

Immigration Misfire

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Political pundits used to maintain that the American electorate was galvanized around the issue of illegal immigration. Voters, they claimed, would punish any candidate who failed to take a tough stance on immigrants and did not adamantly oppose the "A" word -- Amnesty -- in all its tortured definitions.

Yet a funny thing happened in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida. The most anti-immigrant candidates performed below expectations, and those accused of supporting amnesty and in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants won.

How is this possible? How could John McCain, the author of the McCain-Kennedy Comprehensive Immigration bill beat Mitt Romney, who aired anti-illegal-immigrant commercials more than 12,000 times in Iowa and New Hampshire alone?

Well, it turns out that 57% of Iowa primary voters actually favored earned citizenship for the undocumented. Only 23% favored deportation. And according to New Hampshire exit polls, immigration was not among the three most important issues for Democrats. It was tied for third place among Republicans.

In Florida, Mr. Romney's anti-illegal-immigrant message led Cuban Americans to vote for Mr. McCain by a 5-1 margin. Additionally, CNN exit polls showed that Republicans who favored deportation for illegal immigrants constituted only 40% of the vote, while 58% favored either temporary resident status or an earned pathway to citizenship.

Now the pundits have changed their tune. Mr. Romney's anti-illegal-immigrant rhetoric, they're declaring, is driving Latino voters away from the GOP and making traditionally conservative states such as Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Florida, Iowa and even Arizona into swing states.

However, the backlash to Mr. Romney's rhetoric was predictable from the beginning. In 22 national public opinion polls conducted last year, 50%-83% of Americans supported some type of pathway to legalization for undocumented workers. In almost every competitive race in the 2006 congressional elections that matched an anti-immigration candidate against one that supported comprehensive immigration reform, the anti-immigrant candidate lost.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Romney started out with a fairly moderate position on immigration, saying in 2005 that it would not be "practical or economic for the country" to deport all undocumented immigrants residing in the United States. In reference to the proposals of President Bush and Mr. McCain to create pathways to legalization, Mr. Romney told the Boston Globe that, "I think those are reasonable proposals."

Yet once Mr. Romney became serious about a presidential run his rhetoric became increasingly anti-immigrant. On his way out the door as governor of Massachusetts, he initiated a program to deputize state troopers to detain individuals solely on the basis of

their immigration status. Once on the campaign trail, he began running numerous ads attacking the other candidates for being too soft on "illegals."

Apparently conservative voters respond to issues that impact their personal quality of life far more than they do to racially polarized rhetoric designed to pit one group of Americans against another. In the two states Mr. Romney won, Michigan and Nevada, he focused on economic issues, and exit polls show that issue resonated much more than immigration.

While Mr. Romney's campaign must be disappointed with the election results so far, it is immigrants themselves who've suffered the most from the divisive offensive on immigration. Congress shelved comprehensive reform last summer, as many members became convinced that helping immigrants, even when it is in our nation's interest, was politically untenable. Inflammatory rhetoric has also led to a dramatic increase in hate crimes and racial profiling against Latinos, according to the FBI and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In 2008, our country needs a leader who will unite Americans, not divide them; one that honors the hard work and patriotism of immigrants, not holds them out for public scorn. Even if pundits, bloggers and talk show hosts can't seem to get this message in their heads, the American public is speaking through their votes. They are choosing candidates who offer hope and solutions, not the politics of fear.

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