



The GOP Battle Over Immigration Policy

Alex Nowrasteh | August 24, 2012

The GOP convention is gearing up to begin next week in Tampa but a lot of action has already happened behind the scenes. On Tuesday, Republican Party platform drafters agreed to add a plank calling for a guest worker program for temporary migrants. The anti-immigrant establishment (yes, they are opposed to legal immigration too) fought hard against that plank.

A group of committed conservative Texans are responsible for this changing wind. Brad Bailey and Jacob Monty are leading the charge. Earlier this year they began promoting an idea they dubbed the [Texas Solution](#), eventually founding a non-profit to push for the idea. Their idea is simple: Solve the immigration problem by allowing more legal migration.

They had considerable success earlier this year when they got the [Texas state GOP](#) to add a plank to their state platform calling for a guest worker visa. But their task hasn't been easy.

“Over the past decade the immigration issue has become a ‘third rail’ political issue inside the GOP,” said Bailey. “Our party took a big step forward yesterday with the endorsement of a national guest worker program.” Anti-immigrant GOPers and some odd outside groups have been fighting Bailey every step of the way.

Kansas Secretary of State [Kris Kobach](#), who has had a major hand in drafting state level anti-immigration laws, has been working to stop Bailey from influencing the national GOP. He and Roy Beck, the environmentalist head of NumbersUSA, have been working together to head off Bailey's efforts. Beck's group is committed to limiting immigration so that U.S. population growth can be curbed. A strange bedfellow for any conservative.

Kobach and others have been fairly successful. Thanks to their efforts the GOP platform now supports the boondoggle known as the border fence, increased federal involvement in local law enforcement as an immigration force multiplier, and a mandatory government run employment verification scheme that will reach into every business in the country.

Unauthorized immigrants are overwhelmingly peaceful people who abstain from property and violent crimes. They come illegally because there is no legal pathway for them. The [Bracero Program](#), a lightly regulated guest worker visa

that was in place from 1942 to 1964, drove most unauthorized immigrant farm workers into the legal market.

Nothing like the Bracero Program exists today but it could be created for low and high skilled workers.

The guest worker plank also signals an improvement over then-Senator Obama's killing of immigration reform in 2007. His vote for the Dorgan amendment, named after then-Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D, who introduced it, was a poison pill amendment designed to gut the guest worker expansion and scuttle the entire reform effort. It passed 49 to 48 thanks to Obama's unexpected support.

Besides driving most unauthorized immigration into the legal market, a large guest worker program would allow growth in some parts of the economy. With national unemployment above 8 percent, it may seem silly to allow in more temporary workers. But unemployment is not uniform across all sectors of the U.S. economy. In the low skilled and high skilled sectors, in particular, there is very low unemployment and a huge demand for employees that are going unfilled.

Unemployment for architecture and engineering professions is only [4.9 percent nationally](#). In areas of the country where engineers are in high demand, the scramble to find qualified engineers is intense. On the low skilled side, California's farm workers are the scarcest they've been in living memory. Despite a statewide unemployment rate of almost 11 percent, Californians are still not drawn to the fields.

"This year is the worst it's been, ever," said [Craig Underwood](#), who farms vegetable and fruits in my childhood home of Ventura County. For the crops that are not getting picked, Underwood said, "We just left them in the field." The Western Growers Association has said that its members are reporting a 20 percent drop in laborers this year. Stricter border controls, fewer opportunities in construction, and the lack of a workable guest worker visa are keeping these demanded workers away.

Immigrants to America are attracted by economic opportunity. Immigration from Mexico has or stopped or, by some estimates, even reversed since the housing collapse began six years ago. That's because many Mexicans, including unauthorized immigrants, were attracted by the growing housing construction sector and the other industries that supplied it. With the collapse of that market, at least as many Mexicans are leaving the U.S. as are coming in.

This pro-guest worker plank may not seem so grand, especially with some of the other anti-immigrant portions of the GOP platform, but it's a big improvement over the previous platform. The GOP is the supposed conservative party so it should look into its own past for clues about how to solve this problem. Their [own 1864 platform reads](#): "[F]oreign immigration, which in the past has added so much to the wealth, development of resources and increase of power to the

nation, the asylum of the oppressed of all nations, should be fostered and encouraged by a liberal and just policy.”