



A Republican-controlled Senate may be the only way immigration reform passes

By Matthew Kolken

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With only a few weeks left before the midterm elections, and on the heels of President Obama's delay of ameliorative executive action, immigration reform activists are at a crossroads as to where to throw the power of their vote. Tossing gasoline onto an already roaring fire was at risk Senators Mary Landrieu (D- LA), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Mark Pryor (D-AR) and Kay Hagan (D-NC) who linked arms with Republican Tea Party favorite Ted Cruz calling to defund executive actions that provide deportation relief to the undocumented community.

All four Democrats are fighting for their political lives as evidenced by the break from Senate Democrats who ultimately defeated the Republican lead charge to permit amendments to a continuing resolution. The activist community took note.

Presente.org, the nation's largest online Latino organization, issued a statement that "Latinos are not political footballs to be thrown back and forth as convenient," while circulating an online petition calling for people to oppose Senator Pryor in his reelection bid reasoning that "they didn't have our backs — so we won't have theirs." They were not alone.

The National Coordinating Committee for Fair and Humane Immigration Reform 2014 recommended that Latino voters oppose any candidate, regardless of party affiliation, that does not support an immediate end to deportations. The coalition explained that their intent is to "forge an independent political electorate among Latino communities," and their goal is to make both parties work for the Hispanic vote, while opposing candidates that do not support the core needs of the constituency. A worthy goal indeed, but at what cost?

House Republicans have been the singular force obstructing immigration reform since bipartisan Senate legislation passed over a year ago, and most presume they will continue to obstruct for the remainder of the lame duck Obama Presidency. Is there any credible reason to believe that Republicans will drive reform efforts in the event of a Senate takeover?

The short answer: possibly.

In an interview with George Stephanopoulos, Speaker Boehner played the same old tired tune that he “absolutely” could get the votes needed to advance legislation through the House remarking that “it was time to do immigration reform.” The Speaker claims to be confident that his party will act, but he predictably attached the caveat that any executive action providing deportation relief will “poison the well” to reform negotiations.

But put that aside, as there have been other more believable signs that Republicans may intend to advance immigration reform in the event of a Senate takeover. Republican immigration torch bearer Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL) recently went on record stating that the chances of immigration reform passing may actually increase with a GOP controlled Senate. Republican Rep. Jeff Denham (R-CA), who supports a pathway to citizenship, agreed stating that “I think there would certainly be greater trust between the House and Senate in agreeing on something.”

There appears to be movement in the GOP-controlled House towards a middle of the road immigration reform solution. Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA), Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Raúl Labrador (R-ID) have both spoken about removing one of the major impediments preventing a significant percentage of the undocumented community from becoming legal. They have both acknowledged that any solution with an end-game resulting in the deportation of 11 million people is neither politically viable nor legally plausible, as our immigration courts simply do not possess the resources necessary to effectuate removals on a scale of that magnitude.

Independent immigration policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity has also expressed cautious optimism that all may not be lost should the GOP wrestle control of the upper house stating that “a Republican controlled Senate could liberalize the legal immigration system and address many of the concerns raised by moderate Republicans.” He noted that there may also be benefits should Republicans control the immigration reform narrative, which includes the creation of a workable guest worker program, and an immigration system that better serves our nation’s economic needs.

In fact, there are growing whispers that the only way immigration reform has any chance of passage before the 2016 presidential election is if the Republicans win the Senate, because should they fail in their bid they will continue their obstruction in the House.

Recent polls reveal that battleground races are too close to call, but whatever the final outcome the lesson to be learned is that the Hispanic electorate is a force that can no longer be ignored, and that those that oppose them will find themselves on the wrong side of history.