

GOP needs to get serious about immigration reform

By Joshua Culling – 11/8/2012

Every election cycle, Republicans wring their hands and repeat the same mantra about the Hispanic demographic. “They are pro-life, they are entrepreneurial, they are religious. Their natural home is the GOP. Why aren’t they voting for us?” Then the party increases its “Hispanic outreach” budget, cuts some Spanish-language ads for the Miami and Denver media markets, and wonders why it is hemorrhaging even more Hispanic votes than it did the previous cycle.

By now, it is almost universally understood that the GOP needs to capture more of the Hispanic vote. It will soon be very difficult for the party to win national elections if it doesn’t. But much more has to be done; Hispanics have heard enough about how the Republican Party is the pro-life, pro-small business, anti-tax party. What they have not heard is a Republican consensus that America’s immigration system is broken. Until the GOP acknowledges the need for immigration reform, the other issues that make the party the natural home for American Latinos will remain second-tier, non-vote-moving issues.

The Republican Party and conservative movement have much to offer Hispanics. But combining our message with “we want to deport your uncles, cousins, parents, grandparents, neighbors, fellow church members, and friends,” does not work. Republicans understand the importance of family and religion, so why are we attacking Hispanics in those two areas and expecting their support?

We need to change course. George W. Bush earned 40 percent of the Hispanic vote in his re-election bid. John McCain only mustered 32 percent, and Mitt Romney received support from only 27 percent of the Hispanic community. McCain and Romney didn't slash their Hispanic outreach budgets; they strayed from Bush's message of inclusion, free labor markets, and serious immigration reform.

Recognizing this reality is not just a cold political calculation. It's good public policy. Immigrants, both low-skilled and high-skilled, enrich our country. They add to the tax base, serve in our military, and attend church. Many of them start businesses that otherwise would be our competitors overseas. And allowing a freer flow of Labor is consistent with free market economics, and goes against the protectionist tendencies of labor unions.

But the political impetus will be what motivates most Republicans to embrace a new approach to immigration. Forget swing states; red states like Texas, Arizona, and Georgia will wind up solidly blue if the erosion of Republican support among Hispanics continues. Sure, Republicans could win the House of Representatives once in a while. But the Senate and the presidency will be all but out of reach — and with them, the ability to appoint and confirm Supreme Court justices.

But the GOP's problem isn't just with Hispanics; it's with other new immigrant groups and their descendants, too. Asian-Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S., according to Cato Institute immigration policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh. In 1965, barely 1 percent of the nation's population was Asian; it has since increased to 6 percent. Romney fared worse with Asians than he did with Hispanics, winning just 24 percent of the Asian vote. Most Asian groups trend Democratic, but this wasn't always the case, and Republicans can win them back.

Asian-American values are very conservative. Asian-Americans overwhelmingly believe that hard work, marriage, and family are essential to success. They believe in the American dream, are more likely than the general population to be educated, are entrepreneurial, and are upwardly mobile.

The Hispanic and Asian populations in formerly Republican swing states are large and growing quickly. In Virginia, Hispanics and Asians together comprise almost 14 percent of the population. In Colorado, 24 percent. In Nevada, 34 percent. Arizona, where Asians and Hispanics make up a combined 33 percent of the population, is still fairly Republican, but is changing rapidly. Kansas, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Idaho, and Utah have Hispanic and Asian populations in the low double digits. Republicans can't win national elections by only attracting one out of every four votes from these growing groups.

As the Republican Party rebounds from its failure in 2012 and begins to chart its return to power, improving its standing among Hispanics and Asians will be the number one priority. It's important to reject the type of pandering that Democrats have gotten away with in the current political vacuum. By becoming the party of forward-thinking immigration solutions, the GOP can boost the economy and its prospects.

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