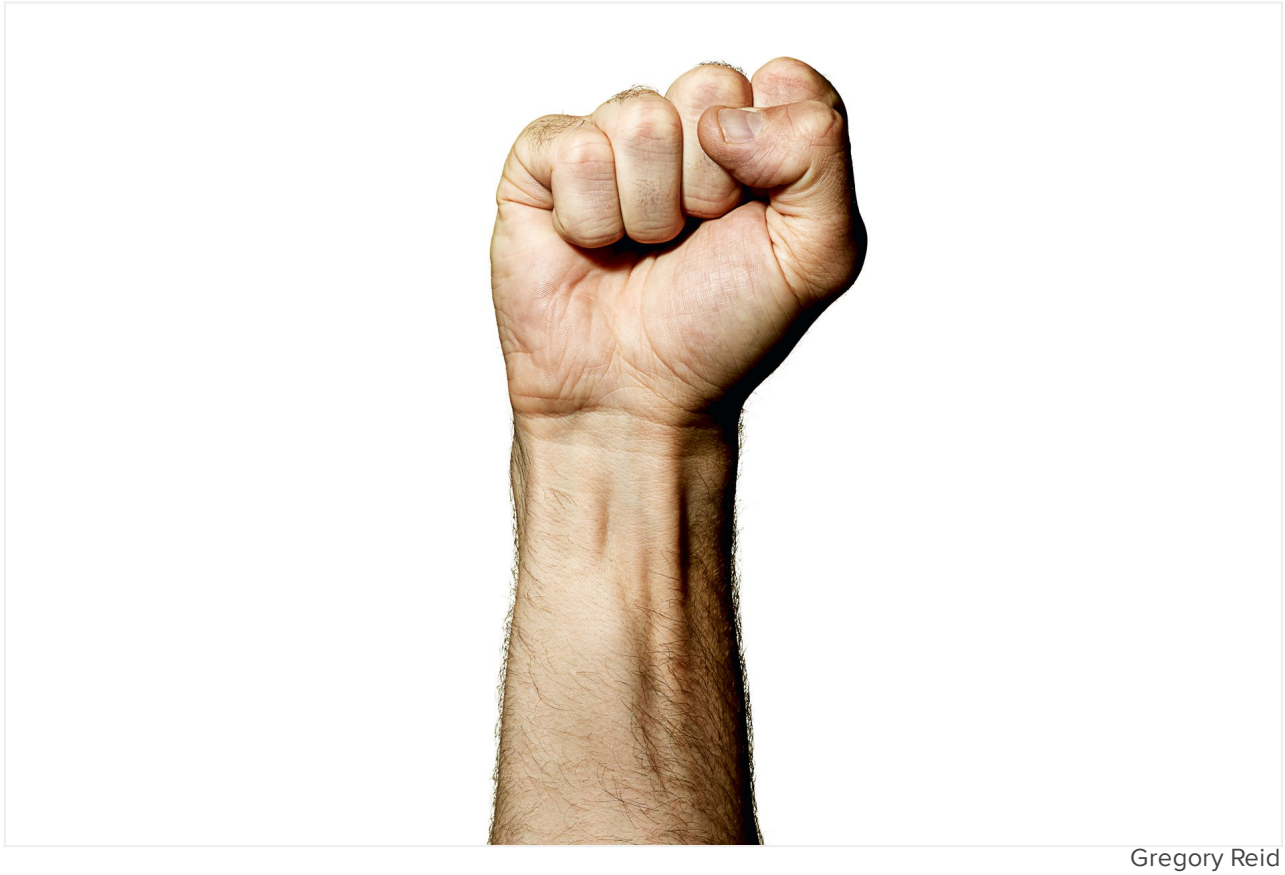
The Atlantic

# The Republican Party's White Strategy

Embracing white nativism in the 1990s turned the California GOP into a permanent minority. The same story may now be repeating itself nationally.



