The Democrats’ Immigration Problem

By ZOLTAN L. HAJNAL  NOV. 20, 2014

SAN DIEGO — PRESIDENT OBAMA’S executive order eliminating the threat of deportation for millions of undocumented immigrants is good policy. It is the right thing to do. But it is a dangerous move for the Democratic Party.

Yes, immigration is an important issue for most Latinos and Asian-Americans. And yes, 63 percent of Latinos and 66 percent of Asian-Americans voted for Democratic candidates for Congress in the midterms. The executive order could solidify and expand that support for years to come.

But Latinos and Asian-Americans made up only 11 percent of the electorate. Even if immigration were the only issue driving their vote — and it most certainly was not — it could have shifted the national partisan balance of power by only a few percentage points.

Whites, meanwhile, accounted for 75 percent of the electorate. Far more than any other group, whites will decide the fate of the parties in the years to come. Unfortunately for the Democratic Party, the data suggest that immigration very much matters for whites.

Immigrants are moving to almost every corner of the nation. They usually look different from the white majority. And, irrespective of the facts, the dominant
narrative maintains that immigrants rely heavily on public services like welfare, education and health care, that immigrants take jobs from native-born workers and lower their wages, and that immigration is leading to cultural decline.

Polls indicate that an overwhelming majority of white Americans view illegal immigration as a serious problem. A third think immigration over all is bad for the country.

This anxiety is coupled with an increasingly clear partisan divide on immigration. No Democrat in the Arizona Legislature, for example, supported the 2010 state law known as SB 1070, which among other things directed law enforcement officers to check the immigration status of people they’ud arrested or stopped; all but one Republican voted for it. Republicans have condemned Mr. Obama’s executive order as a usurpation of Congress’s authority.

Put it all together: Many white Americans see that America is changing, believe that immigration is driving many of the negative changes and know that one party stands largely on the side of immigrants while the other party stands largely in opposition. For many whites, this is a powerful motivation to vote Republican.

As a result there is now a tight relationship between views on immigration and the vote. In the midterms, 75 percent of Americans who felt that most illegal immigrants should be deported voted Republican. In contrast, only 35 percent of those who favored a chance for undocumented immigrants to apply for legal status supported Republican candidates. Of those who saw immigration as the nation’s most important problem, 74 percent went Republican.

For the Democrats, the consequences are severe. Only 38 percent of white voters in the midterm elections sided with Democratic candidates. Almost two-thirds of whites without a college degree voted for Republicans in the midterms; as recently as 1990, these voters overwhelmingly favored Democrats.

There are no easy solutions for the Democrats. Shifting to the right is not possible, given the party’s strong pro-immigration constituencies. Half of the Latino and Asian-American populations profess no allegiance to any party. Shifting to the right on immigration might cost more minority votes than it gains white votes.
The Democrats could simply hold tight and wait until changing demographics give them an edge. That might be an effective long-term strategy, but it is likely to give Republicans control of the levers of power for decades.

Mr. Obama’s approach — moving to the left — 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. A vast majority of the undocumented have committed no crime other than crossing the border. They should be allowed to stay.

Optimistic Democrats will point to California, where the party made major gains by opposing Proposition 187, a Republican-backed measure in 1994 that sought to cut public services to undocumented immigrants.

But California — a majority-minority state where losing a few white voters can be more than balanced out by winning over Latino and Asian-American voters — is not America. As long as whites represent a vast majority of voters and as long as most remain skeptical of immigrants, supporting immigrants’ rights will be likely to hurt the Democrats. The dilemma isn’t going away.

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