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IMMIGRATION SPLITS GOP, BUSINESS GROUPS IN KANSAS

By Neil King Jr.
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TOPEKA, Kan. – As the Republican Party grapples with its next steps on immigration policy, Kansas is showing the strains arising within the GOP over competing visions of how to handle undocumented workers.

A coalition of powerful business groups, including the Farm Bureau and the conservative Kansas Chamber of Commerce, is proposing a guest-worker program that would turn the state into one of the most welcoming in the country for undocumented immigrants. Backing the effort are national conservatives, local faith groups and a number of law-enforcement officials.

But lined up against them is Kansas' ambitious Republican secretary of state, Kris Kobach, who is promoting a series of measures in the legislature to crack down on illegal workers and their employers.

An adviser to Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign, Mr. Kobach became a national lightning-rod after he helped draft tough immigration laws in Arizona and Alabama, the first of which sparked a Supreme Court brawl for the Obama administration.

Mr. Kobach calls the business coalition's plan "dead on arrival" and has the support of a large faction within the GOP-dominated Kansas legislature, which is expected to wade into the immigration fight this spring.

"What we have are two very different ideologies that are getting ready to run right through the middle of this state," said state Rep. Steve Brunk, a Wichita Republican who leads the committee that handles immigration issues.

Caught in the middle, and wishing it would all go away, is Gov. Sam Brownback, who earned a reputation while in the U.S. Senate as one of the GOP's leading advocates for immigrant rights. Now he wants nothing to distract from his overarching goals of cutting taxes and government spending. "This is a federal issue and should remain a federal issue," he said in an interview, acknowledging that he feared an immigration fight could split the state GOP.

The Kansas face-off comes as the national GOP is eager to shed the perception that it is anti-immigrant and to earn the trust of growing populations of Asians and Hispanics, who voted solidly for President Barack Obama in November. But there are deep misgivings among many rank-and-file conservatives about taking steps they feel would reward 11 million immigrants now in the U.S. illegally.

Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) recently floated a proposal to strengthen border enforcement but also offer a pathway for legal status for illegal immigrants, one of several similar GOP overhaul proposals taking shape.

In an interview, Mr. Kobach dismissed those efforts as wrongheaded, saying they would “cause the U.S. welfare rolls to swell” while doing little to win new voters for the party.

A former law professor, Mr. Kobach predicts restrictive bills could pass the legislature this year, including a move to repeal discounted, in-state college tuition for the children of undocumented workers and a requirement that all employers verify the legal status of their employees. “Because of our inaction over the past decade, Kansas has become the sanctuary state of the Midwest,” he said.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates Kansas has as many as 85,000 unauthorized immigrants, many of them concentrated in the southwestern corner of the state, where meatpacking jobs are plentiful.

Business groups say they fear tough new laws could drive away much-needed workers in parts of the state where the population is already in decline. The business-backed plan would provide legal refuge for undocumented workers who have been in the U.S. for at least five years and choose to work in industries with clear labor shortages.

To soothe conservative jitters, the coalition drafted anti-tax activist Grover Norquist to address a Topeka breakfast last week packed with state lawmakers. Trying to punish everyone who broke the law getting into the country, he said, would be like fining everyone who ever broke the national 55-mile-an-hour speed limit, before that was lifted. “We have a 55-mile-an-hour immigration law,” he said.

Predicting where the debate will go is tricky. Last year, Republicans buried the issue after one GOP member said at a hearing that illegal immigrants should be shot “like feral hogs.” Republican state House Speaker Ray Merrick shares the Brownback belief that no action is the best action. “I’m not real enthused about having an immigration debate this year,” he said.