

A CONFLICT OF CULTURE OR CONSCIENCE: RE-READING THE 2006 ELECTION

ALLON BRANN

In 1924, as the United States Congress debated the Johnson-Reed immigration act, Senator Ellison Smith of South Carolina took to the Senate floor to assert what he believed to be the country's need to "shut the door." "Without offense," Smith ironically declared, "but with regard to the salvation of our own, let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own American resources." While Smith believed this "purity" could best be achieved through immigration restriction harsher than that created by the already restrictive bill on the table, he was willing to vote for the bill's quotas, as were most of his colleagues. Although Smith's racist arguments were not indicative of the entire chamber's calculus for vetting the bill, it was nonetheless approved with overwhelming support and signed into law the same year ("Shut the Door").

Over eighty years later, a similar scene unfolded in the halls of Congress. During a speech to the House of Representatives in September of 2006 regarding a bill which would strengthen the investigatory powers of law enforcement, Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo invoked the supposed criminal activity of illegal immigrants in his state to garner support for what he called "our true and one single responsibility" (United States Congress). In effect, the responsibility was to deal with the increasing illegal alien population of the country, a cause with which Tancredo, the Chairman of the House Immigration Reform Caucus and author of *In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America's Border and Security*, had long been associated ("Biography").

The juxtaposition of these two moments in legislative history offers a glimpse into America's seemingly never-ending conflict with immigration, particularly illegal immigration. The racism of Smith's time evolved into the more refined nativist streak in politicians like Tancredo, one which arguably placed him to the right of his colleagues on the issue (like Smith himself). However, such an acknowledgment must be treated cautiously; perhaps the more proper angle from which to consider Tancredo's position is in relation to the view of the American public. With equal caution, we can submit the Congressional elections of 2006 as the measuring stick with which to gauge the electorate's perception of illegal immigration and the nativist response it may have drawn in various political circles. More complex but perhaps more relevant would be to view the election as a moment of internal struggle, the latest development of the existential conflict in which the "nation of immigrants" attempts to define itself.

Less than two weeks before the midterm elections, President Bush signed a law authorizing the construction of a seven-hundred-mile fence on the border with Mexico. While many critics decried the ludicrous inefficacy and difficulty of the fence's

construction, to the shrewd political observer the intent was not pragmatism but rather political opportunism; Republicans seemed to believe that a platform highlighting immigration control would aid them in the coming election. As Michael Fletcher and Jonathan Weisman of the *Washington Post* astutely noted, the bill had backed President Bush into a corner, with “international allies and his own immigration principles on one side, and the electoral needs of his party on the other” (A04). Bush’s signing of the law effectively heralded his resignation to the political reality, an acceptance of the fence as willed by the people.

Taking the passage of the fence construction bill as the definitive emergence of immigration as a Republican issue for voters in 2006, we can consider the party’s tactics in passing the law a mixed success. According to the CNN National Exit Poll for the U.S. House, of the sixty-two percent of voters who considered illegal immigration either “very” or “extremely” important in 2006, the majority voted for Republican candidates (“U.S. House of Representatives/National/Exit Poll”). On the one hand, this figure seems to indicate voters’ recognition of Republican efforts on the immigration issue. However, the significant national net losses by the Republican Party might point to the relegation of the immigration issue among the priorities of the electorate. While it seems likely that the favorable response to the Republican immigration agenda was that party’s reward for pragmatic legislative effort (the mere passage of the fence bill), it is also reasonable to conclude that the average American voter did not undergo a radical ideological shift, such as an adoption of nativism as a guiding philosophy on the issue.

Whether or not the election returns and the polling data on immigration specifically were a referendum on American *personal* sentiment towards immigrants, the results lend credibility to the notion that American identity is not marked by a prejudicial nativism. Moreover, if the voters approved of Republican immigration policy because of its emphasis on external (at the border) rather than internal control, the results would be in line with larger international trends. According to a study by Angel Solano Garcia which asks, “Does illegal immigration empower rightist parties?” in most developed nations where the issue is framed (and parties distinguished) by level of commitment to border enforcement, voters tend to heavily favor right-wing parties when they connect illegal immigration to a sense of insecurity (652). This projection validates the statistics provided by the CNN exit poll that asked voters what should be done with “most” illegal immigrants currently living in the U.S. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said that illegal residents should be “offered legal status,” while thirty-eight percent favored deportation (“U.S. House of Representatives/National/Exit Poll”). The willingness of the majority to grant amnesty (a term as fervently avoided by many politicians as a scarlet letter of treason) in some form to illegal immigrants would seem to preclude any evidence of nativist bias among most voters. Of course, the thirty-eight percent minority in support of deportation is significant, and we can speculate that those voters responded to the “border security is national security”

trope. Even if the distinction between the two responding constituencies is conditioned by the influence of nativism on the part of the minority, it would adhere to Garcia's model, given the fact that fifty-six percent of that minority voted for Republican candidates ("U.S. House of Representatives/National/Exit Poll").

