AMERICA'S VOICE

For Trump and the GOP, Xenophobia as a Political Strategy Has Backfired
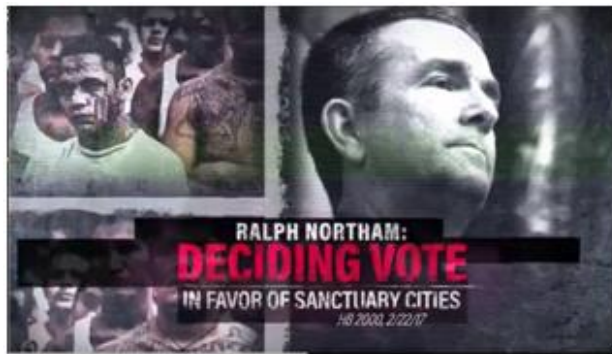
By America's Voice, April 21, 2020

From the moment Donald Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower to announce his presidential campaign, racist anti-immigrant vitriol has been his main message. The Republican Party has followed in lockstep. From 2017 through 2019, Republicans have tried to copy his electoral success by running on racial incitement and xenophobia in races across the country. But in election after election, that strategy has failed.

2017

The 2017 Virginia's governor's race was the initial case of an anti-immigrant strategy backfiring. It was the first statewide election in the Trump presidency and the GOP nominee, Ed Gillespie, was pulled to the right during a contested primary with long-time xenophobe Corey Stewart. In the general election, Gillespie doubled down on the anti-immigrant attacks rather than move to the center.

His campaign tried to use the threat of the international gang MS-13 as the lens to view all Latino immigrants, and tried to claim that Democratic candidate Ralph Northam was weak on crime. Gillespie pressed the issue attacking 'sanctuary cities', of which there are none in the state.

In the lead up to election day, political observers and pundits, including Steve Bannon, believed Gillespie's strategy would work — and would serve as a model for other Republicans. ""Corey Stewart is the reason Gillespie is going to win," Stephen K. Bannon, the former White House chief strategist and Trump's campaign czar, said in an interview. "It was the Trump-Stewart talking points that got Gillespie close and even maybe to victory. It was embracing Trump's agenda as personified by Corey's platform."

In fact, that Trump-Stewart strategy backfired among voters of nearly every demographic, and Northam won by 9 points. That was a much wider margin than anyone expected. As Matt Barreto from Latino Decisions wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, election eve polling conducted by Latino Decisions found much evidence of the backlash:

By a 23-point margin (52 to 29), whites in Virginia also said the MS-13 ads turned them away from Mr. Gillespie, as did African-American and Asian-American voters by larger margins. Data speaks louder than punditry, and our regression analysis of survey data paints a clear picture.

Exposure to Mr. Gillespie's MS-13 ads actually helped drive white college-educated voters away from the Republicans. When we analyzed findings for white independents and Republicans, voters who were aware of the MS-13 ads were significantly more likely to vote for Mr. Gillespie's Democratic opponent.

It wasn't just the Governor's race in Virginia where racist ads were used. A number of the Republican candidates running for the Virginia state legislature followed Gillespie's strategy and shared his failures. In HD 93, Republican Heather Cordasco also attempted to use Virigina's nonexistent sanctuary cities in a failed effort to beat Democrat Mike Mullin. Scott Lingamfelter of House District 31 lost his seat to Democrat Elizabeth Guzman after his attempt to equate undocumented immigrants' ability to obtain a driver's license with violent crime. Democrat Jennifer Foy won House District 2 after an attempt to attack her support for in-state tuition for undocumented students fell flat. Overall, despite the onslaught, Democrats picked up 15 seats, narrowing the GOP's control from 66-34 to 51-49.

