

Cavaliers, Borderers and immigration reform

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Last week, House Speaker John Boehner [announced that he has no intention of moving forward on the immigration reform bill](#) that passed the Senate by a wide margin in June.

On the one hand, this is no surprise. Boehner's Congress is sitting on a lot of important legislation (the Farm Bill, crucial budgetary legislation), and Boehner has [said](#) that he intends to be judged by "how many laws that we repeal," not "how many new laws we create."

On the other hand, not so long ago immigration reform was thought to be key to the Republican Party's future: rebuilding relationships with Hispanic voters and changing the [perception](#) of the party as consisting of old, out-of-touch white men.

Why no action on something that seems like an economic win for the country, a cultural win for the millions of young people in limbo and a political win for Republicans battered by incidents such as Mitt Romney's "self-deport" comments during the presidential campaign? I don't claim to know the answer, but I found [this now four-year-old analysis](#) from Keith Ammann helpful in thinking about it.

Ammann uses David Hackett Fischer's book *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* to illuminate the divide in the Republican Party that may now be pressing down on immigration reform. Amman argues that today's GOP can be understood as an alliance between the heirs of two groups of early settlers. One Fischer calls the Cavaliers, those who came to the United States for land and became plantation owners. The other is the Borderers, Scotch-Irish settlers who settled in the outer areas of the Appalachians and spread south and west.

If Ammann is right that the very different ideologies of these two groups are alive today, we can pretty easily map his analysis onto the intraparty conflict over immigration reform. Many Republicans badly want immigration reform, not simply to attract a wider spectrum of voters but also because it helps business owners and farmers recruit labor. Here's just [one](#) recent example of the call for an immigration

system that allows a greater flow of inexpensive labor into the United States. Whether immigration reform could accomplish this is [open to debate](#). But the call, and the business-first ideology behind it, is clear.

This is very much what Amman/Fischer might call a Cavalier position. Landowners who need a source of relatively inexpensive labor generally support immigration reform.

But the Borderer side of the Republican Party has a very different view. Borderers have traditionally been wary of outsiders. Throughout U.S. history, they have led nativist campaigns against groups they perceive as threatening their territory. Borderers came to the U.S. seeking material betterment and self-determination. They often carried strong beliefs about the need for weapons to defend their hard-won territory—first against the British, later against Native American tribes and Northerners. They developed family systems, agricultural and economic habits, and religious practices that all helped to defend this way of life.

Immigration reform strikes at a core anxiety in the sons and daughters of the Borderers: outsiders threaten territory. This segment of the Republican Party has repeated this objection in multiple ways, with Spanish-speaking immigrants the current targets.

Will the desperate need for immigration reform finally break this fragile and fraught alliance between Cavaliers and Borderers? If so, what will rise from the Republican Party's ashes?