



Ciattarelli Tries to Negotiate the Trump Hate Fever

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Even as our nation's capital remains stuck in the post January 6 dysfunction of a failed insurrection that lingers on in GOP obstructionism, there are signs that the anti-immigrant racism that Donald Trump used to mobilize his troops is running out of steam.

Four years ago, the Trump induced hate fever, that put migrant children in cages and relished tearing apart families, was potent enough that it completely infected the brain stems of the 2017 Virginia and New Jersey Republican campaigns for Governor.

With just 24 hours to go before voters headed to the polls former Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno and Virginia's GOP standard bearer Ed Gillespie used their final push to link their Democratic opponents to MS-13, the violent El Salvadorian drug gang. The GOP line of attack linked both Phil Murphy and Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam's support for so called 'sanctuary cities' as the equivalent of endorsing the harboring of violent illegal aliens.

The linkage between undocumented immigrants and a propensity for criminal behavior had been widely debunked and yet Trump rode that hobby horse all the way to the Oval Office. In a 2015 report from the National Academy of Sciences researchers concluded that "immigrants are in fact much less likely to commit crime than natives, and the presence of large numbers of immigrants seems to lower crime rates.....This disparity also holds for young men most likely to be undocumented immigrants: Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan men."

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, reached similar findings in a 2017 report. "Empirical studies of immigrant criminality generally find that immigrants do not increase local crime rates and are less likely to cause crime than their native-born peers, and that natives are more likely to be incarcerated than immigrants," Cato researchers concluded.

Yet in 2017, the Trump tractor beam had New Jersey's GOP locked in its anti-immigrant position.

Scroll forward to the fractious Sept. 28 debate between Gov. Phil Murphy and his opponent former Assemblyman Republican Jack Ciattarelli and the under reported consensus the two rivals espoused on the subject of New Jersey's hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants.

"We are not going to deport 14, 15 or 16 million people that came to this country and are undocumented," said Ciattarelli. "We need to put them on the path to recognition. We need to do that...I voted for the Dream Act. I was one of the few Republicans that did that. We are not going to deny young people who came of no power of their own the opportunity to pursue their American dream."

And as far as the Murphy and Democratically controlled legislature's 2019 decision to permit New Jersey almost half a million undocumented immigrants to be able to get a driver's license, Ciattarelli was on board.

The former Assemblyman described the controversial measure as a "great security measure" that lets us "know who they are" while ensuring all of the state's drivers are licensed and not driving around uninsured.

"I celebrate New Jersey's diversity," Ciattarelli proclaimed. "We are the most diverse state in the union. There's power and beauty in that diversity."

"I will seize on a moment of common ground and echo on the celebration of our diversity particularly given this question which has a disproportionate impact on our Latino communities," Murphy responded.

In that fleeting moment the earth shifted. Our state was inching toward a more harmonious and generous, life affirming place, but that hopeful moment was largely missed because it came amidst the clanging cacophony of our partisan calliope.

The Governor went on to describe the State of New Jersey's 2018 Immigrant Trust Directive issued by then Attorney General Gurbir Grewal which directly challenged the Trump administration's anti-immigration policy that expressly targeted so-called "sanctuary cities" which prohibited their local police from assisting federal authorities in arresting residents based on their immigration status.

"New Jersey police officers cannot participate in federal immigration raids," according to the NJ Attorney General's online explainer. "They cannot stop, question, arrest, search, or detain an individual based solely on actual or suspected immigration status. And they cannot ask an individual's immigration status except in rare cases when it is relevant to a specific criminal investigation."

It continues. "The Directive sends a clear message to Washington: we will not allow you to drive a wedge between New Jersey's law enforcement officers and our immigrant communities. And we will not allow federal authorities to stop us from ensuring the safety of all nine million New Jersey residents."

During the recent debate the 2021 GOP standard bearer didn't use his rebuttal time to push back but only to make a direct appeal to the state's immigrant business owners suggesting their ambitions for prosperity were better entrusted with another self-made businessman.

Back in 2017, GOP strategists were making a different calculation that in off year elections, when turnout was likely to be lower, it was key to activate the most angry and fearful in your base. So, the Guadagno campaign, running double digits behind, thought it had no other play than to make other than to run ads linking Phil Murphy to Jose Carranza, an undocumented immigrant whose 2007 brutal murder of three New Jersey students in Newark outraged the entire state.

It did not matter to the GOP back then in urban places like Newark, Paterson and Camden, where a high percentage of New Jersey's 500,000 undocumented residents live, overall crime was actually down. It was precisely that influx of immigrants that helped to stabilize neighborhoods as well as staunch a steady state population decline that has seen our Congressional delegation shrink from 15 to 12 over the last 30 years.

So, what's different in 2021?

Could it be our collective soul has shifted after a bit after a mass death event that killed close to 700,000 Americans, many of them people of color and no doubt many of them undocumented immigrants who in life were essential workers who lost their lives serving us?

Perhaps, you can only fuel your existence with hate for so long. It's love that goes the distance.