

As long as white America remains skeptical of immigrants, moving to the left on immigration is likely to hurt the Democrats.

*Last week, President Obama announced new executive action to stop the deportation of undocumented immigrants that have been in the country for more than five years. This step has raised criticisms from Republicans who are against undocumented immigration and from some Democrats for not going far enough. **Zoltan Hajnal** looks at the Democratic Party's immigration problem, writing that while Latinos and Asian Americans are an important voting group for the party, their support for immigration reform is outweighed by many whites' concerns over immigration. He argues that as long as whites are a majority in America and remain skeptical of immigrants, advocating for immigrants' rights will hurt the Democrats' election chances.*



The Democratic Party has an immigration problem. That may be a surprising statement to make about a political party that wins the lion's share of the votes of Latinos and Asian Americans – the two groups most closely linked to immigration. But a broader look at the numbers suggests that immigration is hurting Democrats more with white voters than it is helping them with non-white voters.

Yes, immigration is an important issue for most Latinos and Asian Americans. And yes, the overwhelming majority of Latinos and Asian Americans who care a great deal about immigration support the Democratic Party. All told 72 percent of Latinos and 66 percent of Asian Americans voted for Democratic candidates for Congress in this year's midterms. That is an important boost for the Democratic Party.

But it is only a relatively small part of the partisan story on immigration. Despite decades of historically high rates of immigration, Latinos and Asian Americans only made up 11 percent of the midterm electorate. Even if immigration was the only issue driving their vote – and it most certainly was not – it could only shift the national partisan balance of power by a few percentage points.

The much bigger story is the white vote. Whites accounted for 75 percent of the electorate in the midterm election. As such, whites, far more than any other group, will decide the fate of the Democratic and Republican Parties in the years to come. Unfortunately, for the Democratic Party, the data suggest that immigration very much matters for whites as well. Why does immigration matter to whites? To begin with, immigration is almost impossible to ignore.

Immigrants are growing in number, they are moving to almost every corner of the nation, and, when they arrive, they tend to look different racially from the existing white majority. They are visibly present in most of our lives.



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The growing presence of immigrants has been accompanied by an ongoing and oft repeated threat narrative that links them to a host of pernicious fiscal, social, and cultural consequences. Irrespective of the actual costs of immigration, the narrative maintains that immigrants are relying heavily on public services like welfare, education, and health while paying few taxes. It asserts that immigrants are taking jobs away from natives and lowering their wages, and it contends that immigration is leading to cultural decline. The threat narrative is almost ubiquitous. Even the New York Times' coverage of immigration has been lop-sided. [Analysis of all Times articles](#) that touched on immigration between 1980 and 2011 indicates that stories on immigration with a negative overall tone outnumbered positive stories by four-to-one. When we talk about immigration, we typically highlight its costs and complications, fueling white fears.

While individual views on immigration are diverse – with many white Americans either supportive or ambivalent about immigration — most are deeply concerned. Polls indicate that an overwhelming majority of white Americans view illegal immigration as a serious problem. Well over a third thinks immigration is a bad thing for the country. The bottom line is that immigration produces real anxiety among large segments of the white public.

Immigration related anxiety has now been coupled with an increasingly clear partisan divide on immigration. Democratic politicians are divided over what to do on immigration but there is much larger gap between the typical Democratic stance on immigration and the average Republican position. No Democrat in the Arizona legislature supported the controversial immigrant enforcement bill, SB 1070, which would make it a misdemeanor crime for an immigrant to not have their registration documents at all times, while all but one Republican voted for it. In Congress, recent votes on immigration have been almost as polarized by party.

The result is that there is now a tight relationship between views on immigration and the vote. In the midterms, the National Exit Poll data reveal that [75 percent](#) of Americans who felt that most illegal immigrants should be deported voted Republican. In sharp contrast, only 35 percent of those who favored a chance for undocumented immigrants to apply for legal status supported Republican candidates. Of those who see immigration as the nation's most important problem, 74 percent went Republican. As I show in [research with Michael Rivera](#), the relationship between attitudes on immigration and white vote choice holds even after controlling for the other main factors that we think drive the vote.

But is this all correlation without causation? Do opinions on immigration really drive party choice? To answer that more difficult question, we looked to see if individual attitudes on immigration at one point in time predict changes in future partisanship. The answer is yes. The effect is not large but small individual shifts in partisan allegiance that are repeated over the course of decades can become massive electoral shifts over time.

Finally, in a [study with Marisa Abrajano and Hans Hassell](#) I sought to determine if we could see the impact of immigration at the aggregate level as well. Our test was pretty straightforward. We looked to see if reporting on immigration affected the national balance between white Democrats and white Republicans. It does and to a startling degree. The more that media coverage of immigration is negative, the more the balance between Democrats and Republicans shifts toward the Republican Party. By any measure, fears of immigration are driving many white Americans to the Republican Party.

The consequences of this can be disastrous for the Democratic Party. In 2014, only 38 percent of white voters sided with Democratic candidates. That matches historic lows for the Democrats. As the years go by, as the number of immigrants grows, and anxiety about immigration broadens, the party loses more and more white voters. That decline has been especially pronounced among working class whites who used to be the core base of the Democratic Party but who are also especially anxious about immigration. Back in 1990, whites without a college degree overwhelmingly favored the Democratic Party. In 2014, almost two-thirds of the same group supported the Republican Party. The transformation of the white vote is a complex phenomenon with many origins but there is little doubt that immigration is one of the main drivers of white defection to the Republican Party.

There are no easy solutions for the Democratic Party. The most obvious plan would be to shift to the right on immigration. This would probably be enough to win over some white voters but it would be unsavory to many liberals in the party and potentially disastrous in terms of Latino and Asian American support. Those two immigrant-based groups have generally supported the Democrats in large numbers but their attachments to either party are quite weak. Half of the Latino and Asian American population profess no allegiance to any party. Shifting to the right on immigration might, in fact, lose more minority votes than it gains white votes.

Alternatively, the Democratic Party could simply hold tight and wait until changing racial demographics give the Democrats an edge. That might be a wise long term strategy but it is likely to give Republicans control of the levers of power for decades. Republicans already control the House and Senate, two-thirds of the State Legislatures, and 31 Governor's offices. To put it mildly, doing nothing is a dangerous strategy.

That leaves the Democrats with a third option of moving to the left on immigration – a strategy that President Obama appears to be following. That strategy makes all kinds of sense from a policy standpoint. The data show that immigrants are generally not a burden on America. They work hard. They use relatively few government services. They contribute to the economy. That strategy is also right from a moral standpoint. The vast majority of the undocumented have committed no crime other than crossing the border. They should be allowed to stay.

That strategy can also be politically helpful for Democrats under the right circumstances. Democrats, in California, for example, made major gains after the early 1990s by vehemently opposing [Proposition 187](#) a measure which sought to cut public services to undocumented immigrants.

But California is not America. California is a majority-minority state where losing a few white voters can be more than balanced out by winning over many Latino and Asian American voters. That is not the case in the rest of America. As long as whites represent the vast majority of America and as long as much of white America remains skeptical of immigrants, advocating for immigrants' rights will likely hurt the party. The right policy and the right thing to do may be the wrong political choice.

This article is a longer version of a piece that originally appeared at the [New York Times](#).

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