

## **IMMIGRATION, OPEN BORDERS AND THE "REAGAN DEMOCRATS" – DEVISING A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY**

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It is an unfortunate fact that during election years important discussions of long-term political strategy often get oversimplified and distorted in order to squeeze them into conventional campaign narratives.

This is what happened to an important Democracy Corps memo issued several weeks ago. The memo — which offered an analysis of polls and focus group data on a range of domestic economic issues including immigration and open borders — got grabbed and sucked up into the mainstream media debate about the electoral wisdom of the Republican's "get tough", anti-illegal immigrant posturing and whether the Democrats should follow their lead or stick to traditional progressive principles.

But this was not the specific issue the D-Corps memo was actually evaluating and its more subtle strategic analysis and conclusions should not be allowed to get lost in the shuffle. The central finding of D-Corps' polls and focus groups was that a profound and unrecognized degree of frustration exists among average middle-class Americans regarding a wide range of economic issues, feeding an extraordinarily deep contempt and anger at the political establishment, Democratic as well as Republican. The Memo's key thesis was that, without a proper political strategy, this deep discontent will not necessarily benefit the Democrats next year.

In regard to immigration, the memo noted three critical facts:

1. While Democrats in the survey identified Iraq and health care as the major areas where the country was going in the wrong direction, the top issue identified by independents was immigration and "unprotected borders." 40% of independents chose this option – no other issue even came close.
2. Immigration and open borders were the top concern for those voters who want to vote Democratic but are holding back – the most attainable swing voters of all.
3. The voters who were most angry about the issue were those with a high school education and rural voters – groups where recent surveys have suggested Democrats might otherwise be able to regain some lost ground.

The first point that should be noted is that these conclusions are focused on how immigration is perceived by a specific group of voters – “ordinary middle-class” swing voters – and not how the issue will play with the electorate as a whole (In fact, when D-Corps studied national opinion as a whole, they found slightly less support for the one-sided “get tough” measures than for alternatives that included some path to citizenship).

More important, the basic problem the D-Corps memo identified is not simply that there is substantial middle-American antagonism to illegal immigration. It is that this sentiment threatens to fuse with three other attitudes among many potential democratic voters: a sense of severe economic distress; a feeling of powerlessness and of being ignored by political leaders; and a simmering sense of class resentment toward the “liberal” educated elite. This was the potent ideological package that Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and both Bushes used to ride to the presidency and which Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, Ross Perot and scores of their lesser imitators have ridden to national celebrity.

It is not surprising that Democracy Corps detected this emerging danger. Back in the 1980s Stan Greenberg, the lead author of the memo, was the first political analyst to clearly understand and map the distinct political attitudes of the “Reagan Democrats” – the traditionally Democratic blue-collar and grey-collar workers whose defection to the Republicans has arguably been the most fundamental (and intractable) demographic problem for the Democrats during the past 25 years. The clear implicit warning the recent D-Corps memo contains is that if Democrats fail to successfully confront the current challenge, these voters could be lost for another quarter-century.

This division within the Roosevelt New Deal Democratic coalition first emerged in the early 1970s as the “white backlash” to the civil rights protests of the 60s. Nixon’s political strategists based their successful appeal to “The Forgotten Americans” and “Silent Majority” on the notion that the Democratic Party had become a coalition of affluent “limousine liberals” and lower-class minorities allied against the moral and social values and the economic interests of ordinary middle-class Americans.

A modern-day updating of this Republican wedge strategy would tap into three related attitudes among non-affluent voters that the D-Corps survey identified – a profound sense of economic insecurity, a feeling that all the Washington politicians are indifferent to the problems and needs of ordinary people and a sense that uncontrolled immigration represents a major breakdown of just and legitimate social rules, and of the rule of law.

When appeals to these attitudes among ordinary middle-class Americans are combined with direct appeals to explicit anti-immigrant sentiment, a potent counter-narrative can be

constructed to blunt the appeal of relatively popular Democratic proposals on health care and other economic issues and to deflect widely shared criticisms of Republican failures. As E.J. Dionne has noted: "For Republicans the issue (of immigration) is both a way of changing the political subject from Iraq, the economy and the failures of the Bush presidency and a means of sowing discord in the Democratic coalition."