In the other statewide gubernatorial race in 2017 in New Jersey, Republican Kim Guadagno deployed an aggressive anti-immigrant strategy. It did not work, and Democrat Philip Murphy won by a wide margin: 56%-41.9%. Guadagno had previously been supportive of a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, but wrongfully believing that attacking immigrants would turn out the Republican base, and she switched her strategy. She called for a ban on 'sanctuary cities' and ran TV ads that attempted to equate all Latino immigration with crime. In the end, she lost badly.
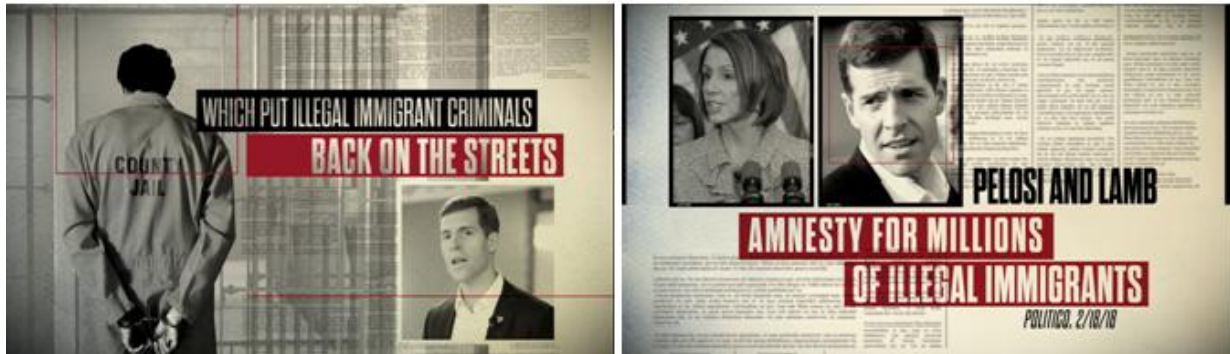
Also in 2017, two different failed attempts to attack Democrats on immigration were made at the county level in New York in races for Nassau County executive and the 10th Assembly District seat. Democrats Laura Curran and Steve Stern, respectively, won their seats after mailers were sent using the strategy of MS-13 to scare voters and stir up anti-immigrant sentiment. The New York Times reported that Curran may have received a boost to her campaign from the backlash to the ads. One mailer featured a photo of three Latino men covered in tattoos that read "Meet Your New Neighbors!", adding that Curran was "MS-13's choice for county executive!" who would "roll out the welcome mat" for gangs.

Injecting anti-immigrant ugliness was not a winning strategy in the December 2017 special Senate election in Alabama either. At the end of his campaign, extremist Republican Roy Moore and right-wing outlets that supported his campaign attempted to focus on 'sanctuary cities' and the Kate Steinle verdict to save his campaign. It did not work. Doug Jones won, making him the first Democrat to win an Alabama Senate seat in 25 years.

2018 midterms

Despite this massive failure, Republicans persisted with the anti-immigrant strategy but it did not even work in the March 2018 special election in Pennsylvania's 18th District, which went for Donald Trump by 20 points. Democrat Conor Lamb won the seat after a super PAC connected to Republican House leadership ran TV ads that said Lamb supports "amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants … Lamb worked in the Obama administration that encouraged sanctuary cities, which put illegal immigrants who commit crimes back on the street." The Republican candidate Rick Saccone's attempt to pit union workers against immigrants on jobs did not work either.

The GOP' anti-immigrant strategy underline backfired in the February 2018 special election in Florida's House District 72. The district went in favor of Trump by 5 points in 2016, but Democrat Margaret Good won by 7 points after her Republican opponent tried to attack her pro-immigration positions using mailers that said her "very progressive beliefs on immigration" will be a "danger to us all."

