

Hispanic activists urge GOP to follow Gingrich's lead on immigration

Newt Gingrich's call for 'humane' approach to migrants earns plaudits from Latino voters – but propels the former speaker into an increasingly hostile debate within the Republican party

[Ed Pilkington](#) in New York

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[Newt Gingrich's](#) appeal for a "humane" approach to [US immigration](#) in the latest televised debate has propelled him into the thick of one of the most bitterly divisive issues within the Republican party, at the same time earning him plaudits from Hispanic activists battling against new legal clampdowns sweeping across the southern states.

Latino groups in Alabama and Arizona, where some of the harshest anti-immigration laws have been passed in recent months, welcomed Gingrich's comments as a sign, they said, of a changing tone in the debate. In Alabama, where police officers are under instruction to round up anyone they suspect of being undocumented, campaigners embraced his call for a new attitude.

"It's about time that we moved away from extremism and take up, as he said, a more human approach," said Gwendolyn Ferreti, a researcher on immigration who has been campaigning against Alabama's new law, HB56.

Until recently, the prevailing view among the Republican leadership was that a way had to be found to bring up to 12 million undocumented Latinos in the US into the legal fold. Both for economic reasons, to ensure a supply of cheap labour, and for reasons of political self-interest given the growing size of the Hispanic electorate, a compromise had to be reached.

Both the former president George Bush, who embraced so-called "compassionate conservatism", and the unsuccessful Republican candidate in 2008, John McCain, took a liberal view on immigration. McCain joined forces with the late Ted Kennedy from 2005 in a failed attempt to pass a Secure America Act that would tighten the borders but award legal status to undocumented workers already in the country.

But over the past 18 months a succession of Republican legislatures in states across the country – starting with Arizona and spreading to Alabama, South Carolina and beyond – have introduced tough new laws instructing police to check the documentation of "suspicious" people and deport anyone found lacking legal papers. The tone of the debate among Republican leaders in Washington has also hardened.

Lydia Guzman, of the Hispanic group Immigration Rights Coalition in Phoenix, Arizona, where the first anti-immigrant law, SB1070, was passed last year, said she was pleasantly shocked to hear Gingrich's comments. "There seems to be a shift in the dialogue taking place. I think people are really fed up of all this inflexibility and extremism, and Gingrich is picking up on this."

Guzman pointed to the recent unseating of the most powerful Republican politician in Arizona, Russell Pearce. A key architect of SB1070, Pearce was toppled by a recall vote in which Latinos and moderate Republicans joined forces against his hardline brand of Republicanism.

Despite these signs of shifting attitudes, Latino members of the conservative movement complain they still face hostility from the political peers. Last month DeeDee Garcia Blase stood down as president of one of the most prominent rightwing Hispanic groups, Somos Republicans, in protest at what she sees as the increasingly anti-Latino mood of the party.

The rot set in, she says, when only three Republican senators backed the 2010 Dream Act, a reform proposal that would have seen young undocumented Hispanics in higher education being given temporary legal status.

"When the Dream Act failed, you can't imagine how much that hurt," she said, adding that after the defeat of the legislation the number of visitors to the Somos Republicans website "dropped off a cliff".

Garcia Blase welcomed Gingrich's comments as a "restoration within the Republican party of common sense on immigration." But she said she feared that the candidate would suffer as a result of taking that stance, in much the same way Rick Perry saw his support dwindle among Republican voters after he publicly supported the Texas version of the Dream Act.

Garcia Blase believes the increasingly anti-Hispanic drift of the Republican party is political suicide. Every year almost 500,000 new Latino voters come of age in America, and their growing demographic presence is already being felt in key battleground states such as New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and Florida.

"Unless the party moves quickly to regain the common-sense approach we saw under Bush, then it is in danger of losing the Hispanic vote for an entire generation. They must show foresight, or else they will become extinct under the name of the Old White Party," she said.

A more nuanced approach to immigration is reflected in conservative thinktanks such as the Cato Institute, which in January [gave evidence](#) to the Congressional subcommittee on immigration policy in which it said that the existing emphasis on legal enforcement against undocumented workers in factories and farms was having a damaging effect on the economy. "Our enforcement-only approach is at odds with the underlying economic and demographic realities of our dynamic American economy," it said.

Nick Schulz, a fellow with the conservative thinktank the American Enterprise Institute, which sponsored Tuesday night's debate, said Gingrich was trying to move the debate on within the party and put it on a more realistic level. "I think he did a real service to the party by trying to enlarge the discussion and give it a bigger context," said Schulz, who posed the question at the televised debate that led to Gingrich's controversial answer.

Schulz said that there was an element of realpolitik to Gingrich's position. "He knows that the demographics are such that anyone who wants to be the leader of one of the two main parties cannot afford to alienate a large and growing proportion of the country."

But Schulz added that he was convinced that Gingrich also believed what he said. "I thought it was pretty courageous of him."