

Borderline Catastrophe

How the fight over immigration blew up Rove's big tent.

By [Rachel Morris](#) Washington Monthly October 2006

Karl Rove's storied partnership with George W. Bush, now in its second decade, has long been concerned with more momentous matters than simply winning elections. Famously, Rove has sought to engineer a seismic realignment in American politics. To that end, he's perfected two signature strategies. He's mastered a "base-in" approach, designing policy positions first for the party's core conservatives, then marketing them to moderates (in contrast to the "center-out" model preferred by Bill Clinton). At the same time, Rove has made ingenious appeals to new constituencies that he believed were already Republicans, but just didn't know it. Because these tactics defy all kinds of conventional wisdom and have delivered Bush a string of victories, they've won Rove a reputation for political genius. Stories about him invariably make dazzled references to his latest scheme to bring some unlikely group into the GOP fold: black conservatives, Arabs in Michigan, outlier Jews.

But for Republicans eyeing a long-term majority, the Hispanic vote is considered the real prize, particularly immigrant Hispanics. While two thirds of registered U.S.-born Hispanics reliably vote Democratic, foreign-born Hispanics remain up for grabs. This group now comprises nearly half the Latino electorate, which has tripled between 1980 and 2004 to 10 million voters; that figure is expected to double by 2020. For Republicans, this growth is especially important, because their core constituency—white voters—is in demographic decline. But what makes Hispanic voters so coveted by both parties is also their location on a stratified electoral map. As the last two presidential contests have demonstrated, the Democrats have a lock on the Northeast and California, while Republicans hold the South; the two parties split the Midwest. The real battleground is the West and Southwest, traditionally GOP regions that have been drifting leftward, partly because of their growing concentrations of Hispanic residents. If one party wins their loyalty, the theory goes, it holds the key to a generation of political dominance.

Rove and Bush understood the importance of Hispanic voters and have courted them earnestly. That's not an easy task. Puerto Ricans don't vote like Cubans; Mexican Americans in Texas are very different from Mexican Americans in California. But one issue has the potential to attract significant Latino support or provoke their opposition: immigration. After Bush won the White House in 2000, he repeatedly promised to enact a guest-worker program and some form of legalization for the undocumented. In a rare occurrence for this administration, the imperatives of Republican politics actually aligned with something resembling sound public policy. It's not so far-fetched to say that the GOP's future rested with Bush and Rove's ability to make that policy happen.

Nor is it too overwrought to say that Rove's grand designs have disintegrated. For most of this year, the Republican Party has been publicly waging an ugly internal fight over immigration. Like the president—and, polls show, most Americans—a bipartisan coalition in the Senate supports comprehensive reform. But House Republicans, fearful of their inflamed base, won't budge from an enforcement-only measure that in March and April propelled thousands of Hispanics into the streets. This April, former Republican National Committee chairman Ed Gillespie penned a dire warning to his party in *The Wall Street Journal*: "Anti-immigration rhetoric is a political siren song, and Republicans must resist its lure," he wrote, "or our majority will crash on the shoals." But instead of working with the Senate to actually pass legislation, this summer, Republican representatives have been traveling to competitive districts to hold hearings with titles like, "Should We Embrace the Senate's Grant of Amnesty to Millions of Illegal Aliens and Repeat the Mistakes of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986?" Even if Congress scrapes together a face-saving compromise before November, the damage to the GOP's standing with Latinos can't be so quickly repaired—already, a recent poll by NDN showed that Bush's support among Spanish-speaking Hispanics has dropped almost by half.

It's become a journalistic truism that the House's theatrics will hurt the Republicans in the long-term, but will at least provide the boost they need to hold Congress in November. A closer look suggests that even that latter assumption is doubtful (see "[Base Instinct](#)"). Historians may look back at the GOP's struggle over comprehensive reform and pronounce it the moment when its chances for an enduring majority slipped from its grasp. It's worth asking how the Republicans got into this mess—and what it says about the sustainability of the Karl Rove brand of politics.

