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Donald Trump's Rise Threatens to Undo GOP's Post-2012 Latino Outreach

Insults and calls for mass deportations are at odds with much-touted Growth and Opportunity Project report

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In the weeks following Republican Mitt Romney's Electoral College drubbing after getting just 27 percent of the Latino vote, GOP leaders came up with a plan.

They would go into Hispanic communities to build relationships based on shared, traditional values. They would push an immigration overhaul to end the fear of deportation hanging over 11 million people in the country illegally. Most important, they would do all this in a respectful manner.

“If we want ethnic minority voters to support Republicans, we have to engage them and show our sincerity,” the 2013 “Growth and Opportunity Project” report stated. “If Hispanics think we do not want them here, they will close their ears to our policies.”

All this, of course, was before celebrity businessman Donald Trump, channeling the party's virulently anti-immigrant wing, has all but torn up the plan, doused it with lighter fluid, and set it on fire.

In the three months since he formally entered the GOP presidential hunt, Trump has:

Called Mexicans who cross the border illegally “rapists;”

Promised a massive border wall along the entire Mexican border, and promised to make Mexico pay for it;

Called for an end to the birthright-citizenship guarantee in the 14th Amendment, which gives children born in this country U.S. citizenship regardless of their parents' status;

Called for the deportation of all 11 million people in this country illegally, including their children who were born here;

Retweeted to his 4 million followers (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>) a taunt about former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's ability to "speak Mexican;"

Chided Bush, whose wife is a native of Mexico, for speaking Spanish on the campaign trail.

"It's pure hate," said Diego Sanchez, an immigration activist who himself was brought into the United States unlawfully at a young age by his parents. "I don't know how he plans to run for president with that kind of language in the Latino community."

Sanchez met with Trump two years ago, and said that Trump at the time seemed reasonable and open to immigration reforms. He said Trump's new, harsher language and positions seem to have come with his presidential run. "I feel bad for the Republican Party because he is making them look bad."

It's a view shared by an author of the party's 2013 report.

"The things he is espousing are absolutely detrimental to the party," said Ari Fleischer, a spokesman to former President George W. Bush. "For every good point Trump makes, he makes so many derogatory, nasty points. He loses people when he should be winning people."

Polls already show that Latinos have a dim view of Trump. The big question for Fleischer and other top Republicans: whether that distaste will remain contained to Trump, or grow into a renewed disgust with the GOP primary field generally.

In fairness, Trump did not create the party's Latino problem by himself. A comprehensive immigration overhaul actually passed the Senate in June 2013. But after dozens of House Republicans made their opposition to the plan clear, Speaker John Boehner let the bill die

rather than pass it using mainly Democratic votes. And while Jeb Bush has been hammering Trump for weeks and even more so recently—“Those are dog-whistle terms,” Bush said of the “speak Mexican” remark—some of the other Republican candidates have declined to criticize Trump. One, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, has essentially allied himself with him, even inviting him to a Capitol rally where he hugged him and called him “my friend.”

Sean Spicer, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said that what Trump or any other candidate says today will not necessarily matter a year from now heading into the general election, particularly given the party’s “unprecedented” outreach in minority communities. “It’s very early to assess that,” he said. “We’re still in a primary.”

Yet it was in the primary season of the 2012 election that the debate over illegal immigration led Romney to suggest that those in the country illegally should “self-deport.”

Democrats keyed in on that phrase specifically and on the tenor of the debate generally, and successfully sold many Latinos on the idea that the Republican Party was not their friend. This was acknowledged in the GOP postelection report, which became known as the 2012 “autopsy.”

“If Hispanic Americans perceive that a GOP nominee or candidate does not want them in the United States (i.e. self-deportation), they will not pay attention to our next sentence. It does not matter what we say about education, jobs or the economy,” the report said.

The authors also restated the underlying shifts in the population that have led to five Republican popular-vote losses in the last six presidential elections.

“The nation’s demographic changes add to the urgency of recognizing how precarious our position has become,” the report stated. “In 1980, exit polls tell us that the electorate was 88 percent white. In 2012, it was 72 percent white. Hispanics made up 7 percent of the electorate in 2000, 8 percent in 2004, 9 percent in 2008 and 10 percent in 2012. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2050, whites will be 47 percent of the country while Hispanics will grow to 29 percent and Asians to 9 percent.”

In other words, Republicans could no longer win the presidency relying on white people, as they were able to do during the 1970s and 1980s, when the so-called “Southern Strategy” relied on a solid bloc of Southern states, plus California and the Mountain West, to deliver the White House.

Yet it is precisely that outreach to minorities and those changing demographics that many “base” Republicans—particularly men with no college education, disproportionately from the South—find so troubling.

“For a lot of the Republican base, things like being nicer to immigrants is seen as RINO-ism,” said Tom Jensen of the Democratic-leaning Public Policy Polling, referring to the epithet “Republican in Name Only.”

In a recent PPP poll of Republican voters nationally, twice as many Trump supporters wanted to do away with birthright citizenship as wanted to leave it alone—the exact opposite of the way Jeb Bush supporters answered that question. (Similarly, twice as many Trump supporters believe President Obama was born outside the United States as believe he was born in this country. Among Bush supporters, the ratio is five-to-one in the other direction.)

“Republican voters think the country is changing very fast in a way they don’t like, and Trump is seen as a way of putting the brakes on that,” Jensen said. “These people don’t want to apologize for what they believe, and Trump doesn’t apologize.”

For which Democrats have two words: Thank you.

“He adds some much-needed seriousness that has previously been lacking from the GOP field,” read a Democratic National Committee statement when Trump joined the race in June.

Amusement turned to barely concealed glee when polls began showing Trump taking the GOP lead, both nationally, and in key early-voting states, at which point the DNC started imputing Trump’s remarks and views on the rest of the field.

“This is a Republican presidential field that is taking its cues on immigration policy from Donald Trump. Whether it is mass deportation, repealing deportation relief that keeps families together, or rejecting a pathway to citizenship, each Republican presidential contender is as bad as the next one,” read an August statement.

Even Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton, whose speeches can be flat and plodding, seems to let loose and enjoy herself when discussing Trump. Speaking at the DNC summer meeting in Minneapolis recently, Clinton reinforced the message that Trump basically spoke for the entire GOP field.

“They’re Trump without the pizzazz or the hair,” she said, before allowing that she could empathize with Trump in at least one respect. “You know, a lot of people have said a lot of things about my hair over the years. So I do kind of know what Donald is going through.”

It’s unclear how effective this strategy might be a year from now if neither Trump nor a candidate who publicly supported him winds up as the Republican nominee. But the fact that it’s a possibility at all means the GOP is not where party leaders had hoped to be heading into 2016.

“It could matter,” Fleischer said, but he added that the upcoming televised debate at the Reagan Library could help undo some of the damage—should one or more of the other candidates start challenging Trump on stage.

“If Trump is the nominee, he’s fatally flawed,” Fleischer said. “On the other hand, let’s say that he loses the primary and he loses to someone who took him on. That could be a huge opening for that candidate.”