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Saving the GOP From Modern Know-Nothingism

Republican pro-immigration policies have a long and successful history.

By Alex Nowrasteh
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Many in the GOP are jockeying for the soul of the party ahead of an anticipated 2014 midterm election victory. Social conservatives are eager to reassert their influence after repeated defeats over gay marriage. Fiscal conservatives make the case for a greater emphasis on runaway spending. And then there are the nativists, who contend that the future of the Republican Party lies in opposing immigration reform. Conservative radio host Laura Ingraham, for example, said last month that, “Immigration could be to 2016 what ObamaCare was to 2010.”

Not if history is any guide. Consider the experience of California and Texas.

When [George W. Bush](#) was governor of Texas from 1995-2000, he consistently reached out to the Hispanic community and supported immigration reform. Mr. Bush won his first gubernatorial election in 1994 with 25% of the Hispanic vote and was re-elected in 1998 with almost 40% Hispanic support. He left behind a solidly Republican Texas and a state party with a much friendlier reputation among Hispanics, along with the extra political support that entails. Two years later he won the presidential election with 34% of the national Hispanic vote and was re-elected with 40% in 2004.

California’s Gov. Pete Wilson took another path. Facing a tough re-election campaign in 1994, the Republican decided to blame illegal immigrants for all of the state’s troubles. The result was that he and the rest of the state GOP were perceived as blaming *all immigrants* for California’s woes. Mr. Wilson won re-election but doomed the GOP for decades in that state.

The GOP’s decline in California was dramatic. According to the Field Poll, the GOP gubernatorial candidates in 1986 and 1990 received 46% and 47% of the Hispanic vote, respectively. In 1994 Mr. Wilson received 25% of the Hispanic vote. In 1998, Republican gubernatorial candidate Dan Lungren received 17% of the Hispanic vote, giving Democratic candidate Gray Davis an 8.5-point lead in the general election.

Democrat Bill Press ran a voter drive in heavily Hispanic East Los Angeles in the early 1990s. At that time, he recently explained in the Hill newspaper, “residents distrusted government so much, it was hard convincing them to register, let alone vote. At the same time, Democrats feared that, if Latinos ever did register, they’d sign up as Republicans, because most of them were Catholic, pro-family and pro-small business.”

According to Mr. Press, who was chair of the state Democratic Party in 1994, Pete Wilson’s campaign “woke up the ‘sleeping giant.’” Mr. Wilson backed a ballot initiative, Proposition 187, that prohibited illegal immigrants from receiving any government social services, including public education. “Millions of Latinos,” Mr. Press said, “came out and registered to vote—not as Republicans, but as Democrats.” California is now a solidly Democratic state thanks, in part, to Mr. Wilson’s alienation of a large and fast-growing Hispanic electorate.

Mr. Bush empathized with illegal immigrants and supported immigration reform. His 2000 presidential campaign implicitly criticized Mr. Wilson’s hard line on illegal immigration. George P. Bush, the governor’s nephew, said that the biggest challenge the campaign faced among Hispanic voters “will be to separate my uncle from the rest of the Republican Party.” They succeeded.

A recent Fusion [poll](#) of likely millennial voters aged 18 to 34 found that a plurality of 49% support the Democratic Party’s immigration-reform position while only 30% supported the GOP’s position. But when the poll asks whom the respondent blames for the failure of immigration reform, 12% blamed the Democrats, 15% blamed President Obama, and 30% blamed both political parties. Thirty-three percent blamed the Republicans in Congress. Looking at the Fusion poll, the best political hope for a GOP nativist strategy is that few voters notice it—hardly a ringing endorsement.

Modern history doesn’t supply the only lessons against a nativist political strategy. Three early American political parties committed suicide partly due to their intransigent nativism.

The Federalist Party turned against Irish and French immigrants in the late 18th century, who then turned against them, thus eroding their base of support in Northeastern cities. The Whig Party self-destructed over opposition to immigration and disagreements over slavery. In the 1850s, the nativist American Party (also known as the Know-Nothings) quickly rose but then failed after a few successful elections. Anti-immigration positions may have helped those embattled parties for an election or two but in the long run they turned off more voters than they attracted.

Abraham Lincoln would have none of this when he helped build the Republican Party. In an 1855 letter he wrote to Owen Lovejoy, an Illinois state representative and an abolitionist, “I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be?” Lincoln continued, “Of their principles [Know-Nothingism] I think little better than I do of those of the slavery extensionists.”

Lincoln divorced the new Republican Party from nativism. German voters in the Midwest were attracted to the party’s support for immigration and laws, like the Homestead Act and speedy naturalizations, that rebuked the nativists. Modern Republicans would be wise to learn from

Lincoln's inclusive vision. A nativist turn would rebuke the party's principles while paying a high long-term political cost.

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