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Mollie Tibbetts killing touches California governor's race

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Authorities announced this month that a Mexican national in the country illegally is responsible for the stabbing death of the young Iowa college student Mollie Tibbetts, unleashing a wave of criticism by Republicans who say the U.S. must to toughen border security.

Republican gubernatorial candidate John Cox was among the Republicans – led by President Donald Trump – who seized on the news.

“A sad and terrible ending to a story that should have NEVER happened,” Cox tweeted, linking to a Fox News story with the headline: “Mollie Tibbetts’ suspected murderer ID’d as Cristhian Rivera, 24, living in the US illegally.”

The next day, he tweeted another Fox News story comparing Tibbetts’ death to the San Francisco murder of Kate Steinle, whose killing by an undocumented immigrant has served as a national rallying cry for Republicans railing against illegal immigration and Democratic-led sanctuary policies.

In a statement, he called the murder of Tibbetts “one more tragic example of a senseless loss that never should have happened, similar to Kate Steinle’s heartbreaking death in San Francisco.”

Cox hasn’t said much about immigration since the primary, when he fended off his challenger from the right, Republican Assemblyman Travis Allen. He has instead focused on the state’s affordability problems. Until now.

“I think he’s trying to elevate an issue that is a net liability at the moment for Democrats,” said Republican political consultant Rob Stutzman.

“In California, there’s particular traction given the sanctuary state policies and anti-ICE politics of the left and the Democratic Party,” he said. “I think there’s margins for Cox to pick up on this issue.”

Cox, however, is reserving his criticism for social media. He declined several interview requests to discuss his views. To gain any footing in deep-blue California, he must appeal to a broader base of voters and persuade moderate Democrats and independents to vote for him over his Democratic opponent, Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom.

“He’s trying to have his cake and eat it too,” said Alex Nowrasteh, a senior immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute. “He’s trying to get the benefit of telling his base that he’s going to cooperate with the president, forcing the state to enforce federal immigration law if he becomes

governor, but he's also not explicitly saying that. That would infuriate the majority of voters in this state."

The share of Republican Party voters in California is shrinking, now outnumbered by Democrats and independents. And, the majority of likely voters – 67 percent – said in May that they view immigrants as a benefit to the state "because of their hard work and job skills," according to a Public Policy Institute of California survey.

In addition, 80 percent of voters said there should be a way for undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. legally, the survey found.

Shifting views on immigration across California could hurt Cox, Nowrasteh said.

"It started because of Pete Wilson campaigning for Proposition 187 in 1994, when we saw Hispanic voters start to shift dramatically toward the Democratic Party, and they have stayed there since," Nowrasteh said. "That's a big deal in the state of California, where about 39 percent of the population is Hispanic and we're seeing the Republican Party declaring war on illegal immigrants."

Newsom blasted Cox, and the Republican Party more broadly, for "exploiting" the Tibbetts killing.

"It's a tragedy, no question about that," Newsom said at a news conference last week in San Francisco, where he talked about his housing plans. "But to highlight that tragedy and not highlight the success of policies to protect families from deportation, to protect mixed-status families and to protect our diverse communities and our values does an injustice, and that's just typical...of the administration and their need and desire to exploit these issues for political gain.

"It's not a tragedy that should be exploited and that's what they're consistently doing," he added. "I think it's a real outrage."

Newsom favors sanctuary policies and said at a gubernatorial debate in May: "I will defend it and I will be a strong advocate for SB 54," referring to Senate Bill 54, passed last year. It restricts the ability of local law enforcement agencies from cooperating with federal immigration authorities, except in cases that involve serious or violent felonies.

He has faced criticism from Cox, and within his own party, for a policy he spearheaded a decade ago, as mayor of San Francisco, requiring police to report juvenile undocumented immigrants charged with violent felonies to federal authorities — a policy he said he now regrets.

Cox has said he'd immediately end California's sanctuary state law, and early-on, made that a central message in his campaign.

"The sanctuary state law is about criminals who are held by law enforcement and MS-13 gang members," Cox said on a Fox News interview in May. "If somebody who has committed a crime is in the hands of law enforcement, I want ICE informed, I want that person deported."

Law enforcement agencies are permitted to cooperate with immigration agents in cases involving a serious or violent felony.

Cox, who was again endorsed by Trump this month, has spoken strongly in support of a Mexican border wall. In the campaign, he has also called for an end to illegal immigration.

“What we need to do is put CEOs in jail who employ illegal undocumented workers,” Cox said in a televised interview May 22. “Because what they’re doing is they’re trying to violate the rule of law to get an advantage on their competition.”

In a statement this week, Cox said his main concern is “protecting California jobs from unfair competition.”

“I believe in smart immigration, where we seek to attract workers that we need and where there are not Americans willing and able to do those jobs,” he said. “Smart immigration can’t happen until we get control of our borders and re-establish order — something that has been missing for literally decades.”

Newsom, meanwhile, has railed against construction of a border wall and has made fighting Trump a focal point of his campaign.

“One thing I’m going to do is push back against John Cox...and Donald Trump and Trumpism,” Newsom said at the May debate. “This is the kind of rhetoric that has no place in California.”

Stutzman, the Republican strategist, said Newsom’s views could put him in a vulnerable position.

“There’s voters who are incensed that illegal immigrants commit crimes, beyond the Republican base, so it’s an issue for Cox and any Republican to talk about,” he said. “But you have to be very careful that you are not being insensitive.”