Hot patata

The American public agrees on very few things, but the need to do something about immigration forms a rare island of consensus. What that something might be provokes a more fractured response. Although a strain of anti-immigrant sentiment runs throughout the population, in recent times at least, its most uncompromising advocates tend to belong to the Republican Party. Time and time again, the GOP has been seduced by the antics of its nativist wing, with disastrous results.

This happened most notoriously in the mid-1990s, when then-governor of California, Pete Wilson, facing an uphill re-election battle, embraced Proposition 187, a state ballot initiative denying social services to legal and illegal immigrants. Both Wilson and Proposition 187 won, prompting House Republicans to attempt a similar stunt. They clamored for a harsh immigration bill and welfare reforms denying benefits to legal immigrants. Bill Clinton vetoed welfare legislation twice because of these demands. Eventually, he signed both bills, but later restored most of the benefits, portraying his party as the champion of immigrants. In 1996, Clinton returned to the White House with 72 percent of the Hispanic vote, collecting Arizona and Florida along the way. In California, Wilson's crusade prompted Hispanics to register to vote in record numbers. With the maverick exception of Arnold Schwarzenegger, the state has been solidly blue ever since.

There were few more attentive students of these lessons than Karl Rove and George W. Bush. As governor of Texas, Bush denounced Wilson and Proposition 187 and spoke warmly of the contributions that Hispanics had made to Texas. He was rewarded with nearly half the Hispanic vote in his second gubernatorial campaign. Seeking to replicate this success in 2000, Bush became fond of remarking to reporters that “family values don’t stop at the Rio Grande.” His overtures paid off. Whereas Bob Dole won just 21 percent of the Hispanic vote in 1996, Bush, according to exit polls, captured 35 percent.

Everything in moderation

In order to get elected, aspiring presidents often say things that anger their base. Bush did that in two main ways. His education policy, with its prescription for a stronger federal role in local schools, angered believers in small government. And his immigration proposals, with their emphasis on guest-worker provisions rather than border security, were anathema to the party’s nativists. More than anything else, these two platforms signaled to voters that Bush would be a moderate.

At first, it looked like Bush planned to be. He tapped Hispanics for cabinet posts and made his first foreign visit to Mexico to meet with Vicente Fox. He even reportedly considered an amnesty (back then, people still used the word) for around three million Mexican workers. But after conservatives complained—Sen. Phil Gramm declared that an amnesty would proceed over his “cold, dead political body”—Bush wavered. “When he got some rollback from the real conservative base, he backed off,” said Dick Armey, the former House majority leader, who had urged Bush to stand his ground. “He didn’t allow himself to be the largest voice in the country on the subject.”

When Fox visited the United States in the first week of September 2001, he and Bush discussed a guest-worker program, increased visa quotas for Mexicans, a mechanism allowing some undocumented workers to “normalize,” and heightened border security. But instead of reaching a bilateral agreement, as was once anticipated, the “two amigos” merely mapped the outlines of sweeping reform.

Then came September 11. As the nation rallied around Bush, his hand was strengthened immeasurably. In retrospect, this was probably Bush’s best chance to push for comprehensive reform, at a time when the conservative base would have been least able to resist. “Had he done [immigration] in 2002, he would have had more credibility,” said Kate O’Beirne, the Washington editor of *National Review*. “He could have sold both guest worker and citizenship as security issues.” But instead of challenging his base, Bush fed it with tax cuts. For the next two years, immigration virtually vanished from the president’s public agenda, resurfacing only as his reelection campaign took shape at the end of 2003.

