

Expert's take: GOP infighting on immigration

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[Alex Nowrasteh](#), immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, spoke to *HE* about the ongoing [immigration debate](#), how it takes form within the GOP, and what it means for the 2014 and 2016 elections:

Could you describe how the GOP is divided on the immigration issue ([Jeb Bush](#), for instance, is getting criticism for not being conservative enough because of his more sympathetic view on illegals)?

There is far more disagreement within the GOP about immigration than most people realize.

The GOP is divided along two broad lines because there is no “conservative” position on immigration. One of the foundations of conservative thought is the acceptance of reality as it is, which is why conservative luminary William F. Buckley Jr. once said, “Laws attempting to seal the border were in the tradition of King Canute ordering the tide to stop.”

The first GOP position, which I call the Nativist position, is more skeptical of the economic and social benefits of immigration. Many Nativists think that immigration in America's past worked out well but today's immigrants or American culture is unable to absorb them. Nativist arguments, however, are the same arguments used by every skeptic of immigration throughout America's history. From complaints about the Germans and Irish to the Huguenots and Italians, Nativists in America's past claimed that these groups are different, unwilling to assimilate, and burdens on America. Each time, those Nativists were wrong. Every dire prediction of immigration from before America's founding until today has turned out to be wrong – but that doesn't stop modern day Nativists from repeating them anyway. For those Nativists who claim to be conservative, they would be well served by looking at America's remarkable history and present capacity to assimilate large waves of immigrants.

The second GOP position is more welcoming, open, and willing to see the economic and social benefits from immigration. This wing, which is the more free-market and libertarian wing of the party, is also arguably more consistently conservative than the Nativist wing because it is aware of America's success with immigration over the centuries. The free-market wing looks back to America's successful history with immigration and says, “Yes, we can and will do that again.”

The free-market wing also understands that international flows of labor should be guided by market forces instead of the often arbitrary whims of government bureaucrats. People are the most valuable resource and we should be thrilled that so many of today's global population aspires to become American.

What impact does immigration reform generally have on elections? How has it affected past elections? Current polling data?

Immigrants have affected state elections far more than they have national elections. On average, immigrants are much less politically aware or interested than U.S.-born Americans – except when they are threatened. California offers a prime example. In the gubernatorial elections of 1986 and 1990, the Republican candidate received 46% and 47% of the Hispanic vote, respectively. In the 1994 campaign, however, Republican candidate Pete Wilson began to blame unauthorized immigrants for all of the state's problems. Some of his supporters were a little less careful, blaming all immigrants and Hispanics in particular. That nasty Nativist campaign cut Wilson's share of the Hispanic vote from 47% in 1990 to 25% in 1994. Wilson won reelection, but Hispanics fled the party. In the 1998 election, only 17% voted for the GOP candidate. Since then, Hispanic support for the Republican gubernatorial candidate has been extremely low because the GOP has the reputation in California, earned during Pete Wilson's 1994 reelection campaign and the Prop 187 battle, of being anti-Hispanic and anti-immigrant. Whether fair or not, that association is politically devastating in a state like California.

Immigration is an intensely personal issue for New Americans and their immediate descendants. Harsh rhetoric and intense enforcement policies offend people personally far more than other policy issues.

Asian Americans fled the GOP at around the same time. In the 1992 Presidential election, Bush received 55% of the Asian vote. In 2012, Mitt Romney received 26% – one percentage point less than his support from Hispanic voters.

Looking at immigrant's and their descendant's political ideology from the General Social Survey, the second generation is virtually ideologically indistinguishable from 4th generation or greater Americans. The second generation still leans a little Democratic, but that is likely because of identity politics and the nasty tone coming from some in the GOP. By the third generation, party identification is indistinguishable from 4th generation or greater Americans.

What are the projected outcomes of the Democratic and Republican plans for immigration, respectively? What do they hope to accomplish and what are experts saying are positive and negative effects?

Most of the immigration reform packages on the Hill are bipartisan but there are differences in ideology and approach. Democrats generally want a more generous legalization or amnesty program and are more supportive of family-based immigration but skeptical of worker immigration. Republicans generally want a less favorable legalization, limits on family immigration, but want to allow much more worker migration either through green cards or guest

worker visa programs. Many Republicans and Democrats are skeptical of E-Verify but most support it.