



Immigration as a Wedge Issue: Little Payoff; Big Opportunity Cost

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In the 2008 federal election campaigns, we will continue to see an unprecedented focus on immigration. Unfortunately, candidates will not likely be proposing serious solutions to deal with the problems created by our outmoded immigration laws. Instead, we will see politicians try to outdo each other to show that they have a plan that is tougher than their opponent's. The undocumented immigrant worker has become a tool used by some politicians to play on the fear of change felt by some of their constituents. Some politicians think that, by sounding tough on immigration, they will motivate these constituents to vote for them. Millions of dollars are being spent on this strategy. So far, there is little evidence it will pay a dividend.

Public opinion polls show that the public at large favors a different approach toward immigration reform than the mass expulsion advocated by the loudest voices in the debate.

There are many loud voices speaking out on talk radio, calling in to their congressional representatives, and standing up at town hall meetings to demand that Congress reject what they call "amnesty" for "illegal aliens." For these outraged voters, nothing short of mass expulsion will be satisfactory. But do listeners of conservative talk radio, and the audience of Lou Dobbs, represent the public at large?

For the past two years or so, the mainstream press has been testing public opinion about the immigration mess. Over and over, the public has expressed support for solutions that go beyond deportation- and enforcement-only and include a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants under certain conditions. Generally, the conditions tested by the pollsters have included some combination of paying taxes, having no criminal record, learning English, paying a fine—conditions that were included in a bill filibustered to death in the Senate in 2007.

Support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. has been remarkably consistent.

Here is a sampling of results of public opinion polls conducted since late 2005 by mainstream media organizations. Percentages represent those who favor allowing undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. under certain conditions.¹

- 61% in a Washington Post poll in December 2005
- 62% in a Fox News poll in March 2006
- 77% in a CBS News poll in May 2006
- 59% in a Gallup/USA Today poll in March 2007
- 67% in a Fox News poll in June 2007
- 58% in an ABC News poll in September 2007
- 51% in a Washington Post/ABC News poll in October/November 2007.

¹ You can find links to many of these polls here: <http://www.immigrationforum.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=830>.
A memo summarizing public opinion polls on this topic can be found here:
<http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/PressRoom/PublicOpinion/2007/PollingSummary0407.pdf>

Demonizing undocumented immigrants and advocating for their deportation has not paid off in the voting booth.

What the general public thinks may not matter if the people who actually vote are the angry minority who favor the removal of undocumented immigrants. How has the immigration issue played out in the voting booth? Voters so far have tended to act more like the respondents of public opinion polls than callers to talk radio.

In 2006, House Republicans spent a summer demonizing a Senate bill that would have offered a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Republican Representatives and Senators attacked their opponents as not being sufficiently tough on immigration. In that election, many Republican hard-liners on immigration lost their seats, and Democrats took control of the House and Senate. For example, Arizona's 5th District had been represented by immigration hardliner J.D. Hayworth, author of "Whatever It Takes: Illegal Immigration, Border Security, and the War on Terror." His tough stance on immigration failed to save his seat in Congress. He is now a talk radio host. In Arizona's open 8th District, on the U.S./Mexican border, Republican state legislator Randy Graff ran almost exclusively on a tough-on-immigration platform. He was endorsed by the Minutemen. That district is now represented by Democrat Gabrielle Giffords, who favors a comprehensive approach to solving the immigration mess.

Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum aired anti-immigration ads, launched a Web site portraying his opponent as "pro-amnesty," and campaigned with anti-immigration hard-liners. His "hail Mary" strategy didn't work. He suffered the greatest margin of defeat for an incumbent senator since 1980, losing to Democrat Bob Casey.

In 2007, Republicans again used immigration against their opponents, this time in state and local races. In Virginia, where several localities had enacted their own enforcement ordinances, the issue was especially hot. Republicans hammered away at their Democratic rivals for being soft on immigration. For voters, however, there was, as a *Washington Post* headline noted, "no fixation on immigration" and they put Democrats in charge of the Virginia Senate for the first time in 10 years.

Lessons unlearned – the Republican presidential primaries

In the 2008, we are seeing some of the same trends in the Republican presidential primaries. Early in the race, the candidates tried to convince primary voters that each would deport undocumented immigrants faster than their opponents.

Of the major contenders, Mitt Romney spent millions of dollars of his personal fortune trying to convince voters that he was the toughest candidate when it came to illegal immigration—airing more than 12,000 anti-illegal immigration ads in Iowa and New Hampshire. He won in neither state. In Florida, many of Romney's 4,500 television ads attacked John McCain, co-sponsor of the Kennedy-McCain comprehensive immigration reform legislation, for favoring "amnesty." Romney won among voters who said that the way we should handle undocumented immigrants is to deport them. Those voters, however, were in the minority (40%, vs. 58% of Republican primary voters who favored some form of legal status for undocumented immigrants). Among Latino voters, McCain won overwhelmingly—54% to 9% among the 7% of voters who were of Cuban origin, and 53% to

21% among non-Cuban Latino voters.² Romney found his wedge issue, but the wedge was driven between him and Latino voters.

