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## Immigration Deal Hits Political Reality

**BYLINE:** By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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One of the nation's most vexing political and social issues how to deal with millions of illegal immigrants can be solved only if Congress and the White House embrace the same can-do spirit that marked this week's tentative deal. Don't count on it.

Forged in secrecy, the proposal now faces the harsh realities of the public arena, its fate in the hands of politicians averse to compromise or taking chances. In particular, the 2008 presidential candidates seem determined to play politics with immigration: They're changing their tone and positions, or hedging to meet election-year demands.

"In terms of all the senators running for their parties' presidential nominations, this is sort of like receiving a mysterious package in the mail and trying to figure out what's inside. It could explode in their faces or be 10 pounds of fudge," said Ross K. Baker, political science professor at Rutgers University.

A cross-party coalition of lawmakers from liberal icon Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., to conservative Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz. signed off Thursday on a bill that would offer legal status to most of the nation's 12 million illegal immigrants while also toughening border security. The effort suggests that some politicians are adequately motivated to address the immigration crisis before the 2008 elections.

It may be President Bush's last chance to claim a significant domestic policy victory before the end of a second term hit by scandal, war and plummeting approval ratings. It's the first major opportunity by the Democratic-led Congress to get something done. And it's the best chance Washington will get anytime soon to control the nation's porous borders and bring millions of illegal immigrants out of the shadows of the law, confronting economic and national security concerns.

Immigration control is no longer an issue just along the nation's borders, but one that touches virtually every state. It tends to divide people more along regional and economic lines than by party a maker of strange bedfellows. Business leaders and some Democrats are united to extend the flow of cheap labor into the country. Conservatives and some populist Democrats speak in unison about closing the nation's borders before doing anything else.

Compromise on such a complicated issue would be tough any time in U.S. history. These are unusually divisive times.

"The public's approval of Congress is very low, as low as the president's, and we think one reason is all the conflict there," said Carol Cassel, professor of political science at the University of Alabama.

It is no accident that presidential candidates reacted so cautiously and politically to news of the deal.

Democratic Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois said he wouldn't prejudge the bill, but worried that some provisions were not "just and humane."

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., said she'd study the package to make sure it "does not lead to the creation of a new underclass."

Former Sen. John Edwards, who is running on a more liberal platform than he adopted in his failed 2004 race, expressed concerns about a "poorly conceived guest worker program."

The leading Republican candidates seem even more tortured.

Sen. John McCain of Arizona distanced himself from negotiations he once championed, then suddenly re-emerged Thursday to take part in the news conference.

Former Sen. Fred Thompson flatly rejected the deal as a "bill of goods," while writing separately on a political blog that Congress needs bipartisanship. "Too often, what we are seeing isn't an effort to find solutions, but rather insults and purely partisan politics."

Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said he is willing to compromise on language allowing legalization for illegal immigrants, but only if the bill requires tamperproof ID cards and a database of foreigners. He sounds tougher on immigration than in his days as mayor, when Giuliani billed himself as one of the most "pro-immigrant" politicians in America and argued against a GOP bill restricting immigration.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney opposes the deal because it would allow virtually every illegal immigrant to remain indefinitely. A year ago, he sounded more open to immigrants.

"With these 11 million people, let's have them registered, know who they are," Romney told a New Hampshire newspaper. "Those who've been arrested or convicted of crimes shouldn't be here; those that are here paying taxes and not taking government benefits should begin a process toward application for citizenship, as they would from their home country."

Romney once stressed what needed to be done. Now he stresses what he doesn't want done.

It's a shift in tone and emphasis tailored for the presidential campaign trail, the last place you'd expect to find a can-do spirit.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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