

Playing It Dangerously Safe

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Highlight: Can Mitt Romney be everything to everyone on immigration?

Body

In October, 1999, as George W. Bush prepared for the Republican presidential primaries, he took the unexpected step of denouncing a House Republican proposal to cut the Earned Income Tax Credit, a benefit for the working poor.

"I don't think they ought to balance their budget on the backs of the poor," [*Bush declared*](#), while campaigning in California. "I'm concerned for someone who is moving from near-poverty to middle class."

When Bill Clinton was preparing for the Democratic presidential primaries in 1992, he challenged the liberal wing of his own party over and over again. He declared that he would "end welfare as we know it"; he [*sanctioned the execution*](#) in Arkansas of Ricky Ray Rector, a mentally disabled murderer; and [*he denounced the appearance at a conference sponsored by Jesse Jackson of*](#) Sister Souljah, a political activist and rapper who had become notorious for her comments in the wake of the riots in Los Angeles earlier that year: "If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?"

Bush and Clinton, both of whom went on to win two terms in the White House, dealt head-on with one of the most difficult problems presidential candidates face: How to address issues which divide the candidate's core constituencies.

Now Mitt Romney faces a similar dilemma: the issue of immigration. In this case, Romney's choice has been to avoid making a choice; he is trying to have it both ways.

Immigration is a complicated problem for Romney because the issue pits hard-core anti-immigration forces on the right against two distinct constituencies: Hispanic voters; and the business wing of the Republican party, which wants legal access to the services of millions of low-wage workers. All three groups are crucial to Romney.

By ducking the issue, Romney may be taking what seems like the **safest** route, but equivocation carries its own liabilities.

Perhaps most **dangerously**, Romney makes himself vulnerable to the same [*charge*](#) of failed leadership that he has frequently leveled against Obama.

The [*immigration issue surfaced*](#) on June 15 when the Obama administration announced its new enforcement policy, which exempts from deportation young, undocumented but law-abiding people brought to the United States before the age of 16.

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Two days after the Obama announcement, Romney appeared on "Face The Nation" on CBS where [Bob Schieffer asked him](#), "Just to make sure I understand, would you leave this" - the Obama policy - "in place while you worked out a long-term solution or would you just repeal it?"

Romney replied:

We'll - we'll look at that - we'll look at that setting as we - as we reach that. But my anticipation is, I'd come into office and say we need to get this done on a long-term basis, not this kind of a stopgap measure. What the president did, he should have worked on this years ago. If he felt seriously about this, he should have taken action when he had a Democrat House and Senate, but he didn't. He saves these sorts of things until four and a half months before the general election.

The [full interview](#) is worth reading. Schieffer is courteous but persistent. Romney's performance is consistently evasive.

On June 25, shortly after the Supreme Court [released its decision](#) on the constitutionality of Arizona's tough immigration law - headline news across the country - the Romney campaign issued the following statement:

Today's decision underscores the need for a President who will lead on this critical issue and work in a bipartisan fashion to pursue a national immigration strategy. President Obama has failed to provide any leadership on immigration. This represents yet another broken promise by this President. I believe that each state has the duty - and the right - to secure our borders and preserve the rule of law, particularly when the federal government has failed to meet its responsibilities. As Candidate Obama, he promised to present an immigration plan during his first year in office. But four years later, we are still waiting.

The statement was worthy of the famous 1980 headline in the Boston Globe describing a speech by President Jimmy Carter: "[More Mush From the Wimp](#)."

Later on the 25th, [Romney told a group of donors](#) in Scottsdale, Ariz. that he would have "preferred to see the Supreme Court give more latitude to the states, not less."

Liberal commentators have had a field day carving up Romney's equivocations.

Salon's Alex Seitz-Wald [summed it up well](#) in a story headlined "Romney **plays** immigration dodgeball: A comprehensive guide to everything Romney has refused to say about immigration."

Think Progress's Igor Volsky [continued the full court press](#): "Romney's Campaign Co-Chair Spends Four Minutes Dodging Direct Questions On Arizona Immigration Law."

The Romney campaign dismisses sniping from the left, but perhaps they took note of a tweet from Mark Levin, the right-wing talk show host: "Romney on illegal immigration and Arizona's law - weak."

Levin read Romney's statement aloud on his radio show, then said:

Here we are in the face of tyranny, a president of the United States acting outside immigration statutes, acting outside the Constitution's separation of powers doctrine, flipping the bird to the Supreme Court - this is the best he could do?

