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## RUBIO WALKS FINE LINE IN IMMIGRATION REVAMP

By Neil King Jr.  
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Florida Sen. Marco Rubio knew from the outset that championing a major immigration overhaul would expose him and the Republican Party to multiple perils, so he started doing the spadework early.

Working off a tight script, the freshman lawmaker began airing his own ideas weeks before he and a bipartisan group of seven other senators unveiled their package of proposals on Monday.

In the days since, Mr. Rubio has shouldered the main burden in selling the plan to skittish conservatives, including talk-show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, whose opposition could prove lethal.

Last year's presidential defeat of Mitt Romney crystallized for the GOP how much its future rests on winning over more Hispanic voters. Negotiating a deal to help solve the country's nagging immigration problems would build Mr. Rubio a reputation as an effective lawmaker and give him an accomplishment that has eluded many of his Senate predecessors, Republicans say.

Mr. Rubio, 41 years old, won his Senate seat in 2010 after a surprise surge in which he forced aside Florida's sitting Republican governor, Charlie Crist, who opted to run as an independent for Senate instead of facing Mr. Rubio in the primary.

Mr. Rubio, the son of working-class Cuban immigrants, had served nine years in the Florida House, rising to become House speaker in 2003.

While far from a political newcomer, Mr. Rubio enjoyed a wave of support from tea-party groups both in Florida and nationally, giving him a prominence that fueled speculation soon after he arrived in the Senate that he might be part of the GOP presidential ticket in 2012.

But as he eyes a potential 2016 presidential bid, Mr. Rubio faces manifold risks. The immigration overhaul marks by far his most ambitious legislative effort, opening the possibility that his first major test could also strain ties with some of the conservative groups who championed his rise to the Senate.

That is why he has been so assiduous in reaching out to influential conservatives and in drawing his own red lines for what he will and won't accept as new immigration policy is written.

Polls show conservatives remain highly wary of any law that would pave the way to citizenship for the 11 million or so undocumented immigrants now in the U.S., as the bipartisan framework does. Many consider it a form of amnesty for lawbreakers.

In agreeing to join the Senate group, which includes Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona and Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, Mr. Rubio demanded that their joint

framework say no one now in the country illegally could qualify for citizenship until a series of benchmarks on border security and law enforcement were first met, Rubio aides said.

At the same time, Mr. Rubio has made a point of sharing his own unease over the contours of the overhaul he envisions.

"I know why people are uncomfortable about it," he told Mr. Limbaugh in an interview Tuesday. "It doesn't feel right, in some instances, to allow people who have come here undocumented to be able to stay."

A talk-radio backlash helped scupper the last big push for an immigration deal, in 2007 under President George W. Bush. Early signs are that the rollout this time may be going more smoothly for those backing an overhaul.

After their 10-minute talk on his show, Mr. Limbaugh gushed to his listeners that he had gone from "adamantly against" the Senate proposal to thinking, "maybe we should do this."

In all, Mr. Rubio has granted interviews to more than a dozen conservative outlets this month, going back to several of them repeatedly, his aides said.

His aim is twofold: to sell the overall package, but also to make it clear where he, himself, stands. "The senator very much wants people to know what he is for and what he is against," said his spokesman, Alex Conant.

"We need border security. We need workplace enforcement. We need a visa-tracking system," Mr. Rubio told Mr. Limbaugh, adding that if the bill didn't require those steps before other actions are taken, "I won't support it."

Mr. Rubio brings unusual attributes to the fight. He was a standout in the 2010 tea-party insurgency, and can sell his ideas in Spanish.

"No one has the political maneuverability on this issue that Marco does," said Ana Navarro, a GOP political consultant in Miami who has known Mr. Rubio for years.

In promoting his ideas, the senator has turned to a theme that Mr. Obama also adopted in his own immigration speech in Las Vegas on Tuesday: that the U.S. must maintain its exceptional status as a beacon for immigrants, and that doing so requires both sides to work to resolve the country's immigration problems.

The Senate framework has drawn some sharp criticism from Republican lawmakers, though the depth of opposition within the party remains unclear. Conservatives in Iowa already are warning that Mr. Rubio's work could haunt him in the state that kicks off the presidential nomination race.

"He could be in big trouble here among Republicans," said Ryan Rhodes, head of the Iowa Tea Party.

Rich Stolz, executive director of the immigrant advocacy group OneAmerica, said liberals are pleased by Mr. Rubio's involvement.

"People on the left are glad, if wary," Mr. Stolz said. "He could make the overall package more conservative, but he will also make it easier to get through Congress."