In 2000 and 2004 explicit and divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric was held in check by Karl Rove's desire to try to win Latinos to the Republican coalition. As that strategy has now been effectively abandoned, an alternative, "Democrats don't care about ordinary people" narrative, centered on Democratic "tolerance for law-breakers" or "refusal to stand up for average Americans" against illegal immigration, will become a particularly important political wedge strategy. When the smoke clears, the result could easily be that Latinos will become a firm and permanent part of the Democratic coalition, but at the price of losing any chance of winning back any substantial numbers of Reagan Democrats and other moderate-income white Americans for another generation.

Virtually all the debate within the Democratic coalition in the last several weeks has been based on accepting this simplistic either-or view of the available alternatives. The Dems' only choices, it would seem, are to either "move to the right" or "stick to their principles". Yet, even on the surface, it is clear that the anti-immigrant "coalition" is extremely unstable and internally divided, and an alternative view of the Democrats challenge is to consider what strategies they might best employ to prevent the Republicans from overcoming these obstacles.

The first step is to face the reality that the Republicans will inevitably make some substantial inroads among Reagan Democrats (who previous polls suggest might be unusually receptive to Democratic appeals this election) with a blending of class resentment against liberals and the educated with a more aggressively anti-immigrant stance. There are several basic psychological schemas very deeply embedded in the political attitudes of many Americans that are simply waiting to be invoked.

First, many voters old enough to remember the 70s or 80s will easily transfer large clusters of negative stereotypes and attitudes about African-Americans and liberals from those eras onto the issues of today. One particularly dramatic example of this process can be seen in the fact (observed in the focus groups conducted by D-Corps) that many participants quite implausibly complained about immigrants coming to America to live on welfare and food stamps. Most Americans clearly recognize the very strong work ethic of Latino immigrants, and this "Latinos on welfare" notion is not seriously promoted in either the mainstream or even the right-wing media. So such complaints almost certainly represents dormant schemas from the 70s and 80s about black "welfare queens driving Cadillacs" and "able-bodied men living off

welfare checks” being unconsciously mapped onto a new minority that is similar in that it is also poor and non-white.

Second, the notion that the Democratic Party represents a coalition of wealthy liberals with various ethnic minorities or other “special interest” groups has been a standard feature of the right-wing echo chamber for almost three decades, particularly in the talk radio and Fox media environments. Voters even modestly influenced by these media channels will immediately adopt this extremely familiar and deeply embedded frame of reference when it is presented as the explanation for why Democrats “just don’t care” about illegal immigration and wide-open borders.

Finally, the underlying sense of powerlessness in the face of economic forces like outsourcing and downsizing and a frustration with being ignored – which closely resembles the attitudes of 1992 Perot voters – will easily be linked to economic arguments against immigration (e.g. competition for jobs, loss of bargaining power).

Taken together, the exploitation of these preexisting, deeply engrained attitudes will give Republican politicians a receptive audience for an anti-immigrant appeal that will reach beyond those voters who have overtly racial or ethnic anti-immigrant views.

It is important to recognize the significance of these pre-existing attitudes because they clearly influence the choice of Democratic strategy. Just as firefighters will deploy their resources quite differently if they are trying to contain a blaze rather than directly extinguish it, so Democratic strategy will vary depending on whether the goal is visualized as trying to contain and limit the spread of a Republican anti-immigrant campaign among Reagan Democrats (i.e. among high-school educated swing voters) versus trying to directly confront it and defeat it completely. In one case the goal becomes splitting the coalition the Republicans are trying to create. In the other the goal is to frontally attack the anti-immigrant campaign in the most categorical and comprehensive possible way.

Given the preexisting psychological attitudes that the anti-immigrant campaign can exploit, the likelihood of Democrats being able to decisively defeat it are relatively remote. There is, on the other hand, a reasonable chance that the coalition can be divided and contained.

