

Virginia's Message to the GOP

By Leslie Sanchez

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Republicans nationally should draw a number of lessons from the party's unsuccessful effort to take back the Virginia governor's mansion this month. One of the more obvious ones is that the anti-tax party has to lead with an anti-tax candidate. Republican Jerry Kilgore, in his effort to win the backing of the Northern Virginia business community, played down his historical anti-tax leanings. He got the business support but lost the election.

There is, however, a more subtle but potentially as important lesson for Republicans that could be drowned out by the tax discussion: When it comes to immigration, dropping the word "illegal" into any anti-immigration proposal is not likely to work electoral magic.

In his stump speeches and in his television ads, Kilgore hit his Democratic opponent, Tim Kaine, on the immigration issue but was careful to use the word "illegal" in his rhetoric at every turn, as if that alone were some kind of magic bullet.

This is the stuff of GOP consultants and pollsters, who advise that even legal immigrants are opposed to "illegal" immigration. That's true, of course: Nobody defends those who flout the law, and resentment is especially acute among those who have gone to extreme lengths to comply. What these advisers miss, however, is the question of intensity: Substantial numbers of immigrants (not to mention their children and grandchildren, too) hear attacks on "illegal" immigration as attacks on them -- so that a discussion of, say, day laborers can quickly turn into an anti-Hispanic free-for-all.

Hispanics know from experience that most people can't tell the difference between legal and illegal immigrants or, in many cases, between immigrants and U.S.-born, Spanish-speaking Hispanics -- so they just assume the worst absent proof to the contrary.

It's not just Hispanics, though. Kilgore lost reliably Republican and conservative Prince William and Loudoun counties -- places where he issued a strong call for a "crackdown" on illegal immigration. Why? One reason may be that close to 15,000 Muslims -- many of them immigrants -- live in those counties, and, according to some post-election survey data, they supported Democrats by close to 30 to 1. Kilgore is the first Republican since 1989 to lose those two counties.

Republicans embrace anti-immigrant fervor at their peril. The party is perilously close to adopting as its immigration policy the hanging of a "closed" sign on the border. To do so would be a gross mistake that would oversimplify the problem and set back all the efforts of President Bush to build bridges to America's growing population of Hispanics while finding a workable solution to a complex problem, one with far-ranging political consequences for the party over the long run.

To be sure, the issue of illegal immigration is a serious one that needs and deserves to be addressed: No one should make light of the genuine resentment some people feel. Almost 40 years of immigrant vote-buying by advocates of the liberal welfare state has only made matters worse. The point the party must absorb is that while it's one thing to talk about specific policies, it's quite another to issue broadsides that reinforce the perception of a Republican Party that is, in its soul, intolerant.

Republicans would do well to recognize the folly in the approach used by Kilgore before recommending it to other candidates. Rather than a comprehensive approach to the problem broadly defined as immigration, they would do well to break it down into its constituent parts: border security, public policies that inhibit assimilation, the issue of guest workers and the problem of illegal immigration itself. It is time to recognize that the problem may be too big and too complex to approach with one big bill.

Ham-fisted attacks by Kilgore and others on illegal immigrants, while political red meat for some, cause many in our coalition -- particularly Hispanics and suburban women -- to recoil. For them, such attacks run counter to the Reaganite image of America as a welcoming land of opportunity, a place where anyone can -- through hard work, smarts and a little luck -- pursue happiness as the Founding Fathers intended. Immigrants from around the world made this country, and immigrants will continue to make this country a better place, a fact that no great political party can ignore for long.

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