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Republican allies advocate for immigration reform

By: Brian Bennett - January 22, 2013

WASHINGTON Traditional pillars of the Republican base, such as police groups, evangelical pastors and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, have begun to push skeptical GOP lawmakers to change federal immigration laws to allow most of the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants to apply for legal status.

The issue has long been fought mostly between Republicans and Democrats. But the fate of a potential immigration overhaul may be determined by battles erupting inside the GOP.

"Now it's conservatives vs. conservatives over how much immigration reform should happen," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington that has advanced a free-market argument for opening up the immigration system.

President Barack Obama has vowed to revise immigration laws early in his second term, but Republican support would be necessary to pass any significant legislation in the GOP-held House.

Some national Christian organizations, law enforcement officials and business leaders have begun coordinating a national campaign to convince voters that immigration reform can be consistent with conservative values. Gathering in Washington last week, leaders of several groups said the goal is to help Republicans in Congress who fear being voted out of office if they support legal status for illegal immigrants.

Republican strategists have dubbed the emerging coalition "Bibles, badges and business." And opponents are gearing up their own lobbying machinery in favor of restricting immigration.

"It is unfortunate that these groups have abandoned the base to support immigration reform that is not in the best interest of Americans," said Rosemary Jenks, director of government relations for NumbersUSA, a Virginia-based advocacy group that lobbies to reduce immigration levels and grades members of Congress. "We have 20 million Americans unemployed who can't find jobs."

But conservative views on immigration are changing.

Recent polling shows a majority of Republican voters would support a plan that simultaneously tightens border security, requires employers to check the immigration status of new hires, and creates a path to legal status for immigrants who have paid a fine and back taxes.

In coming months, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce will try to convince local chapters that businesses will benefit from laws that make it easier for non-Americans to obtain work visas,

and allow illegal immigrants to apply for permanent legal status, said Randel Johnson, a senior vice president for the chamber in Washington.