



Immigration Deja Vu All Over Again?

Why immigration reform in 2013 won't follow in the footsteps of 2007

By: [Robert Schlesinger](#) – April 26, 2013

Little new happens in Washington, even when there are new things outside the Beltway. The D.C. reaction to the Boston bombings ran in predictable grooves. So critics of the comprehensive immigration reform saw a reason to slow it down or stop it ("The background checks in this bill are insufficient from preventing a terrorist from getting amnesty," Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, an anti-immigration hard-liner, told the Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday). Reform proponents meanwhile saw a new reason to push forward. ("Our bill actually strengthens security and the events in Boston if anything should importune us to leave the status quo and go to a proposal like ours," New York Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer said Thursday).

Here's the ultimate importance of the Boston attacks in the immigration debate: It provided a stress test for GOP support of the bipartisan approach the Senate is currently considering, and the party passed. Given an excuse to scuttle the bill, key Republicans like House Speaker John Boehner didn't. "If we fix our immigration system, it may actually help us understand who all is here, why they're here and what legal status they have," he told Fox News last Sunday. Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, whose commitment to reform has been an open question given his once hard-line stances on the issue, has run a rapid response effort in his office pushing back on rumors and disinformation. "It's amazing how aggressive Republican leaders have been about saying that this doesn't fundamentally change anything," says Simon Rosenberg of the pro-reform think tank, NDN.

Boehner and company passing this test is important because despite the Senate bill's novel (these days) bipartisan heritage, it figures to run on familiar tracks in the House where it could well enjoy the support of a (mostly Democratic) majority in the chamber, while generating fierce opposition from most of the Republicans.

It's said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme, and more than a few observers are asking whether 2013 will end up sounding like 2007, the last time a second-term president and a strong bipartisan group of senators seemed poised to enact an immigration overhaul. Six years ago, conservatives, paced by their talk radio firebrand brigades, killed the bill.

But things change. "A coalition has been assembled from labor to business to evangelicals to the Catholic Church," Arizona Sen. John McCain, a sponsor of both bills, said Thursday. "When you look at the broad spectrum of support that has been assembled ... it is a coalition we did not have in 2007." So, influential right-wing groups like Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Cato Institute have lined up squarely behind the reform effort.

And, as importantly, the facts on the ground have changed fairly radically over the last several years. Consider these facts, pulled together in a border security briefing that the NDN has been giving on the Hill and around town:

- Funding for immigration enforcement has nearly tripled since 2002, going from \$6.2 billion that year to \$18 billion in 2012.
- The number of border patrol agents more than doubled from 2004 to 2012, from 10,650 to 21,300.
- Violent crime along the U.S. side of the border has dropped – from more than 19,000 incidents in 2004 to fewer than 15,000 in 2011 – even as it's gotten worse on the Mexican side.
- Net migration from Mexico to the U.S. from 2005 to 2010 was actually slightly negative.

In other words, not only is the United States doing more to protect our southern border than ever before, but also it's working. That kind of data potentially gives Republicans the breathing room they need to address immigration reform.

The other big difference from 2007 is political. Six years ago Hispanics had yet to achieve the slumbering demographic giant status they currently enjoy, and George W. Bush had garnered over 40 percent of their vote in 2004. Now the GOP is contemplating this increasingly politically potent group locking in as long term Democrats. "If we pass this legislation, it won't gain us a single Hispanic vote," McCain said. "But what it will do is put us on a playing field on which we can compete. Right now we cannot compete."

That's produced a familiar fault line which is laid bare nowhere more starkly than in the immigration debate. The pro-reform side tends to be nationally oriented Republicans, those who are worried about ensuring the party has broad appeal in a diverse country. They occupy the strategist ranks (see Karl Rove, for example) and, in many cases, U.S. Senate seats. It's no accident that the bipartisan proposal originated in the Senate. On the other side are people with more parochial interests, whether avoiding primaries in their heavily gerrymandered districts or rousing the rabble for talk radio ratings.

Trying to uncomfortably straddle the middle are the would-be presidential class of 2016. So Rubio pushes inexorably forward on the issue all the while trying to give very high profile voice to conservative concerns. Further to his right Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, who has ostensibly embraced some form of reform, called for the whole process to slow down because of the Boston attacks.

Pace is critical. Enemies of reform reportedly plan to kill it by grinding it to a halt. Which brings us back to Boehner. Immigration reform could well come down to the question of whether he values his national party's interests over his House colleagues' hard-line desires.

My bet is Boehner saves the GOP from itself and lets a reform bill pass.