

The Immigration Fight Is the Battle for the Soul of the GOP

The party's internal conflict isn't about wooing Hispanic voters. It's a proxy war between pragmatist elites and the angry fringe -- and the fringe is winning.

By: Molly Ball – July 17, 2013

Imagine a policy proposal that has the support of the Republican National Committee, Paul Ryan, Marco Rubio, Karl Rove, John McCain, and George W. Bush. The Chamber of Commerce backs it, as do major Catholic and evangelical groups. Right-wing think tanks like the Cato Institute, major GOP donors, Rupert Murdoch, Grover Norquist, Haley Barbour -- they all want it, and it is broadly popular with voters.

And yet this legislation -- immigration reform -- is widely viewed as having no chance in the Republican-led House of Representatives, because the party's hard right has decided it is not the "conservative" thing to do.

If immigration reform goes down to defeat, it will mean that the right has won the defining post-2012 battle between Republican factions. It will mean the GOP establishment's efforts to wrest back authority, which had appeared initially promising, have failed, and the hard core is still in charge. It will mean that the party is ruled for the foreseeable future by a small but implacable faction whose ideology is so unyielding it cannot be swayed by policy concessions, political necessity, or financial self-interest. It will mean that, in the climactic confrontation between the establishment and the Tea Party, the Tea Party won.

For the Republican elites who overwhelmingly favor immigration reform, this is a grim prospect. "This is the fight for the soul of the party," said John Feehery, a former top aide to House Speaker Dennis Hastert and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. "Marco Rubio and Paul Ryan get it. Ted Cruz doesn't get it. It's the defining struggle for the Republican Party, and right now the good guys are losing."

The debate over Republicans' approach to immigration has largely focused on politics -- on whether and how the party will be able to woo Hispanic voters in the next presidential election. But the intra-party psychodrama is bigger than that. It's about whether the pragmatists can seize the reins of the Republican Party, or whether the angry, oppositionist, populist strain retains control. (Feehery calls them "the haters," and sees them as the heirs to the Know-Nothings who tried to keep out his Irish ancestors.)

The consequence, these more moderate Republicans fear, will be a GOP that remains the party of Sarah Palin and Donald Trump, one that is content to excite the passions of an irate base without even pretending to propose solutions to the country's problems.

"We will not be a national governing party for a long, long time if we turn our backs on this chance to pass immigration reform. It's just that simple," said John Weaver, the former John McCain and Jon Huntsman strategist, calling the prospect "depressing."

By rejecting immigration, he said, the Republicans in the House are sending a message that they're not interested in being part of the solution. "If you only have to worry about your right flank -- you don't have to worry about a general election, don't have to worry about governing -- that's a pretty easy gig, isn't it? What the hell is the point?"

Among Republican power brokers, support for immigration reform -- meaning a comprehensive bill that legalizes the undocumented, expands legal immigration, and increases border security -- is virtually universal. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the business lobby that spent more than \$30 million against Democratic candidates in 2012, has endorsed the Senate proposal. Karl Rove, the last strategist to win a presidential election for the party, has repeatedly devoted his *Wall Street Journal* column to urging reform, and George W. Bush recently emerged from his post-presidential seclusion to do the same. In a post-election "autopsy" commissioned by the Republican National Committee, the only policy prescription was this: "We must embrace and champion comprehensive immigration reform." The committee that drafted the report included former Bush Press Secretary Ari Fleischer and prominent GOP strategists Henry Barbour and Sally Bradshaw.

A group called Republicans for Immigration Reform is headed by Bush's commerce secretary, Carlos Gutierrez; its board includes fellow Bush Cabinet members Spencer Abraham and Margaret Spellings, as well as Charlie Spies, who last headed the pro-Romney super PAC Restore Our Future, and Malek, a prominent GOP fundraiser since the Nixon Administration. The American Action Forum, whose president is a former political director for the National Republican Congressional Committee, is airing ads boosting immigration reform; the group is backed by former Senator Norm Coleman and former Bush and McCain economist Douglas Holtz-Eakin. FWD.us, the pro-reform group backed by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, has a Republican subsidiary called Americans for a Conservative Direction whose board that includes Haley Barbour, the onetime Mississippi governor and RNC chairman, and Dan Senor, the former Bush and Romney adviser. The Southern Baptists, normally one of the most conservative religious groups, are among several that have aggressively advocated for an immigration solution that includes citizenship for the undocumented.

This powerful coalition was enough to get a massive reform bill through the Senate last month with 14 Republican votes. But now the legislation's fate is in the hands of the House, where Speaker John Boehner has said the Senate bill will not be considered and no immigration action is likely until fall at the earliest. A burgeoning conventional wisdom holds that the prospects for reform look vanishingly dim. Anti-immigration-reform hard-liners such as Iowa Rep. Steve King decry the Senate bill as an "amnesty plan" that threatens to taint "American civilization and culture into perpetuity."

The pro-reform GOP elites express frustration that their combined efforts seem to hold no sway with the unruly House Republican caucus. Some wonder if the GOP is risking its standing with big business by failing to move on immigration. Privately, they mutter about the "crazies" -- but the fact that they're powerless to overcome this unreasonable fringe is a powerful statement about the dynamics of today's Republican Party.

Many explain the problem structurally -- the majority of House Republicans come from overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly conservative districts, where it's in their interest to avoid a primary challenge. "From a political point of view, are Republicans concerned primarily with a challenge from their right in 2014, so they have to protect their right flank by being very hard-line?" Gutierrez told me. "It's unfortunate that that gets in the way of doing the right thing."

But the "primary challenge" explanation is, at its heart, a euphemism -- a delicate way of explaining that the activists who vote in Republican primaries are easily swayed by high-volume invocations of ideological purity, and must be appeased at all costs. Republican politicians remain scarred by the primary battles of 2010 and 2012, when candidates like Todd Akin and Sharron Angle proved there's no limit to primary voters' appetite for red meat. In some cases, the Republicans now in office got there by winning such primaries, ousting more compromising pols. These Republicans aren't afraid of the right-wing base; *they are* the right-wing base.

Some conservatives fighting for immigration reform look at the overwhelming power amassed on their side and don't accept the conventional wisdom that they are bound to lose. They point out that reform opponents are far more marginal now than they were in 2007: Talk-radio hosts aren't united on the issue, the Minutemen are gone, there are no protests in the streets, and even the shouting at congressional town halls has been minimal.

Joshua Culling of Americans for Tax Reform has accompanied Norquist -- who, he points out, is "not some squishy RINO" -- to Boise, Austin, and Topeka to campaign for immigration reform. He says the anti-reform House caucus appears mainly to consist of "Steve King and his four friends," and they're not getting as much traction as they used to. He believes the many House Republicans who have thus far declined to take aggressive stands for or against comprehensive reform are an encouraging sign.

Culling acknowledged there is a "visceral reaction" from the GOP base to any sort of immigration legislation, but he suggested it is "more an anti-Washington thing." If the push for the legislation ultimately fails, he said, "the pro-reform conservative movement will not have done its job. We have such a compelling case to make as to why it's good policy."

Others are less sanguine, and they see dire consequences for a party that is increasingly out of their grip.

"We have a fundamental deficit of leadership among political leaders when it comes to standing up to the ideological, radical voices who claim to speak in the name of conservatism," said Steve Schmidt, the former McCain presidential campaign strategist. And with immigration reform's prospects looking dim, he said, "Things could get worse before they get better."