In fact, one key goal for Democratic strategy should actually be to drive a wedge between the explicitly racist and anti-ethnic wing of the emerging anti-immigrant coalition and the larger group for whom the driving force is not a personal dislike of Latinos and other non-whites. While detailed polling data distinguishing the two groups has not been collected, the distinction is clearly visible. On the one hand, focus groups and journalistic interviews consistently find substantial numbers of people who express relatively positive and sympathetic

attitudes toward Latino immigrants as individuals, while disapproving of open borders. On the other hand, letters to the editor and comment areas in political web sites reveal a very large current of bitter, overt and explicit bigotry. One particularly repulsive example of this is the very frequent application of words usually applied to dogs and other animals – words like “whelps”, “spawn” and “mongrels” -- to describe the infant children of illegal immigrants (The Anti-Defamation League and Southern Poverty Law Center both provide extensive documentation of this, cited Here).

In seeking to drive a wedge between these two groups there are three lessons that can be drawn from the mistakes Democrats made in dealing with the white backlash of the 70s that can help to avoid a repetition today.

First, the best sociological field studies of the white backlash (such as Jonathan Rieder’s Canarse and Kenneth Durr’s Behind the Backlash) demonstrated that it was simply impossible to meaningfully divide white attitudes into two neatly separate categories called “racism” and “legitimate grievances” and then decide whether the views of most whites were properly classed as one or the other. In practice the two categories were inevitably fused in complex and individually idiosyncratic ways. What was clear, however, was that categorically dismissing white grievances as “simply smokescreens for racism” acted to unite non-affluent whites against the accusers rather than driving a wedge between the overt and incorrigible racists and other more ambivalent whites. As Drew Westen argues in his recent book, *The Political Brain*, appealing to voters’ “better angels” (i.e., their belief in basic American notions of equality, justice and fairness) far more effectively isolates the prejudiced from the ambivalent than blanket accusations of bias and racism.

Second, it was only in retrospect that Democrats realized that there were certain issues that inflamed the white backlash far more than others because they more directly and tangibly affected real life. Crime and school busing, in particular, evoked a passionate, intensely emotional reaction that more abstract racial issues did not because they touched peoples’ lives deeply and undermined their physical security and sense of community in their local streets and neighborhoods.

Today, the most intense and emotional hostility to immigrants comes from people who see their local communities undergoing rapid change because of immigration and who feel a resulting sense of cultural threat and dislocation. This attitude may not be as easily expressed on opinion surveys as more abstract complaints about fiscal or economic effects, but they are much more deeply and emotionally felt. The more educated and cosmopolitan may view this attitude as retrograde and provincial, but it is not the same as racism.

Finally, Democrats in the 70s underestimated the degree to which the backlash against welfare was motivated not by a simple “us vs. them” dislike of African-Americans, but by a sense of unfairness and affront to the basic values of hard work and fair treatment. Today, the comparable basic values many people feel are violated by illegal immigration involve “following the rules” and obeying the law. The intensely negative reaction to the proposal to give undocumented workers drivers’ licenses flows directly from this hostility to seeing people “getting rewarded for breaking the law”.

How then can the Dems best communicate with generally high-school educated Reagan Democrats on this issue? There are two features of public opinion about immigration and the border that provide the answer. First, polls and focus groups suggest that a substantial group of middle-American voters do not hold deeply negative views of Latinos as individuals. They are widely seen as hard working, polite and deeply committed to family. Second, there is considerable sympathy for the motives – seeking jobs and a better life -- that brought the migrants to the U.S.

These views provide the basis for a Democratic response to the anti-immigrant campaign that is now developing, one that highlights the gap between the racist and non-racist elements of the coalition and connects the problem with the larger economic failure of the Republican Party to defend the interests of average, middle-class Americans.

Two basic facts underlie this strategy. First, Republican demands to simply “build a high fence” and “close the border” – while emotionally satisfying -- cannot possibly be fulfilled without dividing vast numbers of children from their families. In the early 80s most undocumented workers were younger men earning money to send back to their families in Mexico. Today, in contrast, there are hundreds of thousands of “cross-border” families with some members in the U.S. and some in Mexico, many of whom have been separated for years. Tightened border security in recent years as already produced large numbers of new broken families and any major increase in border control will vastly increase the numbers of people affected. As a recent New York Times article -- entitled “Immigration Dilemma: a Mother Torn from a Baby” --noted, “at least 13,000 American children have seen one or both parents deported in the past two years after round-ups in factories and neighborhoods. These figures are expected to grow. Over all, about 3.1 million American children have at least one parent who is an illegal immigrant”.

