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Sane GOP immigration voices drowned by xenophobes

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By Steve and Cokie Roberts (18)



‘When so many GOP federal and state electeds ... engage in dog-whistle racism, these are always personal attacks equally on me. If Obama is not an American and does not legitimately belong, then they’re saying the same about me. I imagine I’m not alone, that people of color across the board see what I see, and the election results confirm this.’

That voter, writing for the liberal blog Talking Points Memo, got it exactly right. Other “people of color” shared his view and voted the same way for the same reasons. But he is not an African-American or Hispanic, the two groups that received most of the attention this election cycle. He is of Indian origins, born and raised in Iowa, and he’s part of a critical shift in American politics: the enormous surge of Asian-Americans into the Democratic column.

Seventy-three percent of these voters backed the president, up from 62 percent in 2008. John Kerry was the first Democrat to get a majority of this group, 56 percent in 2004, and as recently as 1992, Bill Clinton won only 31 percent of the Asian vote.

Two political scientists who have studied this trend, Taeku Lee and Karthick Ramakrishnan, summed up their findings recently in the Los Angeles Times: “Asian-Americans are no longer a swing vote or a crouching tiger in the electorate; their political stripes are now distinctly Democratic blue.”

Asian-Americans made up 3 percent of the electorate in November, but they are almost 6 percent of the population, and they have now passed Latinos as the fastest-growing racial group in the country. Moreover, they are better educated (half have college degrees compared to a national average of 28 percent) and more affluent than other Americans (their

median household income of \$66,000 is more than \$16,000 above the norm). And those two assets give them potential influence far beyond their numbers.

So it's important to ask: What happened? One answer is how Asians tend to view government. A study by the Pew Research Center last spring found that 55 percent prefer bigger government and more services, while 36 percent want smaller government and fewer services (results for the general population were almost reversed). Lee and Ramakrishnan found "very strong support among all Asian-American groups for universal health care."

The researchers also report that many Asians were turned off by Republican candidates "emphasizing Christian values." Since many of them are not Christian, it was one more signal that Republicans didn't want them. The most loyal Democratic voters include Hindus from India and secularists raised in Communist China, while national groups with strong Christian elements — Koreans, Filipinos and Vietnamese — are more likely to be Republican, Pew reports.

The economic success of Asian immigrants leads to a more optimistic outlook, and therefore a greater willingness to support an incumbent running for re-election. Half of all Asian-Americans told Pew they were satisfied with their personal finances, while for the general public, only one in three made that claim. A fair number are scientists who disagree strongly with decidedly unscientific Republican positions on issues like climate change.

Obama has traveled frequently to Asia and appointed Asians to prominent posts, including Energy Secretary Steven Chu and Gary Locke, now the ambassador to China. And his party has produced high-visibility candidates like Mazie Hirono, the new senator from Hawaii and the first Asian-American woman to sit in that body.

But the key reason for the trend is the "dog-whistle racism" threading through Republican ranks that sends a clear and corrosive message: No foreigners need apply. That attitude showed up in many forms this year: attacks on Obama's birth certificate and religion; overheated rhetoric opposing immigration reform; voter ID laws that were cynically aimed at suppressing turnout among minorities.

Asian-American voters are not automatically Democrats. Like Latinos, many run small businesses and favor GOP policies on lower taxes and less regulation. And some good-hearted Republicans understand the value of immigrants, starting with former President George W. Bush who said this week, "Not only do immigrants help build our economy, they help invigorate our soul."

But those voices of sanity are drowned out by the xenophobic wing of the GOP, and like Latinos, Asian-Americans are offended by a party that does not seem to want them or respect them. They see attacks on the president's legitimacy as attacks on them. If he is a foreigner, a stranger, then so are they. That whistle is loud and clear.

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