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Senate candidates in tight races reject anti-immigrant message

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As Donald Trump doubled down on his anti-immigration message in last night's debate, Republican candidates for Senate across the country are not adopting his lines. In fact, they are overwhelmingly going the other way, rejecting mass deportation and endorsing legal immigration and various forms of legalization for those immigrants illegally in the United States. Here are what the candidates in the tightest races are saying:

1. Arizona – John McCain

It comes as little surprise that Sen. McCain, a longtime proponent of immigration reform and coauthor of the Senate 2013 reform bill, should be running on an openly pro-immigrant platform. He touted his accomplishment at his Senate debate last week. "I was able to get immigration reform through the United States Senate," he said. "That is the very big difference between having working groups and talking about it and legislative accomplishment, and I promise you that the Dreamers were part of immigration reform."

2. Florida – Marco Rubio

Sen. Rubio also coauthored the 2013 reform bill that passed the Senate. Although he has backed away from that approach, he continued to take a pro-immigration position at his debate. "I personally know people, children included, who are in this country out of status, illegally brought here at a very young age, and I see the sadness that they're going through. I want to fix the problem," he said. "The second step would be to modernize our legal immigration system so that it's not as bureaucratic, and it works better. ... Republicans would support doing something very reasonable with people that are not criminals, that have been here a long time."

3. Illinois – Mark Kirk

Sen. Kirk who voted for the 2013 reform bill defended his pro-immigrant position during his campaign. In a campaign ad in Spanish, he said, "When Donald Trump says bad things about immigrants, I have spoken out against him. I don't support Trump. I've worked with Republicans and Democrats to reduce gang violence in Chicago. And I support immigration reform so families can stay together."

4. Indiana – Todd Young

Rep. Young has previously endorsed a form of legal status for the unauthorized immigrants in the country. “Immigration should be attractive to Americans so long as immigrants come to our country to contribute to our economy and society. I strongly support legal immigration,” he said in response to questions from a local news outlet. “I would consider proposals which require those who have entered the U.S. illegally to apply for their visas from their home countries and not from within the US... Congress should work to find a rational middle ground between granting an automatic path to citizenship for every illegal immigrant and a program of mass deportation.”

5. Nevada – Joe Heck

Congressman Heck supported a form of legalization during the 2013 immigration reform debate and has maintained his pro-immigration stance in his current race for Senate. “When someone goes through the legal system,” he said at his debate, “they shouldn’t have to wait ten to twelve years to bring their spouse or family over. Let’s develop a robust guest worker program... Dreamers... should get a path to citizenship... I have never talked about deportation, and I believe that when we talk about the 11 to 12 million undocumented, outside of the dreamers, those that have a criminal past should be deported. However, those who have been working should be given some kind of path to legal status.”

6. New Hampshire – Kelly Ayotte

Sen. Ayotte also voted for the reform bill in 2013 and has continued to tout her record during her race. “I supported the bipartisan immigration bill in the Senate because I want to solve this problem,” she said at her debate last month. “For the people who want to be part of this country to work... have a better legal system that is fair... Sometimes I take some heat because of this from my own party, but I’m for solving this.”

7. North Carolina – Richard Burr

Sen. Richard Burr voted against the Senate immigration reform bill in 2013, but in this election, he has endorsed expanding legal immigration and giving temporary visas (which may or may not be renewable) to unauthorized immigrants. “Immigration reform... starts with fixing the legal system,” he said at his Senate debate last week. “Individuals who haven’t committed a crime in this country should have a legal status that’s temporary.”

8. Ohio – Rob Portman

Sen. Portman also voted against the Senate bill in 2013 due to enforcement concerns, but he has also favored a form of legalization and an expansion of legal immigration at the time. “We do need to do something with people who are here, who are living in the shadows. It’s wrong,” he said at the Senate debate this week. “We’re a country of immigrants. For those who are here, who have roots in the community, and are willing to come forward, pay a fine, and pay any back taxes – and if they have any criminal record of course they should be deported – but the others should have a path to legalization... We ought to continue to bring refugees and immigrants who enrich our country.”

9. Pennsylvania – Pat Toomey

Sen. Toomey voted against the reform bill in 2013, but is a long-time proponent of expanding legal immigration. In this race, he appears to have maintained a broadly pro-immigration stance and rejected mass deportation, while staying vague on how he'd keep immigrants here.

According to CBS Pittsburgh's voter guide, "Toomey supports a guest worker program and increasing spending on border security. Toomey says Donald Trump's proposal to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border is simplistic and says Trump's plan to deport every immigrant living illegally in the United States is not realistic."

10. Wisconsin – Ron Johnson

Sen. Johnson who voted against the 2013 bill but has favored giving work permits to unauthorized immigrants since 2013 continued to advocate for this approach during his race. "My concept of a border security bill would have a robust guest worker program pretty well governed by the states. They can set the number of people," he said at his debate. "My guest worker program would actually address the people in this country, in Wisconsin milking cows.... Until you secure the border, you're not going to have the public willingness to accept some kind of legalization, and I'm happy to do that. Once we secure the border, we will treat the people... with real humanity."

Other Members

Roy Blunt of Missouri appears to be the only candidate in a close race that had virtually nothing positive to say about immigration in his recent debate. For members in less competitive races, it was harder to get details on their views. There are eight other incumbents running for reelection this year who voted against the 2013 reform bill and have not—as far as I could tell—adopted a pro-legalization stance for unauthorized immigrants, although that doesn't mean they are anti-legal immigration.

On the other side, Sens. Lisa Murkowski in Alaska and John Hoeven of North Dakota voted for the 2013 bill, and Sens. James Lankford of Oklahoma and Rand Paul of Kentucky have advocated for legalization since 2013, and Sen. Paul has done so even during his presidential run this year. Chris Vance, the GOP candidate in Washington, also touts support for immigration reform on his website.

Overall, most serious GOP candidates are taking much more pro-immigration positions in the 2016 election despite the rise of Trump. As I explained during the week in which Trump considered reversing his immigration stance, this could be because Trump lost the argument with voters, even with Republican voters, a majority of whom favor legalization over deportation.

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