

Republican Platform Calls for Guest-Worker Program

The agenda at the GOP convention also includes a plan to make gang membership a deportable offense.

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Republicans are attempting to balance their party's disparate opinions on immigration by taking a tough stance on illegal immigrants in the United States while at the same time calling for a new temporary foreign worker program.

The Republican National Committee's 2012 platform on immigration, adopted on Tuesday, calls for a "legal and reliable source of foreign labor through a new guest-worker program."

"It wasn't even attacked," crowed Brad Bailey, a Texas restaurateur who lobbied heavily for the inclusion of a guest-worker program in the document. Bailey was expecting immigration hard-liners to go after the proposed temporary worker program because a standard GOP campaign line says that illegal immigrants are taking jobs from Americans. Businesses dispute that statement, saying there are many jobs (like roofing and fruit-picking) that Americans won't do.

The Republican platform also seeks long-term detention for "dangerous but undeportable aliens" and proposes to make gang membership a deportable offense. It is typical of electoral policy platforms to be vague on details--this isn't legislation, after all. It's the tone that counts. Note the crime-related wording when it comes to gangs and detention, reinforcing an idea important to Republicans: that they are tougher on illegal immigration than President Obama.

"Complaining about the problem is no longer working. Republicans need to lead in repairing our nation's immigration policy," Bailey said on Monday in an e-mail to supporters of a guest-worker program.

The Hispanic vote is in play in the general election, and how Republicans handle the immigration question will be a critical factor in determining whether conservative Hispanic voters can be convinced to cast their votes for Mitt Romney.

Hispanics as a group tend to be more conservative than traditional Democrats; half identify themselves as "independent," according to a recent Gallup poll. But two-thirds of them voted for President Obama in 2008, in part because he promised to push for a broad immigration overhaul that would create a path to citizenship for some illegal immigrants. Some Republican strategists worry that harsh rhetoric from Republicans about immigration will scare those independent Hispanics away.

The inclusion of a guest-worker program in the GOP platform marks a victory for business-oriented Republicans who are worried that a strict "enforcement-only" approach to immigration will ruin certain industries, such as agriculture, which relies heavily on undocumented immigrant labor.

"It was brutal," said Bailey, the founder of the free-market nonprofit group The Texas Immigration Solution, who is lobbying aggressively for businesses' access to foreign labor at the Republican National Convention. "I'm a rookie. I didn't know anybody. I was stopping people during bathroom breaks."

Bailey is flaming a tinder box within a party that has struggled for years with its commitment to "the rule of law," which sometimes conflicts with businesses' consistent use of immigrant labor--both legal and illegal. With some 12 million illegal immigrants working in the United States, it is difficult to imagine the government committing the resources to extricating all of them. Yet Republicans chafe at any policy that would ease off on punishment for immigration violations.

"We are a party that recognizes that illegal means illegal," said Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, a platform committee member and outspoken immigration hard-liner who was the brains behind Arizona's tough immigration law. "If you want to open a job tomorrow, you can remove an illegal immigrant today."

Kobach's considerable influence was on display at the Republican platform committee meeting on Tuesday, as he shot down several suggestions from other members who questioned the necessity of mandating electronic verification of workers or asked for market-based quotas on foreign workers. At Kobach's request, the committee added language to the platform calling for mandatory electronic verification of workers, a border fence, and an end to "sanctuary cities" and in-state tuition for illegal immigrant college students.

Bailey knew he was fighting an uphill battle when he brought his proposal for a temporary worker program to the Republican convention. He is one of many business leaders who say enforcement-minded Republicans should adopt a broader view of immigration to acknowledge their need for labor.

Many business leaders want more than a guest-worker program. Texas has advocated work visas for undocumented immigrants who are already in the country. But that idea goes too far for GOP members who are squeamish about giving any legal status to illegal aliens.

"When you are sitting in the back of the room and have no relationships with anyone on the subcommittee, you are fighting an uphill battle," Bailey wrote in his e-mail. "We understand that this is NOT a perfect document. But sometimes in life and in politics we have to compromise and negotiate."

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/thenextamerica/immigration/republican-platform-calls-for-guest-worker-program-20120821>