



Why the Democratic Party – Not Just the GOP – Has an Immigration Problem

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In the wake of President Obama's November 2014 decision to lift the threat of deportation for about half of eleven million undocumented immigrants in the United States, pundit commentary has stressed the difficulties Republicans will have courting Latino voters in 2016. But this overlooks the fact that the Democratic Party also faces continuing political dilemmas about immigration. That may be a surprising statement to make about a political party that wins the lion's share of the vote from Latinos and Asian Americans. But a broader look suggests that immigration may be hurting Democrats more with white voters more than it is helping them with non-white voters. Despite recent high rates of immigration, Latinos and Asian Americans only made up 11 percent of the electorate that turned out on November 4, 2014. Even if immigration was the only issue driving their vote – and it most certainly was not – their allegiances only shift the national partisan balance by a few percentage points. Meanwhile, immigration has an outsized impact on the concerns of white voters.

The Fears of White Voters

Whites accounted for 75 percent of the electorate in the 2014 midterm election and available national data suggest that even though many white Americans support or ambivalently accept immigration, an overwhelming majority view illegal arrivals as a serious problem, and more than a third think immigration is bad for the country.

Recent waves of immigration from Mexico, Central America, Asia, and Africa are almost impossible for most Americans to ignore. Immigrants are growing in number and have moved to almost every corner of the nation, where they often look different racially from existing white majorities. And the growing immigrant presence has sparked ongoing discussion of threats.

- Irrespective of the actual costs of immigration, commentators repeatedly claim that immigrants pay little in taxes but rely heavily on public services for welfare, education, and health care.
- Immigrants are said to take jobs away from natives and lower their wages.
- Immigrants are linked to cultural worries about disorder and changing communities.

Threat narratives are all over the media. Even in the *New York Times* from 1980 to 2011, negative stories about immigration outnumbered positive stories by a four to one margin.

A Growing Partisan Divide

Immigration anxiety is also linked to a widening partisan divide. Democratic politicians may vary in their stands, but there is a much larger gap between the typical Democratic and Republican positions on immigration. No Democrat in the Arizona legislature supported that state's controversial bill toughening local steps against undocumented immigrants, but every Republican except one voted for it. Votes in the U.S. Congress have been similarly polarized.

Citizens are now at partisan loggerheads too. In the 2014 midterms, three-quarters of Americans who want most illegal immigrants deported voted for Republicans, as did a comparable portion of those who see immigration as the nation's leading problem. More than correlation is at work.

- In research with Michael Rivera, I show that the relationship between immigration attitudes and partisan choice holds even when other important factors are controlled. What is more, individual attitudes on immigration at one point in time predict future partisan shifts.

- In a study with Marisa Abrajano and Hans Hassell, I learned that, to a startling degree, media reporting affects the national partisan balance. Increases in negative media coverage of immigration shifts white voters toward the Republican Party.

Dilemmas for Democrats

In the 2014 elections, only 38 percent of white voters supported Democratic candidates, matching historic lows. In recent times, as the immigrant presence and anxiety about it have grown, white working class people especially have moved away from Democrats. Back in 1990, whites without a college degree overwhelmingly favored the Democratic Party, but in 2014 almost two-thirds supported the GOP. Other factors are also at work, but there is little doubt that immigration is one of the main drivers of white defection to the Republican Party.

What can the Democratic Party do? The trade-offs are difficult.

- Shifting to the right on immigration might win back some white voters but would be unsavory to many liberals and could dampen support from Latinos and Asian Americans, many of whom continue to have no strong connection to either party.
- The Democratic Party could simply wait to benefit from changing racial demographics. That might work over the long run but could cede power to the GOP for decades. Republicans already control the House and Senate, two-thirds of state legislatures, and 31 governorships.
- Actively reaching out to law-abiding immigrants is the option President Obama seems to be following. This strategy makes sense in policy terms as well as morally. Data show that immigrants work hard, pay taxes, boost the economy, and use relatively few government services. The vast majority of the undocumented have committed no crime other than crossing the border. Their families are part of American life and should be allowed to stay.

Under the right circumstances, actively embracing new immigrants can be politically helpful. For example, Democrats in California made major gains after opposing early 1990s measures to cut public services to undocumented immigrants. But California is not America. It is a majority-minority state where losing a chunk of white voters can be more than balanced out by winning over many Latino and Asian American voters. In most other U.S. states, whites remain the overwhelming majority. Especially in states with older, more culturally conservative white populations, Democratic Party support for immigrant rights and welcoming policies may be economically and morally defensible, but may nevertheless continue to hurt the party at the polls for quite a few election cycles to come.