Will immigration protests mobilize Latino voters?

California Republicans felt backlash from past efforts to crack down on immigration and curb immigrant rights.

The current debate on illegal immigration reminds me of baseball legend Yogi Berra's famous line: "It's déjà vu all over again." Whether it's the Chinese in the 1800s, the forced deportation of Mexicans in the 1930s, or Proposition 187 in 1994, the current atmosphere has people up in arms about "illegal" horses.

But the poverty of our current debate is that in spite of employers and consumers being equally culpable in creating an "illegal triangle" that makes "illegal" Mexican labor a reality, the only group this "Christian" nation wants to punish are the actions of one group of people. So much for equity and justice for all.

While political pundits ponder the political fallout, Republicans are already running scared.

Republicans control Congress. By overwhelmingly supporting SB 4437, Republican Sen. James Sensenbrenner's bill, Republicans have only themselves to blame for trying to turn undocumented workers into felons, while virtually ignoring the other two pillars of the "illegal triangle."

However, facing the prospect of a 1996-98 Latino voter backlash, especially in California, Republicans want to pin the Sensenbrenner mess on Democrats. The Arizona Republic reported that the Republican Party would launch a Spanish-language radio campaign, deceptively dumping the punitive-laden Sensenbrenner bill on Democrats.

In part, the ad says: "Terrorists coming across our borders. Drugs smuggled to America's shores. But just last week, there was hope. Congress was working on immigration reform..." Harry Reid played politics and blocked our leaders from working together. Reid's Democrat allies voted to treat millions of hard-working immigrants...as felons."

Words escape me. Well, not really. "Political cowardice" and "hypocrisy" jump immediately to mind. But political cowardice and hypocrisy are also understandable. Consider this:

* Iraq's a disaster.
* The Bush administration is awash in scandal.
* Katrina helped tag the administration with ineptitude and cronyism.

With only 28 percent of Americans approving of Bush's leadership, and gas prices well over $3 per gallon, Republicans have had trouble finding polling traction on issues. Until now.

But illegal immigration bashing is a double-edged sword. In California, the last time Republicans needed political coverage for abysmal poll numbers, Gov. Pete Wilson went to the voters filled well in 1994. Apart from using ads showing Mexicans crossing the border, Wilson also backed Proposition 187, which sought to eliminate social services for undocumented workers. While Wilson served his own interests and was re-elected, he also ended up poisoning his own party. And the electoral backlash was considerable.

Latinos overwhelmingly saw Wilson's ads as race-baiting and viewed his campaign as scapegoating, which pushed Latinos to act. Nationally, Immigration and Naturalization Service activity spiked. The number of citizens naturalized by the INS jumped from less than 300,000 in 1990 to approximately 1.2 million by 1996. Voting by California's Latinos jumped by 60 percent from 1988-98 (7.9 percent to 13 percent).

Today we know that more than half (52 percent) of all Latinos who are registered to vote in California did so after 1995. Unfortunately for Republicans, angered by Wilson's tactics, Latinos registered and voted overwhelmingly Democratic. What does this mean for the electoral prospects of Republicans in the future? It all depends.

Republican leaders who want Bush to avoid accountability support the current political environment. Why? With the wheels falling off of the Bush presidency, it's a line of attack that makes political sense. It rallies the troops when they don't have much to rally around. By taking Bush's failures off the front page, illegal immigration helps Americans forget about Republican failures, which might allow the Republicans to maintain control of Congress. This should keep President Bush from answering subpoenas his last two years. And Karl Rove smiles.

Those who remember the past, however, understand the potential ramifications. After 1994, Latinos registered and voted on a level that made Cruz Bustamante California's first modern Hispanic lieutenant governor, saw Loretta Sanchez beat back "B-1" Bob Dornan in Orange County, and ushered a team of Latino legislators into Sacramento by 1998. The problem for Republicans? They were all Democrats.

Republicans today face that infamous "fork in the road." They can embrace the Sensenbrenner bill, and hope it's enough to help Bush and other Republicans avoid accountability for current problems.

Or they can show they understand that solving the "illegal triangle" of illegal immigration requires a more comprehensive approach. This would show they recognize how a political smoke screen today can become an electoral snake pit tomorrow. And it just might generate solutions. Indeed, Republicans could come up with a solution tomorrow if they wanted. They do control Congress. But they're also in the pockets of the business community, who profit from the current situation. The result? There's no real rush to stop the flow.

With America lost on the road of political scapegoating and "comfortable" business practices, all of America is forced to face the Republican political fork in the road. While Republicans will probably follow Yogi Berra's confused advice and "take it," in the process getting even more lost, there's a greater worry: The Republicans will adopt Yogi's position when told he was lost: "Yeah, but at least we're making great time." America deserves better than this.

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