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The Politics of Immigration Reform

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 2, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The politics of immigration cause fissures in both political parties which is why, as President Obama said yesterday, comprehensive immigration reform can only be enacted with bipartisan support. But, as President Bush found out when he tried to advance the issue, his own party is deeply resistant to anything that provides a path to citizenship for those immigrants who are currently undocumented. And, after leaning on moderate Democrats from marginal districts to vote for health care and for climate change, asking them to support immigration reform makes them think they can pull the guillotine chord now.

This year, however, is a midterm election. Very few people will vote next November and so it is critical to get the base fired up. The GOP base is already fired up; being in the opposition will do that to a party and polls indicate that they are much more motivated to vote than Democrats. But, it is not clear that immigration reform will drive additional GOP voters to the polls: they will be there anyway. Pollsters will check their cross tabs, but at the level of specificity for the important question, you can toss those cross tabs out the window. The key question is this: How many of the people who are all riled up about immigration reform are also the people riled up about health care reform or climate change?

Not to put too fine a point on it, but my gut tells me that the noisiest of the nativists are actually not riled up about health care or climate change or the federal deficit. I have heard the thinly veiled, and not so thinly veiled, racism of the Tom Tancredos of the world. If they hate Latinos that much, you can guess how they feel about a black man in the White House. If you doubt that there is a racist undertone to the Tea Party, you were not at their anti-health care rally on Capitol Hill the day of the final House vote. I was. The mood was ugly and dark. The signs portraying Obama dressed as a witch doctor or the toy chimpanzees dressed up with Obama signs demonstrated something visceral, a sense that Obama was not just wrong or misguided in his politics but illegitimate. But, in addition to the signs, there was an anger there that frankly scared me. It was a mob.

Conservatives do not have a monopoly on political ugliness. I recall the derogatory and ridiculous things that some lefties hurled at President Bush. They, too, were often ugly but, they did not, apart from understandable questions about Bush v. Gore, question his legitimacy. No member of Congress interrupted a State of the Union to shout that he was a liar. No one asked to see his birth certificate if memory serves.

I do not wish to suggest that all people who oppose Obama are racists: I know many people who oppose the President?s policies on principled grounds and they do so intelligently and respectfully. The point is that I think the Democrats have already lost the people who would be likely to get upset by a push for immigration reform. Earlier this year, after the loss of a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, the President had to decide whether or not to pursue health care reform and the most compelling reason to do so was that the Dems were already tagged with the issue, and the choice in January was whether to be tagged as a loser as well or to be tagged as delivering on an historic Democratic goal.

If the President pushes immigration reform, he stands a chance of firing up the Latino vote. The issue of immigration reform is not theoretical for Latinos. It is existential. People can weigh their views of two candidates, weighing their different stands on the issues and the relative weight of the issues, but when one

candidate says that your aunt or your husband or one of your parents should be deported, you take that more seriously than, say, a debate about plans to save Social Security.

Immigration is also an issue with strong geographic considerations. Anyone want to bet that Texas will be firmly in the Democratic column within twenty years? Like California, the GOP?s identification with anti-immigrant policies will cost them that state for a generation. But, it won?t happen by November. On the other hand, Democratic congressmen from marginal districts in the rust belt or in Appalachia, where jobs have been declining for years, may be unwilling to support a measure that seems to introduce more low wage competition, even though it is the ?illegal? part of ?illegal immigration? that drives down wages.

Finally, on this issue, the White House should walk hand-in-hand with the USCCB. Many of those moderate Democrats are in districts with large Catholic populations, which is why so many of them are pro-life. Their districts are classic swing districts and they are imperiled this November. Lining up on an issue where the local bishop is vocal and forceful on the need for immigration reform might help some of those centrist Democrats survive.

As mentioned yesterday, I think the President needs to change the debate if he wants to get this issue across the finish line. And, the way to do that is not only to quote statistics about lower crime rates along the border but to quote from the Book of Exodus: ?You shall not oppress a stranger, you know the heart of a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.? He must make a moral case for immigration reform, convincing enough of his fellow Americans that this is the right thing to do. Then, and only then, will he provide sufficient cover for moderates in both parties to embrace comprehensive reform. And, if the GOP caves to the nativists in their base, they may win some swing districts in November, but the demographics of the electorate virtually guarantee that they will become the minority party sooner rather than later. If that happens, win or lose, Obama will have won the support of Latinos for the Democrats for a generation.

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