This reality provides the opening to challenge anti-immigrant campaigns on a simple, emotionally compelling basis – are the Republicans willing to pass draconian “shut the borders” or “strict enforcement” measures that will result in permanently separating tens of thousands of children from one or both of their parents, particularly if the latter have no jobs or ways to

make a living in their native country? It will certainly be cheaper to do it that way than to use a more humane “case-by-case” approach, but how many ordinary middle-Americans are actually willing to save money by breaking up tens of thousands of families whose only crime is having crossed the border in search of a better life? The answer to this question will dramatically divide those who consider Latino children sub-human “whelps” and “mongrels” from the more decent sentiments of most ordinary Americans.

Second, the basic force that has impelled this vast migration of Mexicans is not simply population growth in Mexico but also the direct effect of the Republican-sponsored, free-market policies applied in Mexico after the nations’ default on its debt in 1982. In the 50s, 60s and 70s most factory workers in Mexico actually had substantial job security, health and retirement benefits (a result of New Deal inspired legislation passed in the 1930’s) and rural policy favored small farmers. It was the “neo-liberal” (i.e. free market) policies championed by the Republicans and then pushed by the IMF and US trained technocrats that undermined labor standards in industry and opened small scale agriculture to ruinous competition from large private companies. The predictable result was that decent jobs and viable small-scale farming shrank dramatically.

This line of argument allows Democrats to tie the problem of immigration to the broader Democratic critique of Republican economic policy and philosophy – everything from the rejection of national health insurance to outsourcing and unfair trade policy. This approach directly challenges and undermines the Republican “immigration shows that Democrats don’t care about ordinary people” counter-narrative whose central purpose is to distract attention away from traditional economic issues.

Let’s get specific. Here’s what the Dems can say:

We believe the border must be secured, immigrants must follow the rules and obey the law and people who come to this country to live must be willing to accept our values and assimilate into our way of life.

But there are two places where Democrats break with the Republicans:

First, we will not support proposals that will separate children from their parents. This is just plain immoral. A fair immigration system must not only control the borders, it must be enforced in a way that is fair, humane and in accord with American values and the American way.

Second, we’re going to put the blame for the problem where it belongs. The people coming here to work didn’t want to leave their homes, their parents and relatives and the communities where they grew up. They are economic refugees from an economic Hurricane Katrina

unleashed in Mexico and other Latin countries by the extremist free market policies that have been championed by the Republicans ever since the 1980's.

The same Republican economists who don't want all Americans to have health insurance and won't protect American workers from outsourcing, downsizing and unfair trade are also the ones who helped make a mess of Mexico's economy in the 80s and 90s and left these people with no alternative except to leave their homes to seek a better life. We have to fix the immigration mess, but the right place to start is by recognizing who made the mess in the first place.

These talking points are intentionally limited to achieving two goals: to focus the debate on real-life children and families rather than faceless abstractions and to directly link immigration to the Republicans broader failures in defending the economic interests of ordinary Americans. To the extent that the debate can be fought on this terrain, the Democrats will hold a significant advantage.

Beyond this, of course, there are the broader challenges of devising effective long-term programs and policies that can win majority support. The D-Corps memo actually contains quite useful polling data on the ways in which support for relatively balanced proposals vary depending on which particular elements are included. Equally, a variety of proposals have been offered for more flexible, cross-border labor market reforms that would significantly reduce and regularize the flow of immigrant workers (see, for example, Princeton sociologist Alejandro Portes' proposal in the October 2007 issue of *The American Prospect*).

But the most pressing and immediate challenge facing the Democrats is to drive a wedge between the racist and non-racist elements of the coalition the Republicans are trying to create and to link immigration with the Republican Party's failure to defend the economic interests of ordinary Americans.. The Republican strategy ultimately depends on successfully blurring and obscuring these divisions and failures – not only from moderates and progressives, but from the middle-American "Reagan Democrats" in the coalition itself. A successful Democratic strategy, in contrast, will consist in successfully exposing the reality behind the façade.

The Democrats' real choice is not simply between "moving to the right" and "sticking to principles"; it is between allowing the Republicans to set the terms of the debate or presenting an alternative narrative in which the Democrats are both decent and right on the issue of immigration and the Republicans are dishonest and wrong.

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