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# Fellow Republicans, Open Your Doors

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REPUBLICAN candidates hoping to make illegal immigration a central issue in next year's Congressional elections and the 2008 presidential race should consider the results of the Virginia governor's contest.

The Republican candidate, Jerry Kilgore, tried to tap into sentiment against illegal aliens by running advertisements that featured grainy video of border arrests and Hispanic men waiting in line while an announcer accused his Democratic opponent, Tim Kaine, of favoring "taxpayer benefits for illegal immigrants." In the last weeks of the race, Mr. Kilgore regularly worked the theme into his campaign speeches, especially in Northern Virginia, home to most of the state's immigrant population, legal and illegal.

But on Election Day, immigration failed to galvanize voters, and Mr. Kilgore lost by six percentage points, coming up short even in reliably conservative areas like Loudoun County, where I live. No doubt other missteps, including harshly negative ads on his opponent's position on the death penalty, contributed to Mr. Kilgore's defeat. But clearly, immigrant bashing can cut both ways in an election.

Northern Virginia is home to about 200,000 illegal aliens. Jobs are plentiful, many of them good-paying ones in construction. Statewide unemployment is at 3.5 percent, lower than the 5 percent national average; but Northern Virginia is even lower at 2.5 percent. Legal immigrants in the area outnumber illegal ones by more than 2 to 1 (about the same proportion as they do nationally), but both groups have helped transform the region's economy into one of the most robust in the nation.

Nationally, illegal immigrant males actually have higher labor force participation rates - 92 percent - than other groups (83 percent for native-born men and 82 percent for immigrant men overall). And they make up an increasingly large share of certain occupations. A survey last summer by the Pew Hispanic Center found that about a quarter of all drywall and ceiling tile installers in the United States are illegal aliens, a statistic confirmed by a visit to almost any construction site in the Virginia suburbs.

If these immigrant workers were to disappear tomorrow - as so many politicians and conservative talk-show hosts seem to desire - it would have a drastic and unwelcome effect on the economy here and around the country. Not only do these workers fill necessary jobs in a tight labor market, but they spend their wages largely in the communities in which they live and work, and most contribute their share of taxes as well (employers generally withhold from paychecks in these industries).

Unfortunately, buoyed by polls showing that most Americans (69 percent in a survey last year) say that they are concerned about illegal immigration, some Republicans are hoping to ride the issue into the White House. Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado, the leader of the virtually all-Republican immigration reform caucus in the House, is spending time in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina in anticipation of a possible presidential campaign. (Mr. Tancredo caused even some immigration hard-liners to wince when he tried to have a high school honors student and his family deported after a newspaper article about the boy noted that he entered the country illegally at age 12.)

The Senate majority leader, Bill Frist, also eyeing a presidential run, has e-mailed his supporters asking them to post messages on his Web site "showing support for a tough border bill." The National Republican Senatorial Committee contacted one million Republican voters asking them to respond to a survey on immigration that asked "where loyal Republicans like you stand on this critical issue." And there is even discussion among House Republicans to revoke the laws giving citizenship to children born in America to illegal-immigrant parents.

Yet most polls show that illegal immigration is way down on the list of concerns motivating most voters, and Republicans may be confusing the intensity of the small number of people for whom it is a top priority - usually about 10 percent of voters - with its overall appeal as an election issue.

None of this is to suggest that the status quo - some 11 million illegal aliens residing in the United States and more coming every day - is desirable. Border security is an important issue; indeed, it is too important for demagoguery. A terrorist or drug smuggler can just as easily cross a porous border as can a father hoping to support his family back home.

The best way to intercept the jihadists and criminals, however, would be to give hard-working laborers a realistic opportunity to come here legally - by enacting a more generous legal immigration law with a guest-worker option. Ideally, such a program would allow illegal aliens already here to participate after paying a fine and demonstrating that they have paid taxes and are gainfully employed.

Three Republican senators from border states - John McCain and Jon Kyl of Arizona and John Cornyn of Texas - have introduced bills that address these issues in various promising ways; and President Bush has outlined a similar, if somewhat vaguer, proposal. A poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government last year showed that about 58 percent of Republican respondents supported a guest worker program.

Republican leaders have two choices: continue with the hard-line rhetoric that may or may not help at the polls, or enact market-based immigration reform that will give a chance to those willing to work hard for a better America.

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Linda Chavez, president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, was the director of the United States Commission on Civil Rights under President Ronald Reagan.