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The mouth that ate the GOP: Donald Trump's campaign couldn't be doing more damage to Republicans' 2016 prospects if Democrats had designed it themselves

BY STUART ANDERSON

Imagine if, in April 2015, Democratic National Committee officials decided to devise a plan to ensure no Republican presidential candidate could possibly attract enough Latino and Asian voters in 2016 to take back the White House from Democrats, who dominated among both growing constituencies in the last two national elections.

The DNC needed to win Florida, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and other key states with large Latino populations. They needed a plan.

"How about if we get Donald Trump?" one operative might have asked, "and get him to say and propose the most outrageous, offensive and off-putting things — to poison the water with those voters?"

"Let's go talk to him," the other might have answered.

And in the end, let's suppose the plan proceeded — its goal being to secure a Democratic victory in 2016. The Trump campaign would have played out exactly as it has for the past two months.

Exactly.

From the Democrats' perspective, the first order of business would be to arrange focus groups — not to appeal to key voting groups, but rather to figure out how to alienate voters crucial to winning swing states and a majority in the Electoral College.

The focus groups would have come up with lines similar to the ones used in Donald Trump's presidential announcement speech, particularly when he said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."

As a way to create a negative impression of both Trump and the Republican Party, labeling an entire ethnic group sexual predators (there are more than 30 million people of Mexican origin in America, and roughly 54 million Hispanics in total) has proved brilliant. According to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, after Trump's comments on Mexico and immigration, 75% of Latinos had a negative view of Donald Trump (61% "very negative"). Only 13% had a positive view of Trump. First mission accomplished.

The second strategy to push Hispanic voters into the Democratic column: Put together extreme and unrealistic policy proposals and hope at least some potential GOP nominees go on the record in favor of them, thereby opening up the candidates to attack in the general election. This strategy has also proved successful.

First, Trump proposed ending "birthright citizenship," which guarantees babies born on American soil are U.S. citizens (the children of diplomats excluded). Most legal scholars believe only a constitutional amendment could eliminate the 14th Amendment's guarantee of citizenship to those born in America. And while European countries generally do not permit automatic citizenship for children born there, tens of thousands of individuals keep trying to enter those same countries illegally — making it hard to argue the absence of birthright citizenship deters anyone from attempting illegal entry.

It would be one thing if Trump and Trump alone were beating this drum. But Trump's promotion of the idea has already enticed Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal to endorse ending birthright citizenship, too. In the public mind, that makes the already hard GOP sell to Latino voters that much harder.

(Florida's Sen. Marco Rubio and its former Gov. Jeb Bush have both said they oppose Trump's idea and believe that attempts to enter the country solely for the purpose of giving birth could be addressed in a targeted way. Ohio Gov. John Kasich also said he opposed eliminating birthright citizenship.)

Of course, ending birthright citizenship cuts against other conservative principles: It would significantly expand the reach of government and likely cost Americans up to \$1,000 in legal fees per birth to prove a child met the new definition for citizenship, according to Margaret Stock, an attorney with Cascadia Cross-Border Law. Instead of producing citizens who could later work legally and participate in our democracy, the policy would leave America with potentially millions of stateless children.

Not content with the political and policy damage done, Trump seems anxious to extend the hurt, intimating on Fox News he would go to court to take away U.S. citizenship already granted to the U.S.-born children of immigrants in the country unlawfully.

Not surprisingly, Latinos don't like policies that scapegoat children. Romney won just 27% of the Latino vote in 2012, which hurt him especially in a number of swing states.

Latino Decisions performed extensive polling on Latino voters in 2012 and reported: "Romney's policy stance on immigration led nearly 60% of Latino voters to feel less enthusiastic about him,

while President Obama benefited from a 58% increase in enthusiasm for his deferred action policy," referring to the President's plans to lift the threat of deportation for children without legal status who were brought to America by their parents.

"As we have been consistently reporting throughout the campaign, immigration policy was the key policy that likely explains the significant gap in vote choice for Latinos in 2012," concluded Latino Decisions.

What was this Romney policy stance that drove Hispanics away in droves? The roundly criticized idea that undocumented immigrants would "self-deport."

