



Democrats face law and order dilemma

By DAVID PAUL KUHN

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The rising American discontent with illegal immigration has the potential to sever Democrats from the majority of voters — especially those in the working and middle class — like no issue has in four decades.

During the mid-1900s, Hubert Humphrey was one of the toughest anti-crime mayors in America. But by the 1968 presidential campaign both Republican Richard Nixon and independent George Wallace were viewed as more capable than the Democratic nominee of doing the “best job in handling law and order,” according to a poll that year.

Another survey found that urban upheaval was considered a top concern by nearly as many Americans as the war in Vietnam.

Now some Democrats are accusing Republicans of demagoguery over illegal immigration. Liberals tried a similar strategy in 1968 over riots, crime and racial unrest. While there may have been merit to some of these charges, it was Democrats who ended up paying a political price.

Democrats in 1968 focused heavily on courting the black vote, then roughly one in 10 voters. There was a sense that Democrats could not emphasize curtailing riots and rising crime without devaluing hard-won gains in civil rights.

Liberals rightly emphasized the problem of rampant police abuse. But they glossed over the fact that lawlessness was increasingly defining American life — between 1960 and 1972, the violent crime and robbery rate tripled and the aggravated assault, rape and murder rates all doubled.

Republicans focused on urban upheaval as a campaign issue when Democrats would not, and they found a way to reach white working- and middle-class voters.

Today Democrats are focused on courting Hispanics, who made up an estimated 8 percent of the presidential vote in 2004.

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Conventional wisdom has it that Republicans will slip into permanent minority party status if they fail to woo Hispanics, which critics suggest means softening the party's traditional hard-line stance on immigration.


That could very well happen in three decades, as demographic trends continue to slip away from the GOP.

But Democrats have more to lose in the short term over the immigration issue. After all, the vast majority of blacks (76 percent) and whites (86 percent) oppose issuing driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, an October CNN/Opinion Research poll found.

And when a recent Gallup Poll asked Americans what the "top priorities" of the president and Congress should be, combating illegal immigration was topped only by dealing with the war in Iraq.

The real problem for Democrats, however, is that the very voters they need to win back are most concerned over immigration.

Veteran liberal strategists Stan Greenberg, Al Quinlan and James Carville reported last week their finding that the "top issue underlying the discontent" for independent voters is that U.S. borders have been "left unprotected."

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There was no close second. Twice as many independent voters cited border security as a bigger problem than Iraq.

The Democrats' dilemma goes even deeper as Republicans increasingly tie other, seemingly unrelated, problems of public concern to immigration. Fair or not, drug trafficking and weapons smuggling will be linked rhetorically to an unsecured border with Mexico.

This may seem the stuff of Washington framing wars. But to many Americans the issue is real, often linked to economic anxiety.

One person interviewed by the Democratic strategists complained that teenagers could not find employment because illegal immigrants are "willing to work many more hours for less."

Another expressed concern that illegal immigrants "just get [health insurance] for free" while American citizens struggle to pay for their own.

The concerns have the ring of the debate over welfare. It's a likeness liberals should fear, as the veteran Democratic strategists note.

So Democrats are poised to make the same mistakes all over again. The same voters upset over urban upheaval and welfare are now upset about illegal immigration. Some liberals will call them racists. And that will only leave them more upset.

That these same voters are heavily represented in the independent bloc means Democrats cannot afford to ignore their angst.

But for Democrats to take on the immigration issue, certain myths have to be overcome. A sterner stance on illegal immigration does not betray our national ideals. This is an issue of illegal immigration, not immigration.

Yet liberals should be worried. The inability or lack of intent to significantly decrease illegal immigration seems to be souring the public's mood over immigration itself.

In July, Gallup found that Americans were "more negative about the impact of immigrants" than anytime this decade. A majority of blacks and non-Hispanic whites said they believe immigration has made crime and the economy worse.

A third of whites also believe immigration has made "job opportunities for you and your family" worse, while half of blacks said the same. But African-Americans are firmly in the Democrats' camp.

The political left should be particularly troubled because the illegal immigration issue also aggravates Democrats' long-term demographics challenge and the left's lack of support among male voters.

Today 40 percent of white men, compared with 28 percent of white women, identify as independents, according to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

The fact that illegal immigration concerns independents most means that the issue could only serve to widen the white male gap, which has vexed Democrats since the days of Nixon.

Too often, however, the political debate gets lost in how justified the anxiety is over illegal immigration. The reason actually matters less than the reality. The majority of Americans are upset. They view immigration in law and order terms. Therefore, so must Democrats.

After all, there is no yielding of principle to stand for following the law. But should Democrats stand for the alternative, many moderates, especially men, may come to question — just as they did in 1968 — whether Democrats stand for them.

[David Paul Kuhn](#), a Politico senior political writer, is author of the recently published book, *"The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma."*