

Election Point and Counterpoint Number Two

An Anti-immigration Reckoning?

by Paul A. Gigot

Two years ago a few of us right-wing free-market eccentrics argued that shouting about immigrants might give Republicans a short-term edge but would backfire in the long run. It looks like the long run is shorter than even we thought.

At least the Pat Buchanan-National Review-California Governor Pete Wilson wing of the GOP has some explaining to do amid the political wreckage of 1996. Hispanic voters moved sharply toward the Democrats this year, and a backlash against the GOP's immigrant-bashing seems the likeliest reason.

The yawning Hispanic gap is the most alarming news for Republicans this year. Ronald Reagan used to get one of every three Hispanic votes, but Bob Dole won only one out of four. President Clinton increased his margin this year among Hispanic voters by 15 percentage points over 1992, to a 51-point chasm. Only Asian Americans swung harder (by 19 percentage points to a mere five-point Clinton deficit), according to exit polls.

If Republicans want a reason to worry, they can anticipate the fast-growing Hispanic population voting

Democratic the way blacks do now, by more than 80 percent. If that happens, Republicans could win 60 percent of the white vote and still lose elections. White men can't jump into power by themselves.

Anyone who doubts this math should consult Bob Dornan. He lost his Orange County, California, House seat to Loretta Sanchez, a former Republican, on a surge of Latino voters. A wacky "B-1 Bob" exception? Sorry, the GOP also lost two nearby state assembly districts (and their assembly majority) where Hispanics made a difference. Who would have thought Pat Buchanan would help end Bob Dornan's career?

Immigration explains the Hispanic shift in 1996 better than anything else. A lousy Dole campaign didn't help, but GOP House candidates nationwide also saw a drop in the Hispanic vote (to 27 percent from 39 percent). Some blame the California Civil Rights Initiative, except that one of three Hispanics voted for CCRI. It's highly unlikely that Hispanic- and Asian-Americans suddenly became born-again liberals. Both groups are culturally conservative enough to make them natural Republicans.

The sharp Hispanic turn in just two years suggests a backlash against both the 1994 fight over California's Proposition 187 and Congress' crusade to limit all immigration. While Gov. Wilson has always been careful to distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants, many in Congress no longer are. Who can blame Hispanics for picking up bad political vibes? "Even when Latinos agree with us philosophically, they think we don't want them," says Allan Hoffenblum, a GOP consultant in California.

A similar view comes from across the country in Florida, where Republicans lost support even among usually loyal Cuban-Americans. Dario Moreno, a professor at Florida International University who follows Cuban voting in Dade County, says the GOP presidential vote fell to just 60% this year, from 72% in 1992 and 85% in 1988.

Mr. Moreno credits Mr. Clinton's skill in signing GOP anti-Fidel Castro legislation. But he adds that, "Republicans were viewed as being anti-immigrant and eroded Dole's support." It's no accident that two of the few Republicans who opposed their party's immigration bill last year were both Cuban-American House

members from South Florida.

“Republican candidates who are right on immigration, like Jeb Bush, can still count on the Cuban vote,” says Mr. Moreno, a Cuban-American and a Republican himself. That’s also true in Texas, where GOP Gov. George W. Bush has opposed the GOP’s harsher anti-immigrant stands and does better among Hispanics.

So maybe it’s time for Republicans to re-think their lurch back toward 1920s nativism. What’s the point now anyway? Their illegal immigration bill is already on the books, as if it will do any good. But to do more on that front requires harassing U.S. employers to become

immigration police — Ted Kennedy’s agenda.

As for reducing legal immigration, the politics go from dumb to dumber. “It’s very important for the Republican party to continue to stand up for legal immigrants, or there could be fallout in other ethnic communities, such as East Europeans, in the Midwest and Northeast,” says GOP Senator Spence Abraham of Michigan. Mr. Abraham led the successful fight last year to split off legal immigration limits from anti-illegal enforcement, a move that played well in his multi-ethnic state.

The GOP conservative also points out that younger

immigrants help compensate for an otherwise aging U.S. population. And as historian David Kennedy reports in *The Atlantic Monthly*, immigration has costs, yet the current level is proportionally only half what America absorbed so well in the early part of this century.

Of course, the Republicans of that era also chose to become the anti-immigrant party, and those Italian, Irish and other new citizens understandably enlisted in FDR’s 50-year Democratic majority. Maybe that’s a lesson for Republicans bent on driving today’s fastest-growing voter group into the arms of the their enemies. **TSC**