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## CONSERVATIVES SEE A TURNING TIDE ON IMMIGRATION

By Michael Shear and Julia Preston  
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WASHINGTON — Hours after a bipartisan group of eight senators introduced a sweeping overhaul of the nation's immigration system, conservative radio talk show hosts took over two floors of a Capitol Hill hotel on Wednesday and denounced the proposal on the country's drive-time airwaves as nothing more than a reward for lawbreakers.

On a Florida station, WFTL, the host Joyce Kaufman called it "pure amnesty." Jim Sharpe, a talk show host on KFYI in Phoenix, promised that "Arizonans are still not taking this sitting down." On Denny Schaffer's show in New Orleans, callers demanded deportations.

"I see nothing wrong with putting them on a bus and shipping them back to wherever they came from," a caller named Alan told Mr. Schaffer. "The law's the law."

But even some of the talk show hosts most vehemently opposed to illegal immigration said they were worried that times have changed. They said their listeners seemed less agitated by the prospect that 11 million illegal immigrants might be granted legal status and concede that proponents of the legislation — who now include some conservative radio personalities — are better at promoting their message this time around.

The senators filed their 844-page bill after 2 a.m. Wednesday, officially beginning what President Obama and other supporters hope will be a six-week effort to pass it in the Senate by early June. Hearings on the legislation, which tightens border security and offers an eventual path to citizenship, are set to begin on Friday.

Opponents of the measure are eager to harness the conservative airwaves the way they did in 2007, when talk radio hosts helped whip up a fury of outrage that doomed similar legislation supported by President George W. Bush. This time there were 46 talk radio hosts sharing booths in the Phoenix Park Hotel, where they bent over their microphones and broadcast to places like Albany, Salt Lake City and Huntsville, Ala.

"So far this has been an inside-the-Beltway echo chamber," said Bob Dane, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which organized the gathering. "What they have not had yet is a good, cold blast of air in the face from the rank-and-file conservative. We now have a bill. This is the game-changer where the American public is now starting to weigh in."

But how the public weighs in — and what they say when they call in to the shows — remains an open question.

Sean Hannity, who in 2007 used his nationally syndicated radio program and perch at Fox News to rail against an immigration overhaul, now says that he has "evolved" and that it is time for Republicans to support some kind of major change in the nation's immigration system. Opposition from some Republican lawmakers has softened since the 2012 presidential election, when Mr. Obama won the vast majority of Hispanic votes. Evangelical

Christians, many of whom were opposed to an overhaul in 2007, are now among the biggest supporters.

"There are some people who lost their will to fight this fight," said Ms. Kaufman, who remains combative but admitted in an interview during a commercial break that she was worried the legislation might pass. "They think they've lost it already and they've sort of thrown in the towel, including my fellow radio hosts."

Or as Mr. Schaffer from New Orleans put it, "There is not that rage that was there." From the beginning of this year's immigration talks, senators from both parties braced for the reaction on conservative talk radio once the legislation was made public. Their memories were still fresh from six years ago, when activists at town hall meetings who had listened to talk radio harshly criticized Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, for his support of the 2007 proposed legislation.

This time proponents are hoping that Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida and a member of the group of eight, will be able to mute the impact of the conservative chatter. Mr. Rubio, a Tea Party favorite, has spent much of his time in recent months talking about the proposals on conservative radio programs.

That appears to have worked, at least a little. Michael Medved, one of the few conservative talk show hosts who has always supported an immigration overhaul, said he sensed a shift. "What you are not hearing as much, except from a handful of people, is 'over my dead body,'" Mr. Medved said in an interview. "The level of apocalyptic hysteria is much less." There are nonetheless plenty of talk show hosts who disagree with Mr. Hannity and Mr. Medved, as was clear at the Phoenix Park Hotel, where the hosts and activists sported "Border Security Now!" buttons. Many hosts and callers derided the "gang of eight" senators who drafted the legislation as the "eight gangsters."

But a few blocks away on the East Front of the Capitol, more than 300 evangelical Christian pastors gathered for what they billed as a national day of prayer to support the immigration legislation. Unlike 2007, this year evangelicals have mobilized some Christian radio hosts on behalf of immigration and are running saturation ad campaigns summoning evangelicals to obey biblical instructions that call for welcoming the stranger.

In South Carolina, evangelical leaders ran radio commercials defending Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican who is an author of the bipartisan bill, and Representative Trey Gowdy, also a Republican. The lawmakers were "inundated — very happily inundated" with calls from evangelicals, said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's policy arm.

"We've provided an example that when people like Lindsey Graham and Trey Gowdy get targeted, we've got their back," Dr. Land said, "and we can activate a counternetwork."