In a June 2018 special election in Missouri's 17th Senate district, Democrat Lauren Arthur defeated Republican Kevin Corlew after his anti-immigrant strategy backfired. "Robin Martinez, a 54-year-old attorney from the Village of Oaks, said that the attack ads against Arthur, including ones that linked illegal immigration to violence, turned him off Corlew's candidacy," the _Kansas City Star_ reported.
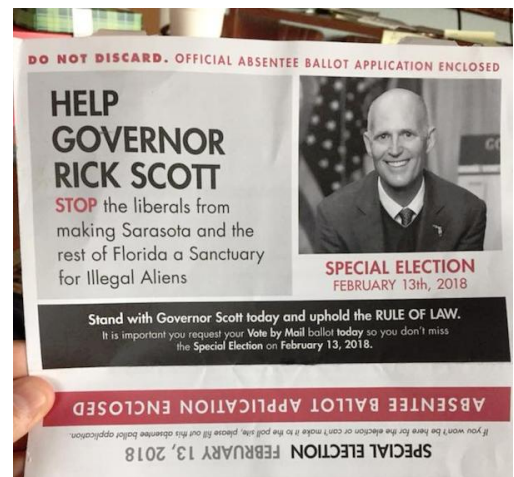
During the 2018 congressional campaigns, Republicans, led by Trump, made racism and xenophobia a central message of their campaigns, from state parties to leadership superPACS to party committees and canidate ads, Republicans focused on anti-immigrant ads.

Again, in 2018, there was a broad backlash to the GOP's reliance on racism and xenophobia was stronger than Trump's shameless turnout strategy.

Trump's divisive demagoguery produced a broad backlash effect that swept many Democrats to victory, defeated numerous anti-immigrant Republicans, and consolidated public support for pro-immigrant policies. Xenophobia backfired on numerous anti-immigrant Republican candidates including some Trump acolytes:
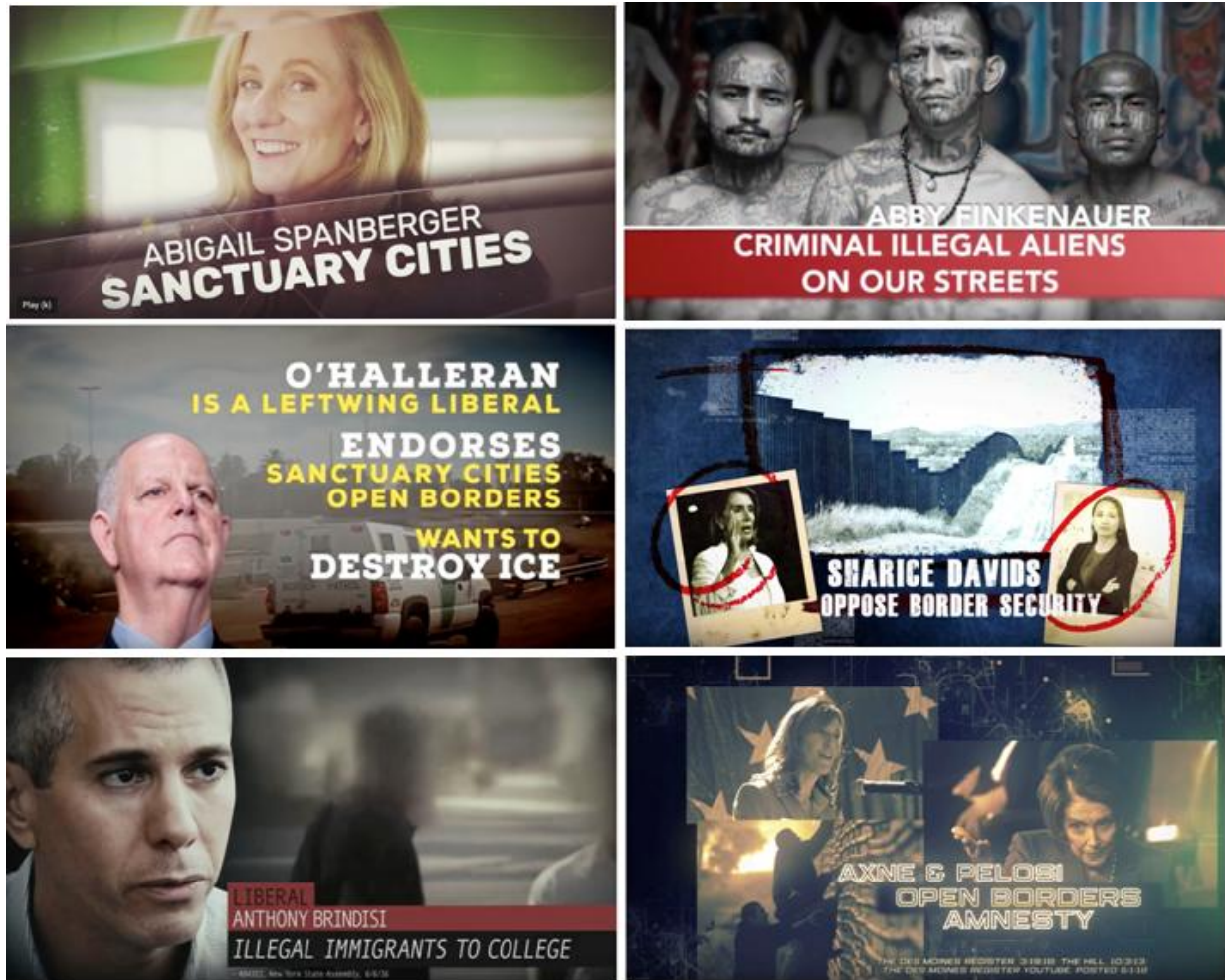
- Kris Kobach, a leading architect of the nativist movement in America, ran for governor of ruby red Kansas and lost by nearly 5%.