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JULY/AUGUST 2016 ISSUE | POLITICS

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WHEN IT COMES TO LATINOS, Donald Trump has a muse: Ann Coulter. Last June, when Trump called Mexican immigrants "rapists" in his presidential-campaign announcement, the comment took

many journalists by surprise. But that's because many journalists hadn't read Coulter's work. Her book *Adios, America: The Left's Plan to Turn Our Country Into a Third World Hellhole*, which hit bookstores two weeks before Trump entered the race, is packed with statements about "Latin American rape culture" and "the gusto for gang rape, incest and child rape of our main immigrant groups." On page 191 Coulter writes, "The rape of little girls isn't even considered a crime in Latino culture." On page 173 she warns, "Another few years of our current immigration policies, and we'll all have to move to Canada to escape the rapes." Before announcing his presidential run, Trump called *Adios, America* a "great read." Since Trump began his campaign, Coulter has occasionally warmed up crowds at his rallies.

Given Coulter's role in Trump's crusade against Mexican immigration, it's worth examining her book for clues to that crusade's future. In particular, it's worth examining what she says about California.

In *Adios, America*'s acknowledgments section, Coulter notes that many of the people who helped her with the book hail from that state:

> Ned, Jim, Trish, Robert, Melanie, and Merrill are all Californians, so they have a closeup view of what our new country is going to be like. In fact, nearly all my friends who were willing to be named are Californians. It's remarkable how quickly people in a state that has been overwhelmed with illegal aliens are able to grasp the fine points of my thesis. If it's not a hit in 2015, this book will be HUGE as soon as the other forty-nine states become California.

Coulter is right. California, where Latinos now outnumber non-Latino whites, offers valuable lessons about what American politics will be like as

the share of Latinos grows in the country as a whole. But those lessons suggest that the Trump insurrection will fail miserably. If the Golden State is any guide, the Trump campaign does not herald the beginning of a mass nativist backlash against Latino immigration. It heralds something closer to the end.

ALTHOUGH TRUMP HAS BROKEN with his party's establishment on many issues, immigration has been the most central to his rise. His "rapists" comment dominated media coverage of his campaign launch, and his pledge to build a wall along the Mexican border is, by far, his best-known policy proposal. When his events grow "a little boring," the real-estate mogul told *The New York Times*' editorial board, "I just say, 'We will build the wall!' and they go nuts." According to a Pew Research Center poll this spring, the wall divides pro-Trump from anti-Trump Republicans more sharply than any other issue.

**FROM OUR JULY/AUGUST 2016 ISSUE**


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But Trump is not the first Republican to put illegal immigration at the heart of his presidential bid. Pete Wilson did it 20 years ago. On a late-summer day in 1995, with the Statue of Liberty as his backdrop, the then-governor of California declared that he was entering the presidential race because "there's a right way to come to America and a wrong way. Illegal immigration is not the American way. We teach our children to respect the law, but nearly 4 million illegal immigrants in our country break it every day, and Washington—Washington actually rewards these lawbreakers by forcing

states to give them benefits paid for by the taxpayers. That's like giving free room service to someone who breaks into a hotel."

The reference to free room service was a nod to Proposition 187, a California ballot initiative Wilson had successfully championed the year before, which denied undocumented immigrants public education, nonemergency health care, and other government services. It was the beginning of a ferocious reaction to Latino immigration in the Golden State. In 1995, Elton Gallegly, a Republican congressman from California and the chair of a House task force on immigration reform, recommended an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to deny automatic citizenship to the children of undocumented immigrants. In 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209, which prohibited public universities and other state institutions from giving preference to racial and ethnic minorities. In 1998, Californians passed Proposition 227, which curtailed bilingual education.

Until recently, immigration did not sharply divide the two parties. But today, partisanship deeply influences views toward immigrants. (Kathy Willens / AP)

From 1994 to 1998, in other words, California Republicans rebelled against Latino immigration in many of the ways Ann Coulter now hopes America as a whole will. What has happened since is instructive.