The national data is useful to the extent that it can help us form a picture of the average voter's attitude towards the parties' portrayal of the illegal immigration issue, as well as their respective success in reconciling pragmatic security concerns with heavier moral ones. By isolating certain races of note in 2006, we can build on that portrait in order to better understand how such considerations were weighed on a more local level. The southwest region is the most likely candidate for closer observation in any immigration study, owing to its higher concentration of illegal immigrants and the tendency for that presence to pervade the realm of state and local politics. In Arizona's fifth congressional district, the defeat of Rep. J.D. Hayworth was hailed by many supporters of the "path to citizenship" plan for alien residents as a symbolic victory for their cause, part of an overall American repudiation of conservative restrictive policies (Archibold).

At first glance, it seems reasonable to conclude that voters rejected Hayworth's relatively "hardline" position on illegal immigration. Hayworth, like Congressman Tancredo, authored a book on the subject entitled *Whatever it Takes*, which sparked controversy both in his district and nationally for, among other things, its employment of a quotation from Henry Ford (Giblin). In addition, the *Arizona Republic*, an influential community publication, called Hayworth a "bully," and asserted that the district needed "a bridge-builder, not a bomb-thrower" (Myers). If we were to assume that these characterizations represent a prevalent view of Hayworth within his district, we would concurrently assume that the voters of the fifth district favored tempered rhetoric and moderation of policy (in the hope that it would lead to pragmatic legislative achievement) over more fiery, divisive postures.

Unfortunately, the presence on the statewide ballot of Proposition 103 complicates such an assessment. Proposition 103, which called for the adoption of English as the official language of Arizona as well as the limitation of multilingual government programs, was passed with 74.2% of the vote ("Voters Make English"). Traditionally, measures such as this one have been perceived as the hallmark of the modern nativist effort. Why then did an overwhelming expression of statewide disapproval for the intrusion of immigrant language into American communities not translate into a victory for Hayworth and his restrictive platform? After all, the characterization of the passage by one leader of the English-first campaign, Mauro Mujica, as Arizona's call for "assimilation, not separation," was strikingly reminiscent of what was rejected by many as nativism in Hayworth's *Whatever it Takes* ("Voters Make English"). "Instead of Americanization," Hayworth wrote, current policy offers "bilingual education, racial and ethnic quotas, and education that focuses not on American heroes and culture, but on a potpourri of ethnic heroes and cultures" (qtd. in Giblin).

Unless popular opinion in the fifth district differs extraordinarily from that of Arizona as a whole, it seems clear that Hayworth's support for "Americanism" rather than so-called "multiculturalism" was not the voters' chief grievance with their congressman. Overall, Arizonans may have felt that in fact, the defense of English (and perhaps transitively in their minds, the defense of strictly "American" culture) was as essential a tool on the illegal immigration front as physical border security itself. But the fact that Proposition 103 was passed irrespective of party or ideological affiliation—exit polls indicate the measure was approved by fifty-four percent and fifty-three percent of Democrats and Liberals, respectively—shows that while Hayworth may have been on the right side of the issue for some voters, like many Republicans nationwide he may simply have been a member of the wrong party for this election ("Ballot Measures/Arizona Proposition 103/Exit Poll").

However, even support for Proposition 103 does not lend itself to the embrace of nativism as a guiding philosophy without reservation. Exit polling estimates that fifty-five percent of all Arizona voters supported the granting of legal status to current illegal residents ("Ballot Measures/Arizona Proposition 103/Exit Poll"). It is this statistic more than any other that exposes the suggested "existential conflict" over immigration. The stated motives of proponents of Proposition 103 are designed to distance, or even reject, an explicit nativism. Consider the rationale offered by Arizona State Rep. Russell Pearce to voters considering the Proposition that "Official English promotes unity" and "empowers immigrants" ("Ballot argument FOR Proposition 103"). If sincere, these assertions could hardly be considered anti-immigrant. Rather, they, along with Pearce's contention that the measure will eliminate government waste, appeal to an *inclusive* persuasion. Therefore, the "existential conflict" is essentially the struggle to reconcile Americans' tendency towards the so-called "Americanism" and "Americanization" with the previously embraced "melting pot" theory of societal development. The difficulty lies in validating the belief that these new systems allow for an equally smooth and efficient integration of an immigrant population into American communities.

