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## BUSHES FOCUS ON IMMIGRATION DEBATE TO RECLAIM THEIR INFLUENCE

By Ashley Parker  
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After years of enormous power and political influence, no member of the Bush family currently holds political office.

But as the focus on military action in Syria drags former President George W. Bush's Iraq war policy back into the spotlight, the Bush family is quietly but forcefully gearing up for another, still-developing debate: The fight on Capitol Hill over a broad overhaul of the nation's immigration laws – a discussion critical to protecting the Bushes' legacy on what has, for decades, been a defining issue for them.

In July, Mr. Bush, who has largely avoided the political spotlight since leaving office, attended a naturalization ceremony for newly sworn-in citizens at his presidential library in Dallas.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, his brother, has been traveling the country delivering speeches and writing opinion pieces pegged to his recent book, "Immigration Wars," written with Clint Bolick, which argues for change in the law.

And Jeb Bush's two sons have been reaching out to Hispanics. George P. Bush, 37, is a founder of a political action committee – Hispanic Republicans of Texas – devoted to promoting Hispanics in Texas politics, and is running for office himself as a candidate for Texas land commissioner. Jeb Bush Jr., 29, is the founder of Sun PAC, a Florida group that recruits conservative Hispanic political candidates.

For the Bushes, immigration is deeply personal. The family chose to root its political ambitions in Texas, and Jeb Bush's wife, Columba, is from the central Mexican town of León. The elder George Bush famously, and lovingly, once referred to his three Mexican-American grandchildren as "the little brown ones."

Now, as the Republican Party struggles with how to attract Hispanic voters, members of the Bush dynasty seem more determined than ever to exert influence over the issue they have been helping to shape for years.

"For generations, the Bush family has been connected to Hispanics by history, geography and family, and as a result, they have a deep understanding and acute sensitivity to important cultural nuances and political issues that affect the population," said Mark McKinnon, a Republican strategist who worked on both of George W. Bush's presidential campaigns. "When it comes to issues affecting Hispanics, the Bush family has a strong compass."

The family's outreach to Hispanics is also smart politics, likely to bolster its political future in 2016 and beyond. George W. Bush won re-election to the White House in 2004 with 44 percent of the Hispanic vote, a number neither subsequent Republican presidential nominee

came close to matching, and Jeb Bush is often mentioned as a likely 2016 contender in large part because of his strong relationship with Hispanic voters and support for an immigration overhaul.

Mr. McKinnon has already nicknamed George P. Bush "47." (His uncle, of course, is "43," and his grandfather is "41.")

Jeb Bush speaks Spanish fluently and George W. less so, but in the words of friends, "fearlessly."

During his 1998 re-election campaign for Texas governor, Mr. Bush made a concerted push to win El Paso, with its large Hispanic population; he won the county with just over 50 percent of the vote, and used the victory to position himself for a presidential run two years later.

"I want it to be known that a conservative candidate can carry the Hispanic vote," he told reporters at the time.

George P. Bush said in a recent interview after a campaign event here that courting Hispanics has always been both the politically smart and morally right thing to do.

"My uncle obviously thought it was an important strategy for him, not only to win, but to expand the party, expand the base," he said. "For my dad, it might be a little bit more personal, in the sense that he married 'una Mexicana,' and it certainly changes one's perspective. But you know, being in Florida, it's similar demographics to what you see in Texas, so it's been important both from a political and a personal standpoint."

In the preface to his book, Jeb Bush writes that immigration to him "means my wife and family."

"It's just smart marketing; it's just smart business," said Henry Bonilla, who is Hispanic and is a former Republican House member from Texas. "Whether it's political business or corporate business, there are those who understand that it's a diverse nation and it's wise to be inclusive, and those who don't, and it was just innately part of the Bush culture from the get-go."

The Bush family's affinity for Hispanic issues has passed down through the generations, starting with the current patriarch. As chairman of the Republican National Committee, George Bush helped found the Republican National Hispanic Assembly in the early 1970s, part of an effort to involve Hispanics in Republican Party politics. But the family's formative experiences with Hispanics came two decades earlier, when Mr. Bush moved his young family from the elite societies of New Haven to a dusty West Texas oil town. According to friends, the immigrants the Bushes encountered there were similar to the way the Bushes viewed themselves – hard workers who had moved to Texas in search of a better life.

"I think for President George W. Bush, growing up in West Texas, when you see people working hard, when you see immigrants, both legal and illegal, working to make a better life for their families, it has an impact," said Karen Hughes, who worked for Mr. Bush in the governor's office and the White House.

In his book "Decision Points," George W. Bush says his family's Mexican housekeeper, Paula Rendón, who was hired when he was 13, was like "a second mother." She would later become the inspiration for his approach to handling immigration policy, he wrote.

In their political careers, both he and Jeb pursued education policies that they say benefited minorities. And before the Sept. 11 attacks, Robert Draper, the author of a book about the younger Bush's presidency, reported that one of the priorities of Mr. Bush's administration was to tackle immigration; the White House was so committed, he wrote, that "throughout 2001, the subject of amnesty for illegal immigrants popped up frequently in White House meetings."

The fact that the 43rd president's immigration push – which failed in 2006 and 2007 – is being attempted again today, friends say, is evidence that he was simply ahead of his time.

John Weaver, a Republican strategist who has worked on the presidential campaigns of the first President Bush and Senator John McCain of Arizona, said the issue was one the Bushes believed in.

But, Mr. Weaver added: "If the House effectively kills comprehensive immigration reform this cycle, we'll be set back for generations, if not longer. And the Bush legacy will certainly look a lot brighter to people when we're out of power and can't get back in, than perhaps it does today."