

Border Battles

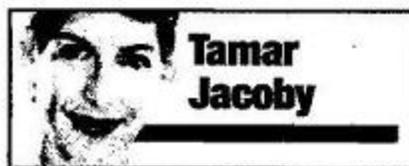
Ending a GOP civil war

THE Republican platform committee did the right thing last week in fending off an attack by a small but vocal group of anti-immigration activists. Now the GOP is in a position to take the next step: not just finessing the issue, but turning it to the party's advantage, appealing to voters hungry for an answer to one of the nation's most pressing problems.

Republicans have always been of two minds on immigration: divided between businesses that rely on immigrant labor and a rank-and-file that fears today's newcomers will change America's culture for the worse.

Add in the fact that our immigration quotas aren't nearly high enough to meet the demand for foreign labor, guaranteeing a continued flow of illegal immigrants, and you have a recipe for all-out war between the GOP's free-trade, pro-business wing and its law-and-order, grassroots base.

The platform fight is the latest round of a standoff that began in



tion reform likely to cost the GOP leadership as much as it fears. Skeptical as they may be about the continuing influx, most grassroots Republicans don't vote on border issues. Pat Buchanan learned that the hard way when he ran for president in 2000 — and won a grand total of 1 percent of the vote. So too in this year's congressional primaries: Taking a harsh line on immigration has hardly proved a silver bullet.

If anything, evidence suggests that Republicans can benefit politically from making a strong case on immigration reform. Voters understand that the system is broken, and polls consistently show that they want it fixed. They aren't anti-immigrant — just eager for the nation to get control of its borders.

January, when President Bush outlined a solution for an immigration system everyone on all sides agrees is broken. His proposal was carefully crafted: a guest-worker program, combined with a provision to let illegal immigrants already here and working earn the right to a legal job. But a vocal faction in his own party objected, and the battle has been raging ever since.

Immigration has been Topic A in several of this year's most hotly contested Republican congressional primaries. And meanwhile divisions on border issues are blocking the GOP from achieving its own goals; just last month, a struggle over an agricultural guest-worker program kept one of the party's priority bills, on class-action suits, from coming up for a vote.

All of which might argue for avoiding the issue this fall — except that the GOP knows its future hinges on Latino voters. Much more than blacks, Latinos are up for grabs politically. And Republicans don't need to win a Latino majority: Reasonable showings in a few swing states (Arizona, Florida, New Mexico) could make the difference for the Bush-Cheney ticket.

No wonder GOP leaders feel they face a dilemma: How to use immigration to rally Latinos without alienating the party's conservative base? But the truth is the party has more leeway than it thinks on immigration.

For one thing, not all Latinos vote first and foremost on the issue: Their primary concerns, like those of many other voters, are education and the economy. And for those who do, even relatively small steps can make a big difference — among the most critical now, letting that stalled agricultural guest-worker bill come up for a vote in Congress.

Nor is a tilt toward immigra-

And as the president and others have argued, the best way to regain control is with a more realistic immigration policy: one that recognizes the reality of global labor markets and seeks to manage the flow, not pretend it doesn't exist or that we can just turn it off, like a faucet.

Republicans from border states, where concern about illegal immigration runs highest, make this case effectively. Look at Arizona: Sen. John McCain and Reps. Jeff Flake and Jim Kolbe, all popular at home, are among the leading proponents of immigration reform.

Their winning position: tougher enforcement, both on the border and in the workplace, and "no" to amnesty — but "yes" to a guest-worker program and to a transitional measure to let those already here and working (contributing to the U.S. economy!) earn their way in out of the shadows.

The position that works in Arizona could work nationwide. What's more, the benefits would go well beyond short-term political calculation.

Neither party alone can hope to fix the nation's broken immigration system. Neither alone can get a bill through Congress. And neither can shape the kind of balanced solution that's needed: one that works for both business and labor, safeguarding our democratic principles and securing our borders.

The question is which party will lead, and which will be dragged kicking and screaming. Republicans can give in to their own internal divide and spend the next four years avoiding immigration — or they can step up and win credit in all voters' eyes for solving one of America's most vexing problems.

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