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DEBATE OVER SANCTUARY CITIES GETS A TEST RUN IN VIRGINIA GOVERNOR'S RACE

Republican candidate is running ads linking sanctuary cities and crime, and Democrats are figuring out how to frame response

By Laura Meckler
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WASHINGTON – The **candidates for governor of Virginia** this fall are battling over the question of “sanctuary cities,” and Democrats fear it will become a new cudgel to be used against them in next year’s midterm elections, especially if they lose in Virginia.

Republican Ed Gillespie has pressed the matter in TV ads, debates and on the trail, drawing a connection between crime and sanctuary-city policies, which generally involve resistance to immigration enforcement. In one TV ad, Mr. Gillespie ties his Democratic opponent to a notorious gang.

“MS-13 is a menace, yet Ralph Northam voted in favor of sanctuary cities that let dangerous illegal immigrants back on the street, increasing the threat of MS-13,” the narrator says

The ad is referring to a Virginia bill that aimed to prevent local jurisdictions from adopting various sanctuary policies. The bill never became law.

The Northam campaign replied, in its own TV ads, by calling the GOP ads “despicable” and “not true” and touting Mr. Northam’s own record. A campaign official said the attacks are backfiring on Mr. Gillespie because they are so “over the top” and false.

Still, even Democrats who strongly support sanctuary policies worry their candidates will be unable to defend themselves against Republican accusations that they are protecting criminals.

“Republicans have figured out how to use the sanctuary-city issue to bring together fears about crime and smash it together with immigration in a way that’s really not helpful for Democrats,” said Lanae Erickson Hatalsky, who oversees social issues at Third Way, a centrist Democratic think tank.

There is no definition of a sanctuary city and no precise count of them, but many communities have adopted policies protecting illegal immigrants, as have the states of California and Illinois. In some cases, law-enforcement officers are barred from asking people about their immigration status. In other cases, city and county jails won’t comply with federal requests to hold people suspected of being in the U.S. illegally so that federal officials can arrest them for possible deportation.

Opponents of sanctuary cities argue that these policies undercut federal efforts to enforce immigration law, and in particular, protect people who have committed dangerous crimes.

Supporters of the policies say that if police are known to quiz people about their immigration status, undocumented residents will be reluctant to report crimes or act as witnesses. They also point to court rulings that have held counties liable for detaining people in jail beyond their release times, as may be the case when suspected illegal immigrants are awaiting pickup by federal authorities.

The subject of how to frame the issue politically came up at a recent meeting of advocates sharing research about public opinion on immigration. "It takes them three words to put it out there and then it takes us three paragraphs to respond," said Angela Kelley, an immigration advocate and former Obama adviser now at the Open Society Foundations. "That's the crux of the challenge."

The politics around sanctuary cities are the reverse of another immigration issue, the fate of young people brought to the country illegally by their parents. The "Dreamer" debate highlights the achievements and aspirations of otherwise law-abiding young people and puts many Republicans on the defensive.

Republicans pressed the sanctuary issue in at least two Senate races last year. In Pennsylvania, Republican Sen. Pat Toomey won after accusing his challenger of backing sanctuary policies; in New Hampshire, Republican Sen. Kelly Ayotte tried the same but was narrowly defeated. A range of Republican strategists are looking to deploy the issue in congressional races next year.

At least two states – Nevada and Oregon – are considering ballot measures that would block sanctuary policies, which could force candidates in those states to take positions on the matter.

In Nevada, the effort is being spearheaded by state Sen. Michael Roberson, who is running for lieutenant governor next year. He says he was motivated by an unsuccessful effort to pass a state law barring cooperation with immigration enforcement. "We cannot allow Nevada to become a sanctuary state," Mr. Roberson said in an interview.

One problem, advocates say, is the term "sanctuary" itself. It stems from the work of churches and synagogues and was extended to cities in the 1980s, as liberal communities sought to protect illegal Central American immigrants from deportation. More recently, the idea gained popularity when the Obama administration stepped up deportations and worked to increase cooperation with local government in holding suspects.

President Donald Trump ran for office promising a crackdown, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions has worked to deliver it. Mr. Sessions is threatening to deny federal grant money to jurisdictions that don't cooperate with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, and he raises the issue frequently, highlighting people in the U.S. illegally who have committed crimes.

"We've got logic and facts on our side. They've got emotion," said Mark Mellman, a Democratic strategist who works on many Senate campaigns. "Sometimes emotion wins out over facts."

The [election results in Virginia](#) may influence how aggressively Republicans use the issue in 2018, Mr. Mellman said. "If they have any inkling this works, they're going to be using it all over in 2018," he said.