

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Paul Giblin

Republicans and Democrats, separated by years of attack politics in Washington, have the opportunity to show they can work together, U.S. Reps. Jeff Flake and Harry Mitchell told members of the East Valley Partnership on Wednesday.

The possibility was created by the Democrats' surge during the November elections, which gave them the majority in both the Senate and the House.

Flake and Mitchell have keen insight into the matter. Flake is a fourth-term Republican whose 6th District includes Mesa and Chandler. Mitchell is a first-term Democrat whose 5th District encompasses Scottsdale and Tempe.

The first real test to the spirit of bipartisanship will be whether Congress can work with President Bush to pass meaningful legislation on border security and immigration reform, Flake said.

"We have a long way to go, but it's better now than it was a couple of years ago," he told the group of business and community leaders during the meeting at the Crowne Plaza San Marcos Golf Resort in Chandler.

He noted that Bush visited San Luis along the U.S.-Mexican border earlier this week to push for legislation that would create a guest worker program and allow some of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already living in the United States to become citizens.

Flake has co-sponsored a bill that reflects Bush's approach, although the president's most vocal opponents come from within the Republican party. Bush, Democrats and likeminded Republicans will have to broker an agreement with more conservative Republicans, Flake said.

That could be a difficult task.

The best opportunity will be in the next four to five months, Flake said. Any time after that, the matter likely will be mired in politics as the 2008 presidential campaign heats up.

Mitchell credited Flake for introducing the immigration bill, which he said is one of the most important issues facing the country. "We all ought to be proud of Jeff. He has taken all the criticism," Mitchell said.

Yet, immigration isn't as partisan as it often is presented, Mitchell said. The real divide is geographic. He has found that people in economically vibrant areas generally support some version of immigration reform. Meanwhile, people in depressed areas, such as the Midwest, generally oppose it.

"They want to put all their woes, their economic woes in their areas of the country on illegal immigration," he said.

Flake and Mitchell also said the federal government has to provide better tools to employers to differentiate between legal and illegal immigrants. One obstacle to that is widespread opposition to a national ID card, Flake said.

The two lawmakers also pledged to help Arizona receive more in federal transportation funding.

Arizona is a donor state. It receives 90 cents for every dollar it contributes to federal coffers, Mitchell said.

Though they are split on the Iraq war, both are committed to improving veterans' health care, Mitchell said.