- Lou Barletta, a former Mayor of Hazleton who rose to prominence as a fierce anti-immigrant hawk, ran for Senator in Pennsylvania with the support of Trump and was crushed by 14%.

- Corey Stewart ran for the Senate in Virginia as an anti-immigrant firebrand and lost by 15%.

In House races, a long list of anti-immigrant Republicans, all of whom aired racist and xenophobic ads, went down to defeat: Barbara Comstock (VA-10); Dave Brat (VA-07); Kevin Yoder (KS-03); Pete Sessions (TX-32); John Faso (NY-19); Claudia Tenney (NY-22); Rod Blum (IA-01); John Chrin (PA-08); Lea Marquez

Peterson (AZ-02); Christopher Peters (IA-03); Jason Lewis (MN-02); Manny Santos (CT-05); Eddie Edwards (NH-01); Wendy Rogers (AZ-01); Rudy Peters (CA-15); Lena Epstein (MI-11); Dana Rohrabacher (CA-48); Danny Tarkanian (NV-03); John McCann (NJ-05); Jay Webber (NJ-11); Katie Arrington (SC-01); and John Culberson (TX-07). Hardliner Steve King in Iowa-04 survived in a very conservative district by a hair.

In other Gubernatorial races, the following leaned on xenophobia in their campaigns and lost: Adam Laxalt (NV); Walker Stapleton (CO); Bill Schuette (MI); Jeff Johnson (MN); Scott Walker (WI); Scott Wagner (PA).

Nativism was directly on the ballot in Oregon in 2018. Measure 105, the anti-sanctuary ballot initiative backed by the nativist anti-immigrant hate group FAIR, went down to defeat by a margin of 63-37%.
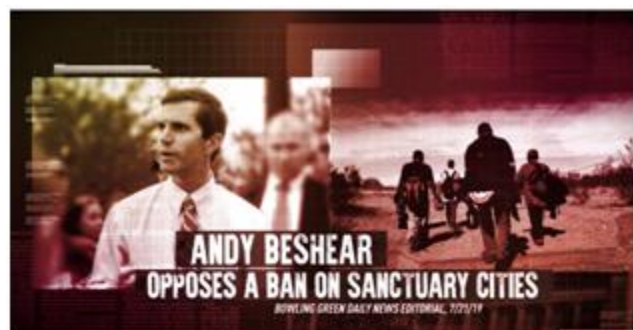
A majority coalition of people of color, young people and educated white voters drove the positive election results for Democrats. According to the American Election Eve poll, a national survey of 70 House battleground districts, found that Democrats won:

- African-Americans 90-6%

- Latinos 73-23%

- AAPI voters 72-24%

- Whites broke 45-52% for Republicans (with a pronounced split between college educated and non college-educated)

2019

On election day in 2019, voters in states across the country again widely rejected xenophobia and elected diverse new leadership.

