



TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Joel Barkin, Progressive States Network; Nathan Newman, Progressive States Network

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RE: States and Immigration: 2007 PSN Election Analysis

Immigration Not a Deciding Issue in 2007 Elections-- but Economic Concerns Do Loom Large

In 2006, many analysts raised fears that anti-immigrant fervor would doom progressive candidates. Instead, progressives won big in those elections. Immigration was a non-issue for many voters and fueled a backlash last year AGAINST conservative candidates [by many Latino voters](#) who had supported President Bush in 2000.

In 2007, it was more of the same in elections in Virginia and New York where Democrats gained control of the Virginia Senate and expanded control in Long Island's Suffolk County. Typical headlines read "[In the Ballot Booths, No Fixation on Immigration](#)" (*Washington Post*) and "[New York Democrats Say License Issue Had Little Effect](#)" (*NY Times*). One senior political strategist in Virginia [said](#), "The one point on

which moderates and conservatives seem to agree is that their party overplayed the illegal immigration issue. They went for a magic bullet with immigration, and it didn't work". Adding to that point, Sen. Richard L. Saslaw, who will likely become majority leader in the Virginia Senate, said in an interview:

"The results are proving that, while immigration is a concern to people -- and it should be -- it is not returning the votes that [anti-immigrant leaders] thought that it would."

Despite local agitation over immigration in both states, elections turned on a range of other issues, from taxes to land use policies. Hard-line anti-immigrant candidates generally lost out to candidates who argued more broadly for progressive policies to address the needs of the public.

Immigration As A Proxy In A Vacuum

Public opinion data has lately diverged on the question of just how important an issue immigration really is to the American public. In 2006, the Associated Press claimed that "immigration is a growing concern" among voters. Yet, at the very same time, polls from CBS and NBC News showed that immigration was, in fact, [among the lowest concerns](#) cited by voters. [Gallup](#) reports that "despite the media attention it has received, immigration usually ranks low when Americans are asked to rate the importance of various issues."

The divergence has at least partially to do with each survey's methodology. Voters are more likely to say they believe immigration is a top issue of concern when they are prompted in a vacuum than when they are asked an open-ended question about their priorities. However, that dynamic is not insignificant. It suggests that in individual races, voters can be prompted to cast their vote on the immigration issue – if progressives allow a vacuum on other issues like jobs, the economy, health care and trade to exist.

The Real Problem is Failure of Political Leaders to Address Uncertain Economic Times

Still, if immigration is not showing up as a decisive issue at the polls, why does it remain so constant an issue in public debates, and why do conservative candidates focus so much attention on it? The answer is that concern about immigration is a stand-in for a much broader anxiety of voters about stagnating wages, the housing meltdown and fears over the global economy.

When a recent [Democracy Corps poll](#) found that 70 percent of the public says the country is on the 'wrong track,' the poll found that this derived from feelings of "big business getting whatever they want in Washington, leaders forgetting the middle class, and America doing nothing about problems at home." Furthermore, a recent [Wall Street Journal Poll](#) on the eve of the 2007 legislative elections found that a majority of both Republican and Democratic voters felt that America's current globalization policies have been bad for American workers. When people feel economic fear and don't see anyone acting to help them, anger and scapegoating, as with some of the attacks on immigrants, is often the result.

Interestingly, we saw precisely this dynamic on immigration back at the beginning of the Reagan Era when the economy was stagnating and neither party was frontally addressing the problem. The New York Times reported in 1980 that "there are growing indications, in public opinion polls and in angry letters from constituents, that many Americans, convinced that immigrants are taking their jobs, draining the treasury and dividing cities into isolated and increasingly hostile ethnic communities, are demanding a solution." That year, a "poll by the Roper Organization showed that nine of 10 of those surveyed supported an 'all-out effort' to halt illegal immigration and that eight of 10 favored reducing the number of legal immigrants."

This pressure is slowly but surely ratcheting up in advance of the 2008 election. As just one example, this week, the think tank [Third Way](#) re-

leased a report in Washington urging advocates of NAFTA-style trade policies “to change both what they argue and how they argue on trade to communicate more effectively with the American public on the benefits of trade” – but not to change the policies they are pushing. This naively assumes that America can be fooled with a repackaged sales pitch when, in fact, public opinion data shows the country is desperate for real change – not just rhetorical change.

Similar efforts from some other organizations in Washington assert that progressives can somehow simultaneously defuse the immigration issue while also endorsing status quo positions on trade, globalization and corporate power – the very issues that the public is so fundamentally angry about and that immigration substitutes for when neither party addresses them.

Luckily, addressing those core economic issues has already been proven to be a political and legislative winner. As [Public Citizen documented](#), in 2006 that advocates of fair trade policies were increasingly winning out over politicians who were just rubber-stamping corporate trade deals. Reacting to those concerns about bad trade deals, state legislative chambers in Alabama, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Wisconsin and Utah all approved resolutions opposing "fast track" trade deals dominated by corporate interests. Legislatures in seventeen states condemned the escalation in Iraq, most of them complaining that spending on the war was short-changing money for needs at home. (See PSN's [Taking the Lead](#) for other state legislative actions in 2008 addressing the concerns of working families.)

Channeling the Punitive Mood: A Progressive Immigration & Economic Agenda in 2008

With comprehensive immigration reform stalled at the federal level, and with polls showing the public in an angry, punitive mood, we will inevitably see even more discussion about immigration at the state level in 2008. If progressives address these broader economic concerns of vot-

ers, there is no reason that immigration cannot be a winning issue for progressive elected leaders. With the Hispanic electorate projected to increase from 7.5 million in 2000 to over 14 million in 2008 and to even greater numbers in the future, the political future belongs to elected leaders who reach out to new immigrants in a compelling way that also addresses the concerns of native citizens.

A key way for progressive leaders to promote a humane policy on immigration is to focus the public's desperation for punitive action on legislation that addresses the abuses of corporate power. The message in the election signals an opportunity to channel the public's punitive mood away from immigrant persecution, into a message that addresses these real concerns about wages and economic growth in their communities.

Examples of positive pro-immigrant state policies include:

- Increasing enforcement of wage & workplace safety laws to eliminate the underground economy.
- “New citizens” programs to better incorporate immigrants into communities and educational institutions.
- Anti-sweatshop procurement rules to raise wages at home and abroad.

The Progressive States Network (PSN) will be hosting a conference call on November 15th with key state legislators and advocates to discuss legislative strategy on immigration for the 2008 session. The call will accompany a strategy paper PSN will be releasing next week to highlight politically smart legislative ways to respond to anti-immigrant attacks and the network of organizations available to support humane immigration legislation at the state and local level. The call will be at 4pm on Nov. 15th. Please RSVP at

http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/1665/event/index.jsp?event_KEY=33291.