

Once an Inside Player, Now Immigration's Mr. Outside

Luis Gutierrez takes on a community organizer's affect to press Obama, other fellow Democrats for an overhaul

BY CLEA BENSON

LUIS V. GUTIERREZ STOOD in the spring sun outside the Capitol last week, closely surrounded by a pack of Spanish-language television reporters. He decried what he described as a *jueguito* — little game — going on in the Senate surrounding an overhaul of immigration laws. He chided President Obama for putting immigration behind issues such as financial regulation. The president, he suggested, needed to prioritize the topic of paramount concern for Hispanic voters who helped elect him.

“When is our moment going to come?” he said in Spanish, sounding more like an activist trying to stir his troops at a rally than a mid-level Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee pressing for movement on legislation at a news conference.

Now in his ninth term as the first Hispanic member of Congress from Illinois — before that he was a city council member and mayoral aide in his native Chicago — Gutierrez got where he is today because he knows how to play the inside game. As the House’s most outspoken advocate for a new path to citizenship for many of the nation’s estimated 12 million illegal immigrants, he has been willing to bargain. Three years ago, the last time immigration policy made it to the top tier of the legislative agenda, he worked with some of the most conservative Republicans at the Capitol to write an ultimately ill-fated compromise, combining tougher border enforcement with an expansion of legal immigration.

But now, with this year’s window of opportunity for an immigration overhaul closing rapidly, Gutierrez is playing the consummate outsider. Fresh off a 30-city speaking tour de-



HIS NEW STANCE: Gutierrez pressed his colleagues to act on immigration at a news conference April 20.

signed to mobilize support for a new federal policy with a focus on keeping immigrant families united, he’s ramping up criticism of his own party’s leadership — the president included. Instead of speaking to his colleagues in the House cloakrooms, he’s been broadcasting a message to the Hispanic grass roots: They should push their elected officials to act.

The immigration issue burst back into the national spotlight last week after Republican Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona signed a law empowering local police in her state to question people on suspicion of being in the country illegally. And no member of Congress was more visible than Gutierrez. He made the rounds of news shows on networks from Fox to Telemundo, decrying the Arizona measure and citing it as yet another reason fellow Democrats should advance a national overhaul. He even suggested he might urge Hispanic voters to stay home from the polls this November if there is no immigration bill.

“The president needs to begin to work harder,” he said at last week’s news conference.

Gutierrez may now appear to be a thorn in

the side of many of those he’s normally been friends with on the issue, but advocates for immigrants and some of his congressional allies say that’s exactly what’s called for in the current climate. Much to their dismay, the administration’s early promises to prioritize immigration policy have taken a back seat to issues such as health care and the economy. Meanwhile, growing party polarization has evaporated support among Republicans who once were willing to negotiate on the issue.

With the confirmation of a new Supreme Court justice threatening to dominate the summertime agenda of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which also has jurisdiction over immigration, Gutierrez and his allies are hustling to keep the momentum alive.

STANDING UP

“You need someone like Luis to hold people accountable,” said Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva of Arizona, a fellow Democrat. “This issue should not go quietly into the night, and as uncomfortable as it makes people, somebody has to play that role.”

Gutierrez was born soon after his parents moved to Chicago from Puerto Rico in the early 1950s. He got his start as an activist early on, when he moved back to the island with his family for high school and almost got expelled while crusading for Puerto Rican independence. In college back in Illinois, he joined student protests against a lack of English language classes. After he graduated, he worked as a community organizer, teacher and social worker.

His political ascent was largely a matter of forging alliances within the venerable Chicago Democratic machine. It began when he worked for the campaign of Harold Washington, a House member who was elected Chicago's first African-American mayor in 1983. After working for Washington for a couple of years and laboring in ward politics, Gutierrez was elected alderman in 1986. Six years later, when the state's congressional lines were redrawn to create an ear-muff shaped, Hispanic-majority district uniting the city's Puerto Rican and Mexican neighborhoods, Gutierrez won it with the backing of Mayor Richard M. Daley, who helped round up the non-Hispanic white vote.

Gutierrez's interest in the immigration issue began soon after, he said. He noticed that while people of Mexican descent outnumbered Puerto Ricans in his district by a ratio of about 3-to-1, nearly equal numbers from each group voted on Election Day. Many Mexicans, he discovered, could not vote because they had not become citizens. He decided to conduct citizenship drives.

Gutierrez and his staff ultimately assisted tens of thousands of people with their citizenship applications. They also found many constituents turning to them for help with complex immigration problems. Sometimes families were being torn apart because some members were in the country legally while others were not. This also convinced Gutierrez it was time for comprehensive changes to federal policy. "I just said to myself, you know what? Someone should step up and speak for millions of people," he said.