In January 2004, Bush again called for a guest worker program in his State of the Union speech. When a president includes a message like this in a major election-year address, it usually means one of two things: He is telling lawmakers that he wants action, or he is merely signaling to a constituent group that he has their interests at heart. In this case,

Bush appears to have been doing the latter—immigration never became a major feature of his campaign. However, at least a few lawmakers seemed to have taken him seriously. In July, Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho) offered an initiative called AgJobs, which would have created a path to legal residency for half a million farm workers. Although 63 senators (including 27 Republicans) backed AgJobs, the White House, reportedly nervous about touching anything resembling an amnesty that year, asked Majority Leader Bill Frist to prevent the measure from coming to a vote. Meanwhile, Sen. John McCain, (R-Ariz), along with two Arizona Republicans in the House, Reps. Jim Kolbe and Jeff Flake, began working on a comprehensive bill. Towards the end of the term, a small group of House Republicans attempted to persuade the White House to translate Bush’s stirring talk on immigration into concrete proposals, according to a former chief of staff to a GOP representative. But the White House responded evasively, refusing even to tell the group what types of measures it might potentially support, the staffer said, adding: “I don’t believe they showed leadership at that time.”

As election day approached, Rove mounted an extraordinary effort to rouse the base to maximum strength. This required a very different style from the soft-focus conservatism of 2000. Because conservative backing underpinned Bush’s entire re-election strategy, this time he could afford few diversions from the party line. His prescription-drug benefit, an affront to the small government wing, used up his minimal allowance for crossing his base.

At the same time, Rove aimed to supplement conservative support, not by concentrating on swing voters as he had done in 2000, but by making targeted appeals to what he considered persuadable constituencies. To that end, Bush continued to say all the right things to Hispanics. While the Democrats’ Hispanic outreach focused on promoting specific policies, Rove produced sophisticated, issue-light TV ads that projected messages of inclusion and respect, delivered by Bush in Spanish. The seeming brilliance of this approach was that Bush could reach out to Latinos without really promising them anything—and without arousing much ire from restrictionists. Rove’s plan appeared to work beautifully. Strong conservative turnout swept Bush back into office, along with a share of the Hispanic vote that increased to 40 percent—almost matching John Kerry among foreign-born Latinos.

All talk

In the weeks after Bush’s victory, Rove’s reputation as “the architect” was confirmed. It seemed that Republicans might really be about to embark on a period of extended dominance. Again Bush indicated that immigration would become a cornerstone of his term. The conditions seemed promising: At this point, he might have used his political capital to override objections from his nativist base and push for moderate immigration reform, boosting his share of the Hispanic vote in the process. Or he could heed the obsession of the party’s small-government ideologues, who were urging him to privatize social security in order to destroy a traditional pillar of Democratic support. Both were, as Bush liked to say, political gamechangers, but only immigration required him to cross his base. Instead, he chose Social Security. This turned out to be a fateful decision: The plan proved irrevocably unpopular. Meanwhile, the consequences of the

administration's decisions of the past four years began to set in. Iraq deteriorated, spending spiraled, corruption scandals unraveled. The administration's distrust of government resulted in a disastrously inept response to Hurricane Katrina. By the summer of 2005, Bush's poll ratings had plummeted, and events had spun beyond his control.

Until then, Rove's strategy of wooing Latinos without actually doing anything that might offend the conservative base had worked remarkably well—perhaps because his outreach to the base and to Hispanics had advanced along separate tracks. So far, he hadn't been confronted with anything that might cause these tracks to converge, forcing the disparate elements of the Republican voting coalition towards collision.

The convergence began on right-wing talk radio. By mid-2005, the medium was at somewhat of a loss. Normally its red meat consists, to put it baldly, of liberal-bashing and bellicose defenses of conservatives. But now the liberals had lost the election, and the causes conservatives had embraced—the war, the insistence on small, frugal government—weren't going so well. Casting around for something to talk about, hosts discovered the Minutemen. Illegal immigration has always been a perennial source of talk-radio outrage, but the Minutemen, with their warnings that terrorists could enter the country via Mexico, set off a veritable storm. Suddenly, the self-styled border patrols, along with their champion in the House, Rep. Tom Tancredo, became fixtures on radio shows and cable TV.

