



# RESURGENT REPUBLIC

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Ed Gillespie and John McLaughlin

**DATE:** March 28, 2013

**RE:** Immigration Reform Through the Lens of Republican Primary Voters

In the second installment of our Beyond the Ballot research series, Resurgent Republic sponsored four focus groups on immigration reform with Republican primary voters in Des Moines, Iowa, and Greenville, South Carolina. These Republican voters self-identified as conservatives and said they regularly vote in Republican primaries. On the presidential level, all the participants in Iowa attended at least one Republican presidential caucus; in South Carolina, all the participants voted in both the 2008 and 2012 Republican presidential primaries. The immigration reform focus groups were separated by gender and conducted by McLaughlin & Associates.



Resurgent Republic has done extensive public opinion research on the challenges and opportunities Republicans face among the Hispanic community. Majorities of Latino voters in swing states believe the Republican Party does not respect their values and concerns, according to our post-election analysis. This opinion results from rhetoric from a small, but vocal, number of Republicans that has characterized past immigration debates.

President Obama's reelection victory, and Republicans' shrinking support among non-white voters, has been a seminal moment for conservatives. That is why we felt it important to qualitatively gauge Republican primary voters on this issue. Previous Resurgent Republic research makes it clear that immigration reform should not be viewed as a one-step panacea guaranteeing Republican inroads among Hispanic voters. Yet it is a critically important step in a long-term effort.

- 1. Republican primary voters strongly support *legal* immigration and are receptive to messages advocating the values and benefits of such policies.** Nearly all participants believe immigration policy should encourage the values of the American Dream. On this point, participants volunteer descriptors such as "freedom," "opportunity," "hard work," and an ability "to make a better life for themselves." There's also a challenge in that most participants have had little to no interaction with today's legal immigration system. Their only reference point is a family lineage that passed through Ellis Island several generations ago. They're largely unaware of the inefficiencies that arise with the current

bureaucratic legal system, such as a foreign student who earned a diploma in the United States and cannot receive a green card in a timely fashion or skilled and non-skilled immigrant workers who suffer because the visa system doesn't match economic needs. Republican primary voters align with the values of legal immigration and favor reforms to make the legal process more efficient and less arduous.

2. **Universally deporting undocumented immigrants is viewed as an impractical solution in fixing the immigration system.** Republican primary voters strongly oppose illegal immigration and are quick to emphasize the rule of law. Yet nearly all of participants in Iowa and South Carolina do not believe 11 million undocumented immigrants should be deported. They're able to balance their strong support for the rule of law with the notion that deportation is impractical due to logistical, economic, moral, and social concerns. These Republican primary voters readily reached the conclusion that mass deportation creates more problems than it solves.
3. **A pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants is acceptable to Republican primary voters if it is an earned process and fair to those who are already legally in the system.** Republican primary voters believe any process that creates an earned pathway to citizenship should be a rigid, yet workable, set of requirements. We opened this discussion by positing that after the border is secure, undocumented immigrants seeking citizenship would have to meet the following requirements:
  - Pass a criminal background check (and those with a criminal record will be deported);
  - Pay a fine, back taxes, and continue to pay taxes;
  - Demonstrate a knowledge of the English language and American history;
  - Be put in the "back of the line" and not given preferential treatment in becoming a citizen.

*"I'd welcome them,"* said a Des Moines woman when asked her response to somebody who completed this process. Another Hawkeye Republican made it clear that *"if you did it legally, you should be up front"* in the line to citizenship. And an Iowa man emphasized the *"need to secure the border before you do that"* or else the immigration system would be perpetually broken.

In the Palmetto State, a Republican woman worried whether this process *"sets a bad precedent."* Another woman disagreed with that conclusion saying she wasn't *"totally against a pathway as long as they are paying a fine."* A Republican male clearly delineated between an earned pathway and amnesty: *"I don't think it's the same as amnesty. We are putting them at the back of the line. If someone came here legally, then they will be legal in a couple of years."*

It's certainly worth noting the phrase "pathway to citizenship" is largely undefined. Participants in Iowa and South Carolina did not put this terminology within the context of immigration reform or have an immediate reaction equating the phrase to amnesty. As the debate progresses, there's an opportunity to clearly distinguish between a lengthy process in which undocumented immigrants could earn legal residency or citizenship and freely

granting that status in a way that absolves any wrongdoing. For example, it was new information to all the participants that the timeline for an earned pathway is likely 10 years or more.