Even as xenophobic fearmongering backfired in the last two cycles, Republican Governor and incumbent candidate Matt Bevin, along with his aligned superPACs, again made racism the centerpiece of their electoral stratgey. Bevin and Republican Governors Association-supported Putting Kentucky First PAC both went hard on anti-immigrant messaging. For example, in classic dog-whistle form, Putting Kentucky First ran an ad where a woman claimed that immigrants were a danger to her children. Bevin's own ads similarly tired to scare voters away from his opponent Andy Beshear with images of people scaling fences and ominous warnings that "Beshear would allow illegal immigrants to swam our state."

But Kentucky voters did not take the bait. Bevin lost the governor's mansion in a state that Donald Trump carried by 30 points in 2016. And Bevin lost despite the now-questionable wisdom of the Trump bump. Trump made multiple visits to the state to support Bevin, including one the night before the election when a poll had Bevin up five points. Bevin still lost. This was partly due to voter enthusiasm, which was way up for an off-election year. Turnout surged in the state, exceeding 2015 numbers by close to 50%, with almost half a million more votes cast.

The 2019 elections also resulted in Democratic majorities in both Virginia state houses. Notably, this will be the first time the state House is in Democratic hands since 1999. But legislative races also saw anti-immigrant messaging, though the xenophobia was significantly less ubiquitous than in 2017 and 2018, when such messaging took center stage.

In all four of the Virginia state House races where we identified xenophobic messaging, Democrats went on to win the election. In House District 21, the blatant xenophobia of a mailer produced by the

Republican Party of Virginia caught the attention of the local press, and Democrat Kelly Convirs-Fowler held on to her seat anyway. In House District 40, Republican incumbent Tim Hugo ran TV and Facebook ads attempting to secure votes by stirring fears about MS-13. Hugo lost his seat to Democrat Dan Helmer. Mailers using xenophobic messaging were also used in House District 28 against Joshua Cole and in House District 85 against Alex Askew; both Democrats went on to win their competitive races.

Also of note, Democrat Ghazala Hashmi defeated incumbent Glen Sturdivant for Senate District 12 in Virginia. Ghazala Hashmi, a naturalized immigrant, became the first Muslim-American ever elected to Virginia's State Senate, turning divisive attacks into a unifying electoral upset. In an April blog post on Medium, Hashmi described her terror as she watched the Trump administration roll out its racist immigration agenda — and how that fueled her desire to run for office.

In the gubernatorial runoff election in Louisiana, Democrat John Bel Edwards defeated Republican Eddie Rispone, a Trump clone whose campaign featured a significant focus on ugly immigration attack ads and welcomed President Trump for three visits in the final month.

Rispone and Republican allies made racial and immigration fear-mongering a core part of their homestretch strategy, but one that apparently failed to move the needle beyond the core, Trumpian base:

- RGA Right Direction PAC ad that erroneously attacked Edwards for supporting "free taxpayer-funded benefits for illegal immigrants" and for opposing a ban on "sanctuary cities"

- Eddie Rispone ran a Willie Horton-style dog whistle calling for a "crackdown on illegal aliens"

- Eddie Rispone nationalized the race with an ad featuring Trump attacking Edwards on benefits for "illegals" and falsing characterizing Democrats as "open border extremists"

Conclusion

For the past three years, Republicans have fully embraced Trump's racist approach to immigration. They've made xenophobia an integral part of their campaigns. And, they have lost. Repeatedly. But, we fully expect to see Trump and his party pursue the same strategy in 2020.