

## Graham, Facing Headwinds, Perseveres

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*By Dan Friedman*

About 25 tea party protesters greeted Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., outside an appearance at a library near Hilton Head, S.C., on Tuesday, urging him to avoid cooperation with Democrats on energy and immigration bills.

The protest came the same day as a poll showing that a solid majority of likely South Carolina primary voters said they would back a more conservative GOP primary challenger to Graham in 2012.

Many observers cite such local reaction as a key reason Graham has spent months explaining why he will not back immigration and energy bills -- for which he was Democrats' top GOP interlocutor, leaving both measures with little hope of passage this year.

"He changed course because he got his butt chewed on by the more conservative element of [the] South Carolina Republican party," said one lobbyist tracking climate talks. "He is a guy who likes to invest himself in every major [issue] ... but sometimes you find yourself on the wrong side of your constituency."

Democrats continue to at least publicly push immigration and energy bills. Last Thursday, Senate Majority Leader Reid said he hopes to bring an energy bill, including efforts to control carbon emissions, to the floor before the August recess. President Obama has repeatedly called for immigration reform.

On those measures, Graham has been Democrats' best hope and biggest problem. He negotiated with Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., the Democratic point man on immigration, and with Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., and Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., on their climate proposal. In both cases, he dangled support but backed away behind a rotating series of explanations.

In March, Graham threatened to bolt talks on both bills over Democrats' use of budget reconciliation to help pass their healthcare overhaul, which he said would prevent bipartisanship on other bills. Graham later accused Democrats of politicizing their immigration push and said Reid's plan, since dropped, to move immigration first caused him to pull out of climate talks. He then appeared to warm again to the bill before saying reaction to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico made passage impossible.

While Senate Minority Leader McConnell has worked to unify his party in opposition to Democratic plans and the Charleston County Republican Party last year voted to censure Graham for his climate work, Graham dismisses the impact of caucus and local politics.

He has repeatedly attributed his reluctance to work with Democrats instead to unwillingness to back bills that cannot pass, in part because they will not win backing from other Republicans. And he has balked at offering a GOP imprint Democrats can use to claim bipartisanship.

"He's afraid of being the one Republican used by Democrats to make other Republicans look bad," said one Democrat who has dealt frequently with Graham.

Graham also has often said he is working to ensure GOP views are included in major legislation.

"I'm trying to get something for it," he said before the recess of his role in talks. "I couldn't get what I wanted."

Democratic aides, however, say immigration and energy proposals already include Graham's input. And they say they bent over backward to include his views.

Democrats working on an immigration bill early this year frequently said, "Let's not anger Lindsey," according to Frank Sharry, who heads a pro-reform group, America's Voice, and said he worked closely with Democrats drafting their proposal. "The strategy was not, 'Let's make Republicans look bad.' It was, 'Let's flush them out so they play ball.'"

Graham argues that securing the border should precede any broad immigration measure, a standard GOP talking point.

Sharry, along with Democratic aides, argues that Graham's stance is an effort to provide cover for Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a close ally embroiled in a tough primary against former Rep. J.D. Hayworth, R-Ariz., that has focused on immigration.

Graham "switched course as soon as McCain found himself in a tough primary," Sharry said. Graham denies McCain's primary affected his immigration position just as he downplays the impact of South Carolina opposition to his positions.

But observers are unconvinced.

Last week's poll, conducted by Public Policy Polling on May 22-23, showed that 57 percent of 638 likely primary GOP voters surveyed would vote for a more conservative primary opponent than Graham in 2012. And 40 percent said they approved, with 45 percent disapproving, of Graham's Senate work. That's a mixed verdict for an incumbent, particularly compared to his junior colleague, Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., who had a 67 percent approval rating among the GOP faithful. The poll has a 4-point error margin.

Though DeMint has not attacked Graham, his frequent calls for electing Republicans who oppose Democrats on all fronts and attempted role as a national champion of conservative *bona fides* has complicated Graham's work in the Senate, particularly on energy, observers argue.

"He is trying to be a legislative bumblebee at the same time DeMint has become a poster boy for not cooperating, so there is no cover back home for Lindsey Graham," said the lobbyist tracking climate talks.

Graham irked conservatives when he voted to confirm Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court and with his support for the Troubled Asset Relief Program.

But even critics credit Graham for a willingness to risk political backlash.

Sharry noted Graham backed a comprehensive immigration bill in 2006 in the face of primary and Democratic challengers using the issue against him.

"There's something about Graham that is a bit different," Sharry said, crediting Graham for working to help Republicans long term with young voters and Hispanics through his efforts on energy and immigration.

"He probably views himself as saving the Republican Party from itself," he said.

For his part, Graham, in contrast to DeMint, has said he believes he has a responsibility to take on complicated issues.

According to Hilton Head's Island Packet, Graham won over some critics at the tea party protest last week, telling them: "Until my time is up in politics, I am going to talk about hard things."