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Trump's immigration pivot: Will he be the latest Republican to alienate the base?

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Donald Trump's surprising pivot on illegal immigration — a policy shift that remains in flux — could bring one of the greatest risks he's faced in an already turbulent campaign.

Trump's recent rethinking about whether to deport all 11 million immigrants in the country illegally, a signature issue that has propelled his campaign, is a stunning reversal for a candidate who once ridiculed such ideas as too soft or a form of "amnesty."

Trump appeared to be test-driving a new, more moderate approach during a Fox News town hall this week. The idea, which sounded strikingly similar to those of his Republican primary rivals former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, would allow some immigrants to remain in the country as long as they had no criminal records and agreed to pay back taxes.

The danger for Trump is clear: Can he persuade his supporters to go along with a new direction on immigration — and pick up some additional voters with a softer tone — or will he belly-flop into the stack of previous Republicans who have been wounded by their changing views?

For many of his ardent supporters, such a change may look like exactly the kind of bait-and-switch they'd come to loathe. Many establishment GOP leaders have paid a steep price for revving up the base with the hard-line promises, for example, to repeal Obamacare, cut the budget or defund Planned Parenthood, only to abruptly pull back in the final moment and compromise. Trump's campaign soared largely because he promised to be unlike those other politicians.

"It's like he's built a Trump Tower and now he's trying to change the foundation just as he realizes nobody's buying the apartments," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the conservative Cato Institute.

On the other hand, there are signs that Trump — thanks largely to his intensely loyal following — may be able to navigate a minefield that others could not, including former House Speaker John

A. Boehner, former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and several of Trump's defeated presidential rivals.

During the Fox town hall, Trump seemed to deftly maneuver the crowd to the view that longtime immigrants who were otherwise law-abiding should be allowed to stay in the country, a far cry from his past vow to create a "deportation force" to kick out all 11 million immigrants, including their families.

"We have the person, 20 years, been an upstanding person, the family is great, everyone is great, do we throw them out or do we work with them?" Trump asked the audience. "No citizenship. Let me go a step further: They'll pay back taxes. They have to pay taxes. There's no amnesty, as such. There's no amnesty, but we work with them."

Trump called for a show of support and the audience registered its approval for the approach to work with immigrants, rather than kick them out.

Even conservative commentator Ann Coulter, who was initially outraged by Trump's remarks and warned him against backing down on immigration, took a more negotiated stance on Thursday.

"Perhaps it is in our interest to let some of them stay," Coulter said in an interview with the Washington Examiner.

Some GOP stalwarts are wondering whether Trump, in a kind of Nixon-goes-to-China way, might be uniquely positioned to bring GOP hard-liners to a more reasonable position when it comes to immigration reform.

"Who knew that it would be Donald Trump to come and convert the GOP base to supporting amnesty?" conservative radio show host Rush Limbaugh said with a laugh Thursday.

The details of Trump's immigration policy remain a work in progress. A planned speech this week was scrapped, but he is expected to outline more specific details in a rescheduled address next week in Phoenix.

In a CNN interview Thursday night, Trump seemed to cast doubt on his own softening, suggesting that immigrants would first need to leave the country before they could return and reap the benefits of any legalization program.

In many ways Trump has little to lose, as polls show his support slipping among white voters, especially women, and picking up only about 20% of Latinos, when most experts say twice that amount is needed to win the White House. One poll found more than 80% of Latinos view him as racist.

Even if the shift does little to improve his standing in the presidential race, his softened tone could help the GOP with its broader approach to immigration reform, an issue that has dogged the party since the 2012 election when nominee Mitt Romney called for "self-deportation."

Advocates of immigration reform have proposed a way to allow some immigrants to come forward, pay back taxes and fines, and begin a path toward legalization and, in some cases, citizenship.

For example, a 2013 Senate plan engineered by Rubio and the “gang of eight,” would have put immigrants on a 13-year pathway toward that goal. At the time, their proposal was coupled with a massive security buildup along the Mexican border, including a wall, as well as a system requiring employers to verify legal status of their workers. It also expanded programs to allow more legal immigration.

Whether Trump will go that far or opt for another approach remains to be seen. He continues to insist he will build a wall along the border.

Some expect he will focus on security, while making some small accommodation for those already in the U.S.

“He’s gotten more practical,” said Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, which favors immigration limits. “Those who have attacked Trump for being too harsh should be pleased.”

Others, though, doubt Trump is preparing to unveil a detailed immigration plan.

“My guess is he’s going to muddle this from now to election day so that on any given day you won’t know what his position is,” said Rory Cooper, a former top aide to Cantor who is now a GOP strategist, and no fan of Trump.

Immigration advocates also remained skeptical Trump could change the views of Latino and other minority voters, but expressed interest in hearing what the candidate has in mind.

“If he’s going to get any credit for a policy pivot, he’s going to have to do more than a few words at a ‘Family Feud’-style town hall,” said Frank Sharry, executive director of America’s Voice, which has been working for years on immigration reform.

“We’re trying to analyze this through the prism of the three-dimensional chess board that immigration is, and he’s playing checkers,” Sharry said. “Immigration policy and politics is a complex world. Trump’s like an eighth-grade student who’s asked to write an essay on it, and he realizes it’s complicated.”