

# National Journal

## Republican Immigration Critic Gets Slapped Down

*Wanna see how the GOP is changing on immigration? Look what happened to Sen. Jeff Sessions.*

By: Fawn Johnson – May 14, 2013

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The most potent illustration that Republicans have shifted their attitudes on immigration came Tuesday morning when all GOP members of the Senate Judiciary Committee rejected an amendment from Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., to severely limit the number of legal immigrants allowed into the country.

The committee's overwhelming 'No' vote shows that the battle for Republicans' souls on immigration has shifted away from groups that want to reduce the influx of foreigners, like the Heritage Foundation, NumbersUSA, and Fairness for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), toward free-market groups that applaud increased immigration, such as Americans for Tax Reform and the CATO Institute.

It was never in doubt that Sessions' "poison pill" amendment would be rejected by a committee stacked with Democrats and four members of the "Gang of Eight" senators that crafted the immigration package.

But it was a big surprise that those rejecting it included hard-core tea-party senators who are almost certain to vote against the immigration bill--Sens. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, Mike Lee, R-Utah, John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa.

Lobbyists were buzzing about the vote as the committee broke for lunch. "Can you believe it? That was amazing," said one lobbyist. "It was a smackdown. That was the defining moment," said another.

Sessions found himself all alone in defending the argument that has been used most often by the scrappy grassroots groups NumbersUSA and FAIR. His amendment would have limited the total immigration to the United States to about 23 million over 10 years, not including the current undocumented population.

"We don't want to invite people to America that can't find work and go on welfare and on dependency," he said.

Those same arguments held considerable sway in stopping the progress of similar immigration bills in 2006 and 2007. NumbersUSA and FAIR also managed to unseat several Republicans who embraced immigration reform, most notably the moderate Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah in 2008.

Now the tide has shifted. Republicans who oppose legalization for undocumented workers don't necessarily reject immigration generally. They are comfortable arguing about the benefits of immigration.

Cruz and Lee, in particular, are considered by immigration-reform advocates to be “ungettable” because they oppose a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. As it turns out, both Cruz and Lee are happy to welcome legal immigrants to come to the United States in the future.

“An artificial cap on legal immigration will not ensure that our needs are met. We need a flexible system that can adapt to changing circumstances,” said Emily Bennion, a spokeswoman for Lee.

“We need to remain a nation that doesn’t just welcome but that celebrates legal immigrants,” said Cruz. “I am a full-throated advocate of legal immigration. I have two amendments to expand the levels of legal immigration, to make this system work better, which has the added benefit of decreasing the demand for illegal immigration.” Several hours later, Cruz vehemently argued for an amendment to dramatically increase the bill’s annual allotments for high-skilled H-1B visas from 110,000 to 325,000. Under current law, only 65,000 are available. The amendment was rejected, but only because it upset the fragile coalition that makes up the Senate “Gang’s” compromise bill.

Sessions has been the most vocal committee member in the committee’s markup sessions—repeatedly refusing to cut short his thoughts during debate. Under the rules, he can talk as long as he wants unless the chairman moves to table the amendment, which rarely happens. Sessions has agitated so much in opposition to the bill that committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., audibly sighs every time Sessions asks to speak.

The rejection of Sessions’ top priority amendment elicited some gleeful responses from liberal advocates who dislike his diatribes. “In Alabama, we’ve been feeling the impacts of Senator Sessions’ extremist immigration views for a long time. Jeff Sessions stands alone in denying our country’s legacy as a nation of immigrants,” said Evelyn Servin, a community leader from Russellville, Ala., in a statement blasted out by the pro-immigration group Alliance for Citizenship.