

Division Problem

The GOP's Ruinous Immigration Stance

By Michael Gerson Wednesday,

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Immigration used to be a debate among Republicans. Now the issue survives mainly as a weapon.

Former [Massachusetts](#) governor [Mitt Romney](#)-- who once commented on illegal immigrants, "I don't believe in rounding up 11 million people and forcing them at gunpoint from our country" -- attacks [Rudy Giuliani](#) for not rounding up enough illegal immigrants when he was mayor of [New York](#). Giuliani -- who once said, "If you come here and you work hard and you happen to be in an undocumented status, you're one of the people who we want in this city" -- criticizes Romney for tolerating "sanctuary cities" in Massachusetts.

One gets the impression of decent men, intimidated by the vocal anger of elements of their own party.

That anger is pushing Republicans into some powerful symbols of indifference to Hispanic voters. The Univision Republican debate, scheduled for last Sunday with simultaneous translation into Spanish, was postponed when only Sen. [John McCain](#) agreed to show up. Rep. [Tom Tancredo](#) objected to the event on principle: "We should not be doing things that encourage people to stay separate in a separate language" -- which raises the question: Is saying "Viva [Cuba Libre](#)" no longer permissible for Republicans? And this snub came on the heels of conspicuous Republican absence at a forum held by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, and at the National Council of La Raza convention.

It is a strange spectacle. Conservatives are intent on building a more appealing, post-Bush Republican Party. But their most obvious change so far is to reverse remarkable Republican gains among one of the fastest-growing groups of American voters. The renovators seem more like the wrecking crew.

From the beginning of his political career, [George W. Bush](#) refused to support amnesty for illegal immigrants. He did, however, take a principled, middle-ground position that also appealed to Latinos -- a proposal that would give legal status to those who want to work in America and return home, while also providing a realistic (but not easy) path to citizenship for those who want to stay.

The political effects were immediate. [Bob Dole](#) got about 21 percent of Hispanic votes in 1996. Bush won about 35 percent in 2000. In 2004, Bush ran in the Latino media on the slogan "Nos conocemos," or "We know one another" -- and both he and Republicans in Congress averaged over 40 percent of the Hispanic vote.

The political effects of conservative opposition to immigration reform have been swift as well. Latino support for [GOP](#) candidates dropped back to 30 percent in 2006. According to one poll, Latinos under age 30 now prefer a generic Democrat over a Republican for president by 42 points. A harsh, Tancredo-like image of Republicans has solidified in the mainstream Hispanic media. And all of this

regression will be even more obvious in the next few months, because more than half of the Hispanic voters in America live in states that are part of the new lineup of early primaries.

I have never seen an issue where the short-term interests of Republican presidential candidates in the primaries were more starkly at odds with the long-term interests of the party itself. At least five swing states that Bush carried in 2004 are rich in Hispanic voters -- [Arizona](#), [New Mexico](#), [Nevada](#), [Colorado](#) and [Florida](#). Bush won Nevada by just over 20,000 votes. A substantial shift of Hispanic voters toward the Democrats in these states could make the national political map unwinnable for Republicans.

There is a moral hazard as well. Surfing on a wave of voter resentment is easier than rowing on the calmer waters of inclusion and charity. But the heroes of America are generally heroes of reconciliation, not division.

In politics, some acts are so emblematic and potent that they cannot be undone for decades -- as when Republican presidential candidate [Barry Goldwater](#) voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Goldwater was no racist; his constitutional objections were sincere. Members of the Republican Party actually voted for the Civil Rights Act in higher percentages than Democrats. But all of this was overwhelmed by the symbolism of the moment. In his autobiography, [Colin Powell](#) says that after the Goldwater vote, he went to his car and affixed a [Lyndon Johnson](#) bumper sticker, as did many other African Americans. Now Republicans seem to be repeating history with Hispanic Americans. Some in the party seem pleased. They should be terrified.