



Why The GOP Shouldn't Think it's Pandering and Embrace Immigration Reform

By JORDAN FABIAN - Nov. 13, 2012

The debate within the Republican Party over whether to make a deal regarding immigration has quickly reached full steam.

In the wake of a crushing defeat in the presidential election, partly fueled by Latino voters, Republican leaders in Congress have indicated they are ready to return to the negotiating table on a comprehensive immigration reform bill, a proposal that's been dead for five years. But some conservative commentators and lawmakers have held up their hands as if to say, not so fast.

Hardline figures such as Iowa Rep. Steve King have outright rejected the idea of an immigration compromise. Other conservatives have made more subtle arguments against compromise on immigration policy.

Writing in *The New York Times* last weekend, Ross Douthat dismissed Republicans' rush to embrace immigration reform that contains a pathway to citizenship as a "legislative pander" that will not guarantee that Latino voters embrace the GOP. In addition, he argues that a leftward shift on immigration policy could turn off white-working class voters from the Republican Party.

"Playing identity politics seems far less painful than overhauling the Republican economic message," Douthat writes, explaining the GOP's fixation

on immigration in the days following the election. "[Latinos] can be wooed, gradually, if Republicans address their aspirations and anxieties, but they aren't going to be claimed in one legislative pander."

Douthat is correct that comprehensive immigration reform -- or "amnesty" as he calls it -- will serve as a "Latino-winning electoral silver bullet is a fantasy." He's also right that Latinos are not single-issue immigration voters, and that the Republican Party needs to overhaul its economic message so that it addresses the economic anxieties of today and resonates beyond the GOP's white, older base.

But Douthat is quick to brush aside immigration reform by calling it pandering. It is increasingly clear that immigration status is one of the central anxieties for many Latinos who vote, despite the fact that they are U.S. citizens. Sixty percent of Latino voters say they know a friend, relative, or co-worker who is undocumented, and thus face the threat of deportation, according to an election eve poll conducted by political opinion research firm Latino Decisions. The national exit poll shows that 74 percent of Latino voters backed a bill that would allow undocumented workers the chance to apply for legal status (aka "amnesty").

Not to mention, immigration reform could also unleash the economic aspirations of the Latino community. Immigrants are twice as likely to start new businesses as native-born Americans, according to the 2011 Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity. But current policy prevents undocumented immigrants in the United States from participating freely and legally in, say, starting their own businesses, according to Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Current law also makes it difficult for foreign-born, highly-skilled individuals who graduate from U.S. colleges and universities to remain here legally and start businesses.

"Immigrants are people like the rest of us, they are very entrepreneurial and that helps native-born Americans too," said Nowrasteh.

Granting legal status and an earned path to citizenship for undocumented workers could also bring up the often menial wages they earn. Nowrasteh estimates that the 8.5 to 9 million undocumented workers in the U.S. make 20 percent less than the average worker in their field.

"Immigration laws do not take into account economic reality, and economic reality has a way of making these laws irrelevant," said Nowrasteh.

Beyond just altering their rhetoric, cutting a deal now on immigration could give conservatives a chance to get their rule-of-law priorities (i.e. enhanced border security and immigration enforcement measures) included in a comprehensive bill.

"That may still be anathema to the GOP base, but it's becoming clear that the base's approach won't work," writes Ed Morrissey of Hot Air, a conservative blog.

(Jorge Bonilla, another conservative blogger, makes a similar point here).

A real policy shift would address many of the central concerns of Latino voters and should be considered a core part of Republicans' efforts to attract Latino support.

"It's not a pander, it's reversing decades of bad Republican rhetoric and policy on immigration that doesn't have to happen," said Nowrasteh. "It is totally consistent with conservative and free-market ideology to be pro-immigrant."