

Breaking the Wall on Immigration Reform

Democrats Have Unique Opportunity to Resolve Crisis

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WASHINGTON -- Will Democrats take the lead on immigration?

One of the quick and easy conclusions drawn from the Republican defeat in last week's midterm elections is that immigration as an issue failed to galvanize voters. It was "the dog that didn't bark," immigration advocates quipped, or, as The Wall Street Journal put it, the "fool's gold of American politics." Few races were decided because of what candidates did or failed to do on immigration.

Before the vote, however, many Republicans and Democrats mistook isolated vitriol for a generalized mood of the nation. The heat generated by cable TV commentators and those who mailed them bricks symbolizing the wall they demanded on the U.S.-Mexico border had many politicians fooled. And so, despite the historic marches last spring in opposition to anti-immigrant legislation, Republicans pushed the Secure Fence Act of 2006 through Congress in September with many Democrats in tow -- 26 in the Senate and 64 in the House. On Oct. 26, President Bush signed the bill into law.

Most lawmakers predicted that voters would make them pay at the ballot box for not doing enough to enforce U.S. borders. Yet fewer than one in three voters cited immigration as extremely important in influencing their decision, with Iraq, the economy, terrorism and health care figuring more prominently.

The lesson? Punitive immigration posturing does not secure votes. And more importantly, nuanced immigration reform need not be shouted down by vocal anti-immigrant activists.

Nevertheless, Democrats aren't exactly seizing the day. On their list of priorities, the so-called New Direction for America, immigration is conspicuously absent. In her first news conference after the Democrats captured the House, soon-to-be Speaker Nancy Pelosi did not even mention the "I" word.

Hopefully, that's just an oversight. Few other issues offer as much common ground between Bush and the new Democratic majority. From Day One of his administration, Bush has envisioned a constructive response to immigration. Democrats, in turn, have been seen as the party more inclined to support such an approach -- one that complements enforcement measures with a temporary worker program and a chance for millions here illegally to correct their situation.

While it failed to trump other issues this electoral season, no one should conclude that immigration is a nonissue for U.S. voters. That was particularly clear in Arizona, the state where most illegal immigrants now enter the country. On Election Day, more than 70 percent of Arizonans voted to enact every immigration initiative put before them.

Those initiatives were what many would call punitive -- punishing illegal immigrants attempting to attend state-sponsored English classes or trying to utilize state-financed day care for their U.S.-born children, for instance. But these choices were tempered by the fact that Arizonans also rejected two congressional candidates -- incumbent Rep.

J.D. Hayworth and state legislator Randy Graf -- who made an enforcement-only approach to immigration the centerpiece to their campaigns.

What to make of this mixed message in Arizona? If anything, it could be frustration with the inaction on meaningful immigration reform at the federal level. The current immigration system leaves states to fend for themselves with a regrettable situation that can only be fully repaired in Washington.

Immigration may not rank high among voter concerns overall, but when asked, most say they support a comprehensive reform. A national exit poll from the National Election Pool, a consortium of news organizations, found that nearly six in 10 voters said that they believe illegal immigrants working in the United States should be offered a chance to legalize their status. And 61 percent of those voters supported a Democratic candidate.

There is no question that comprehensive reform is going to require leadership. Majority opinion may well continue to be eclipsed by a noisy minority with the help of their cable TV pals. So, it would be up to politicians here to remind people, from time to time, that the United States simply cannot wall off this problem.

Democrats now have a window of opportunity to take the debate, lead and pass legislation the president will sign. Immigration may have not rallied voters as Republicans predicted this midterm election, but that may not always be the case.