

Immigration and the politics of hysteria

OUR OPINION: DEMONIZING MIGRANTS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR WORKABLE POLICY

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Just say the words "illegal immigration" nowadays and you're likely to stir up a hornet's nest of argument. It's a hot-button issue that reflects legitimate anxieties over the porous state of our borders and the questionable legal status of millions already living here. The nation deserves a profound debate over immigration, but we're not getting it from the gaggle of candidates vying for president.

Titillating, pointless

Instead of clarifying the issues and offering solutions, most of the candidates are busy feeding the rampant anti-immigration hysteria. This is particularly true in the rivalry between Republicans Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani, who are vying with other to see *quién es más macho* when it comes to immigration. "Soft on amnesty," charges Mr. Romney. "Flip-flopper," shoots back Mr. Giuliani.

The spat over Mr. Romney's use of illegal Guatemalan immigrants to perform yard work at his home, a feature of Wednesday's GOP debate, was typical -- titillating but pointless. Neither candidate offers a comprehensive plan to deal with illegal immigration, but the tone of the debate feeds the frenzy. Even Sen. John McCain, who once championed genuine reform that would open a pathway to legalization for those who qualify, has felt obliged to soften his position, acknowledging that many potential GOP voters want candidates to take a hard line on immigration issues.

During a Senate debate over immigration in March of 2006, Sen. McCain scoffed at calls for large-scale roundups as the answer to the immigration crisis. "I have yet to hear a single proponent of this point of view offer one realistic proposal for locating, apprehending and returning to their countries of origin over 11 million people," Sen. McCain said. "How do we do that?"

It's not that the candidates who scream loudest about illegal immigration don't have a politically correct answer to this question, but rather that they don't have *any* answer at all. The notion of a massive, nationwide search-and-deport mission in the barrios as the answer to illegal immigration is abhorrent, not to mention impractical and unworkable. But railing about illegal immigration without offering a solution that *will* work is a craven approach. No candidate should be allowed to get away with it.

Driver's licenses

The Democrats are hardly doing better. Sen. Hillary Clinton quickly backtracked recently when poll numbers showed most Americans oppose giving driver's licenses to undocumented foreigners. Actually, it makes sense, but instead of using the campaign to explain that denying driving permits to large segments of the community merely

endangers the rest of us, she caved in to the hysteria. Candidates in both parties, it seems, need to learn the difference between pandering and leadership.