



The Wrong Target

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You might have noticed Republicans running for federal and statewide office are no longer touting their connections to and love for President Donald Trump. It's not that their infatuation has necessarily ended, but primary season is now over.

The much-touted Trump base is real in Republican politics. Their support of the president is intense and, so far, unshakable. Republicans running in primary elections challenge the Trump orthodoxy at significant risk to their own political futures.

But Trump isn't wildly popular outside of that base, so clinging to him in a general election is not nearly as attractive, especially in a state like Michigan, where he won by less than 12,000 votes.

So candidates like Bill Schuette no longer run ads with Trump endorsements or talk about supporting the "Trump agenda." Instead, they'll try to connect opponents to Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton and, here, Jennifer Granholm. And they will talk a lot about illegal immigration.

This isn't just a Schuette strategy; it appears to be a national template for statewide and congressional Republican candidates everywhere because it is being repeated in Montana, New Mexico, Ohio, and elsewhere.

We know Nancy Pelosi is poison for Republicans — some Democrats, too — so trying to glue a Democrat opponent to her is just standard practice. Same thing with Hillary in some states. There isn't anything new or different in that.

(Attacking Barack Obama is a little trickier and riskier; his approval ratings are still good, especially among independent voters.)

The ongoing demonization of immigrants is a bit more troubling. We're being taught that illegal immigrants are a mostly criminal element threatening our safety and taking our jobs. There just isn't much evidence to support either notion. What we do know is you're most likely to be violently victimized by a family member or someone you know, and you're more likely to lose your job to outsourcing or automation.

There aren't many hard statistics on crime committed by illegal immigrants. Most states don't keep such records, and the federal government uses an amorphous "criminal alien" designation for federal prisoners.

In fact, the General Accounting Office recently released data indicating 20 percent of federal prisoners were “criminal aliens.” But they do not differentiate between aliens here legally or illegally. And those now touting that data forget to mention that 90 percent of people incarcerated in the United States are in state prisons or local jails. They also ignore that illegal immigrants now being arrested are charged with a federal misdemeanor rather than a civil offense, so they end up in the federal system.

(It's important to note there are about 10 million people here illegally, but there are 34 million legal immigrants. Combining legal and illegal immigrants into the same statistical pool skews the numbers significantly.)

The president is now repeating a stat dug up by a single researcher looking at incarcerations in Texas. He had to make some assumptions and do quite a bit of extrapolating, but he claims illegal immigrants are responsible for 63,000 murders. Trump says that's just since 2001.

But the research data goes all the way back to 1955, doesn't differentiate between immigrants here legally or illegally, accounts only for arrests, and, according to other researchers, has exaggerated the numbers significantly.

Other research, by the Cato Institute, Pew Research Center, our own Census Bureau, and a dozen others have come to dramatically different conclusions. All suggest illegal immigrants are less likely to commit violent crimes than American citizens by anywhere from 25 percent to 46 percent. Legal immigrants are even less likely to be involved in criminal activity, and immigrant neighborhoods are among the safest in the country.

We know a bit more about the economic impact of illegal immigration and immigration in general. A recent study by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine found that despite government costs, mostly at the state and local level, an immigrants' first year here exceeds revenues received. But over time, the financial benefits outweigh the costs.

That mirrors other research indicating immigrants, legal and otherwise, provide long-term economic benefits that outweigh costs to the education, healthcare, and criminal justice systems. And the notion that illegal immigrants take good jobs away from American citizens has been debunked often enough we know it just isn't true. Have you, or anyone you know, ever lost a good job to an illegal immigrant?

Schuetz and the others have made immigration a keystone issue. Fair enough. You can make a legitimate argument that even one crime committed by someone who isn't supposed to be here is one too many. But you cannot legitimately claim they represent some kind of existential threat to our personal and economic well-being because it just isn't true.

Immigrants are an easy political target. They're just the wrong target.