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DONALD TRUMP'S MIXED SIGNALS ON IMMIGRATION ROIL CAMPAIGN

Some backers say they would welcome a change; others say easing his plan to deport all illegal immigrants would cost him the election

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Donald Trump's mixed signals about easing his plan to deport all illegal immigrants are dividing his closest allies and prompting warnings he could lose core supporters if he abandons the signature issue of his campaign.

Even as some supporters said they would welcome a softer tone as a sign Mr. Trump is working to broaden his support, he said in a Thursday CNN interview both that it would be difficult to deport 11 million illegal immigrants and that he might do it anyway.

But in interviews this week with Fox News he backed away from his long-held proposal to deport the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants, suggesting those without criminal records could stay if they pay "back taxes."

That didn't sit well with former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, who was among the first high-profile Republicans to endorse Mr. Trump in January. "If Mr. Trump were to go down a path of wishy-washy positions taken on things that the core foundation of his support has so appreciated, and that is respecting our Constitution and respecting law and order in America, then, yeah, there would be massive disappointment," the party's 2008 vice-presidential nominee said.

"Parts of the message we heard in the last week are clearly not consistent with the stringent position and message that supporters have received all along," she said.

In the CNN interview Thursday, Mr. Trump offered contradictory explanations for his deportation policy.

"You can't take 11 [million] at one time and say, 'Boom your gone,'" Mr. Trump said.

Asked minutes later if he would deport illegal immigrants who haven't committed crimes, Mr. Trump replied: "There is a very good chance the answer could be yes."

The internal Republican angst emerged on the same day that Mr. Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton exchanged pointed barbs in back-to-back speeches, suggesting a bitter fight through November. Mr. Trump this week has called Mrs. Clinton a "bigot." She responded Thursday by painting her GOP rival as a friend to racists.

During a Thursday rally in Manchester, N.H., Mr. Trump renewed his pledge to build a wall along the Mexico border to curb illegal immigration. But he stayed silent on what his plans now are for those already in the country.

Mr. Trump's potential shift coincides with a shakeup of his campaign leadership and amid new, direct appeals in the past week to black and Hispanic voters, who polls show have been solidly backing Mrs. Clinton. The New York businessman, who met with minority leaders Thursday, is seeking to draw some of their support without losing the mostly white voters who propelled him to the GOP nomination.

Rep. Tom Marino (R., Pa.), one of Mr. Trump's earliest congressional supporters, said the candidate is "realizing the magnitude" of immigration issues and altering his position.

"It's going to be said he's changed his mind. Yes, he's changed his mind on some issues but not on all issues," Mr. Marino said. "It takes a strong person to say, 'I am changing my position on this issue' to this extent and I give him credit for redefining it."

Deporting illegal immigrants was the centerpiece of the platform that drove Mr. Trump's success in the GOP primaries. In November he called for a "deportation force" to remove all 11 million undocumented immigrants. At one point he said American-born children of illegal immigrants would be removed from the country with their parents.

During a February debate, Mr. Trump said anyone in the country illegally must leave and apply to be allowed to return. "We have at least 11 million people in this country that came in illegally. They will go out," he said.

Although his aides say his policy hasn't changed, Mr. Trump's recent comments were raised by donors during a Thursday conference call with New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who is seeking contributions for the Republican transition committee.

Gary Kirke, a casino executive who is Iowa finance chairman for the Trump-Republican National Committee State Victory program, told Mr. Christie reports of Mr. Trump's shifting positions are "very scary." Mr. Christie responded: "I don't see him changing his positions at all on this," according to two people on the call.

In a subsequent interview, Mr. Kirke said Mr. Trump would pay a high price if he backtracks on deportations. "This immigration issue is so huge, that's what got him where he is today and he needs to straighten it out," he said. "If people think he's going soft on immigration, it will hurt him and he will lose the election."

Mark Krikorian, the executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors stricter immigration controls, blamed Mr. Trump's new advisers for his changed rhetoric—a move he said was intended to help Mr. Trump appeal to Hispanic audiences.

"Whatever remaining chance he had to win the White House is gone," Mr. Krikorian said. "The fact now that he has betrayed his base on the signature issue that he ran on seems to me the death knell of his candidacy as a practical matter."

Mr. Trump's hard-line immigration proposals pushed his GOP primary rivals to the right. Sen. Ted Cruz said illegal immigrants would be forced out of the country and not be allowed to return. Sen. Marco Rubio abandoned his prior support for comprehensive immigration reform.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who argued during the primary that Mr. Trump's plan wasn't realistic, called his new rhetoric "disturbing," in an interview Thursday with WABC radio in New York

"His views will change based on the feedback he gets from a crowd, or, you know, what he thinks he has to do," said Mr. Bush. "That's what politicians do in this country. That's what Trump is trying to do right now. I find it abhorrent."

The issue of immigration is just the latest policy issue that the New York businessman has shifted on since facing a general election electorate.

He has stopped speaking about barring Muslims from entering the country, despite the fact that his Dec. 7 pledge calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on" remains on his campaign website.

Mr. Trump's new aides have had some trouble navigating their candidate's positions.

When Kellyanne Conway, Mr. Trump's new campaign manager, was asked Wednesday on MSNBC if his proposal to bar immigrants from countries with terrorist enclaves would supplant the Muslim ban, she said: "I don't think it supplants it at all...I think it clarifies it."

One day earlier, asked about Mr. Trump's previous call for mass deportations, she said on CNN: "He has not said that for a while."

Mr. Trump's campaign has insisted, to reporters and in talking points distributed to allies, that his immigration policy has remained consistent. "He hasn't changed his position on immigration," Trump spokeswoman Katrina Pierson said on CNN Thursday. "He's changed the words that he is saying."

Asked about Mr. Trump's deportation policy, Trump immigration policy adviser Julie Kirchner said in an email: "His position has not changed: American workers first, American security first."

Mr. Trump's staunchest conservative media allies are standing by him. Ann Coulter, who this week published a book titled "In Trump We Trust," said Thursday that "perhaps it is in our interest" to let some undocumented people remain in the country.

Radio host Rush Limbaugh said Mr. Trump's supporters "don't care what he does or what he says because there is no way they are going to do anything that helps elect Hillary Clinton. It's no more complicated than that."

Mr. Trump's congressional allies argued he should be given credit for moving off a hard-line immigration promise they said he could never have fulfilled.

Rep. Glenn Grothman (R., Wis.), a Trump supporter who introduced the candidate at a rally last week, said Republican voters never believed Mr. Trump's long-held assertions that he would deport 11 million illegal immigrants. "You have to use some common sense," he said Thursday.

Yet, Mr. Trump insisted Thursday his policy is the same as it is always been. "Republicans always have a tendency to back down," he said. "Not Donald Trump!"