

The Washington Post

Why is 2013 different than 2007?

By: Jennifer Rubin – May 10, 2013

The 2007 immigration reform effort under George W. Bush faltered. So it is natural to wonder if the effort in 2013 won't collapse as well. But much has changed in six years, and those changes work to the benefit of immigration reform.

Then: A president commanding an increasingly unpopular war and having lost the House was losing altitude, especially with his own party.

Now: A Democratic president desperate for some win — any win — is in office.

Then: The GOP had the White House and was busy constructing (so it thought) a “permanent majority.” Bush had been successful with Hispanic voters, even absent immigration reform.

Now: The GOP has now lost two presidential elections, understands (by and large) that it has a problem with minority voters and is eager to claim an accomplishment for which President Obama's main contribution will be remaining quiet.

Then: Maverick Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), bane of the right wing, led the charge for the Republicans with Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), the poster boy for liberalism, at his side. Republicans were not disposed to do them any favors.

This time: It is the darling of the GOP, Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.) who is leading the charge, charming the base and going over the heads of talk-show hosts to reach GOP voters. (No wonder National Review clumsily airbrushed out other faces on its recent cover in order to tie Rubio to McCain and the prickly New York Democrat Chuck Schumer.)

Then: The conservative base was relatively monolithic and dominate in think tanks and talk radio.

Now: The conservative base is more heterogeneous, with heavy doses of libertarianism. A plethora of think tanks, pundits and activists are now pro-immigration.

Then: The president rolled out a policy initiative and got cut off by right-wing activists.

This time: Rubio is running a campaign-style effort, employing social media and old media, working both in public and behind the scenes.

None of this means that immigration reform is sure to pass. But it does suggest that the chances for passage are better this time around and that immigration opponents were caught flat-footed (on everything from Rubio's effectiveness to the Heritage catastrophe), seemingly unaware how strongly a segment of the party had become more ideologically flexible and diverse. The opponents also lack, for the most part, telegenic, capable

spokespeople for their cause who are media-friendly and can go toe to toe with pro-reform voices such as Rubio and Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.)

Meanwhile, for once, Republicans on the pro-immigration side laid out a game plan and organized themselves. Grover Norquist at Americans for Tax Reform, the Cato Institute, the American Action Network and many evangelicals have joined together with high-tech executives to run a full-blown campaign for immigration reform.

If reformers win on this fight, they will have both won an important legislative victory and taken a preeminent position within the party. The anti-immigration side will go away angry (aren't they always angry about something?), determined to obstruct, challenge reformers in primaries and scrape to get back in charge. There are no permanent winners and losers in politics, but winners tend to learn from their mistakes and be prepared for the next round.