



## Obama Describes “Nativist Trend” in Parts of GOP

In an pre-recorded interview with National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast on December 29, President Obama posed the rhetorical question: “By me having taken these [executive] actions, does that spur those voices in the Republican Party who I think genuinely believe immigration is good for our country? Does it spur them to work once again with Democrats and my administration to get a reasonable piece of legislation done?”



“Or does it simply solidify what I do think is a nativist trend in parts of the Republican Party?”

Obama was responding to a question asked by Steve Inskeep, one of the hosts of NPR’s *Morning Edition* program. After the president stated that he thought Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-Ohio) and incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) were responding to those who looked to them “to get things done” and that “the fact that we disagree on one thing shouldn’t prohibit us from getting progress on the areas where there’s some overlap,” Inskeep asked:

Well, let me figure out if there’s overlap on immigration. In an interview in August, you described the Republican Party as being “captive to nativist elements of the party.”

What did you mean by that, and can you work with people who you think of in that way?

Obama replied, in part:

Well, on immigration, I probably can’t; Steve King [R-Iowa] and I fundamentally disagree on immigration....

I think the Republican Party contains a lot of legislators who recognize that; and we know that because those folks voted for a comprehensive bill in the Senate that in many ways was more generous than I was able to offer through executive action.

So, the question then becomes, by me having taken these actions, does that spur those voices in the Republican Party who I think genuinely believe immigration is good for our country? Does it spur them to work once again with Democrats and my administration to get a reasonable piece of legislation done?

Or does it simply solidify what I do think is a nativist trend in parts of the Republican Party? And if it’s the latter, then probably we’re not going to get much more progress done, and it’ll be a major debate in the next presidential election.

I think that if a Republican lawmaker was sitting here, he might say, “Wait a minute. I’m not captive to nativist elements. I have actual concerns, and you’re not addressing them.”

Well, the problem is what are those concerns and how is it that I’m not addressing them?... They’d have to identify for me specifically what those concerns are other than some sense that, you know, these folks just shouldn’t be here.



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on December 30, 2014

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The original interview to which Inskeep referred was with John Micklethwait, editor-in-chief of *The Economist*, and Edward Carr, the newspaper's foreign editor, and was published in *The Economist* for August 2.

When the interviewers asked the president to expand on his criticism of the business community for believing that "the only responsibility that a corporate CEO has is to his shareholders," (to which the interviewers countered, "Every CEO nowadays is involved in nine different social responsibility things") Obama replied:

There's a huge gap between the professed values and visions of corporate CEOs and how their lobbyists operate in Washington.... My challenge to them consistently is, is your lobbyist working as hard on those issues as he or she is on preserving that tax break that you've got? And if the answer is no, then you don't care about it as much as you say.

Obama then shifted gears and focused his criticism away from corporate CEOs and toward Republicans:

Now, to their credit, I think on an issue like immigration reform, for example, companies did step up. And what they're discovering is the problem is not the regulatory zealotry of the Obama administration; what they're discovering is the dysfunction of a Republican Party that knows we need immigration reform, knows that it would actually be good for its long-term prospects, but *is captive to the nativist elements in its party*.

Since Obama seems to enjoy throwing the "nativist" term around when criticizing those in the Republican Party who oppose his plans for "immigration reform" (which, far from reforming our "broken" immigration system, always includes granting amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants), it might be worthwhile to consider the origins of the term in its historical context.

The anti-immigrant philosophy often called nativism was most visible in the United States during the 19th century, the peak years for immigration into the United States. Unlike today, almost all of the immigration during that period was legal. And since the nation was relatively underpopulated during those years in comparison to its rapid growth in territory, opposition to immigrants was motivated by factors other than economics and competition for jobs.

Nativists were active in New York as early as 1843, operating in the American Republican Party, which became the Native American Party in 1845. This party shared leadership with the more widely known Know-Nothing Party. The anti-immigrant stance of the Know-Nothings was based not on the fact that the immigrants threatened America's economy, but because most Irish and many German immigrants were Catholic. Among the most famous activists in the Know-Nothing movement was the inventor Samuel Morse, a rabid anti-Catholic who wanted to forbid Catholics from holding public office, and worked to change immigration laws to limit immigration from Catholic countries.

As immigration patterns shifted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and more immigrants came from southern and Eastern Europe, anti-Catholicism gave way to anti-Italian, anti-Polish, and anti-Jewish sentiments. These prejudices eventually became institutionalized in immigration legislation, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited the annual number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to two percent of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States in 1890. The act effectively reduced the flow of immigrants from Italy, Poland, and the rest of Eastern Europe — most of whom were Catholics, Orthodox, or Jews — to a trickle.

In contrast, today's opponents of illegal immigration do not base their insistence on enforcing our



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immigrations laws on racial, religious, ethnic, or national quotas. They are by no means “nativists,” as the term has been traditionally used. No Republican member of Congress has suggested that Great Britain or Sweden be given a larger quota than Mexico or Guatemala or that only those migrating illegally from Costa Rica should be deported and not those from Denmark.

However, it is the responsibility of every sovereign nation to maintain its borders and to control who crosses those borders. It is a matter not only of sovereignty but also of national security. If our immigration laws need to be changed to allow a larger number of immigrants to enter our country, that can be achieved legislatively, after careful deliberation. But in the meantime, our existing immigration laws should be enforced. To label as “nativists” those legislators who insist on enforcement and the deportation of those who are here illegally is to do them a severe disservice.

*Photo of President Barack Obama: AP Images*

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