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Presidents Without Papers: Who Is More American?

Vijay Pendakur
DePaul University

Art Munin
DePaul University

Abstract

This reflection seeks to link together the “birther” debate and conservative challenges to comprehensive immigration reform while arguing that a new framework is necessary in the progressive response. Birther and other conservative anti-immigration narratives attempt to present themselves as political discourse; however, we seek to uncover and name their true nature as a discussion of race, racism, and the further evolution of white privilege. With a satiric twist, we highlight how eight presidents before President Obama were born outside of the United States, whereas young undocumented children who have spent the vast majority of their developmental years in the United States have their college hopes stymied due to a draconian immigration and naturalization policy. We argue that labeling this reality as the pervasive influence of racism is absolutely necessary to advance progressive ideology, combat covertly racist rhetoric, and champion comprehensive immigration reform.

Vijay Pendakur currently serves as the Director for the Office of Multicultural Student Success at DePaul University. He holds a B.A. in History and East Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and an M.A. in U.S. History from the University of California – San Diego. Vijay is an experienced trainer and facilitator on issues of social justice and diversity education and has worked with organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, the American College Personnel Association, Dominican University, Washington University – St. Louis, along with other universities and organizations. His primary research interests are Asian American history and identity, postcolonial theory, 20th century civil rights history, and the implications of “post-race” politics. Vijay is currently in the doctoral program in education at DePaul University.

Art Munin is Assistant Dean of Students and adjunct professor in the Counseling Program and Liberal Studies Program at DePaul University and Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education Program. A published author he co-authored a book chapter in the 2011 publication Handbook for Student Leadership Development and the 2009 book entitled When Minorities are Strongly Encouraged to Apply: Diversity and Affirmative Action in Higher Education. In June 2012 his newest work, entitled, Color by Number: The Facts and Stats on Children and Racism was published (Stylus Publishing). Art has been a consultant for higher education institutions, not-for-profits, and municipalities all over the country. He earned a Ph.D. in Higher Education and M.Ed. in Community Counseling at Loyola as well as a M.A. in Multicultural Communication at DePaul.

We refuse to allow President Barack Obama’s submission of his original birth certificate on April 27, 2011, to quash the “birther” debate. It is not over, not by a long shot. Now, to be clear, both of us have always believed that our current president was born in the United States. One may assume that puts us at odds with the so-called birthers and celebrities such as Donald Trump, but it does not. We simply advocate a stauncher birther ideology, alleging that we have previously had presidents in this country that could not be classified as “natural born citizens.” This quote from the U.S. Constitution clearly and

narrowly requires that a person must be born within the United States to be eligible to be commander-in-chief. This rule has been violated by eight U.S. presidents.

We know this revelation is shocking, even controversial, but it is our job to speak truth, no matter how difficult it may be to hear. In speaking this truth we offer something the larger birther group has lacked when targeting President Obama: evidence. We can definitively prove, without any doubt, our assertion that eight U.S. presidents were not born in this country. In fact, as seen below, this is true for eight of the very first nine presidents.

Figure 1.1: The List of Eight Presidents Without Papers (Miller Center of Public Affairs, n.d.)

Presidency	President	Birthplace
1st	George Washington	Pope’s Creek, VA – British colony
2nd	John Adams	North Precinct of Braintree, MA – British colony
3rd	Thomas Jefferson	Goochland County, VA – British colony
4th	James Madison	Port Conway, VA – British colony
5th	James Monroe	Westmoreland County, VA – British colony
6th	John Quincy Adams	Braintree, MA – British colony
7th	Andrew Jackson	Waxhaw area, NC/SC border – British colony
9th	William Henry Harrison	Charles City County, VA – British colony

Each of these men who went on to become president of the United States was born in a colony of the British Empire and were, therefore, legal citizens of the United Kingdom.

Jumping ahead to present day, we *continue* to be a nation of immigrants ... with an irony of a different color. According to a Pew Research Center report (n.d.), there were 11.9 million people living without documentation in the United States in 2008. Core American industries like agriculture, construction, and food service have long operated on the backs of undocumented workers. As globalization and offshoring continue to drive domestic wages down, American industries look to undocumented labor in greater numbers to maintain their competitive economic edge. From colonial times to the present day, new Americans continue to be vital to the functioning of this country. Even in light of this historic and present truth, we find ourselves locked in a heated national debate about immigration reform today.

Consider the story of Felicitas Romo. As a small child, Felicitas was carried into this country by her family. Her parents crossed the United States-Mexico border to pull tomatoes and cultivate oranges in the hopes of providing a life for their family. Felicitas was raised with the strong belief that studying hard in school was her opportunity. She said, "I've seen what the possibilities are and looking at how my family is struggling and pushed down, they are stuck at that level. Education is the best possible way I can get out of that level" (Amrhein, 2003, p. 2). This bright and talented young woman was on the honor roll throughout high school, a student any teacher would dream to have in class. However, despite a stellar academic record, she learned that college was not a possibility. She has lived the vast majority

of her life in the United States and yet does not qualify for in-state tuition or financial aid because she is undocumented.

When you have a dream like Felicitas, you are willing to entertain even the most devastating of options. She attempted to be adopted by an American citizen, a process that would have required her to denounce her parents' rights to her as their child so she might start a path toward citizenship. Even after putting her family through that awful ordeal, the adoption was denied because she missed the application deadline by 6 weeks. The more than 15 years of previous residency in the United States did not matter in the adoption proceedings, just those 6 weeks (Amrhein, 2003).

