

Grass Roots Roared and Immigration Plan Collapsed

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WASHINGTON, Mich., June 8 - The undoing of the [immigration](#) bill in the Senate this week had many players, but none more effective than angry voters like Monique Thibodeaux, who joined a nationwide campaign to derail it.

Mrs. Thibodeaux, an office manager at a towing company here in suburban Detroit, became politically active as she never had before. Guided by conservative Internet organizations, she made calls and sent e-mail messages to senators across the country and pushed her friends to do the same.

"These people came in the wrong way, so they don't belong here, period," Mrs. Thibodeaux, [a Republican](#), said of some 12 million illegal immigrants who would have been granted a path to citizenship under the Senate bill.

"In my heart I knew it was wrong for our country," she said of the measure.

Supporters of the legislation defended it as an imperfect but pragmatic solution to the difficult problem of illegal immigration. Public opinion polls, including a New York Times/CBS News Poll conducted last month, showed broad support among Americans for the bill's major provisions. But the legislation sparked a furious rebellion among many Republican and even some Democratic voters, who were linked by the Internet and encouraged by radio talk show hosts. Their outrage and activism surged to full force after Senator Jon Kyl, the Arizona Republican who was an author of the bill, suggested early this week that support for the measure seemed to be growing. The assault on lawmakers in Washington was relentless. In a crucial vote Thursday night, the bill's supporters, including President Bush, fell short by 15 votes. While there is a possibility the legislation could be revived later this year, there was a glow of victory among opponents on Friday.

"Technologically enhanced grass-roots activism is what turned this around, people empowered by the Internet and talk radio," said Colin A. Hanna, president of Let Freedom Ring, a conservative group.

Mr. Hanna suggested the passion and commitment were on the side of the opponents.

"The opposition to the amnesty plan is so much more intense than the intensity of the supporters," said Mr. Hanna, speaking of the bill's provisions to grant legal status to qualifying illegal immigrants, which the authors of the legislation insisted was not amnesty.

In the end, supporters conceded that they were outmaneuvered by opponents who boiled down their complaints to that single hot-button word, repeated often and viscerally on talk radio programs and blogs.

"It's a lot easier to yell one word, 'amnesty,' and it takes a little more to explain, 'No, it's not, and if you don't do anything you have a silent amnesty,' " said Gov. Janet Napolitano of Arizona, a Democrat who backed the measure.

Christopher Sabatini, senior director of policy at the Americas Society/Council of the Americas, which follows Hispanic immigration, described the bill as "born an orphan in terms of popular support."

"You got the sense of a deafening silence from the supporters, and the roar of the opposition," Mr. Sabatini said.

For Mrs. Thibodeaux and others on her side, the immigration debate was a battle for the soul of the nation because it seemed to divert taxpayer-financed resources to cater to foreigners who had not come to this country by legal means.

"This hit home with me because I knew it was taking away from our people," said Mrs. Thibodeaux, 50, who works at Ruehle's Auto Transport. "What happened to taking care of our own people first?"

Rosemary Jenks, a policy advocate at NumbersUSA, which calls for curbing immigration, said that 7,000 new members signed up for the organization in a single day last week. Other groups reported a similar outpouring as proponents of the Senate bill claimed to be gaining momentum.

"We had way more response than we could handle," said Stephen Elliott, president of Grassfire.org, a conservative Internet group that called for volunteers for a petition drive and instructed people how to barrage lawmakers with telephone calls and e-mail.

The group gathered more than 700,000 signatures on petitions opposing the bill, delivering them this week to senators in Washington and in their home states.

Organizers described a new Internet-linked national constituency that emerged among Republicans, much like the one that Democrats pioneered during the presidential candidacy in 2004 of Howard Dean. But many of these Republicans are enraged at their party leaders, including Mr. Kyl and Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, who supported the bill, and they feel betrayed by Mr. Bush.

Opposition to the Senate bill brought together many Americans in states where immigration was not traditionally a fervor-inspiring issue, but where illegal immigration has become more visible in recent years.

"Every state is now a border state," said Susan Tully, the national field director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which has long supported a crackdown on illegal immigration. The bill's opponents also objected to how it was handled, with the huge measure negotiated

behind closed doors between White House and Senate lawmakers, without any hearings or other public input.

"Ordinary people like me rose up and put a stop to it," said William Murphy, a retired policeman from Evansville, Wis., one of the Grassfire.org volunteers who delivered petitions to his senators. On Thursday before the vote, he said, he put in new calls to 15 senators.

Mr. Murphy said he felt strongly about the bill because he believed it would degrade the value of American citizenship.

"If I come from Mexico, I can jump the fence and get all those American benefits," he said. "It's outrageous when you can buy your citizenship for \$5,000," he said, referring to the fines that illegal immigrants would pay under the bill to become legal permanent residents.

When asked about Mr. Bush's support for the bill, Mr. Murphy, a longtime Republican, had to pause to temper his words.

"I was stunned, really," he said. Mr. Bush "has always been a person who stood for some basic human values, and now he's going to give away the country?"

In Virginia, Allen Price, another Grassfire.org member who was formerly a talk show host in Richmond, decried the Senate bill as an attempt by corporate business to secure cheap labor.

"I called up everybody I knew and told them to make calls," said Mr. Price, also a Republican. He delivered 15,000 petitions to the offices of his senators, [John W. Warner](#), a Republican, and [Jim Webb](#), a first-term Democrat, both of whom voted against closing debate on the bill on Thursday night.

In California, a challenge was started by "The John & Ken Show," a popular talk radio show critical of the bill, for 30,000 opposition calls to Senator [Dianne Feinstein](#), a Democrat, who supported the measure. All of Ms. Feinstein's phone lines were clogged, with calls from opponents of the bill and from supporters seeking to undermine the challenge.

Here in Michigan, speaking at her neatly maintained home under hickory trees in Washington, a town north of Detroit that has been battered by auto company layoffs, Mrs. Thibodeaux said the immigration bill worried her like no other political issue. She believed it would reward undeserving immigrants who do not speak English and would soon become a burden on public services that Americans need in a time of economic uncertainty.

"A lot of our American people in Detroit are hurting," Mrs. Thibodeaux said, noting that she has often done volunteer work in poor neighborhoods here. "It's just not right."

Her strong feelings about the immigration issue came gradually, she said. A nephew who works as a house painter had trouble finding high-paying work because of competition from illegal immigrants. Some Mexican teenagers hassled her on the street, seeming to mock her because she walks with a cane. She spotted immigrants shopping with food stamps at the grocery store.

Mrs. Thibodeaux said she favored orderly legal immigration, but did not think illegal immigrants should benefit from American generosity.

"I have a very hard time with illegal," she said. She proposes that all illegal immigrants be given a 90-day period to leave voluntarily. After that, immigration agents, local police and the National Guard, if necessary, should be mobilized to deport them, she said.

Republican voters and organizers said they were ready for a long fight on the immigration issue, even if the debate is reopened in Congress.

"This bill represented something so big that people noticed," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a research group. He said the Senate debate was not "just stirring up the hornet's nest, but is actually changing the dynamics of this issue for the future."

Mrs. Thibodeaux agreed. If the immigration issue comes before Congress again, she said, "I'm going to get a microphone and start yelling."