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Tea Party, redistricting doom immigration change

By Jim Nowlan

The immigration bill recently passed by the U.S. Senate is receiving a hostile reception in the House from Tea Party-oriented GOP members who dominate that party's caucus. The result is likely to be little or no action on the issue this year.

The Tea Party offers a fascinating case study of how a plurality of the GOP House members can obstruct high-profile legislation they don't like.

For much of the 20th Century Republicans operated as a minority in the U.S. House and Senate. The party's leaders took the approach that, instead of trying to obstruct the majority, the party would try to water down, cut back or reshape the Democrats' proposals into less obnoxious or more favorable bills.

The most colorful illustration of this approach was Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois, the U.S. Senate minority leader in the 1960s.

I gave a talk recently on Dirksen, so he is fresh in my mind. Ev had a mellifluous baritone and a penchant for big words and flowery phrases. Visitors to D.C. would fill the Senate galleries just to hear him speak.

Detractors called him the "Wizard of Ooze" and "Oleaginous Ev." But presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson knew they had to have Ev in their camp to pass the Civil Rights legislation of that era and to support Johnson's expansion of the war in Viet Nam, among other major initiatives.

On public accommodations and voting rights (the latter act recently declared no longer necessary by the U.S. Supreme Court), Dirksen pulled together reluctant GOP senators to vote to end a filibuster by senators from the Deep South.

It is probably hard for young people to imagine that in the 1960s blacks were often barred from restaurants and hotels, even in Illinois. My seatmate in the Illinois House, a distinguished black attorney, said black lawmakers could not stay in hotels or eat in restaurants in downtown Springfield, Lincoln's hometown. Instead, they stayed with black families on the east side of the city.

Today, obstruction rather than compromise is more likely the order of the day in Congress. No change is generally better for Tea Party backers than another law, which might expand government somehow, as Obamacare has done.

The Tea Party is aided in its tactics by partisan redistricting of congressional districts, which is how it is done in most states, including Illinois.

To maximize party numbers and protect incumbents in a legislative body like the U.S. House, like-minded voters are packed into safe districts.

So for Republicans that means predominantly white, conservative voters. These voters tend to be less supportive of immigration reform than do the voters of U.S. senators, who represent whole states, which are more diverse.

Tea Party activists are extremely effective at cowing more moderate Republican House members into finding a way to vote the Tea Party line on big issues.

If not, the representative will find himself opposed by a Tea Party-backed candidate in the next primary election, where the Tea Party may have a majority of the small primary voter turnout. This is the nightmare GOP House members live with as they cast their votes.

I am a moderate Republican who believes that some immigration reform is needed, so I would be called a RINO (Republican in Name Only) by the true believing Tea Party activists.

And even though a majority of the U.S. House probably agrees with me, the majority will just as probably be defeated by a minority this time around. GOP Speaker John Boehner has promised not to bring up for a vote a bill opposed by a majority of his own members.

The only way I see that immigration reform of some sort can pass would be for Boehner to call up an immigration bill and seek Democratic votes, which would cost him his job.

I like the Dirksen style of operating better, but then I'm a RINO.