Holding in one hand the eight U.S. presidents who, for all intents and purposes, were offered a pathway to citizenship when they were adults and, in the other hand, Felicitas Romo, an earnest and hard-working student who has spent nearly all her formative years in the United States, we ask one simple question: Who is more American? This question is at the center of our reflection in this article, it surmises the irony we seek to expose, and highlights a vital need for discourse rebranding. We maintain that any contemporary discussion regarding citizenship or immigration is a conversation on race and racism by another name. Birther movements and conservative challenges to comprehensive immigration reform represent another evolution in Whiteness, one that must be named as so.

The birthers represent a fringe group, but their racist ideology has had a significant effect on the national conversation on immigration, legality, and "American-ness." We have seen the effects when Donald Trump and Sarah Palin employed birther rhetoric and tactics. While many clearly see

these as nothing more than the political maneuverings of conservatives gearing up for the 2012 presidential election, how is it possible for a potential presidential candidate to use racist rhetoric without damaging his or her own potential candidacy? It is possible because progressives have not taken the step to clearly label racist discourse as racist. Trump and Palin, along with many other conservative media reporters and pundits, have been able to question the “American-ness” of our president while simultaneously hiding behind a *good will* discursive shield of legalese, counterfactuality, and hearsay. None of these tactics would hold water if they were framed through the lens of race and racism. Scholars have carefully documented the central role that race has played in the conservative critique of Obama during his run for the presidency and in his first term as U.S. president (Esposito & Finley, 2009; Lum, 2009; Tesler & Sears, 2010; Wise, 2009). To simply dismiss birthers as a paranoid fringe group is to dismiss the powerful link between discourse and ideology in the delivery of racist frames, the continued power of Whiteness, and the will of the American voter to cast ballots from a place of fear.

This birther debacle represents an enormous missed opportunity in the broader national debate on comprehensive immigration reform. Currently, there are myriad allies raising their voices and calling for change. The most popular, accessible, progressive strategy uses a humanist discourse to make the case for comprehensive change. Rhetoric and images of families broken, children marginalized, and economic subjugation work to move individuals’ hearts to consider the state of emergency for undocumented Americans and the need for immediate, structural change. These are crucial arguments and should not be minimized or replaced.

Rather, we call for progressives, leftists, and social change agents to add another tool to the immigration reform strategy chest ... the language of Whiteness and racism.

This would mean not allowing politicians, celebrities, or anyone at a microphone to employ insidious racist rhetoric free from reprisal. It would mean calling out how the lens of Whiteness in this debate is used to color the issues. Birther movements and conservative blocks to immigration reform are covertly positioning immigration reform as an attack on white people and Whiteness. Using the language of race and racism highlights this reality, while also stating that birther actions are nothing more than another divide-and-conquer strategy. The powerful elite have employed such tactics countless times throughout history with great success. We have the opportunity to make a change now.

Using the rhetoric of race and racism reflects the need to change the *face* of America. That face is not white. It isn’t black either, nor brown, nor any shade thereof. We are an incredibly diverse nation requiring a wide identity, one that changes with the times, and reflects the best aspects of diversity and justice. We cannot allow politicians, pundits, and celebrities to drive wedges between us for their own gains. In every way they are divisive and contrarian, our rhetoric needs to be both fiercely honest and broadly inclusive. We are not seeking to exclude anyone from this conversation, they are.

As can be seen, we are not seeking to “play the race card” or “wag the dog”; this is a cry for naming what *is* a racial issue with the language of race. It is a call for framing Whiteness as central to this debate. While there are thousands of white Canadians *without papers* living in the United States, the face of undocumented peoples is

continually constructed as Mexican. These frames have been used time and time again to construct and protect Whiteness, while destabilizing movements of racial justice. The difference right now, however, is that champions of comprehensive immigration reform have an opportunity to call out this set of arguments, ideas, and images as racist. This is currently an opportunity we cannot afford to miss, as the need for change is far too critical for us to deny reality and relinquish our greatest tools.

In concluding this brief essay, we challenge our community not simply to embrace this strategy of reframing and naming as an academic concept and political concept, but as a tool for daily life. Imagine the next dinner-table conversation with your extended family: Aunt Matilda has seen the recent CNN story covering Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids at businesses suspected of employing undocumented laborers. In between sips of merlot, she shares, “While it breaks my heart to watch these people get rounded up

by the immigration police, it does make sense ... after all, aren't American jobs for Americans?” Instead of meeting her anti-immigrant sentiments with the usual humanist arguments about the dignity and struggle of these undocumented laborers, you step in and ask, “Aunt Matilda, who are these *real* Americans you are talking about? Would they be deporting those undocumented people if they were white?” As you proceed to share that eight of the first nine U.S. presidents were actually born outside of the United States, or that there are hundreds of thousands of undocumented white Canadians living amongst us, you begin the process of subtly reframing this conversation and introducing the role of Whiteness and racism in the current discourse. We suggest this approach because each of us has a handful of “Aunt Matildas” in our private lives and Aunt Matildas tend to vote. Such a tactic allows each of us to become immediate change agents while we continue to build coalitions for political reform.

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