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Trump Is Walling Off the GOP

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The most misleading line in Donald Trump’s State of the Union address this week might have also been the most revealing about how he is reconfiguring the Republican Party and reshaping America’s electoral alignment.

“Legal immigrants enrich our nation and strengthen our society in countless ways,” he declared at one point. “I want people to come into our country, in the largest numbers ever, but they have to come in legally.”

Trump ad-libbed the part about “the largest numbers ever,” but even the base claim—that he supports legal immigration—radically rewrites his record. Trump just last year supported legislation from Republican Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa that would have cut legal immigration by more than 40 percent—the largest reduction since the 1920s, according to a study from the libertarian Cato Institute. If that bill had been put in place in 1965, when Congress rewrote the nation’s immigration laws, it would have blocked nearly three-fifths of all the immigrants the nation has admitted since then, the study’s author, David Bier, calculated.

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Though Grassley’s bill failed last year in the Republican-controlled Senate, and a companion measure died in the GOP House, Trump has used, in the meantime, almost every administrative tool at his disposal to create more hurdles for legal immigrants. “The idea that the administration is trying to increase legal immigration, or allow more of it, is just totally contrary to every proposal that they have put out here,” Bier said in an interview. Trump was so determined to restrict legal immigration, he rejected a deal accepted by virtually every Senate Democrat that would have provided him with \$25 billion for his border wall in return for a pathway to citizenship for the so-called Dreamers, the young people brought illegally to the U.S. by their parents.

Trump’s hostility to legal immigration, which he so aggressively sought to hide in his speech, is key to understanding the real implications of his immigration agenda. Once again on Tuesday, Trump signaled that he prioritizes no cause more than building a wall across the southern border, portraying his determination as a sign of his commitment to ensuring Americans’ security and upholding the rule of law. His praise for legal immigration, though distorting his record, provided a critical buttress for that case: It allowed him to suggest that his motivation for the wall isn’t resisting immigration per se, only illegal and dangerous behavior. The truth, though, is that the wall is itself only one brick in a much larger structure aimed at restricting most kinds of immigration.

“This administration and this president are opposed to all forms of immigration regardless of status, really regardless of the type of category that they enter under,” Bier said. “They have attacked them all; they have tried to prevent them from being able to come in. It’s not specific to any region of the world, even. It’s everyone coming into this country from abroad is a threat or a problem and needs to be stopped.”

Each pillar of this agenda faces opposition from a majority of Americans in polls. Surveys show that Trump has never persuaded more than 45 percent of the country to support the border wall, and that number stood at just 40 percent, with 60 percent opposing, in a Gallup poll released this week. National surveys, such as this week’s CNN poll, consistently find that two-thirds of Americans, an even more preponderant majority, oppose Trump declaring a national emergency to build the wall, as he’s threatened to do. Gallup this week found that four-fifths of Americans support a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in the U.S., an idea that Trump derides as amnesty.

Gallup has also found that support for legal immigration has steadily increased under Trump: In this week’s survey, the share of Americans who supported increasing legal immigration (30 percent) reached the highest level Gallup has recorded since it first asked the question in 1965, while the share of Americans who want to decrease legal immigration (31 percent) essentially matched the lowest level ever recorded, in June. The combined percentage of Americans who want to maintain legal immigration at its current level (37 percent) or increase it also matched the all-time high.

“In spite of Trump’s policies and rhetoric, more and more Americans support immigrants and immigration—from citizenship for the undocumented to better pathways for legal immigration,” notes Ali Noorani, executive director of the pro-immigration group National Immigration Forum.

What’s more, the polling evidence clearly shows that Trump has built very little constituency for his wall beyond the hard-core base of Americans most resistant to immigration in all its forms. Seven in 10 Americans who believe that legal immigration should be reduced also support building the wall, according to detailed figures provided to me by Gallup.

But the wall is opposed by nearly four in five of those surveyed who want to increase legal immigration and by more than two in three who would maintain it at its current level. Similarly, Gallup found that three-fourths of Americans who back mass deportation of all undocumented immigrants also support building the wall. But among the clear majority who oppose mass deportation (roughly three-fifths of all Americans), 80 percent oppose its construction.

