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## **Sen. John McCain's death a blow to comprehensive immigration reform efforts, experts say**

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Sen. John McCain was the most important champion of immigration reform on the Republican side of the political aisle, and his death will make it that much harder for Congress to pass controversial legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship for millions of immigrants without legal status, experts say.

For nearly two decades, McCain leveraged his considerable clout as a veteran senator from a border state to push for bipartisan immigration legislation, often putting him at odds with many in his party.

"Senator McCain was a singularly important figure in all this and not only because of his political history and his viewpoints but, simply, his knowledge of the issues and the state that he comes from (which) gave him a degree of authenticity and authoritativeness on this that will simply be missing in the future, at least in the near term," said Doris Meissner, a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C.

"So for immigration, it's a big loss," said Meissner, a former Commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service during the Clinton administration.

### **McCain's immigration reform efforts**

Most recently, in 2013, McCain was among four Republicans and four Democrats known as the Gang of Eight who crafted comprehensive immigration reform legislation that overwhelmingly passed the Senate, 68-32, but never got a vote in the House.

McCain also championed failed bipartisan attempts at passing comprehensive immigration reform legislation in 2006 and 2007, along with his late colleague and collaborator on the Democratic side, U.S. Sen. Edward, Kennedy, D-Mass.

The legislation was intended to reduce illegal immigration and improve legal immigration in order to meet the country's economic needs through an overhaul of the nation's immigration system.

The legislation, known as comprehensive immigration reform, combined enhanced border security and immigration enforcement to crack down on illegal immigration. The reform

included revamped visa programs designed to provide legal workers to industries that rely on immigrants to do jobs Americans are unwilling to do, and a legalization program for undocumented immigrants already living and working in the country.

### **Included in McCain's memoir**

In a book McCain published in May, he wrote that the failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform was the biggest disappointment of a political career that spanned more than three decades.

"We failed twice, and then once more after Ted had passed away, despite big majorities in both houses of Congress in favor of it," McCain and co-author, Mark Salter, wrote in "The Restless Wave: Good Times, Just Causes, Great Fights and Other Apprehensions."

"I'd like to say I'll try again. But that is not up to me anymore. That's a harder disappointment than other defeats have been because first, it's something that most Americans want, and most members of Congress know is the right thing to do."

In a chapter titled "Fighting the Good Fight," McCain blames the House's conservative Republican Freedom Caucus for burying the 2013 immigration legislation passed by the Senate.

### **Impact on Republicans in Congress**

Meissner noted that McCain was, at times, "inconsistent" on immigration, particularly in 2010, when he took a much harder line by famously calling for completion of "the danged fence" in a re-election ad.

At the time, McCain faced a tough Republican primary challenge in the wake of his loss in the 2008 presidential race and Arizona's passage of SB 1070, a sweeping immigration enforcement measure aimed at driving undocumented immigrants out of the state.

But three years later, McCain played a significant role in opening the door for Republican support of a new bipartisan push for comprehensive immigration reform when he made a statement that border security had improved sufficiently to consider other measures.

That 2013 statement came after President Barack Obama's trouncing of Republican challenger Mitt Romney to win a second term with overwhelming support from Latino voters, forcing Republicans to re-think their stance on immigration.

McCain's statement, Meissner said, "doesn't get a lot of attention" but was one of McCain's most significant contributions to the immigration debate.

"Because of his stature as an earlier co-sponsor of bills, because of the hard line he took in his re-election in 2010, but then to come back a couple of years later, and actually to make it possible to give cover for Republicans to move beyond just that singular discussion about border security was a very important step," Meissner said.

No other Republican in Congress championed the issue of immigration as often as McCain, said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a group advocating for immigration reforms that include a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

McCain combined a sense of service, pragmatism and passion on the issue that will be difficult to replace, he said. "Frankly, that combination lent him a very unique type of credibility on the issue of immigration that I am not sure anyone else in Congress has," Noorani said.

### **What his death means for the Senate**

McCain's death means the Senate will be losing two Republicans from Arizona who championed comprehensive immigration reform. U.S. Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., was also a member of the Gang of Eight, and is not seeking re-election. His term expires Jan. 3.

"It is really doubling the blow of losing Sen. Flake," said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

As a result, Arizona will no longer carry the same weight in future Senate debates over immigration reform, regardless of who replaces them, at least for the time being, Bier said.

"It's evident that no one has the institutional knowledge of the Senate, of immigration, that John McCain did, that could bring people together from across the aisle and within his own conference to get something through one chamber," Bier said.

"It would take decades of someone of a similar psychological bandwidth to ever get back to that place where you would have someone in Arizona that has that type of respect and knowledge to accomplish the kinds of things he was able to accomplish on this issue."