When Wilson announced his presidential campaign, California was a Republican-leaning state. Between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War, it had gone to the Republican presidential candidate nine out of 11 times and elected a Republican governor seven out of 11 times. Republicans controlled the governor's mansion, the state assembly, and a majority of statewide elected offices. And while the state's growing Latino population posed a challenge to GOP dominance, Latinos had shown themselves willing to vote Republican in substantial numbers. According to exit polls, Ronald Reagan won 44 percent of California Latinos in 1984. Republican Governor George Deukmejian won 46 percent in 1986. Pete Wilson himself won 47 percent in 1990. During the Reagan and George H. W. Bush years, according to a study by the political scientists Shaun Bowler, Stephen P. Nicholson, and Gary M. Segura, "Latinos in California had been drifting toward the GOP."

But all of that changed after the GOP began targeting Latino immigrants. Feeling themselves under assault, California Latinos registered to vote in epic numbers. From 1994 to 2004, according to *Latino America*, by Segura and Matt A. Barreto, the voter-registration rate among California Latinos grew 69 percent—more than twice as fast as the state's Latino population. Latino voters also swung sharply against the GOP. Republicans, who had lost the Latino vote by six points in the 1990 gubernatorial race, lost it by 46 points in 1994, then by 61 points in 1998. Before the passage of Proposition 187 in 1994, California Latinos were four points more likely to identify as Democrats than as Republicans. After Proposition 227 passed in 1998, the margin reached 51 points. The GOP's anti-immigrant efforts appear to have alienated young white voters, too. (Throughout this essay, I

will consider Latinos as a distinct racial group separate from whites, as a majority of Latinos now consider themselves, even though the census does not.)

Almost two decades later, the California Republican Party still has not recovered. Latinos—who now constitute almost 40 percent of California's population and more than a quarter of its eligible voters—have voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1996 by at least 40 points. Democrats today control every statewide elected office, and make up close to two-thirds of the state Senate and assembly, along with almost three-quarters of California's delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives.

What's more, state policy has turned in a radically pro-immigrant direction. Over the past 15 years, California has repealed those elements of Proposition 187 that hadn't already been ruled unconstitutional, allowed undocumented immigrants to get driver's licenses, and granted them in-state tuition at public colleges. It has also begun enrolling undocumented children in the state's version of Medicaid. Even California's Republican Party has changed. Last fall, it removed the phrase *illegal alien* from its platform and stripped out language calling on law-enforcement officials to immediately deport undocumented immigrants who have committed crimes. On the question of "what to do with the millions of people who are currently here illegally," the platform now states merely that Republicans "hold diverse views."

BUT EVEN AS the California GOP retreats from its catastrophic foray into anti-immigrant politics, Republicans across the country are in the midst of their own. Until recently, immigration did not sharply divide the two national parties. In 1986, 42 percent of House Republicans, along with 64 percent of House Democrats, voted for a bill giving legal status to millions of undocumented immigrants—and Ronald Reagan signed

it into law. A study of public attitudes in the early 1990s noted that "the weakness of the connection between party affiliation and opinions about immigration is striking."

Today, the opposite is true. When Pew asked last year whether immigrants make America better or worse in the long run, Democrats replied "better" by a margin of 31 points while Republicans answered "worse" by a margin of 22 points. In their recent book, *The New Immigration Federalism*, the Santa Clara University School of Law professor Pratheepan Gulasekaram and the University of California at Riverside political-science professor S. Karthick Ramakrishnan find that the rate of immigrant population growth, the percentage of Spanish-speaking households, and local economic conditions all fail to predict state policy toward immigrants. But the partisan tilt of the state does: It is "by far" the strongest correlate to policy, they write. Overwhelmingly, Democratic-leaning states pass pro-immigrant laws. Overwhelmingly, Republican-leaning states pass anti-immigrant laws.