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All this underscores how Trump, across a broad range of immigration issues, is steering the GOP toward the preferences of a distinct minority of Americans. And yet the evidence is also clear that Trump is systematically eradicating opposition to his agenda inside the GOP. More than four-fifths of Republicans in the House and nearly three-fourths of Republicans in the Senate voted for the massive cuts to legal immigration that Trump supported last year, though the bills ultimately failed. (Taken together, that was a much higher percentage than the share of Republicans who backed cuts to legal immigration the last time the party seriously proposed them, during the 1990s.) While many Republicans were initially skeptical of the border wall when Trump first endorsed it in the 2016 campaign, those voices have been almost completely

silenced: Until the very end, hardly any congressional Republicans complained about his strategy of shutting down the federal government for five weeks to pursue funding for the barrier.

Republican senators have grumbled more loudly about the prospect of Trump declaring a national emergency to unilaterally fund the wall. But pressure on them to consolidate behind an emergency declaration is rapidly increasing, too: Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina this week warned that there will be a “war” within the GOP if Trump issues a declaration and Republicans don't support him.

The party's willingness to link arms behind Trump over the wall is especially striking, because the idea faces such preponderant opposition from all the groups that powered the big Democratic gains in November's midterm elections: young adults, minorities, independents, and college-educated white voters, especially women. The party's embrace of the wall is symbolic of its larger choice to follow Trump's strategy of trying to squeeze bigger electoral margins out of groups that are shrinking in society: the blue-collar, evangelical, and rural whites who consistently express the most unease in polls about not only immigration, but also other types of social change, from increasing diversity to evolving gender roles.

“My own sense of it is people like Lindsey Graham are being exceedingly shortsighted,” says Pete Wehner, a senior fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center and a frequent Trump critic. “All they are looking at is the next day and the next week and the next month. If the Republican Party breaks with Trump in a fundamental way, there will be costs to it because it will be a divided party. What they are missing is the medium- and long-term damage in attaching themselves to Trump. He is leaving a crimson stain on the party. And instead of finding ways to remove that crimson stain, they are making it more indelible.”

The damage from that “stain” was evident in last fall's House races, when Republicans were annihilated in metro-area districts that contain large numbers of immigrants, minorities, and college-educated voters. After the 2018 result, Democrats now control more than 80 percent of the House seats in which minorities exceed their national share of the population, and nearly 90 percent of the seats with more immigrants than average, according to Census Bureau figures. Fewer than one in 10 House Republicans now represents districts with more foreign-born residents than average, compared with about six times as many Democrats. Most of those diverse places moved sharply against Republicans in Senate and governor races, too.

In the Senate, following pickups in North Dakota and Indiana, Republicans now hold 30 of the seats in the 20 states with the smallest share of immigrants in their population. But after adding Arizona and Nevada (while losing Florida), Democrats hold 32 of the seats in the 20 states with the largest proportion of immigrants. Several of the remaining Republican Senate seats in that grouping (including Colorado, Arizona, Georgia, and perhaps Texas) will be among the top Democratic targets next year.

The audience at Tuesday's speech provided a strikingly visual picture of these sharpening contrasts between the parties. On one side was a preponderantly male, virtually all white Republican congressional membership cheering the president as he denounced undocumented immigrants as a security threat and reiterated his demands for the wall. On the other was a Democratic House and Senate caucus with many more women and minorities audibly grumbling at Trump's sustained alarms.

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When at one point the white-clad and diverse class of women in the House Democratic caucus started chanting “USA,” the immediate trigger was a Trump comment about the growing number of women in the workplace and in Congress. But the unmistakable larger message of their chant was that they, too, represent what the United States is today—not just the white and mostly male conservatives who have usually owned that cheer.

That moment, more than any other in the speech, crystallized the political alignment that Trump is engraving. The strength of his appeal to the white voters most hostile to economic and social change remains a powerful asset, particularly because the Electoral College and two-senator-per-state rule amplify the influence of interior states where those voters are most prevalent. But the magnitude of the GOP’s defeat in House elections last fall suggests the size of the coalition that Trump is potentially solidifying against his party, particularly as the unprecedentedly diverse Millennial and post-Millennial generations grow as a share of the electorate. As Wehner noted, “the real problem” Trump is creating for the GOP is that “the very thing that alienates the Republican Party from most of the public is the very thing that energizes most of the base, which is cultural identity and ethnic nationalism.”

Despite his bravado during the State of the Union, Trump already has conceded that he will, at best, win funding for a wall in designated areas, not the massive concrete barrier he once proposed across the entire Mexican border. But the biggest takeaway from this week’s speech is that Trump may be systematically walling off the GOP from the places in America that are most powerfully forging the country’s future.