

Texas GOP Shift May Show Way Out of Immigration Statement

By Kathy Warbelow on June 29, 2012

Texas Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson rose nervously to urge Republicans at the state party's convention to support a national guest-worker program for millions of undocumented residents.

Two years earlier, the party that dominates the second-most populous state had called for a crackdown on illegal immigrants.

“Well, here's the end of a political career,” Patterson said, recalling his thought as he looked over the June 8 gathering in the Fort Worth Convention Center. Instead, the delegates passed the platform with the guest-worker plan.

In Texas, the state with the second-largest illegal-immigrant population, Republicans have softened their stance toward them. The vote reflected a more pragmatic view of years past, such as when Governor Rick Perry signed a first-in-the-nation 2001 law that gave undocumented residents in-state tuition rates at public colleges. It preceded a U.S. Supreme Court ruling this week that voided most of an Arizona law cracking down on people in the country illegally.

“I'm no bleeding heart; I oppose birthright citizenship,” said Patterson, 65, whose elected office controls state lands and mineral rights. “But we need the labor.”

Job Growth

Employers in Texas, where job growth led the 10 largest U.S. states in the 12 months through March, can't find people for jobs in industries such as construction and food service, Patterson said. The new platform put the party in line with agriculture directors in 15 states, including Texas, who are pushing for the creation of a “conditional status” for undocumented workers. The group includes Alabama, where labor shortages arose after a crackdown on illegal residents.

Support for a national guest-worker program in Texas, reflects an emerging shift on the issue, said Doris Meissner, who led the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service under President Bill Clinton. Texas has 1.8 million undocumented residents, behind only the 2.5 million in California, according to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington.

“This is a pragmatic approach,” Meissner said by telephone from Washington, where she is a fellow at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research organization. The shift to favor guest-worker programs suggests a path toward breaking a national stalemate on illegal immigrants, she said.

“This may be the way that as a country we resolve this problem,” she said. “If you are really serious, this kind of pragmatism does have to come into play.”

Spreading Interest

Guest-worker programs are winning support from Republican-led Utah, where lawmakers passed one, to California, where Democrats rule and voters may have the chance to endorse such a plan in November. This month, more than 150 leaders of U.S. Christian evangelical groups, including Focus on the Family, backed providing pathways to legal status.

In Texas, the shift is also a bow to demographic changes in a state where 38 percent of the population is Latino. Hispanics are forecast to become the majority ethnic group by 2030, according to state data. And the altered stance harkens back to what former Texas governor and U.S. President George W. Bush called “compassionate conservatism.”

Bush backed a guest-worker plan during his second term as president. The proposal, which included creating a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants, stalled in the Senate.

Unwelcome Image

“The Republican Party does not need the image as the party that wants to deport your grandmother,” Norman Adams, 67, president of a Houston insurance company and a member of the convention’s platform panel, said by telephone. Until this month’s gathering, “that’s all our platform told them.” He said that position had to change to avoid alienating Latinos.

Industries such as meat processing rely on immigrant labor, Adams said. Texas is the biggest cattle-producing state. In last year’s legislative session, business groups helped block bills modeled on the Arizona enforcement statute.

“It’s not a complete solution,” Adams said of the platform proposal, which includes fines and criminal background checks and requires employers to withhold taxes and provide health-care coverage. Yet it would resolve some issues.

“We’re not getting the payroll taxes now,” Adams said. “They’re not covered by workers’ comp. They’re burdening the emergency rooms.”

The Texas party’s policy puts it to the left of presumed Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, a former Massachusetts governor derided by Perry as too moderate on social issues during the primary campaign. Perry ended his White House bid in January.

Romney Position

Romney has called for strict immigration-law enforcement and called on those in the nation illegally to “self-deport.” He also has criticized Perry’s 2001 in-state tuition move.

The vote at the Fort Worth convention may help open doors to more people like state Representative Aaron Pena of Edinburg, near the Mexican border. Pena switched to Republican from Democrat in 2010, after winning a fifth term in a district that is 90 percent Hispanic.

“I’ve been a Democrat my whole life, but I feel more comfortable as a Republican because of their traditional values -- faith, family,” Pena, 53, said by telephone. His move suggests a way Republicans may attract more Latinos. He said the party risks losing such opportunities by taking a harsh stance on illegal immigrants, such as the Arizona law.

“The conservative movement may die an unnatural death in some of the southwestern states because the demographics are changing,” Pena said. “If they do not begin to embrace this emerging population, they will lose.”

Hard Line

Republican leaders in Texas still favor a hard line on some aspects of immigration policy. Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst and former state Solicitor General Ted Cruz, rivals for an open U.S. Senate seat, both denounced as “back-door amnesty” President Barack Obama’s June 15 move to halt deportations of some illegal immigrants brought into the country as children. Obama also made them eligible for work permits.

Backing for guest-worker plans shows that “there is a deepening understanding of the dilemma of illegal immigration and actually solving it,” Meissner said. Such programs provide “a different way to address the illegal population without being charged with supporting amnesty,” she said.

Steps by Republicans favoring guest workers also “show some realization that you obviously can’t deport the millions of people who are in this country without legal status,” said Adriana Cadena, a spokeswoman in El Paso for the Reform Immigration for Texas Alliance, an advocacy group.

“Our system needs to be completely revamped, including ways to address future immigration,” Cadena said by telephone.

“You have people who have been here for 20 years,” she said. “They own homes; they have created businesses. They have nothing to go back to.”

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