Leading up to Super Tuesday, the anti-immigrant radio and television talk show hosts, as well as anti-immigrant organizations, made their last stand against McCain, who had become the front runner. They backed Romney, but again, voters had a different agenda. Republican voters in many of the Super Tuesday states had harsher views towards undocumented immigrants than the Republican voters in Florida. (In general, Republican voters in states with fewer immigrants had harsher views than voters in states with significant immigrant populations.) However, even voters who wanted to see undocumented immigrants deported did not necessarily cast their lot with Romney. In Tennessee, for example, while a majority of Republican voters (56%) felt that undocumented immigrants should be deported, a plurality (33%) voted for Mike Huckabee—who also won a plurality of voters (40%) who believed that undocumented immigrants should be provided with a path to citizenship.³

In the delegate-rich (and immigrant-rich) states of California, New York, and Illinois, Republican voters who felt that undocumented immigrants should be deported were in the minority. Romney edged out McCain among those voters, but McCain decisively won among the majority of Republican voters who responded that they favored either a path to citizenship or a guestworker program for undocumented immigrants.⁴

With the failure of his tough-on-immigration message to gain traction with voters, Romney dropped out of the race for the Republican nomination, leaving McCain as the presumptive nominee.

Hispanics—no matter their citizenship status—are feeling threatened by the tone of the immigration debate.

While politicians say they are not against “legal” immigrants, it is very difficult to avoid giving the impression that a major focus on “illegal immigration” really has anti-Hispanic motivations. There are a number of reasons for this.

- Many permanent resident immigrants and naturalized citizens have family members or friends who are undocumented.⁵ More than half of all Hispanic adults say they worry that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported.⁶
- Undocumented immigrants, who overwhelmingly are here to work and are otherwise obeying our laws, are characterized by politicians as criminals, and so are put into the same category as murders and terrorists. For family members of undocumented immigrants, this is a personal insult.
- There is a strong undercurrent of nativism and racism in the immigration debate⁷. The increased visibility of the issue has gained the attention of white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan

² <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#FLREP>

³ <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/state/#TN>

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#CAREP>;
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#NYREP>;
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#ILREP>

⁵ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>

⁶ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/84.pdf>

⁷ See, for example, this video produced by Rep. Tom Tancredo: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5GUCQAdlXg>

which, according to their Web site⁸, wants to “mobilize America” to fight “illegal immigrants and their allies,” who are part of a “movement to turn the U.S. from a white Christian country to a non-white nation.”

- The heated rhetoric used in the immigration debate coincides with a high level of discrimination experienced by Hispanics. In a recent survey, 41% of Hispanic respondents say they, a family member, or a close friend had experienced discrimination in the past five years.⁹ Hate crimes against Hispanics have also been on the rise. According to the FBI, by 2006 there were a record number of hate crimes directed against Hispanics, and Hispanics comprised approximately 63% of the victims of all reported crimes motivated by a bias against the victim’s ethnicity or national origin.¹⁰

Republican politicians are taking the lead on harsh immigration rhetoric. In response, Latinos are dramatically moving away from the Republican Party—reversing gains made earlier in the decade.

- **44%** - the percentage of Latinos who voted for President Bush in the 2004 elections.
- **30%** - the percentage of Latinos who voted for Congressional Republicans in 2006, after a summer of Republican campaigning on tough treatment for undocumented immigrants.¹¹
- **23%** - the percentage of Latinos who said they favored Republicans in October 2007, as Republicans continued their tough-on-immigration rhetoric. 57% said they favored Democrats.¹²

The impact of harsh immigration rhetoric on the party affiliation of Latinos is likely to be magnified as the Latino electorate grows.

- **8.2%** - the share of U.S. eligible voters who were Latino in 2004.¹³
- **8.9%** - the share of U.S. eligible voters who were Latino in 2007.¹⁴
- **700,000** - since 2004, the number of Latino adult immigrants who have become citizens (and thus eligible to vote). In the government’s Fiscal Year 2007, more than **1.4 million** immigrants applied for naturalization (with the majority being Latino).
- **1.3 million** – the number of second- and third-generation native-born Latinos who became eligible to vote between 2004 and 2007.
- In the 2008 presidential primaries, Latino turnout has been up dramatically from the 2004 turnout. for example, Latinos accounted for 29% of the Democratic electorate in California, compared to 16% in 2004. In Missouri, it was 5% verses 1%. In Connecticut, 7% verses 2%.¹⁵

⁸ <http://www.kkk.bz/>

⁹ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/84.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.maldef.org/news/press.cfm?ID=444>

¹¹ <http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/TheDebate/CivicParticipation/2006VoteAnalysis.pdf>

¹² <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/83.pdf>

¹³ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/83.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/83.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://www.miamiherald.com/418/story/409593.html>