## Trump is exploiting fears about Latino immigrants in ways that echo Nixon's "southern strategy."

This partisan split undermines the claim that Republicans are embracing Trump's anti-immigration message primarily because of economic hardship. As the data journalist Nate Silver has pointed out, Trump supporters earn more than supporters of Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders. Yet Clinton and Sanders voters don't generally blame immigration for their economic woes. That merely confirms the findings of shelves full of academic studies: Personal economic circumstances are not a major driver of immigration views.

The much stronger link is between attitudes toward immigration and

attitudes toward race. In 2008, two political scientists at the University of Michigan, Ted Brader and Elizabeth Suhay, along with Nicholas A. Valentino of the University of Texas at Austin, showed several hundred white Americans a fictional news story about the negative effects of immigration. Alongside the news story was a photo of a "recent immigrant." One group of participants saw a photo of "Jose Sanchez" from Mexico. Another saw a photo of "Nikolai Vandinsky" from Russia. The men chosen for the two photos were selected such that their features were "maximally distinct on the dimension of ethnicity." The participants were then asked a series of questions about immigration policy. The result: The people who saw Sanchez were more than twice as likely to endorse anti-immigration measures as those who saw Vandinsky.

It is this connection between views about immigration and views about race that best explains why immigration has become such a partisan wedge. Since the 1970s, political scientists have demonstrated that whites who express a higher level of resentment toward African Americans are more likely to identify as Republicans. Since the 1990s, as the political scientists Zoltan Hajnal and Michael Rivera detail in a 2014 paper, a similar correlation has emerged between resentment toward Latinos and Republican partisanship.

Hajnal and Rivera don't offer a reason for this correlation. But it's plausible that people who resent African Americans might have been predisposed to resent Latinos as they became an increasingly conspicuous minority group. Conservative media likely played a role in turning such predisposition into full-fledged anti-immigrant beliefs. A study for the National Hispanic Media Coalition found that listening to the right-wing radio host Michael Savage discuss immigration or reading an excerpt from Pat Buchanan's anti-immigration book *State of Emergency* made a random sample of white Americans significantly more likely to describe Latinos as unpatriotic and inclined toward crime and gangs. The same study found that viewers of Fox

News's Bill O'Reilly were more than twice as likely as viewers of MSNBC's Rachel Maddow to think Latinos take native-born Americans' jobs, and 30 percent more likely to believe that they were on welfare.

Conservative media have, in turn, created a fertile market for anti-immigrant Republican politicians: Buchanan in the 1990s; Tom Tancredo, who in 2008 tried to parlay his opposition to George W. Bush's immigration reform into a presidential run; local anti-immigrant crusaders such as Kansas's secretary of state, Kris Kobach, and Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Arizona. Trump is only the latest in a string of GOP politicians who have used hostility to immigration to build their political brand.

Like them, he is exploiting fears about Latino immigrants in ways that echo the "southern strategy," through which Richard Nixon fueled and exploited a white backlash against African American civil rights. Even the anti-Latino stereotypes that Trump and Coulter peddle resemble long-standing stereotypes about blacks. Latinos—whom conservatives once viewed as more hardworking than other minorities—are now frequently depicted as welfare-demanding freeloaders. In *Adios, America*, Coulter writes, "In about ten seconds, impoverished immigrants go from *Wait—I can have this?* to *Where's my money?*"

They are also depicted as violent. In his campaign-announcement speech, Trump said undocumented Mexican immigrants are "bringing crime." Coulter writes, "Mexicans specialize in corpse desecration, burning people alive, rolling human heads onto packed nightclub dance floors, dissolving bodies in acid, and hanging mutilated bodies from bridges." And as antiblack racists have for centuries, today's anti-Latino commentators depict their targets as a sexual threat. Coulter, who chastises white women for not appreciating the unique sexual restraint of men of northern-European stock, devotes a whopping six chapters of *Adios, America* to immigrants and rape.

