

This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Greenville News**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Immigration bill's defeat could affect elections
Graham may take heat for strong support of measure

Published: Friday, June 29, 2007 - 2:00 am

By Dan Hoover
STAFF WRITER
dchoover@greenvillenews.com

The U.S. Senate killed controversial immigration legislation Thursday, and the divisions it created among Republicans may linger into election-year politics and leave the issue hanging beyond the 2008 elections.

Supporters of the bill needed 60 votes for a clear path to a final floor test, but they managed only 46. There were 54 votes against cloture, or shutting off debate.

Reforming the nation's much-maligned immigration system now is unlikely to be addressed in comprehensive form until 2009, when a new president and Congress take over in Washington.

The bill split South Carolina's Republican senators.

Advertisement Lindsey Graham, the state's senior senator, who faces re-election next year, helped craft the legislation and has taken extensive criticism from within the party for his role as one of its most outspoken advocates.

Sen. Jim DeMint of Greenville was an equally outspoken leader of opponents who branded the bipartisan plans as amnesty legislation.

"This is remarkable because it shows that Americans are engaged and they care deeply about their country. They care enough for their country to get mad and to fight for it, and that's the most important thing of all. Americans made phone calls and sent letters and convinced the Senate to stop this bill," DeMint said in a statement issued after the vote.

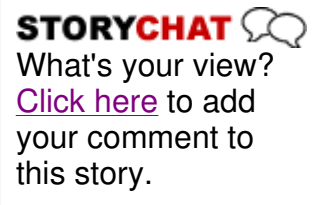
But a disappointed Graham told The Greenville News, "If we do nothing but embrace the current system, which is fatally flawed, then it really is a big loss for the American people. "Sometimes you have to tell people things they don't want to hear. The bill was a good solution -- it was not amnesty."

Saying the issue still must be addressed, Graham said, "I'm trying to find the political sweet spot. How do you do something hard? How do you get that bipartisan agreement that holds?"

In a statement released late Thursday, President Bush praised Graham. The statement said, "Sen. Graham is a leader in the Senate, and I appreciate his steadfast dedication to confronting important issues before the Congress on behalf of the American people. He has been a tireless advocate for reforming our broken immigration system, and I thank him for his hard work."

Defeat in the Senate spared the House its own wrenching debate.

"It turns down the heat, but leaves the problem on the stove," said U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest.



Proponents who resurrected the bill this week after it had been withdrawn following an earlier defeat "declared war on the American people," DeMint said after the vote. "Thankfully, the American people won today."

But Graham said, "I've been in war zones and I have met people who were killed the next day and I've been in political fights. I'm not at war with anybody in the Senate. I never view anybody who opposed me politically as my enemy."

Graham said the bill was "brought back in the spirit of trying to find a solution to chaos."

While the complex, voluminous bill had hundreds of immigration-related provisions, it was the question of whether it represented amnesty for 12 million illegal immigrants that divided the Senate, the Republican Party and Graham and DeMint.

Graham has been bombarded with criticism and was booed at the state GOP convention. With other supporters, including President Bush, he maintained that fines and fees the bill would impose on illegals meant that amnesty was a non-factor.

But opponents, bolstered by conservative talk radio hosts, early on defined the bill as amnesty legislation before its supporters could get their message out.

"There's some truth to that," Graham said Thursday. "It got labeled in a way that was hard to combat."

Graham said he was well aware of feelings within the GOP. "Every Republican ought to be frustrated because we've done a lousy job controlling immigration," he said.

With Graham up for a second term in 2008, any lingering bitterness over his role in the bill could have ongoing political implications back home.

Katon Dawson, the state GOP chairman, said, "You had two senators on opposite sides, which sometimes from my point of view makes me uncomfortable ... and that's to say the least, from my position."

Would he feel more comfortable if DeMint were the one running for re-election next year?

"It surely would make it easier. Will the campaign be on one issue? I don't know yet, but I've never seen this kind of activity as a state chairman that cuts across all lines in the party and resonates with independents."

House Republican leadership exulted in the bill's defeat.

GOP Whip Roy Blount of Missouri issued a statement saying the Senate had "voted the way most Americans would've voted if presented with a bill that rewards people who break the law."

Blount said he wants the House to begin work on legislation that meets national security requirements and is capable of passage.

President Bush appeared to accept the stinging defeat at the hands of his own party.

"The American people understand the status quo is unacceptable when it comes to our immigration laws. A lot of us worked hard to see if we couldn't find common ground -- it didn't work," Bush said in a statement released by the White House.

DeMint called on Bush to make good on a promise to directly deal with border issues.

"The president has said that the border security measures can be implemented over the next 18 months, and they can be done under current law. Now the administration needs to prove it and stop holding border security

hostage for amnesty."

Some senators in both parties said the issue is so volatile that Congress is unlikely to revisit it this fall or next year, when the presidential election will increasingly dominate American politics, The Associated Press reported.

The vote was a defeat for a bipartisan group of lawmakers who advocated the bill as an imperfect but necessary fix of current immigration practices in which many illegal immigrants use forged documents or lapsed visas to live and work in the United States, according to the AP.

In the vote, 33 Democrats, 12 Republicans and Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., voted for the bill, that is, to end debate. But 37 Republicans, 15 Democrats and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., voted nay. Ailing Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., didn't vote.

The bill would have toughened border security and instituted a new system for weeding out illegal immigrants from workplaces. It would have created a new guest worker program and allowed millions of illegal immigrants to obtain legal status if they briefly returned home.

Only one other Southern Republican, Florida's Mel Martinez, who was born in Cuba, joined Graham in supporting the bill.