W. James Antle, of the conservative American Spectator, published a blog post, "[Pinning Romney Down on Arizona](#)," that reprinted a lengthy, agonized effort by Rick Gorka, a Romney spokesman, to explain his boss's position. It is worth reading [in its entirety](#).

Here is a key exchange:

Question: Does [Romney] support the law as it was drafted in Arizona?

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Gorka: The governor supports the right of states, that's all we're going to say on this issue.

Question: Does he have a position on the law, or no position?

Gorka: The governor has his own immigration policy that he laid out in Orlando and in the primary, which he would implement as president, which would address this issue. Whereas Obama has had four years in the office and has yet to address it in a meaningful way.

Question: But does the Governor have a position on the Arizona law besides supporting the right of states?

Gorka: This debate is sprung from the president failing to address this issue, so each state is left and has the power to draft and enact their own immigration policy.

Question: But the Arizona law does very specific things, does the governor support those things that the Arizona law does?

Gorka: We've addressed this.

During the Republican primaries, in which almost no Hispanics vote, Romney declared himself Mr. Hardline on immigration. A Romney commercial titled "[Takes Guts](#)" told viewers:

Mitt Romney. He said no to drivers' licenses for illegals, no to instate tuition, fought for English in the classroom. The only candidate with a proven record of fixing the big problems. From day one, Mitt Romney will do what he does best, take charge, demand results, no excuses.

Now, contemplating a general election contest in which millions of Hispanics will cast ballots, Romney has gone rubber-kneed.

Romney's commitment to the safe route is a core aspect of his political style.

In an unusual moment of candor last April, Romney [explained his rationale for caution to Stephen F. Hayes](#) of the conservative Weekly Standard:

One of the things I found in a short campaign against Ted Kennedy was that when I said, for instance, that I wanted to eliminate the Department of Education, that was used to suggest I don't care about education. So I think it's important for me to point out that I anticipate that there will be departments and agencies that will either be eliminated or combined with other agencies. So for instance, I anticipate that housing vouchers will be turned over to the states rather than be administered at the federal level, and so at this point I think of the programs to be eliminated or to be returned to the states, and we'll see what consolidation opportunities exist as a result of those program eliminations. So will there be some that get eliminated or combined? The answer is yes, but I'm not going to give you a list right now.

Romney also told Hayes exactly why he believes his evasive tactics will work:

One thing I can assure you is that the one group that will certainly be with me in the general election if I'm the nominee will be conservatives and very conservatives. Because they're certainly not going to vote for Barack Obama.

Romney is right that conservatives will not be pulling Democratic levers, but there is no guarantee that they will turn out in the numbers he needs. A [June 7-12 Pew survey](#) showed that lukewarm backing could prove to be a serious problem for Romney.

Most Obama backers support him strongly, while most Romney voters support him only moderately. Similarly, Democrats are more satisfied with the choice of candidates than are Republicans: 68% of Democratic voters say they are satisfied with the field compared with 60% of Republican voters.

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In addition, while the survey found that Obama held a modest 50-46 lead over Romney, the percentage of voters who "strongly" back Obama, 30 percent, was nearly twice the 17 percent who strongly support Romney.

Although poll data does not specifically link Romney's vacillation on immigration to the lack of enthusiasm for his bid, it is virtually certain that a reluctance to take a stand is not an effective tool for building voter intensity.

Romney's stance - or lack thereof - speaks in part to his character, but more significantly it speaks to the slow-motion struggle within the Republican Party about coming to terms with the fact that its white base is shrinking while Hispanics, as a proportion of the electorate, are steadily gaining traction.

In this respect, Romney's fears of taking a more pro-immigrant stance - a posture roughly 90 percent of Republican strategists I have spoken with believe is essential - are possibly realistic. George W. Bush ran in 2004 on a platform calling for liberal immigration reform, winning a higher percentage of Hispanic votes than his Republican predecessors while simultaneously maintaining the backing of socially conservative whites. Romney lacks Bush's glad-handing charm, his gift for electioneering. Bush's [*comfort with the cadence and rhetoric of the southern vernacular*](#) gave him leeway with low- and middle-income whites, leeway Romney may sense he does not have.

- [*The Great Immigration Reform Mirage*](#)
- [*Candidate Blank*](#)
- [*For the Ron Paul Wing, Now What?*](#)
- [*Campaigns and Crankiness*](#)
- [*Romney the Cautious*](#)

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