Of course, plenty of Republicans (and a fair number of Democrats and independents) favor limiting immigration for reasons that have nothing to do with race. While many economists believe immigration boosts the wages of native-born Americans as a whole, it likely depresses the wages of those without a high-school degree; the debate is over how much.

But in their rhetoric, Trump and Coulter go beyond legitimate economic anxieties to rouse darker fears. Their depictions of Latino immigrants as violent, for instance, contradict clear evidence that immigration lowers local crime rates. The good news is that outside the conservative media, and outside the Republican Party, their efforts are likely to fail in spectacular fashion.

THE SOUTHERN STRATEGY lured millions of whites into the GOP. It helped Nixon, and later Ronald Reagan, win the presidency, and gradually turned most former Confederate states from blue to red. But the results this time are likely to be very different. One reason is that the Latino population is growing larger. Another—less well appreciated but just as significant—is that it's growing more politically cohesive.

For African Americans, political cohesion has rarely been a problem. When John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson embraced civil rights and Republicans responded with coded racial appeals to southern whites, blacks expressed their displeasure by moving into the Democratic Party en masse. But their relatively small and static numbers blunted their ability to make Republicans pay. Since 1970, the African American share of the U.S. population has grown by just two percentage points, from roughly 11 to 13 percent. The consequences are starkest in states such as Mississippi, where African Americans—who constitute 38 percent of the state's population—are endlessly outvoted by a white population that has become almost uniformly Republican. (Only 10 percent of white Mississippians voted for Barack

Obama in 2012.) If the African American share of Mississippi's electorate rose to near 50 percent, the state's politics would radically change. But there's no reason to believe it will.

The Latino share of the U.S. population, by contrast, is rising fast. From 1990 to 2014, it almost doubled, from 9 percent to more than 17 percent. And while the rate of growth has slowed, the census still predicts that Latinos will reach almost 30 percent of the population by 2060.

But what's truly ominous for the Trump crusade is Latinos' increasing political cohesion. Anti-immigration politicians often suggest that Latinos who are in the United States legally will cheer anti-immigration initiatives, because they disproportionately compete with undocumented immigrants for jobs and suffer from the strain that these immigrants place on local resources. Once upon a time, that prediction seemed plausible. Data from the 1980s and early 1990s suggest that, back then, Latinos didn't express much political solidarity. Middle-class Latinos, unlike middle-class African Americans, drifted toward the GOP. So did Latinos who had lived in the United States for a long time. Most Latinos did not even think of themselves as Latinos. They identified instead with the specific country from which they hailed.

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But by stigmatizing undocumented immigrants, Republicans have catalyzed the Latino cohesion that could be their undoing. "Latinos have until recently been a step shy of establishing a sense of group identity," Segura and Barreto write in *Latino America*. But as a result of anti-immigrant initiatives,

"Latino commonalities are now gelling into such an identity." Third-generation Latinos were once significantly more likely than newer arrivals to support reducing immigration. But in recent years, that generation gap has closed. In 2012, even fourth-generation Latinos told pollsters they were far less likely to back candidates who wanted to crack down on the undocumented than candidates who didn't.

"Anti-immigrant rhetoric renders all Latinos immigrants," says Cristina Beltrán, a political theorist who directs the Latino-studies department at NYU. "It creates a sense of shared vulnerability and outrage." That shared vulnerability is also helping to erode the distinctions among Latinos who hail from different countries. The political scientists Marisa Abrajano and R. Michael Alvarez note that in 1989, only 20 percent of Latinos said that Latinos from different countries had a lot in common. By 2006, that figure had risen to 50 percent.

It's because they are growing both more numerous and more cohesive that Latinos in California have not suffered the fate of blacks in Mississippi. Instead, their political fortunes have followed a curve. Initially, California's rising Latino population sparked a white backlash. But over time, the combination of Latino population growth and Latino political solidarity helped turn California politics in a pro-immigrant direction. In the years to come, we're likely to see a similar shift in America as a whole.

