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GOP promise of immigration reform fades a year after election

Despite the importance of the Latino vote, divisions among Republicans leave immigration reform at a standstill.

By Lisa Mascaro

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WASHINGTON — Earlier this year, as House [Republicans](#) began considering changes to the nation's [immigration laws](#) after their party's defeat in the presidential election, they were given a list of do's and don'ts that updated GOP thinking on the issue.

The suggestions seemed obvious to most but signaled a new tone for the Republican Party.

"Don't use the term 'anchor baby' or phrases like 'send them all back,'" said the memo from a Republican-aligned advocacy group, the Hispanic Leadership Network. "Do acknowledge that 'our current immigration system is broken and we need to fix it.'"

Changing the way the party talks about immigration is about all House Republicans have to show for their efforts over the last 11 months — and even that effort has notable exceptions.

Though Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) of Ohio has insisted recently that immigration reform is not dead, the House is about to finish the year without progress on a topic that is a priority to Latino voters, an electorate the GOP desperately needs to woo before the next presidential race.

In fact, the House's most visible immigration-related action was a measure to defund an Obama administration program to defer deportations of young immigrants, a vote that increased Latino animosity even though it failed to become law.

The legislative sputter stems from Republicans' focus on the 2014 midterm election. As lawmakers burnish their conservative credentials for potential hard-right primary challenges, they are betting they will have time to court Latinos before the 2016 election.

But the inaction raises questions about whether Republicans have learned from their electoral losses last year and can broaden the party's base to appeal to more minorities. And it's not only immigration reform. GOP promises to be more inclusive to women and gays also have produced few results.

"It's foolhardy," said Alex Nowrasteh, a policy analyst at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "On the one hand, Republicans have improved their rhetoric and they've moved much more toward embracing immigration reform. On the other hand, immigration reform was passed in the [Senate](#) and was dropped in the [House of Representatives](#), and that makes them look like they're opposed to reform, which in a way, they are."

In last year's presidential election, [Mitt Romney](#) — whose comment about "self-deportation" infuriated immigration advocates — lost the Latino vote by a 44-percentage-point margin, the largest deficit of any Republican presidential candidate since the Clinton era. Alarmed GOP insiders jump-started congressional talks toward a bipartisan immigration overhaul, and Boehner announced the time had come for [Congress](#) to act.

But the speaker has refused to take up the Senate's sweeping bipartisan overhaul of immigration laws, even though it would probably pass the House with Democratic support; nor are House Republicans expected to vote on their own measures any time soon.

Divisions within the House GOP have left the party at a standstill. More Republican lawmakers than ever — nearly two dozen, by some counts — support the cornerstone of an immigration overhaul, which is a path to citizenship for immigrants in the U.S. illegally.

But many more oppose legalization efforts. Most House Republicans represent conservative districts, configured to include few minority voters. The handful of exceptions, including several from California, have already come under pressure in their districts, but most have little interest in the subject.

"There's just no cohesion there yet," said Sen. [John McCain](#) (R-Ariz.), who has tried to persuade Republicans to take action. "All I hope is that they realize that the issue is not going away — that we need to act on it — that we'd be glad to consider any proposals or ideas they have."

Hedging the political risks, House GOP leaders continue working behind the scenes with lawmakers to draft a series of bills that could be brought forward next year.

Together, they would resemble the main ingredients of the comprehensive Senate bill.

One, from Majority Leader [Eric Cantor](#) of Virginia, would provide a path to citizenship for young people brought to the U.S. illegally as minors. Another would allow adult immigrants to apply for legal status as border security is ramped up.

President Obama has extended a hand to Boehner several times by saying he would be open to the House GOP's piecemeal approach rather than the Senate's big package.

"It's Thanksgiving; we can carve that bird into multiple pieces," Obama said during a speech in San Francisco on Monday. "A drumstick here, breast meat there. But as long as all the pieces get done — soon — and we actually deliver on the core values we've been talking about for so long, I think everybody is fine with it."

House Republicans, though, have resisted most White House initiatives. Many Republicans prefer to use the months ahead investigating what went wrong with the healthcare law. And some House members seem to have missed the memo on new talking points.

In March, after the memo was distributed on Capitol Hill, one of the House's longest-serving Republican members, [Don Young](#) of Alaska, used a racial slur to describe the migrants who once worked on his family's California farm.

Rep. [Steve King](#) of Iowa, who sponsored the legislation to allow deportation of young immigrants to resume, said some of them had "calves the size of cantaloupes" from hauling drugs across the border.

Longtime immigration advocate Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, warned that Republicans would face another election defeat if they failed to translate their new talking points into legislative action.

"Boehner, if he kills off immigration reform, will be remembered as the speaker who killed the GOP," Sharry said.