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For Republicans, Contest's Hallmark Is Immigration

By Jonathan Weisman
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The imagery of the mailings is designed to pack a wallop: a Mexican flag fluttering above the Stars and Stripes, the Statue of Liberty presiding over a "Welcome Illegal Aliens" doormat, a Social Security card emblazoned with the name "Juan Doe," a U.S. passport proclaiming, "Only one candidate has a plan to STAMP out illegal immigration."

As Republican presidential candidates troll for votes, they have flooded mailboxes in Iowa and New Hampshire with such loaded images. Their campaigns have filled the airwaves, packed their Web sites and taunted their adversaries, proclaiming their concern over porous borders and accusing opponents of insufficient vigilance.

No issue has dominated the Republican presidential nomination fight the way illegal immigration has. Under consistent attack for inconsistent conservatism, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney has turned to the issue again and again to shore up his conservative credentials. Former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, running as the law-and-order candidate, has been forced onto the defensive by immigration policies in his city.

And just days after he delivered a passionate defense of the humanity of undocumented children in a Republican debate, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee presented one of the most punitive immigration platforms seen in this campaign season, rejecting legislation to provide the children of illegal immigrants a path to citizenship if they finish high school, attend two years of college or join the military.

Giuliani, Huckabee and Romney have all used illegal immigration to try to prove to voters that they are the toughest and most conservative candidates in the field. And they have used it with brutal consistency in an attempt to marginalize [Sen. John McCain](#) (Ariz.), whose vocal support for legislation to clamp down on border security while offering illegal immigrants a path to citizenship helped cost him his front-runner status.

Romney, despite facing criticism about some of his own immigration policies in Massachusetts and the fact that he was forced to dismiss a company that tended his lawn after it was revealed that it employed illegal immigrants, has attacked all of his rivals on the issue. A new CNN poll shows Romney with sizable advantages over the competition on the handling of illegal immigration, with a lead of 17 percentage points over Huckabee on the matter.

"You have a strong field, but their strengths and weaknesses cancel each other out. No one candidate is standing out as particularly stronger than the rest of the field or more conservative than the rest of the field," said Ken Mehlman, President Bush's former campaign manager, who spent years courting Latino voters for the Republican cause. "And in that dynamic, the desire is to stand up on every issue and say,

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'I'm the strongest, and I'm the most conservative.' "

And nowhere is that more obvious than in the debate over immigration, he said.

The strategy poses a real risk. As the rhetoric and the policy proposals have grown increasingly strident, the eventual nominee's ability to win Latino support in swing states such as Colorado, Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico may be coming increasingly into question.

"For Republican primary politics, this may be the most significant issue. Clearly, there is a segment that is hotly anti-immigrant, and they're very engaged," said Cecilia Muñoz, senior vice president for public policy at the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Latino political organization. "But I don't understand what these guys are going to say to my community when it's time to run" a general-election campaign.

But if Republicans can focus the debate on law-breaking, border security and the strain that illegal immigrants are placing on public services, the issue could also place a wedge between many Democrats and their eventual nominee.

Less than a year after Bush resumed his push to offer the nation's 12 million illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, most of his would-be GOP successors could not have moved further from his platform. Even McCain now embraces policies to clamp down on employers and to seal the border with fencing, unmanned aerial vehicles and beefed-up border patrols. Only when the border is certified as closed would he then consider what to do with the illegal immigrants already in the country.

Huckabee's "Secure America" plan twins a similar crackdown with a proposal to give all illegal immigrants 120 days to register with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and to leave the country. Those who register would face no penalty if they later applied to immigrate or visit. Those who do not "will be, when caught, barred from future reentry" for a decade, Huckabee's plan states.

Huckabee proved so mindful of the issue that he used last week's assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto to argue for stronger border controls, "to make sure if there's any unusual activity of Pakistanis coming into the country."

Romney would cut federal funds to any city that refuses to comply with federal immigration laws or to cooperate with a crackdown. Giuliani would issue all noncitizen workers and students a single, tamper-proof biometric identity card and create a single database to track all noncitizens in the country.

[Rep. Tom Tancredo](#) (Colo.), who joined the presidential campaign solely to pursue his hard-line agenda on illegal immigration, was so comfortable with the direction that his fellow GOP candidates were taking that he dropped out of the race last month and pronounced the field "Tancredo-ized."

Since Bush's first-term push for immigration reform, the political environment has changed dramatically, in large part because the geography of immigration has changed. It is no longer solely a border-state concern. States such as Iowa and New Hampshire have recently experienced their first real influxes of immigrant communities in decades.

"This is the most volatile issue I have measured since busing in 1972," said Peter D. Hart, a Democratic pollster. "It's not like abortion or gay rights, which may touch some people or offend the moral values of some. This is something that affects everyone."

Hart compared the issue of immigration to the treaty returning to Panama the Panama Canal, which drew a visceral response in conservative circles and turned President Gerald R. Ford's GOP nomination campaign in 1976 from a cakewalk to a dogfight.

"It's been like boiling water," said Al Cardenas, a former Florida Republican Party chairman and a co-chairman of Romney's campaign in the state. "It's an issue that was in the back of Americans' minds that needed to get fixed. It wasn't a priority until numbers got out of hand. Then Congress took it up, put it on the front burner, and when nothing got done, the voters turned exasperated. Can we live with such a significant breaking of the rule of law and not be morally outraged?"

Latino and other minority groups see racial codes in many of the words the Republican candidates have used -- for instance, "illegals" rather than "illegal immigrants." And hovering around the campaigns are far more strident figures and organizations. Immigration groups were taken aback when Huckabee accepted the endorsement of Jim Gilchrist, the founder of the border-security Minuteman Project, calling it "providential."

Mothers Against Illegal Aliens recently posted a plea for people to bring their own sheets and utensils to hotels and restaurants because "the person who cooked your meal or made your bed may very well be the one who picked your fruit and vegetables," suggesting that immigrants are spreading disease.

"We as a community are under attack," Muñoz said.

Its members have pledged to fight back. A coordinated campaign, by Latino political groups, service unions, Spanish-language television and radio stations and print-media outlets helped entice more than 1 million immigrants to apply for citizenship through October, said Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund. The campaign is now shifting to voter registration and education.

"I think many folks underestimate how sophisticated immigrants and immigrant voters are," Vargas said. "People are seeing participation in the political arena as an act of self-defense."

Officials in most of the Republican campaigns say they are not worried. Their candidates have distinguished between their opposition to illegal immigration and their support for legal immigration. And all voters share concerns about security and the rule of law, said Maria Comella, a spokeswoman for the Giuliani campaign.

But other Republicans are not as sanguine. Mehlman warned that without a concerted effort to woo back the Latino voters the campaigns have turned off, the GOP may be in trouble. "Is there a basic concern?" he asked. "The answer is 'yes.' "

Polling director Jon Cohen contributed to this report.

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