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Trump is making Americans more immigrant-friendly

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President Donald Trump may ultimately be a unifying force on one of the most divisive issues in U.S. politics: immigration.

That's not Trump's intent, of course. Having launched his presidential campaign in 2015 with a demagogic assault on immigrants, Trump has been a reliable fount of calumny ever since. His policies, from brutalizing children at the border _ a 7-year-old girl died in U.S. custody last week _ to terminating Temporary Protected Status for refugees, appear designed to convince his MAGAnauts that he can, and somehow will, forestall the further browning of America.

In public opinion, immigration is an imperfect substitute for "race." However, Trump has succeeded in making it a more meaningful one. As numerous political science analyses have determined, Trump's racial animus is the sticky goo that binds him to his most enthusiastic followers. That goo may be a potent political force, but it's not a boundless one. Trump appears to have found its limits.

The NBC/Wall Street Journal poll has been asking survey respondents since 2005 whether "immigration helps the United States more than it hurts it." In December 2005, 37 percent said immigration helps more, while 53 percent said it hurts.

That anti-immigrant sentiment, regularly measured by the poll, largely prevailed until 2012, when opinions started gradually to shift. In the most recent poll, taken in September, the pro-immigration "helps" line reached a peak of 61 while the anti-immigration "hurts" side hit a new low at 28. Measured from December 2005 until September 2018, there is a 49-point swing in favor of immigration "helps."

Likewise, in June this year, Gallup recorded a new high of 75 percent of Americans saying they believe immigration is a "good thing."

In the 2018 midterm elections, Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg wrote, Democrats ran as a "self-confident multicultural party" against a GOP running as an "anti-immigrant party." The results were not good for the anti-immigrant side.

The greatest risk for Republicans is that Trump's racial malice will energize nonwhite voters to be more politically engaged while also alienating them, long-term, from the GOP.

That's what may have happened in California after the state GOP's anti-immigrant turn under Republican Governor Pete Wilson, who won election in 1994 with a sharp anti-immigrant campaign. "The California GOP went from virtually splitting the Hispanic vote in 1990 to only capturing 17 percent of it in 1998," wrote Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration expert at the Cato Institute, in an analysis of the electoral consequences. By contrast, during the same period Republicans in Texas continued to be competitive with Hispanic voters and in Florida, then-Governor Jeb Bush claimed to have won 60 percent of the Hispanic vote in his 2002 re-election.

I asked veteran Democratic consultant Bill Carrick, adviser to California Senator Dianne Feinstein, whether he sees Trump cultivating a California-style backlash. “Trump is doing for immigration nationwide what Pete Wilson did in 1994,” Carrick emailed. “The more we debate the immigration issue, the more supportive voters become of immigration reform.”

Political scientist Dan Hopkins of the University of Pennsylvania wrote in 2017 that “Americans became more liberal on immigration at exactly the time that Trump and the Republicans turned more hard-line.”

However, in an email last week, Hopkins said that his research, using a survey group that has been stable over several years, suggests that the pro-immigrant drift in the electorate has slowed. “The big-picture summary from my data,” he wrote, “is one of remarkable stability since Trump took office.”

That’s largely what Republican pollster David Winston sees as well. In a detailed report on the 2018 midterms, Winston concluded that the immigration debate did hurt Republican candidates. “The focus on the immigration/caravan issue instead of the positive jobs report in the last days of the campaign had a net result of late deciders breaking for Democrats by 12 points,” Winston wrote.

But Winston doesn’t think Democrats are necessarily gaining ground. The basic values debate between the parties, Winston said in a telephone interview, is that the U.S. is a “country of laws” (Republican) versus a “country of immigrants” (Democratic). “The public believes in both of these values,” Winston said. The job of politicians, he said, is to figure out how to make those values work together.

Making things work is not Trump’s strong suit. Consequently, there is a high probability that the immigration issue will fester until a new president is sworn in. But even if Trump doesn’t drive still more Americans into the pro-immigrant camp, the next president appears poised to have a stronger pro-immigrant constituency than Barack Obama had at any point during his presidency.

“There is a Trump effect,” said immigration advocate Frank Sharry, via email. “When it comes to the public’s view of immigrants and pro-immigration policies, Trump has made them more popular than ever.”