

The Immigrant-Bashing Tack; In Virginia, the GOP finds its whipping boy.

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Body

JITTERY **VIRGINIA** Republicans, whose grip on state politics has been weakening steadily for several years, are facing further setbacks in this fall's elections for the General Assembly, possibly including the end of **GOP** control of the Senate for the first time in nearly a decade. In their desperation for a vote-getter, they have seized on the **whipping boy** of illegal immigration, which they blame for ills ranging from the erosion of the commonwealth's values to the difficulty of being admitted to state colleges.

William J. Howell, the Republican speaker of the House of Delegates, worried aloud the other day about the presence of so many newcomers in the Old Dominion. Mr. Howell said that the state's newest residents, particularly in Northern **Virginia**, may not embrace "the shared values we have in **Virginia**," according to the Richmond Times-Dispatch. He didn't specify which "shared values" he had in mind, nor did he draw a distinction between legal and illegal newcomers.

A week earlier, he unveiled the **GOP's immigrant-bashing** agenda for the legislative session that will begin in January. Among other measures, it would bar publicly funded colleges and universities from accepting undocumented aliens -- even those who have graduated from state elementary, middle and high schools. To Mr. Howell and his cohorts, it is a mere detail that most public colleges in **Virginia** already deny entrance to such immigrants. In fact, the Republicans could not cite a single example of an illegal immigrant gaining access to public institutions of higher learning. No matter. The Republicans' point here is to stick it to the culturally distinct "other" by hook or by crook, even to the point of suggesting -- again without proof -- that some of the 36 percent of applicants rejected by four-year public colleges in the state had been denied a place because of the supposed tide of illegals also seeking higher education.

It's an ugly strategy and certainly not one unique to **Virginia**. It seeks to distract voters from core state issues such as transportation, fiscal prudence and good governance. But bigotry-mongering's day in **Virginia** is long past, and voters in the state have shown little disposition to reward candidates who extol intolerance. If Mr. Howell's "shared values" turn out to be mostly about **immigrant-bashing**, the **GOP** strategy is unlikely to rescue the party's electoral prospects.

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