According to a former senior White House official, the administration became concerned by this phenomenon and conducted some research. Staffers listened to hours of talk radio and found that the obsession with illegal immigration on talk radio had appeared virtually from nowhere. “Two years ago, this wasn't on the radar screen,” he said. House Republicans, already eyeing the midterm elections, also took note. By then, Tancredo's immigration-reform caucus had grown to more than 80 members (in 2001, it only had 15).

In August, the White House tried to push back. It tapped Gillespie, Armev and former Democratic Representative Cal Dooley to “do a 501(c)3”—as such efforts are known on the Hill—a non-profit lobbying campaign funded by corporate donations. However, although Bush has always strongly supported a guest-worker program, it's rarely noted that over the years his pronouncements on earned legalization or citizenship have become increasingly opaque. (His preferred formulation is now “bringing workers out of the shadows”). When approached for as much as \$3 million in funding, business groups found that all the White House was offering in return were generalities—bullet points rather than detailed policy. Business groups withheld their cash, and the effort petered out.

However, the former Hill chief of staff said that it was embattled Majority Leader Tom DeLay “who played a key role—probably more than anyone else” in pushing an enforcement-only agenda to the foreground. According to three sources familiar with negotiations over the House bill, in early October, soon after he was indicted, DeLay told the Republican conference that representatives should make a border-security bill their

strategy for the midterm elections. This may have startled some members, like Judiciary Committee chairman Rep. James Sensenbrenner and Speaker Dennis Hastert, who were known to be open to broader reform. “We’d always considered the Speaker kind of in our corner,” said Rep. Flake. But before he stepped down as majority leader, DeLay insisted that the House pass legislation focused only on enforcement. The resulting bill was rushed through the Judiciary committee with no hearings. The leadership refused to allow a vote on any Republican amendments.

This seemed like the moment when Bush would make a stand. Instead, the former White House official said, the administration did some polling, and found that respondents seriously doubted Bush’s commitment to securing the border. In November, the president flew to Tucson, Ariz., and gave a speech touting increased funding for detention, mentioning measures for immigrant workers only in passing. By then, the base didn’t buy it. “[The response was] ‘why is he talking about it now? It’s been five years,’” said O’Beirne. “It sounds tinny, it feels insincere.” On Dec. 16, after a two-day debate, Republicans rammed their bill through the House.

With the base unleashed, the White House was unable to broker a compromise, either by persuasion or by pressure. This spring, Karl Rove and Josh Bolten, the White House’s newly appointed chief of staff, met with the Republican conference to pitch the president’s plan. “People were booing and hissing,” said the former House staffer. “That probably wouldn’t have happened a year ago.” Then in June, Brian Bilbray won the California House seat vacated by disgraced Rep. Randy “Duke” Cunningham. Bilbray had supported the enforcement-only approach against an opponent who supported comprehensive reform. “All of a sudden,” said Flake, “Bilbray becomes our model.”

Comprehensive failure

In the future, people may look to Bilbray as the Pete Wilson of 2006, the superficial success story that Republicans imitated to their long-term detriment. Already, prominent GOP leaders are blaming House Republicans, particularly Rep. Tancredo, for leading the party to its ruin. Grover Norquist, the president of Americans for Tax Reform, described Rep. Tancredo as “the face of the Republican party losing elections for the next 20 years.” (He added that the GOP might have avoided this problem by “sending Tancredo to Guantanamo”). Armev put it more diplomatically. “A lot of Hispanics around the country are taking this very personally,” he said. “They’re saying, ‘The problem with Republicans is that they just don’t like us.’”

But perhaps the real casualty of the GOP’s immigration meltdown is the Rovian model of Republican politics. Part of the near-mythic aura of infallibility surrounding Rove stems from the sense that his tactics seem to defy all known political laws—that it shouldn’t be possible to reach out to minorities while fanning the flames of a base that is often hostile to them. And as it turns out, it probably isn’t.