. Given the political sensitivity of the issue, senior aides told reporters, negotiations could take several years.

Such a prospect was clearly unappealing to Fox, who has seen his massive popularity slump over the last several months as the Mexican economy -- more closely tied to the U.S. economy than ever, thanks to NAFTA -- has suffered in light of the sharp slowdown in growth north of the border.

It was in this context that Fox made his challenge on the White House lawn. "The time has come to give migrants and their communities their proper place in the history of our bilateral relations," he declared. "We must, and we can, reach an agreement on migration before the end of this very year."

Most observers believe that a package can be worked out, though not as quickly as Fox wants. It would include some combination of temporary worker programs and permanent residency green cards, which could lead to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

But the devil -- meaning the political repercussions -- is in the details.

While labor and Democrats favor permanent residency for all working undocumented immigrants, the Republicans are deeply split.

The idea of granting amnesty to undocumented workers -- that is, those who entered the United States illegally -- strikes many of the more conservative Republicans as ideologically unacceptable.

"We abhor the idea of rewarding lawbreakers -- that's our bottom line," warned Phil Kent, a right-wing legal activist.

Other right-wingers worry about the burden on educational, social and health services that would be created not only by hundreds of thousands of Mexican non-English-speaking green card holders, but also the estimated four million other undocumented immigrants -- many from Central America and the Caribbean -- who would also presumably benefit from amnesty.

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To ease these concerns, Republicans close to Bush suggest regularization may be tied to English-language requirements and that the green card applicants may be required to pay hefty penalties. They also favor a regularization program heavily weighted toward temporary work programs, which would not automatically lead to a green card but give beneficiaries more security than they now have.

Democrats, however, will likely oppose a major expansion of temporary work programs without guarantees that beneficiaries will enjoy full worker rights -- guarantees that Republicans lawmakers, particularly from agricultural states, will be reluctant to grant.

Still other Republicans argue that Bush's own political calculations are flawed. Citing recent polls, they say that a majority of Hispanics opposes any far-reaching liberalization of the immigration laws.

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