

# National Journal

## Who Is Robert Rector, Conservative Immigration Whisperer?

*The most influential outside player on immigration wants lawmakers to know the "Gang of Eight" is dishing bad information.*

By: Tim Alberta – June 25, 2013

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Michele Bachmann must have mentioned his name half a dozen times.

It was a special meeting of the House's Republican Study Committee, and conservative lawmakers were taking turns arguing the merits of comprehensive immigration reform. When it was finally Rep. Bachmann's turn, the Minnesota firebrand unleashed an onslaught of rapid-fire criticisms, all eventually ending with some flustered variation of the same question: "Why isn't Robert Rector here?"

The answer was obvious--it was a members-only meeting--but the request was not entirely unreasonable. In the days leading up to that June 5 meeting, Rector's influence was ubiquitous on Capitol Hill. A senior research fellow with the Heritage Foundation, Rector had recently coauthored its controversial study on "The Fiscal Cost of Unlawful Immigrants and Amnesty to the U.S. Taxpayer," which argued that the burden of adding millions of new residents to the nation's entitlement rolls would far exceed the benefits of gaining new taxpayers.

Rector's methodology was questioned by some members of Congress, and was outright rejected by others. But for conservatives such as Bachmann and Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa--the leading immigration hawk in the House--Rector's report was a revelation. They read it aloud on the House floor. They sent press releases summarizing its findings. They congratulated the coauthors on its success.

But when it came to debating immigration reform with their fellow conservatives--plenty of whom held differing views on the matter--Bachmann and King recognized that their arguments were not enough. They were attempting to prosecute without their star witness. They needed Rector.

He's not a hard man to find. In the seven weeks since Rector released his Heritage study, he has spent hundreds of hours roaming the corridors of the Capitol. He has met with dozens of senators and scores of House members--the views of whom span the ideological divide--to discuss the findings of his report. He has tangled with lawmakers, schooled young staffers, and been skewered by opposing policy analysts.

And in the process, Rector has become the most influential outside player on what is perhaps the defining issue of the 113th Congress.

"He's *the* guy," said one lobbyist who has been involved with immigration negotiations and witnessed Rector's impact. "He's not afraid to push back on members, he's not afraid to push back on staff, and he's not afraid to tell people they're wrong."

Rector's relentless, incendiary style is familiar to political veterans. He injected controversy into last year's presidential campaign by authoring a study that accused President Obama of "gutting" welfare reform. (Some conservative lawmakers call him "the intellectual godfather of welfare reform," a title first coined by the *National Review*.) A decade after helping to pass the welfare law, Rector wrote a hard-hitting study on immigration reform, arguing that the bill championed by the Bush administration and then-Sen. Edward Kennedy would admit an unsustainable number of new immigrants into the U.S. and ultimately doom the nation's entitlement system.

Today, he's lobbying against the legislative effort he helped torpedo in 2007. But this time around, Rector explained, his task is made tougher by the pace of debate in the Senate.

"The problem is, they are trying to move the bill so fast that no one can really understand what the issues are," Rector said in an interview. "There's not a lot of understanding of the issues, and what I perceive is kind of a race to get this bill passed before anyone really understands what its consequences are."

Rector spends much of his time at private "informational" sessions with members and their staffs, discussing the findings of his study and the language of the Senate bill. But his role is not restricted to behind-the-scenes policy wonk. Rector is increasingly an aggressive, out-front opponent of immigration reform, taking his case to television shows and public rallies. Just last week, Rector was a featured speaker at King's "anti-amnesty" event on the East Lawn of the Capitol.

There, Rector was part-policy expert, part-political strategist, organizing congressional opposition while warning of the "lifetime of entitlements" created by the Senate "Gang of Eight" bill. Rector also repeatedly belittled Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, the face of the GOP's pro-reform wing, alleging that Rubio "hasn't read his own bill."

Rector won't get into specifics on which lawmakers he meets with, or which party initiates contact. He will say, however, that he has discussed and debated his study with legislators in both chambers and on all sides of the policy debate. Some are swing voters he's trying to persuade; others are opponents whose arguments he's trying to reinforce; still others are advocates whose mind he's trying to change.

Regardless of the recipient, Rector's message is simple: Don't trust the Gang of Eight. "The information they're giving about the bill is, I think, raw and false," he said.

Two of the gang's Republican members--Rubio and Sen. Jeff Flake of Arizona--have been instrumental in promoting immigration reform to members of the lower chamber, even attending the RSC summit earlier this month to explain the core policies in the Senate bill. It was there that Bachmann, concerned that her colleagues were drifting from conservative principles, stood up and argued that Rector should be in the room for such a discussion.

RSC Chairman Steve Scalise of Louisiana told Bachmann he would work on arranging a special RSC meeting with Rector. But, he warned, he would also invite CATO's immigration expert, Alex Nowrasteh, so that members could hear arguments from both sides of the debate.

Scalise kept his word. Last week, Rector and Nowrasteh headlined two separate sessions on immigration reform. Roughly a dozen members attended Tuesday's meeting, and another 15 or so were present Thursday. Bachmann was not among either crowd, according to those in attendance. But that doesn't bother Rector. In his view, Bachmann and King are responsible for raising awareness of his work in the lower chamber, where immigration reform will ultimately be defeated.

"The House needs to hear the information that I have to provide," Rector said.