Moreover, in addressing the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country, it's important for Republicans to have this discussion in context of alternatives. There are no easy solutions. Mass deportation is impractical on many fronts, and President Obama should not have carte blanche authority to fix the immigration system.

**4. Republican primary voters believe any immigration reform plan must secure the border and not offer public assistance incentives to undocumented immigrants.**

- *Border Enforcement* – universally, all participants agree that stronger border enforcement is absolutely necessary before moving forward with any plan for legal residency or earned citizenship. Republican primary voters often cite the need to “enforce our laws,” whether that is border patrol agents or building a wall on the U.S. – Mexico border.

The fact that 40 percent of undocumented immigrants came to America *legally* but overstayed their visas is new information to Republican voters. Likewise, they're unaware that an exit system is not in place today to help solve this problem. Such new information helps Republican primary voters understand that immigration reform should include provisions in addition to border enforcement.

- *Public assistance* – many participants believe undocumented immigrants unfairly benefit today from taxpayer-funded services such as education, food stamps, and health care services. This was one of the most frequently repeated themes in our groups, often generating more intensity than the pathway to citizenship discussion. Republicans can make the case to base supporters that immigration reform is needed in order to help correct abuses in the system.

**5. Like the electorate at large, the issue of immigration reform is not the top priority for Republican primary voters, but they do believe Republicans should lead on immigration reform.** When asked to identify the most important issue facing the country, the men and women groups cite the economy, spending, debt, and health care. They are following the immigration reform debate from a distance right now, and their topline responses center on border enforcement. They support Republicans leading on immigration and say the nation needs to figure out a solution to the undocumented immigrants here already. They do not want to cede this issue to President Obama or congressional Democrats.

The groups in Iowa and South Carolina are familiar that Republicans such as former Governor Jeb Bush and Senator Marco Rubio are leading figures on this issue and both are viewed favorably. It's clear that Senator Rubio's presence in this debate creates a significant amount of goodwill among the Republican base. As one Des Moines woman

said when commenting on a potential pathway to citizenship, *“I’d like to see what Marco Rubio comes up with. I trust him.”*<sup>1</sup>

- 6. The Republican base recognizes the need for their party to broaden its support in order to remain politically relevant.** Few things bring clarity of thought like defeat. Participants rattled off several reasons as to why President Obama won reelection, including messaging, candidate quality, media bias, and the president’s personal popularity. Republicans’ deficit among women and non-white voters also made the list. Several participants made the case for Republican candidates to do a better job appealing to the Hispanic community.

In South Carolina, one voter said Republicans *“need to take out ads on Spanish language television”* and *“explain this is who we are and what we believe.”* One Iowa women concluded, *“What the Republicans need to do is present to Hispanic voters their beliefs.”* The Hispanic community is not monolithic and polling shows many prefer a more activist role of government, but in order to appeal to swing Latino voters the Republican base sees the need to show up. One Palmetto State woman set the scene for failing do so, *“If we continue to be so off in the corner, that’s where we’re going to stay.”*

## CONCLUSIONS

1. These Republican base voters strongly support *legal* immigration. Regardless of their individual positions on immigration reform, Republicans should open any discussion on this issue highlighting the benefits legal immigration brings to America.
2. Immigration reform is not on the radar of the Republican base. They are following this issue from a distance, so Republicans seeking to pass broad based immigration policies need to make the case as to why this is necessary.
3. Participants agree that mass deportation of undocumented immigrants would create more problems than it solves and they cite logistical, economic, moral, and social concerns with doing so.
4. Securing the border is foundational before implementing an earned citizenship process.
5. In order to be acceptable for Republican primary voters, any potential pathway to citizenship should be defined as a lengthy, rigid, and workable process that results in an earned status. It does not absolve wrongdoing.
6. Solutions addressing undocumented immigrants should be presented in the context of alternatives. There are no easy fixes and Republican voters oppose giving President Obama carte blanche authority on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> These focus groups occurred prior to Senator Rand Paul's announcement supporting a pathway to citizenship (March 19, 2013).

## **FOCUS GROUPS ON IMMIGRATION REFORM**

Republican primary voters in these four focus groups were self-described conservatives and always support Republican candidates.

Des Moines, Iowa

March 5, 2013

Groups separated by gender

Conducted by McLaughlin & Associates

Greenville, South Carolina

March 11, 2013

Groups separated by gender

Conducted by McLaughlin & Associates