

Trump's Racial Appeals Trap the GOP Inside its Own Base

Instead of reaching out to minorities, the Republican front-runner has tailored his appeal to whites.



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What happens when a dog whistle is replaced by a megaphone?

Republican Party leaders appear to be finding out, as reality-TV star Donald Trump continues winning by openly and loudly appealing to the grievances of working-class white voters—voters that Republican candidates have successfully courted for years, only with less-inflammatory language.

“You can go all the way back to Nixon,” said Alan Abramowitz, a demographer at Emory University. “But Trump takes it to another level. Clearly that resonates with a very large percentage of the Republican base.”

What’s giving party leaders fits is that Trump has confined his appeal to

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What's giving party leaders pause is that Trump has cornered his appeal to that slice of the base instead of trying to broaden the party's appeal.

Katie Packer, a former top aide to 2012 GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney, distilled the frustration of mainstream Republicans the night of Trump's first big victory, in the New Hampshire primary. On Twitter, she pointed out that populist firebrand Pat Buchanan had once won that contest. "Shows that a racist who doesn't represent the soul of the GOP can win there," she wrote.

Packer, who is now running a super PAC to defeat Trump, said Trump's statements are rife with "racial resentments," and that's attracting a certain kind of voter. "Thirty-eight percent of Trump's supporters wish the South had won the Civil War," she said, referring to a recent poll. "I think that's a very dramatic number."

Of course, race had been playing a major role in Republican presidential-campaign strategy for a quarter-century before Buchanan's 1996 run.

When Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, he told an aide that he'd likely handed the South to the Republicans for a long time. In the Electoral College, adding the former states of the Confederacy to the "R" column gave the GOP a virtual lock on the presidency. An aide to Richard Nixon, Kevin Phillips, even spelled this out in his 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, in which he predicted that Nixon's presidency would be "the beginning of a new Republican era."

The Solid South did indeed deliver—Nixon won in 1972 (Nixon won in 1968, too, but former Alabama Gov. George Wallace won five Southern states running as a segregationist), Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, George H.W. Bush in 1988, and George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. It got to where Democrats came to believe that only a Southerner such as Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton could possibly win the presidency by breaking Republicans' stranglehold on the region.

Republican campaigns used cultural codes to remind noncollege-educated white voters all over the country, but particularly in the South, that their complaints were understood. Reagan spoke about welfare moms who drove Cadillacs. George H.W. Bush highlighted furloughed murderer Willie Horton. George W. Bush refused to condemn South Carolina's flying of the Confederate flag from atop its statehouse. The veiled racial messages spoke to that key bloc of white voters, even if they didn't reflect the views of party leadership or the candidates themselves.

During his South Carolina primary battle against George W. Bush in 2000, John McCain also said the flag was a local issue to be decided by

South Carolinians. After he left the race that year, he came out against it. “I should have done this earlier, when an honest answer could have affected me personally,” McCain said then. “I did not do so for one reason alone. I feared that if I answered honestly, I could not win the South Carolina primary.”

McCain, as it happens, lost when he did win the nomination eight years later—but not to a southern Democratic governor. Rather, he was defeated by a liberal, African-American law professor from Chicago, a result that put an exclamation point on demographic shifts that had been under way for years.

California started voting Democratic in presidential elections in 1992, thanks to many more Mexican-American voters. Florida, with large influxes of Puerto Ricans and other non-Cuban Hispanics, became a true swing state in 2000, followed by Colorado in 2004, and Virginia in 2008.

While the deep South remains solidly Republican, it’s no longer enough. Instead of enjoying a near guarantee to win the White House, Republicans now start each election in a hole a couple of dozen electoral votes deep.

Ironically, this coming election was to be the one to change that.

In 2013, after Romney lost to President Obama, the Republican National Committee set out to diagnose why. The resulting “Growth and Opportunity Project” scolded the party for failing to reach out to minority communities—particularly Latinos, the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country.

“If Hispanics think we do not want them here, they will close their ears to our policies,” the report stated.

Party leaders agreed that letting the immigration discussion devolve—to the point where the front-runner advocated making life so difficult for undocumented immigrants that they would “self-deport”—was not ultimately helpful in the general election.

Three years later, that language pales in comparison to what the GOP front-runner has been saying about minorities this time—from labeling illegal immigrants as rapists, to caricaturing Chinese businessmen, to stereotyping Jews, to calling for a complete ban on Muslims from entering the country.

Packer said Trump’s approach goes far beyond merely empathizing with white voters who feel they’ve been left behind. “Ginning up and playing to those fears is what I think is a mistake.” she said “The danger for Re-

to those terms is what I think is a mistake," she said. The danger for the republicans is we can't win as a party if only white people vote for us in the general election."

According to Abramowitz, it might be too late to do anything about that, at least for this November. "The party leadership understood that and understands that and there's nothing they can do about it this year," he said. "The party is trapped by its own base."

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