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BEYOND 2012 FIELD, NUANCED G.O.P. VIEWS ON IMMIGRANTS

By Jennifer Steinhauer
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WASHINGTON — Representative Tim Griffin, a Republican freshman from Arkansas with a university in his district, supports legislation that would make it easier for foreign math and science professionals to get legal residency.

Representative Bobby Schilling, Republican of Illinois, is resisting intense pressure to support a House bill that would require employers to verify the legal status of their workers because he is concerned that businesses would be unduly burdened.

Senator Mike Lee of Utah, one of the most conservative members of the chamber, recently teamed with Senator Charles E. Schumer, the New York Democrat, on a bill that would provide three-year residential visas to foreign home buyers who invest at least \$500,000.

While the Republican presidential campaign trail bristles with talk of moats, militarization and electrified fences when it comes to illegal immigration, the view among some Congressional Republicans has become more nuanced and measured.

Now many Republican freshmen, lacking the scar tissue of previous Congressional attempts to make sweeping changes in immigration law, are advocating that policy be changed in small, bite-size pieces that could help bring order to the system and redefine their party's increasingly anti-immigration image, even as they maintain a strong push for better federal border security.

The move comes as some leading Republican voices are warning that the view of their party among Hispanics is doing significant political damage and causing economic disruption.

"It does cause me a great deal of concern," said Mark Shurtleff, the Republican attorney general of Utah, where the Republican-controlled Legislature recently passed a law to give some protections to illegal workers who find employment in the state. "The rhetoric I hear from the Republican candidates, and that state legislatures that are passing enforcement-only provisions, are both damaging the economy. We ought not to be doing things to hurt the economy right now, and I think this hurts us politically."

In addition to worrying that Hispanics are turning away from their party, some Republicans feel the heat from local employers, who need immigrant labor to fill jobs they have repeatedly been unable to fill with American workers. Others still worry about the drain of American-trained math and science students back to their home countries, where they will compete with Americans in building businesses.

"We Republicans are hearing more and more from businesses and the agricultural communities that this system isn't working," said Representative Raúl R. Labrador of Idaho. "The subtle difference that I see right now is that more and more Republicans are saying that, yes, we need border enforcement, but we also need to create a guest-worker program that works at the same time."

Mr. Labrador has a bill that would allow foreign students with advanced degrees in certain high-tech and science fields to be immediately eligible for a green card if they are offered a job here.

Immigration, one of the country's most incendiary policy issues, has long been a painful thorn for Republicans, who have sought to balance a desire to attract Hispanics to the party with the powerful antipathy toward illegal immigration among some voters that has animated every political race of the last decade.

Aware of those pitfalls, Republicans new to the Hill are thinking small.

"I think there's is some low-hanging fruit on the immigration debate," said Senator Marco Rubio, the Florida Republican and conservative favorite. The son of Cuban immigrants, he supports a visa program for some high-skilled workers and a limited one for agricultural workers and some students who came into the country illegally as children.

Without question, most House Republicans, including freshmen, have rallied behind bills to deter illegal immigration and made public statements that suggest their views are not open for interpretation or negotiation. Representative Mo Brooks, for instance, recently told a television reporter back home in Alabama that when it came to illegal immigrants, "as your congressman on the House floor, I will do anything short of shooting them."

But members are increasingly supporting limited immigration measures that center on a discrete issue, like shortening the green card process, which can now take years, for science and math Ph.D. candidates who wish to teach or work in the United States. The backlog of green cards is caused by the limited number of foreign math and science professionals and country quotas; the majority of these professionals are from India or China.

"I just thought this was something that should be a little less controversial and have bipartisan support," Mr. Labrador said of his bill. "One of the most surprising things is that some of the freshmen are interested in talking about immigration in a positive way."

In Arkansas, illegal immigration remains a hot-button issue, and Mr. Griffin supports tough border control. However, math and science professionals "are not people who snuck over in the middle of the night and crept over to a school and got a degree," he said.

Officials at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock have leaned on lawmakers like Mr. Griffin for years about the problem. "To increase entrepreneurs, we need sufficient number of people with science and math backgrounds," said Michael Gealt, the dean of the university's College of Science and Mathematics, where the doctoral program is 70 percent to 80 percent foreign students.

Immigration politics, he said, have complicated his efforts. "It has been my observation," Mr. Gealt said, "that it is hard for lawmakers to differentiate between problems of people coming across the border and people coming for jobs where we absolutely need their expertise."

There are also bills to address illegal immigration that some conservative Republicans oppose. A high-profile measure that would require private businesses to use a federal program that checks the immigration status of all job applicants recently cleared the House Judiciary Committee, but has since stalled because too many members, pressured by agricultural companies and other business groups, have reservations.

"I think you have got to be careful to force it on people," said Mr. Schilling of Illinois, who said "it might start out with a good intent, but the next thing you know, it's something totally different."

Then there are members who simply face a new demographic reality, where many voters, including potential new Republicans, are Hispanic.

"I am troubled by the demonization of immigrants, legal or illegal, in our party," said Representative Blake Farenthold, who represents a South Texas district and is a member of the bipartisan House Border Caucus. "We've got a country that was built on immigrants and immigration, and we've kind of lost sight of that."