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GOP TRIES TO WOO HISPANICS

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Congressional Republicans and Mitt Romney's presidential campaign are working to fashion proposals that could make up ground with Hispanic voters, concerned rhetoric on immigration from many in the party is turning away the increasingly powerful constituency.

Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) is developing a scaled-back version of the Dream Act, which would allow people brought to the U.S. as children to gain legal status, but not citizenship, if they enroll in college or the military. Several Senate Republicans have signed on to bipartisan legislation aimed at broadening access to the legal immigrant visa system.

The Romney campaign is looking for new proposals that would show he backs legal immigration, trying to pivot from a primary campaign in which he has taken a tough line on assistance to those here illegally.

It's unclear whether any of these initiatives will bear fruit, but there is an increasing sense among some in the party of the need to try.

This effort is taking on new importance as an increasing number of Republicans signal it is time to end the primary fight and begin positioning the party for the general election. How close it is to wrapping up the primary contest may become more clear Tuesday night, when Mr. Romney looks for victory in the battleground state of Wisconsin, as well as in Maryland and the District of Columbia.

Immigration policy is just one part of winning over Hispanic voters, who made up about 9% of voters in the 2008 presidential race and are important to both parties. Many Republicans, including Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), argue that if the party could get past the immigration issue, it would be the natural home for many more Latino voters, who are often socially conservative and value entrepreneurship.

Polls show the challenge. A Fox News survey in March of likely Latino voters found just 14% would support Mr. Romney against President Barack Obama. A Pew Hispanic Center poll conducted in November found that Mr. Romney would get 23%.

That is well short of the 31% of the Hispanic vote John McCain won in 2008, and the 40% George W. Bush won in 2004. Advisers to Mr. Romney say they believe it will be very difficult for him to win unless he gets a percentage of the Hispanic vote in the mid-to-high 30s.

Mr. Romney has turned off some Hispanic voters by calling a strict Arizona law a model for the nation, promising to veto the Dream Act in its current form and saying he hopes those here illegally will self-deport after tough laws make it impossible to get a job or do other business.

Mr. Obama faces his own challenges. The Pew poll found his approval ratings were down among Hispanics, and it found six in 10 disapprove of his handling of deportations, which have risen to record levels.

In 2008, about 9.7 million Latinos voted, according to Census figures. That is projected to grow to 11.8 million to 12.2 million in 2012. The Latino population is growing in presidential battlegrounds such as Colorado and Nevada. Mr. Obama frequently reaches out to Hispanic voters, often through Spanish-language media, and blames Republicans for a lack of legislative progress.

Many Republican analysts say Mr. Romney could make up much lost ground by choosing a Latino running-mate such as Mr. Rubio, of Florida. Mr. Rubio has dismissed the chatter, but it persists.

Mr. Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, said Republicans need to change the way they talk about immigration. "We spent a lot of time talking about what we're against and not nearly enough time talking about what we're for," he said.

The Democratic version of the Dream Act, proposed in 2001, would offer citizenship; Mr. Rubio's expected plan would grant legal status short of citizenship. He said he doesn't want to offer citizenship because that would allow those affected to sponsor others for future visas. Without citizenship, they couldn't vote or hold certain jobs. Others in the GOP oppose citizenship or anything they view as amnesty or reward for breaking the law.

Mr. Rubio said his interest in a modified version of the Dream Act came from learning the story of a Miami teenager who came to the U.S. from Colombia at age 4 and is now her high school's valedictorian. Set for college, she received a deportation notice. Under the Democrats' version of the Dream Act, she could earn citizenship by completing at least two years of college.

Mr. Romney is open to giving those who serve in the military a path to legal status. But he wouldn't include those who go to college, as Mr. Rubio would, spokeswoman Andrea Saul said.

Democrats dismiss the Rubio proposal as inadequate and unlikely to satisfy conservative voices in the GOP or the bulk of Hispanics. Without Democratic support, the bill would have little chance in the Senate.

Republicans "can see what's happening. They are angering and estranging a large group of Americans," said Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.), the lead sponsor of the Dream Act. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had an op-ed in the Miami Herald Sunday dismissing efforts like Mr. Rubio's as papering over the GOP's "lurch to the right with opportunistic half-measures that don't solve the crisis."

Clarissa Martinez, an official of the National Council of La Raza advocacy group, said the Rubio approach would create a "generation of nationless children."

The bipartisan bill aimed at repairing holes in the legal immigration system faces better prospects, but it is unclear whether Democrats will move it to the Senate floor.

The Fox News survey found that large majorities of Hispanics support the Dream Act and a path to citizenship for the broader set of people in the U.S. illegally. Mr. Romney opposes both policies.

One key for Mr. Romney will be to develop new policies aimed at fortifying the legal immigration system, said Jose Fuentes, co-chairman of the Romney Hispanic Steering Committee. One possibility, he said, is to broaden guest-worker programs allowing more people to work in the U.S. and then return home.

Senate Democrats are looking for an immigration bill to bring to the floor this year, knowing it probably wouldn't pass but hoping to score political points. In September 2010, they forced a vote on the Dream Act. Though the 55-41 vote in favor was short of the 60 votes needed, Democrats think it helped them win a couple of close Senate contests.

Mr. Bush as president led an effort to pass a comprehensive immigration overhaul, including a path to citizenship for those here illegally, but many Republicans who supported him then have since backed away.

Last week, Republican pollster Whit Ayres spoke to Senate Republicans about the GOP's image problems with Hispanics. "Clearly, the tone has to be one of welcoming new people into the party," he said in an interview. "But the substance has got to be right as well. We need to be sure any positions we take are not perceived in the community as anti-Hispanic."