THE KEY QUESTION is how long it will take. It's possible to imagine a scenario in which whites nationwide react to growing Latino political power the way whites respond to blacks in Mississippi: The higher Latino numbers grow, the more they will vote for anti-immigration candidates. Given that whites will likely remain a majority in the United States until the 2040s, and a majority of voters until well after that, a Mississippi-style scenario could mean that nativism flourishes for decades

to come.

Whites will remain a majority in the U.S. until the 2040s, but white identity politics can work only if they grow ever more nativist over that span. (Ross D. Franklin / AP)

The problem with this scenario is that it requires whites to grow ever more nativist as Latinos grow in number and political influence. That probably won't happen. California didn't flip from anti-immigration to pro-immigration just because its Latino population grew larger and more cohesive. It also flipped because enough whites joined Latinos and other minorities in voting for pro-immigration candidates. Since the anti-immigrant initiatives of the mid-1990s, white Californians have not responded to Latinos the way white Mississippians respond to blacks—by voting en masse for the other party. Obama won 45 percent of white Californians in 2012, six points more than the 39 percent of whites he won nationwide.

As Latinos assimilate, whites become less hostile to them. A forthcoming article in the *American Sociological Review* by Ariela Schachter, a graduate student in sociology at Stanford, shows that whites are more comfortable

having Latinos as neighbors if those Latinos speak English well, work in high-status occupations, have a white spouse, were born in the United States, and are in the United States legally. When Latinos look and sound like Marco Rubio or the NFL quarterback Mark Sanchez, whites are less likely to stigmatize them.

Whites, in other words, view Latinos more positively when they integrate into the middle class. And the longer Latinos stay in the United States, the more they do just that. Although only 10 percent of noncitizen Latino immigrants intermarry, 30 percent of their children do. Second-generation Mexican Americans are far better-educated than their parents and significantly less likely to hold low-status jobs. A study in Southern California found that among third-generation Mexican Americans, 96 percent prefer to speak English at home.

A big reason nativist sentiment is strong today is that immigration has outpaced assimilation: Because so many poor Latino immigrants have entered the United States in recent decades, most Latinos haven't looked or sounded like Rubio or Sanchez. From 1980 to 2007, the share of Latino adults born outside the U.S. rose from 39 to 55 percent.

That immigration wave, however, has passed. Although you'd never know it listening to Trump, more Mexicans have left the United States than entered it since 2009. According to the Census Bureau, in 2013, the No. 1 source of immigrants to the U.S. wasn't Mexico. It was China. Even more surprising, scholars don't think large-scale Mexican immigration is coming back. The Great Recession depressed Mexican immigration because immigrants couldn't find jobs. But if that were the only reason for the decline, immigration would have rebounded as the U.S. economy improved. It has not. Tougher border enforcement has played some role in reducing immigration levels. Greater economic opportunity in Mexico has too. But

the biggest reason Mexican immigration is way down is that Mexican women are having far fewer children than they used to. In 1960, the average Mexican woman had more than six children. By 2009, she had just over two. This vast reduction in fertility has deflated Mexico's youth bubble: The average Mexican is now almost a decade older than in 1970. This affects immigration levels because, in the words of the Princeton sociologist Douglas Massey, "If people don't begin migrating [from Mexico to the U.S.] between the ages of 15 and 30, they generally don't migrate at all."

## More Mexicans have left the United States than entered it since 2009.

Since 2000, Latino migration from El Salvador and Guatemala has increased, largely in response to gang violence and economic distress, thus partly offsetting the Mexican decline. But those two countries together contain fewer than one-fifth as many people as Mexico. And as in Mexico, birthrates have fallen dramatically in both countries, meaning that over time, there will be fewer young adults to make the trip north.

