



THE VIEW

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POPULATION CHANGES AND POLITICS

BY

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Population characteristics crept quietly into the news this week. If their implications are borne out, the impact will be profound upon the political landscape. To add immediate intrigue to these census-based reports, Congress and the President agreed to a compromise immigration bill that, while far from passage, is quite revealing with respect to the negotiators' knowledge of the potential impact of these continued population trends.

The first report cited in many newspapers around the country and in Mississippi emanated from the Census Bureau, and the big news was that the minority population in the United States has topped the 100 million mark. Furthermore, that figure is nowhere close to leveling off. For example, the Hispanic population is growing nationally at a 25% clip while, by comparison, the white population is growing at a 1.6% rate nationally. The Hispanic population at 15% of the total population has surpassed the African-American population at 13.5% as the nation's largest minority. Mississippi has experienced a fairly paltry 2% growth overall compared to a national population growth of 6.4%. We should not forget that we have just gone through the painful process of losing a Congressman just because of such population performance.

It is the other data that are perhaps more startling. The Hispanic population in Mississippi has grown at a 35 % rate and the African-American population has grown at a 4% rate. The growth in Mississippi's white population is a flat zero. It should also be noted that American Indian population in Mississippi grew at a rate of 15%, double that of the rest of the country.

Population statistics can make a person's eyes glaze over, but one wonders if there is a political context for these data. It seems that the President and many members of Congress think so. This is particularly true of the party strategists on both sides of the aisle. The passage of the aforementioned immigration bill will turn largely on the final nature of the path to citizenship contained in the bill. While the word "amnesty" for those who have already made their way into the country from Mexico is not mentioned in the bill itself, every effort will be made to symbolically attach that label to any process of allowing Hispanics in the country illegally to become citizens.

Why the fuss? President Bush finds himself on the opposite side of many of the Republicans in Congress. He seems to be on to something. History shows that in the neighborhood of 70 percent of Hispanics tend to vote Democratic in elections. Add this to an African-American Democratic vote in the mid-90 percent range and the Republican concern for approval of legislation that would someday lead to citizenship and voting for the 12 to 13 million Hispanics becomes understandable. The President's knowledge of the potential voting power of Hispanics comes perhaps from his brother Jeb Bush. Jeb is the immediate past Governor of heavily Hispanic Florida and he no doubt has proven to be a ready sounding board for his brother, the President, on the potential impact of the growing Hispanic political presence. President Bush seems to be of the opinion that dealing with Hispanics illegally in this country in a harsh way will alienate Hispanic voters and potential Hispanic voters for decades to come. Meanwhile, the Democrats are salivating over the potential for a big block of voters down the road and increased favor with the ethnic Hispanics who are already voting.

Turning for a moment to Mississippi, the Democratic Party would do well to heed the opportunities afforded it by this census news. The Republican Party could corral only about 5% of the African-American vote in the last election, and that segment of the population is growing at a 4% rate compared to a zero rate of growth for whites. The 35% explosion in the Hispanic population represents a potential wind fall in the future for Democrats since it is unlikely that many Hispanics are yet able to vote. Much as on the national scene, it must be good news for the Democratic Party leaders that minority groups that have traditionally been found in the Democratic column show such potential for growth. The Republican Party, which has depended largely on white voters, must be concerned about the direction in which the population numbers are headed. While the Republicans have made a number of attempts to broaden their base, they have little to show for it in the way of voter demographics. President Bush obviously sees a way to make inroads into the



Hispanic vote with this current debate over the immigration bill. He has the right idea but he may not win. In Mississippi Republicans are just getting a glimpse of what it may be like to be the majority party, but an organized effort by the Democrats over the next few years that includes a renewed understanding of the get out the vote effort could thwart that opportunity based on a swelling of the Democratic base. The counterpunch for the Republicans both nationally and in Mississippi is to develop real policies that will appeal in a significant way to the growing minority populations, and hence broaden their base to incorporate more minorities in their ranks. President Bush's support of the currently proposed immigration bill indicates that he understands this.

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