

Undertow for the G.O.P.

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Byline: By Matthew Miller;

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Body

Just as California's Proposition 13 in 1978 ushered in the anti-tax wave Republicans have ridden to this day, the state's backlash against immigration and affirmative action was supposed to energize enough "angry white men" to bury Democrats for a decade. But these so-called wedge issues are not helping Republican Congressional candidates here. In fact, they're laying the groundwork for erosion of the Republican base in the nation's pivotal electoral state.

Blame Pete Wilson and Newt Gingrich. Republican strategists misread the meaning of Mr. Wilson's come-from-behind romp over Kathleen Brown in the 1994 race for Governor. Yes, Mr. Wilson's disciplined campaign, tied to Proposition 187's call for ending government benefits to illegal immigrants, was effective. But lost amid the excitement was the fact that Ms. Brown's own weaknesses were more decisive.

Nonetheless, Republicans apparently thought all they needed in 1996 was another wedge issue like Proposition 187 to help their candidates. Thus their use of the California Civil Rights Initiative, which would bar state and local governments from using quotas or preferences based on race, ethnicity and sex.

But the Republicans have been outflanked. President Clinton's moves to address legitimate concerns about immigration have inoculated Democrats down the ballot. Mr. Clinton's campaign ads here boast of border patrols and surveillance beefed up on his watch. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has just announced record numbers of deportations from the state.

On affirmative action, Mr. Clinton's "mend it, don't end it" straddle has helped out Democratic candidates on the stump. And though polls suggest that the initiative, Proposition 209, will pass, for Republican candidates there's no percentage in being tied to it. A new Field Poll here shows that opposition to the civil rights initiative has risen by nine percentage points since Bob Dole and the **G.O.P.** embraced it.

It turns out that affirmative action doesn't resonate with voters the way immigration does. Since 1990, a third of Californians have routinely told pollsters that immigration is a big problem, especially in the southern part of the

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state. "People see immigration as an issue every day in their lives as they drive around," said Representative Henry Waxman, a Los Angeles Democrat. "It's an issue that's brought out emotion in people."

Affirmative action, involving state procurement and agency jobs, has a narrower impact. Bill Carrick, senior adviser to the Clinton campaign here, says that of 25 statewide surveys he's seen, not one has turned up a significant percentage of voters who are seriously concerned about quotas or set-asides. A **G.O.P.** analyst, Tony Quinn, acknowledged that state Republican candidates aren't using Proposition 209 as an issue because "nobody is interested in it."

The Republicans' wedge strategy has another problem: It drives away educated female swing voters. Women have benefited from affirmative action, and the proposal also evokes the "meanness" they may already associate with Newt Gingrich's party. So while Republican candidates support the measure, few say much about it. Last week, Mr. Waxman's Republican challenger, Paul Stepanek, even endorsed Mr. Clinton.

Despite efforts by individual candidates to soft-pedal the initiative, last-minute advertising in favor of it will aim at shoring up support among the "angry white men." But for Mr. Dole and the Republicans, hopes of a bailout by these voters looks a lot like California dreamin'.

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