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## **NATION: Romney should tweak stance on immigration to gain votes**

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Last week, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on the constitutionality of Arizona's 2010 law on immigration enforcement. Arizona's law, if upheld in June, would require police to check the immigration status of anyone they stop and would create unprecedented state crimes for immigration violations.

The Supreme Court case comes at a delicate time for Mitt Romney and the national Republican Party. During the primaries, Romney burnished his credentials as a conservative on immigration, voicing support for Arizona's law and its theory of self-deportation through attrition. After becoming the likely nominee, however, he has tried to strike a more moderate tone. Keenly aware of his low standing among Latino voters — as low as 14 percent in February according to a Fox News Latino poll — Romney began to campaign with Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, and has indicated that he might someday support Rubio's version of the DREAM Act.

These lukewarm statements have only given him a modest bump among Latinos, up to 22 percent according to a recent NBC/Wall Street Journal poll. If Romney is to win the general election, he needs to dramatically improve his standing among Latinos and aim for the 40 percent level that propelled a Bush victory in 2004. Indeed, most studies of the general election indicate that Latinos will play a heavy role in battleground states such as Florida, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico.

Hitting the reset button among Latinos, however, will not be easy: In order to undo years of damage to the GOP brand, Romney needs to make some bold pronouncements. He needs to show that he can stand up to conservatives on immigration that are out of the mainstream. He needs to show a hopeful message for Latinos that is similar to those of George W. Bush and President Obama. And he needs to bring other Republicans on board, including the Senate and House leadership, to show a sophisticated Latino electorate that he can deliver on his promises.

To repair his relationship among Latinos, Romney needs to evoke more humane solutions to the illegal immigration problem. This means supporting the full DREAM Act that gives a path to citizenship for those attending college or serving in the military, not Rubio's weak version of the act that would avoid granting U.S. residency. Rubio's plan has been roundly criticized in Latino news media as being insufficient, and Mitt Romney can offer a bolder solution.

Romney can also use the “Arizona moment” in June to voice his support for legalization programs that prevent the deportation of millions of residents who have lived in the United States for more than a decade. These are people who have violated our country’s immigration laws, but are otherwise productive and supportive members of society. Deportations also often break up families, since about a half of illegal immigrants live in households where at least one other family member is a U.S. citizen. By supporting a path to legalization, Romney can show the compassionate side of his conservatism.

Finally, Romney can use his Arizona moment to display his leadership within the Republican Party. Instead of avoiding all talk of immigration, he should call a news conference to announce his bold proposals, flanked by the Senate and House Republican leadership.

If Romney does all of these, he could capitalize on the opportunity that Arizona provides. Latino voters would take notice, Romney would get more favorable press coverage in Spanish media, and he can reverse the deep slide in Republican support among Latinos.

If he fails to seize the moment, however, Romney risks losing the November election and returning the Republican Party to its increasingly untenable position on immigration among Latinos.

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