In 2007, Gutierrez partnered with Arizona Republican Jeff Flake to write a bill that would have combined tougher enforcement with a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. The bill was never taken up in the House, however, because a somewhat similar bipartisan deal was unable to overcome a filibuster in the Senate.

Flake recalls how Gutierrez was willing to put provisions in their bill that he didn't like, such as one requiring undocumented immigrants to leave the country before applying for legal status. "The last effort we had was a great example

LUIS VICENTE GUTIERREZ

Path to Congress: Elected with 78 percent in 1992 in the 4th District, which links parts of Chicago's north and south sides; the first Hispanic elected to Congress from Illinois; re-elected eight times with at least 75 percent; announced retirement in 2007 but changed his mind five months later

Committees: Judiciary, Financial Services (Financial Institutions and Consumer Credit, chairman)

Born: Dec. 10, 1953, in Chicago

Family: Married to Soraida Arocho in 1977; they have two daughters

Religion: Roman Catholic

Education: Northeastern Illinois U., B.A. 1975 (liberal arts)

Before Congress: Teacher; social worker; aid to Mayor Harold Washington, 1984-86; Chicago City Council member, 1986-93

of compromise on all sides," Flake said.

In December, Gutierrez introduced his own version of an immigration overhaul that doesn't include some of the compromise provisions he supported three years ago. But the measure is a largely symbolic starting point, since once again the fate of any overhaul essentially relies on the Senate passing the first version of a bill.

IMMIGRATION OBSTACLES

Gutierrez and his allies are pinning their hopes on a recent vow by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, that he will put a bill before the Senate by July 4. Whether that effort will be anything more than a pro forma gesture, designed to appease Hispanic voters a bit, remains to be seen.

For now, Gutierrez's best bet, and advocates' best hope, may be playing the outside game, tapping into yet another rising wave of public sentiment to convince the Democratic leaders that they have more to lose than gain if they fail to act on immigration now. But exactly where public sentiment lies is the subject of a raging debate between both sides on the immigration issue.

Advocates for tougher border control say Democrats will lose politically if they try to move legislation that would make it easier for undocumented immigrants to stay here. On top of that, they say, Republicans will not support an overhaul this election year, and so any political capital Democrats expend would be counterproductive. "I think one of the reasons the more grown-up Democrats

don't make a big fuss of amnesty is precisely because they don't want to poke the hornet's nest of public outrage," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a pro-enforcement group.

On the other side, Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, agrees with Gutierrez that the real political risk for Democrats is that Hispanic voters will become discouraged and stop turning out. "The right is so mobilized that, if Democrats did immigration reform, it wouldn't mobilize them any more," said Sharry, who is a big Gutierrez booster. "Mostly, you have politicians who are dealmakers. Occasionally, you have elected leaders who are torchbearers. Gutierrez is both."

Though he's well-known for his advocacy on immigration in Congress, Gutierrez's real power may lie in the bully pulpit. He joined the Judiciary Committee in 2007, at the start of his eighth term, and so doesn't have enough panel seniority to claim a subcommittee gavel. He is chairman of a House Financial Services panel, though he admits that's not where his main passion lies.

"The issue that keeps me focused and energized and wanting to come back here is comprehensive immigration reform," he said.

Krikorian sees Gutierrez as using the immigration issue to launch himself out of Congress and into the national spotlight. "This way, he can become the tribune of illegal aliens, the national spokesman for amnesty, and I suspect that's what it's all about," he said.

Gutierrez, in fact, does see a role for himself outside of Congress — but only if an immigration bill becomes law. Three years ago he announced his retirement from Congress, saying he wanted to be the next mayor of Chicago, but soon changed his mind. And in early 2009 he embarked on the nationwide tour, spending his weekends speaking directly to Hispanic voters in districts across the country.

Gutierrez says his side is starting to create a thaw in the Senate and that "my fantasy" of an overhaul law in 2010 is possible. If that happens, he says he'll leave the House in 2012 and head back home to Chicago to become a full-time organizer, helping ensure the new federal immigration policies are carried out equitably. "That's where I see my job. Not here in Congress, but out there in the communities, getting that job done." ■

FOR FURTHER READING: *Gutierrez's bill is HR 4321; immigration overhaul prospects, 2009 CQ Weekly, p. 2860; Obama's approach, p. 1264; past efforts, 2007 Almanac p. 15-9, 2006 Almanac, p. 14-3, 2005 Almanac, p. 13-3.*