

## **An Immigration Breakthrough?**

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### **Body**

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The latest Pew Hispanic poll is an eye opener. According to Pew Hispanic, 55% of Latino immigrants will settle for a green card that allows them to work but not vote. As a group, Latino immigrants aren't particularly interested in US citizenship.

In fact, Mexican LPRs (legal permanent residents) have the lowest rate of citizenship applications of any immigrant group, half the average. Mexican immigrants have not opted for citizenship. This important fact creates a potential political **breakthrough**.

In her recent column referencing the new polls, Esther Cepeda opines:

... a pathway [to] citizenship is not a make-or-break ... Insisting on citizenship only serves to keep 11.7 million people in ... limbo for ... those who care only about scoring points in a future election...

... a majority of [immigrants] would... compromise on a package that provided the legal status... without [a] 'special' pathway to citizenship.

As Cepeda notes, legalization without citizenship provides full access to the American Dream including property rights, due process rights and full employment rights that quickly bring immigrants out of the underground economy into the tax paying mainstream. LPRs have full educational rights and can participate politically by volunteer activism, working on campaigns, donating, etc. In America, voting isn't the only way to make your views heard.

But LPRs cannot vote and are ineligible for food stamps, welfare and SSI though vested in Social Security retirement, unemployment and worker compensation insurance that their taxes support.

Cepeda excoriates cynical progressives and Democrats as:

... advocacy groups, politicians and other parties who are invested in **immigration** reform solely for the purpose of creating a perpetual Democrat-leaning voting bloc... [who] push citizenship-only plans on Republicans who fundamentally disagree with bestowing the cherished right of citizenship on people who broke laws... then demoniz[e] such lawmakers for not compromising.

She notes that the Democrats have been winning, successfully painting a 'racist' and 'nativist' anti-immigrant label on conservatives. She says;

The losers? They're the car washers, dishwashers, busboys, maids, nannies, physical laborers and other immigrants who... don't understand that their [Democrat] protectors are setting them up for an all-or-nothing political confrontation that has so far yielded nothing.

Are conservatives and Republicans ready to compromise? Hopefully, they will be at least willing to consider proposals granting permanent or semi-permanent green card status in lieu of a pathway to citizenship. Digging more deeply into the polling and focus group data, we can see why this makes sense. I will concentrate on Mexican immigrants, by far the largest Hispanic immigrant group.

Fact: Two thirds of Mexican LPRs who qualify for US citizenship don't apply. Only 36% of qualified Mexican LPRs apply for citizenship, half the rate of other LPRs. The data is clear and telegraphs a larger reality, that Mexican immigrants in particular don't want citizenship. Why?

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First, Mexican patriotism. Mexico has a long history with the US which includes war, invasion, conquest and huge territorial losses to the gringo nation to the north. Mexicans are patriotic, to Mexico. With almost 11% of the entire population of Mexico currently in the US (by some estimates 1 in 7 Mexican workers) a complex dynamic exists that includes appreciation for America but also resentment and even a degree of subterranean national shame. Against this, Viva Mexico! nationalism is a strong, universal retort.

Second, traditional Mexican extended family structure creates a disincentive. Even as modern, egalitarian families emerge in Mexico and US Mexican communities (fewer children, gender equality, more women working, etc.) patriarchal clan-based family structures (a culture of machismo and respeto) continue to create social cohesion.

**Immigration** puts enormous stress on traditional families, creating immigrant adults and children who on one hand long for the warmth, comfort and support of large extended families in Mexico and on the other hand only partly assimilate. **Immigration** fuels divorce as spouses lose touch across time and distance. And **immigration** creates semi-abandoned children left in Mexico with relatives or without two parents at home.

**Immigration** also leads to parents overcompensating for a toxic American culture by becoming very strict, especially with adolescent girls. Mexican food, culture and language and constant communication with Mexican relatives mitigates the hardships of **immigration** but also lowers the drive to naturalize.

Third, Mexican immigrants have lower educational levels, lower language skills, less money on arrival and enter vibrant, US Mexican communities. Arriving broke and often illegal into US Mexican communities where English is optional, assimilation is not a priority. The low educational status and low English skills keep Mexicans at the economic bottom rungs; they know this and take ESL courses in high numbers. But pidgin English suffices on construction sites, in restaurants, in motels, etc. Polling reveals that difficult citizenship tests in English, the relatively high cost of applying for citizenship (\$680) and many other factors also contribute to low naturalization rates.

Fourth, proximity across a 2,000 mile border creates a disincentive. The USA, especially in areas where Mexican immigrants have historically congregated (SoCal, Texas, Arizona etc.) is geographically close to the Mexico. With low cost intra-Mexican air and bus fares, it is relatively cheap to enter the US illegally. Most Mexicans know home town coyotes who will transport them safely across the border on an enter-now, pay-later basis. The larger problem is often getting back to Mexico.

Given these realities, a conservative-friendly **immigration** bill substituting LPR legalization for a pathway to citizenship might work. With such legislation on the table, conservatives could fire large bore rhetorical cannons against the 'racist' and 'nativist' attacks by the left while giving Hispanics what polls say they really want. Conservatives can do this without ceding the precious right of citizenship, without creating a decades long Democrat lock on the Presidency and without an immigrant welfare state.

Finally, after passing a comprehensive **immigration** bill the GOP can begin to fully integrate Hispanics into Big Tent conservatism.

The polling absolutely confirms this. Romney, overall a disaster courting Hispanics, won 39% of those with incomes over \$50,000, 35% of college grads and 35% of those over 65. The obvious lesson? As Hispanics enter the mainstream, large numbers become conservatives eschewing redistribution for protecting what they've worked so hard to achieve.

As Ronald Reagan liked to say, Hispanics are natural Republicans, they just don't know it yet.

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