



## **Why Republicans Aren't Scared by the Politics of Immigration**

**By Heidi Przybyla**

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For the third time in as many years, congressional Republicans find themselves threatening to shut down part of the federal government rather than compromise with the White House. The latest fight, over President Obama's decision to stop the U.S. Department of Homeland Security from deporting millions of undocumented immigrants, has upset potential GOP presidential candidates, several of whom have made it a priority to attract Latino voters. In the run-up to Friday's theater in Congress, Senator Lindsey Graham implored his party not to shut down the government, adding that, as Republicans, "we'll get blamed." Representative Peter King of New York said, "people think we're crazy." Congress came two hours from a department shutdown before reaching an agreement. But it was only a stopgap measure, setting up a repeat performance next week.

Graham's and King's comments echoed a plea made by Karl Rove, the party's senior strategist, in the Wall Street Journal. "The argument has always been about the prudence of tactics, not about goals," he wrote. But the same strong-arm tactics that Rove says are bad for the GOP's chances of winning the White House in 2016 may be good for some politicians on the Hill. While the national electorate crucial to winning presidential elections is becoming younger and more diverse, the voter base of many congressional Republicans remains overwhelmingly old, white, and male.

Republicans have worked to consolidate and amplify the power of that constituency. After the 2010 census, GOP-controlled state legislatures around the country redrew many congressional districts to make them whiter and more conservative, creating an estimated 200 safe Republican seats. "If you're a House member in a bleached district, even if you're in a diverse state, your tendency is to look over your right shoulder for a Tea Party challenger rather than worry about the nonwhite vote," says Frank Sharry, executive director of the immigrant advocacy group America's Voice.

Senate Republicans face a similar calculus, even without doctored districts. Today, minorities make up the majority of the population in only four states: California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and

Texas. That number won't double for more than a decade, and it won't be until 2052 that minorities make up a majority of eligible voters across the U.S., according to a Feb. 24 report jointly sponsored by the conservative American Enterprise Institute, the liberal Center for American Progress, and the nonpartisan Brookings Institution. White voters, who tend to be older, still vote at higher rates than minority voters: In 2012 white turnout was 64 percent, vs. 48 percent for Latino voters. Speaking at a town hall event in Miami on February 25, President Obama underlined the importance of Latinos voting. He said, "Why are you staying at home? Why are you not participating? There are war-torn countries, people full of poverty, who still voted, 60, 70 percent. If here in the United States of America, we voted at 60 percent, 70 percent, it would transform our politics. Our Congress would be completely different. We would have already passed comprehensive immigration reform."

After Mitt Romney lost the 2012 election, taking only 27 percent of the Latino vote, the Republican National Committee invested in a \$10 million plan to boost Latino outreach. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who's exploring a presidential run and whose wife is from Mexico, last year called illegal immigration "an act of love" by parents seeking a better life for their children. In February he called on the president and Congress to find a "common-sense immigration solution." Florida Senator Marco Rubio, another possible contender, spearheaded the Senate's failed 2013 effort to create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for years without papers.

The immigration issue has splintered Republican advocacy and donor groups. Business groups including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have lobbied for an immigration overhaul, while Heritage Action for America, the political arm of the Heritage Foundation think tank, has opposed concessions that would allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. without punishment, describing it as amnesty.

In January, Iowa's Steve King successfully championed a Homeland Security funding bill overruling not only Obama's November decision to shield the parents of children born in the U.S. from deportation but also a 2012 directive from the administration protecting young adults who came to the U.S. as children. After persuading House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy to put forward the legislation, King—who in 2013 characterized immigrants crossing the southern border with Mexico as drug runners with "calves the size of cantaloupes"—emerged with a grin from McCarthy's Capitol office.

When Democrats in the Senate blocked passage of similar legislation, House Speaker John Boehner, who promised to use his expanded majority to undermine Obama's immigration action, proposed a \$10 billion Homeland Security bill that paid for border enforcement, including drones, radar, and biometric tracking systems. It didn't include provisions for addressing the problem of undocumented immigrants already living in the U.S. The goal, Boehner said in a Jan. 27 news conference, was to "show the American people that we're here to listen to their priorities."

That effort also failed, even though Republicans in both chambers—including Senator John McCain of Arizona, who in 2013 championed giving immigrants a path to citizenship—lined up behind the measure. “Even the ‘good’ Republicans are going along,” says Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. Republican leaders “think this will just placate the anti-immigration reform crowd enough that they’ll be able to do what they want on immigration reform,” he says. “Nothing will placate them, and they’re being foolish thinking that it will.”

The impasse on Capitol Hill set up the last-minute scramble to reach an accord before funding for Homeland Security was due to run out on Feb. 27—and, though Congress did manage to avert a shutdown, it simply punted the battle over immigration into the following week. Now party leaders are on the record trying “to separate families and deport kids brought here through no fault of their own,” says Hector Barajas, a Republican strategist from California. “That negative message is one that the community will remember. I’m afraid it’s taking us back in a way that we will lose another generation of voters.”