

GOP's harsh immigration stances repel a natural constituency

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Body

Hispanic voters represent one of the biggest opportunities for the Republican Party in winning the White House. They skew conservative on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage. They value hard work and have shown, in the case of former president George W. Bush, a willingness to support Republican candidates.

But today's GOP is in the clutches of illegal-immigration hawks, the same people who helped torpedo Bush's efforts at comprehensive reform and who have pushed stringent laws in a number of states under GOP control. Their dominance in the party is hampering one of its best opportunities to expand its base and position itself for the future.

To be sure, this week's Republican convention will not lack for Hispanic speakers. Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, passed over for the No. 2 spot on the ticket, will introduce Mitt Romney on Thursday night. New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez and Texas Senate candidate Ted Cruz are among the others getting slots.

Even so, the party's platform, endorsed just days before the convention, is hardly likely to help the party's outreach efforts. It calls for a double fence along the nation's southern border. It would also federalize provisions in Arizona's controversial immigration law that are likely to result in discrimination against Hispanics who are here legally.

Positions like these help explain why, in polls, Romney has been unable to hit 30% support among Hispanic voters -- at a time when no Republican in the past five elections has won the presidency with less than 35%. Bush narrowly won re-election in 2004 with 44% of the Hispanic vote, a high-water mark for GOP candidates.

Romney could, of course, win this election even with a poor showing among Latinos if he musters an overwhelming number of disaffected working-class white voters. He might also still be able to improve his standing among Latinos despite his tough rhetoric (illegal immigrants should "self deport") if he can convince them that he would do more than President Obama to improve the economy.

But these approaches are like a fighter compensating for having one arm tied behind his back.

More ominously for the party, they won't work going forward. Republican nominees won't be able to count on the economy working in their favor every election. And, with the Latino vote at close to 10% of the electorate and growing fast, they won't be able to win without a more diverse coalition. In Florida, the battleground state where the convention is being held, 13.1% of registered voters are Hispanic.

For these reasons, sensible voices are urging the party to be less rigid on immigration matters and to find ways to appeal to immigrant voters. Former Florida governor Jeb Bush, for one, has urged a change in tone. He is one of several GOP insiders who has backed a proposal known as the DREAM Act, which would give legal status to people who came here as a child and meet certain requirements.

This type of approach, of being for tough immigration enforcement but tempering it with policies that show a humane touch, is the right one for the Republican Party and the nation. The specific elements of smart reform

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remain the same as when George W. Bush proposed them: securing the borders, combined with sanctions on employers who hire illegal workers, a guest-worker program for certain manual laborers, and a path to legality for immigrants already here who pay taxes and stay out of trouble.

For the GOP, a ***harsh***, enforcement-only approach is a sure fire route to being labeled as anti-immigrant and mean-spirited. That's not a place where it wants to find itself. Which is why it will need to do more than load up its convention program with native Spanish speakers.

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