One of those who savaged the idea as a vote-loser in a general election was a man named Donald Trump. In late November 2012, as the dust cleared from the 2012 election, Trump told Newsmax: "He [ROMNEY] had a crazy policy of self-deportation which was maniacal. It sounded as bad as it was, and he lost all of the Latino vote. He lost the Asian vote. He lost everybody who is inspired to come into this country." This quote powerfully suggests Trump today is not a true believer on immigration policy but the worst kind of opportunist.

After all, Trump's policies are self-deportation on steroids. They will drive away the Latino vote with a speed of which Romney could never have dreamed.

Another Trump proposal is to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it. One way he says this could be done is for the federal government to "impound all remittance payments derived from illegal wages." Not only would this repulse Latinos but also anyone who cares about civil liberties and limited government, since it would likely take extraordinary and intrusive federal law enforcement efforts to "impound" remittances (which can be sent now over the Internet) and determine which ones came from legal vs. "illegal" wages.

Latinos aren't the only voters Trump's rhetoric and plans will alienate. Ironically for a billionaire businessman, his trade protectionism combined with his plan to stop issuing new green cards to foreign workers send all the wrong signals to the business community.

Not allowing the many workers now in the country working in H-1B temporary status to obtain employment-based green cards, as Trump proposes, would keep such professionals in permanent legal limbo, thereby alienating not only businesses but also many people in the Indian, Chinese and Filipino communities — a two-for-one political triumph for The Donald.

Trump may believe that white voters will rise up by the millions to support his policies, more than compensating for the Hispanics he repulses.

Nonsense. The math just doesn't work that way.

"If the 2016 Republican nominee gets no more of the non-white vote than Romney, then he will need 65% of the white vote to win," explains Whit Ayres, a veteran GOP pollster and author of the book "2016 and Beyond: How Republicans Can Elect a President in the New America."

(Ayres advises the Rubio campaign.) This is because the non-white percentage of the electorate will rise from 2012 to 2016.

Sixty-five percent is the level of the white vote that Ronald Reagan achieved in 1984 when he defeated Walter Mondale in 49 states.

And it's not just about how many white votes a Republican gets; it's about where those votes are cast.

Ayres notes that concentrating on getting more white voters is a mistake because not only will whites continue to become a smaller proportion of the electorate, but because Romney's 59% of the white vote in 2012 owed much to "huge margins" in heavily Republican states.

In swing states such as Michigan and Wisconsin, Romney received a smaller share of the white vote than in states like Alabama and Mississippi. Running up higher victory margins in solid Republican states does not help a GOP presidential candidate under America's Electoral College system.

And Asian votes are an oft-forgotten, crucial, constituency — and now in the Democratic column. In 1996, Bob Dole actually won the Asian vote; in 2012, more than 70% of Asians voted for Obama.

Why? The switch to the Democrats among Asians is collateral damage from GOP attacks on Latinos. "A message perceived as hostile to one group of immigrants will be perceived as hostile by all immigrants," notes Ayres. He writes that tone and rhetoric matter, tracing the start of the large Latino movement from Democrats to Republicans to the acrimonious 2006-07 debate on President George W. Bush's immigration reform proposal in Congress.

More welcoming GOP rhetoric and policies on immigration will make it far easier to appeal to Latinos and Asians on issues like education, where Democrats must choose between minority voters and the teachers unions that oppose most of the reforms that help minority children gain a better education.

Based on their statements and policy positions, Rubio, Bush and Kasich seem the best positioned of the GOP candidates to reach out and gain non-white voters in the general election. Convincing voters is still likely to prove a tough task - but they will at least get a hearing.

The 2016 election is pivotal for the country's future not only in immigration policy, but in a wide range of areas important to Republicans like health care, energy, tax policy, Internet policy and the future of the Supreme Court.

Donald Trump cares about Donald Trump - but not very much, it seems, about any of those issues. The road he is paving on immigration is gold for Democrats but a dead end for Republicans.

Anderson, the executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy, worked as an immigration policy adviser to Republican Sens. Spencer Abraham and Sam Brownback, as well as in the George W. Bush administration.