

Hard-liners Don't Speak For GOP

BY [TAMAR JACOBY](#) and Grover Norquist

December 19, 2005

Watching the action in the House of Representatives last week, it was easy to imagine that immigration was a strictly partisan issue.

The bill under discussion, mostly the brainchild of Judiciary Chairman James Sensenbrenner, was about as tough as it gets: not just 700 miles of border fence and stiffer penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants but also a provision that turns illegal presence in this country from a civil violation into a federal crime – subject to an entirely different kind of policing and punishable by much stiffer penalties.

Over two days of emotional debate on the floor, Democrats railed against the legislation, standing up, member after member, to defend our tradition as a nation of immigrants. Most of the Republicans who spoke used an entirely different vocabulary – all about policing and punishment. A few brave GOP dissenters stood up to say that we can have both – can remain a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. But when these moderates clashed with hard-liners – when restrictionist Tom Tancredo demanded that the leadership renege on a promise to balance the bill's tough enforcement with recognition that we also need more realistic, more enforceable laws, in line with our need for foreign workers – the party chieftains came down squarely with Tancredo.

Then, when it came time to vote, the members split lopsidedly along party lines: most Republicans for tougher enforcement, most Democrats for a broader approach – enforcement plus a temporary worker program and a provision to deal with the 11 million illegal immigrants already in the country.

Add in President Bush's tough-sounding speech on border security in Tucson last month, and the conclusion seems obvious: The Republican Party is pivoting on immigration, resolving the differences that have plagued it since Bush proposed a guest-worker program nearly two years ago and coming together around a new hard line calculated to please the base in the run-up to next year's election.

The only problem: This isn't true. And though the hard-liners had the upper hand in the House, they do not speak for the party and will not, we are convinced, triumph in the long run.

What happened last week was less about immigration than about a GOP congressional leadership looking for an issue to rally the party after a bad autumn dominated by Katrina, Iraq, Harriet Miers and accumulating indictments. Many pro-immigration reform Republicans understood that and went along, not because they support the Sensenbrenner approach, but because they didn't want to buck the leadership or disregard the powerful committee chairman. No doubt, this was agonizing for them – and the heavily partisan votes made the party look unappealingly anti-immigrant. But don't mistake it for a new, harsh GOP unanimity.

In fact, the reform-minded wing of the party is alive and well – and standing ready for the next phase of the battle, in the Senate and beyond.

Who makes up the reform wing?

- There are political operatives such as Ken Mehlman concerned about how immigration plays with Latino voters.
- There are business friendly Republicans at The Wall Street Journal, the Cato Institute and elsewhere who know that immigration is good for the economy; not just good for individual employers – in agriculture, food-processing, hospitality, healthcare, construction and other sectors – who depend on these workers to keep their businesses open and growing, but also for native-born workers employed by these companies and others that trade with them.
- There are security-minded Republicans like Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and his predecessor Tom Ridge who know that creating a system for immigrant laborers to enter the country legally is the best way to free up border agents whose real job is protecting us from terrorists.

And then there are Republicans like Ronald Reagan and now President Bush who understand in a more general way that immigrants are good for the country: that they bring entrepreneurial energy and family values and fresh patriotism – and that, as Reagan emphasized, the nation must remain a beacon to the world.

None of these Republicans think enforcement or legality are unimportant. But they are convinced that the best way to restore the rule of law is to start with more-honest, more-enforceable immigration quotas – a temporary-worker program more in line with the reality of our labor needs – and then make those realistic limits stick with all the means at our disposal. This is the approach that the Senate will almost certainly pursue when it turns to immigration in January or February, and it is the approach the president hopes to sign into law, perhaps as soon as next spring.

Let's not kid ourselves: What happened in the House last week will make those next steps harder. This polarizes the debate, in and outside the beltway, and it may unnerve hesitant senators who side with the president but fear spitting into what they see as the prevailing political wind.

The challenge for the Republican Party is particularly difficult – precisely because of the way the issue divides us from one other. But we remain convinced that reason – and the party's traditional values – will prevail in the end. Instead of trying punitively to enforce unrealistic law, the majority of the GOP will eventually come together around an immigration policy worthy of the label Republican – one that encourages the American Dream and rewards work, even as it restores the rule of law and enhances national security.

Tamar Jacoby is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.