The immigration slowdown is already changing the composition of America's Latino population. Since its 2007 peak, the percentage of Latino adults born abroad has declined about five percentage points, to just under 50 percent. Since 1990, the share of foreign-born Mexican Americans who have lived in the U.S. for five years or less has dropped by more than two-thirds. The Latino share of the U.S. population will continue to rise for decades, because Latinos in the U.S. are younger, on average, than whites and blacks—and because the Latino birthrate, though falling, remains higher. But unlike in prior decades, most of that growth will come from Latinos born in the U.S.

As American Latinos become less culturally and economically distinct from society at large, white hostility toward them is likely to wane. *The New York Times* provided a taste of this last fall when it sent a reporter to Muscatine, Iowa, to see how local Republicans were responding to Donald Trump's anti-Mexican rhetoric. The town's mayor was nonplussed. In Muscatine, he noted, "if you see a young middle-school Latino lad on the street, he probably doesn't even speak Spanish."

PERHAPS THE BEST EVIDENCE that America as a whole is experiencing a California-style flip away from nativist politics is the reaction to Trump's candidacy itself. As in California in the 1990s, Republican nativism is sparking a surge in Latino voter registration. Since Trump entered the race last summer, the number of immigrants becoming American citizens in Texas has risen from 1,200 a month to 2,200 a month, and a higher percentage of the newly naturalized is registering to vote. The trend is similar nationwide.

And as in California in the 1990s, Latinos have unified across ancestral, generational, and class lines against the GOP standard-bearer. According to polling of registered voters by the firm Latino Decisions, Trump's unfavorability rating is 88 percent among foreign-born Latinos, and 86 percent among Latinos born in the U.S. Among Latinos who earn less than $40,000 a year, it is 90 percent, and among those who earn more than $80,000 a year, it is 85 percent. Among Mexican Americans, Trump's unfavorability rating is 90 percent. Among Cuban Americans, historically the most Republican Latino group, it is 82 percent.

Such overwhelming opposition is hard to overcome. Before early May, when Trump effectively secured the Republican nomination, polls showed him leading Hillary Clinton among whites by high single digits. By late May, with Hillary Clinton still competing against Bernie Sanders, Trump's edge among

whites had risen to between 12 and 24 points. If Clinton can consolidate Sanders's support after she wins the Democratic nomination, Trump's margin among whites might dip. But regardless, Trump probably can't win. A study by Latino Decisions found that even if Trump defeats Clinton by 20 points among whites—the same margin Mitt Romney achieved in 2012—and even if African Americans don't turn out for Clinton at the rates they turned out for Obama, Trump will still need more than 40 percent of Latinos to win the popular vote. That's extraordinarily unlikely.

Even if Trump-style anti-Latino politics fails nationally, it may still enjoy a half-life in particular states. It's most likely to thrive in the South, where the white population is conservative and the Latino population remains small. The first senator to endorse Trump was Alabama's Jeff Sessions, the Senate's most fervent opponent of illegal immigration. In 2012, *The New York Times* found that of the 14 states that had either passed or taken steps to pass laws cracking down on undocumented immigrants, nine were in the old Confederacy.

But nationwide, Republicans are unlikely to win consistently with a message that Latinos perceive as hostile.

Many white ethnics began voting Republican in the 1960s and '70s, even though the GOP had led a nativist backlash against their forefathers in the early 20th century. Eventually, something similar could happen among Latinos. Yet that process will begin only once the GOP turns definitively away from Coulter- and Trump-style nativism. The longer it takes the GOP to make Latino immigrants feel welcome, the longer it will take for the descendants of those immigrants to follow the increasingly conservative political trajectory that Italians, Irish, and Poles traveled during the past century.

Many Republican elites know this. They knew it in 2012, when an autopsy

sponsored by the party after Romney's loss stated, "If Hispanic Americans perceive that a GOP nominee or candidate does not want them in the United States (i.e. self-deportation), they will not pay attention to our next sentence."

What they don't know is how to build a party that contains both Latinos and the supporters of Donald Trump. Whether Republican leaders can solve that dilemma may well determine whether the party lives or dies.


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