

Immigration Issue Not Shaping Up to be the Republican Electoral Wedge Some Predicted

National Immigration Forum

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Washington, DC - Yesterday, Sen. John McCain won the Florida Republican presidential primary. The following is a statement by Douglas Rivlin, Communication Director of the National Immigration Forum, a non-partisan, pro-immigrant advocacy group in Washington.

Based on exit polls provided by CNN, which included questions about immigration and ethnicity, the results of the Florida primary are further evidence that the immigration issue is not shaping up to be the wedge issue some had hoped it would be. In fact, the deportation-only approach favored by many candidates seems to be more of a liability than an asset.

The exit polls show that the deportation-only approach to immigration was favored by a minority of Republican voters (40%), with the majority (58%) selecting either a temporary legal status (29%) or a path to citizenship (29%) for immigrants in the country illegally. Gov. Romney captured 38% of these deportation-only voters, compared to Sen. McCain's 26%. Meanwhile, Sen. McCain captured a majority of the majority of voters who selected temporary or permanent legal status for immigrants here illegally.

Similarly, Gov. Romney won among Republicans who identified immigration as their number one issue (43% to McCain's 25%), but these voters were only 16% of the Republican electorate.

So pandering to the deportation-only crowd, in which Gov. Romney, Gov. Huckabee, and Sen. Thompson have all engaged in to varying degrees over the past several weeks, doesn't seem to deliver a win, even in a Republican primary.

The flip-side - the harm a deportation-only approach does to a candidate - also shines through in the Florida results. While Sen. McCain and Gov. Romney split the non-Latino Republican vote (33%-33%), Sen. McCain had a big edge among Latino Republicans, winning both Cuban Republicans (54% to Romney's 8%) and non-Cuban Latino Republicans (53% to Romney's 21%).

These results are from just one state, albeit an important one, but they lend further evidence to what we have been saying about harsh anti-immigration positions in an electoral context. The benefits to a candidate of a strict deportation-only approach to immigration are practically non-existent, while the downside with the fastest growing group of American voters - Hispanics - of wanting to deport their families and neighbors can be decisive.