Further, Rep. Hayworth's framing of the issue sheds light on the rhetorical ambiguity surrounding this conflict. It is doubtful that most supporters of English-first legislation, such as Mujica, would assert that assimilation through language (and perhaps other responsibilities of American citizenship) mandates the purging of ethnic identity. Rather, their philosophy accepts the ethnic "potpourri," which Hayworth decried, as a viable part of American life. Indeed, most would maintain that a confluence of ethnic traditions created and continues to create American culture, rather than threaten it. It is clear then that their call for "assimilation" is far more benign than Hayworth's "Americanization," which seems to equate the adoption of English with that of an exceedingly narrow view of American identity. And inevitably, this view of identity is based in potentially harmful racial distinctions, rather than inclusive patriotic sentiment.

Of course, Arizona cannot legitimately be considered a microcosm for the entire United States. As the national polling data indicated, American voters may have been less concerned with immigrant integration than Arizonans were when they voted in 2006. Therefore a consideration of a case outside of the southwest, a region we might even consider “tainted” for study given the way in which the economic and cultural effects of immigration may prejudice votes, can be used to return to a more general study of national opinion. The election in the sixth district of Illinois, another one of the key swing races in 2006, may illuminate how illegal immigration was used or misused as an issue among the rest of the electorate.

The race in the sixth district pitted Democrat Tammy Duckworth, an Iraq war veteran, against Peter Roskam, a Republican state legislator (“The 2006 Campaign”). Not surprisingly given Duckworth’s combat experience, Democratic strategists hoped to use this race to emphasize their party’s commitment to national security and defense issues, which were traditionally in the Republican corner. Also not surprising given the national dissatisfaction with Iraq was Roskam’s refusal to make that war a major focus of his campaign. However, he did not shy away from the issue of illegal immigration, a decision which ultimately may have greatly helped him secure victory. Roskam opposed the “path to citizenship” legislation and supported fence construction on the border (“Border Security/Illegal Immigration”).

By conventional standards, Roskam’s decision to incorporate immigration into the debate is rather puzzling. Considering the overall national distaste for the Republican record, sticking to the prevailing wisdom of treating local issues primarily in a House race would have been the logical strategy. If a Republican candidate were to widen the discourse to the national scale, they would open themselves up to attacks based more on party affiliation than on personal record. However, Roskam did just that, allowing illegal immigration to come into play as the primary issue in the national security field.

It was certainly not the issue Democrats had hoped would emerge. But the question remains: why would voters respond favorably to Roskam’s posturing on illegal immigration when the issue affected their district only tangentially? While we cannot assume that Roskam won solely on this point of contention, it undoubtedly played a role in his victory. One reasonable inference is that the voters of the Illinois sixth considered immigration an economic threat first and foremost. Perhaps the same protectionist sentiment ridden by some Democratic candidates, such as Rep. Sherrod Brown in the Ohio Senate race, to victory in 2006 aided Roskam in this case in the sense that voters were attentive to the potential economic consequences of expanded immigration and amnesty. If voters supported Roskam’s campaign platform, which stated, “We are a nation of immigrants, but we are also a nation of laws,” we can identify a new voice in the existential debate, one that hearkens to the call of immigration control not out of bias or even the integration of “Americanism” (“Border Security/Illegal Immigration”). Rather, this constituency responds to a sense of “crowding”—the imposition of immigrant economic needs (not cultural ones) on

the country. As the sixth district shows us, the crowding can be just as potent hundreds of miles from the source.

While the 2006 election failed to produce a clear consensus on immigration, it cemented the status of the issue as far more complex and relevant than previous agents of electoral polarization. Indeed, we now see that immigration is not a polemic of the same fabric as the much-hyped “moral values” debate of 2004; the issue is impaired by hyperbole yet rejects the tendency to divide along traditional regional and social contours. The identity crisis observed among the American electorate is one which will continue to compound the national immigration debate, fostering a confused politics in which voters are unable to define themselves according to philosophies traditionally recognized by politicians. Still, perhaps only by recognizing the impossibility of settling this internal discord—of reaching a cultural consensus—will we reject the disquieting politics of anxiety that currently reigns in public discourse.

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