

Hispanic Vote Matters

**By Professor Maria L. Fornella*

The largest and fastest growing minority in the United States has not yet reached the level of political participation that could transform its numbers into tangible political power. Still, its surge, especially in certain key “battle” states, will be crucial for the outcome of the 2012 election. This realization has both parties scrambling to reach out to Hispanics. For the first time, an anti-Obama advertisement campaign has been launched in Spanish language in the state of Virginia, for example. This unprecedented move is part of a two-month, twenty million dollar anti -Obama push paid for by conservative group Crossroads GPS. The Obama White House has also organized its early campaign stage around this reality: it is consistently sending out emails in Spanish to its Latino constituents, enlisting their support with voter registration and the mobilization of their communities.

Overall, the 2010 Census found that the number of eligible Hispanic voters has gone from 18million in 2008 to 22 million in 2010. This, coupled with the esoteric Electoral College voting system based on Winner Takes All by state, brings into sharp focus the importance of the Hispanic vote in the 2012 presidential election.

The huge increase in Hispanic voting population in several key “swing” states which Obama won in 2008 is not going unnoticed by his campaign. Between 2008 and 2010, the voting age Latino population has grown by 19% in Virginia, by 20% in Nevada and by 40% in North Carolina. In Florida, the largest and most competitive swing state, it grew by 13%, adding 250,000 new voters. The arithmetic is pretty clear, to be re-elected, President Obama needs to win these states and that is why he is already campaigning in each of them.

Obama won 67% of the Hispanic vote in 2008, but many voters, disillusioned with the high unemployment rate in the community (11.3%, compared to the national 9% rate), and the failure of the administration to make comprehensive immigration reform a priority, may not show up on election day. As usual, turn out will be key. The latest Gallup poll found that his approval among Hispanics is only 48%. This decrease in support is mainly due to economic woes and the fact that many in the community have been unable to refinance their mortgages and are losing their houses. To this it must be added that the loss of support is to some extent of his own making. In order to prove his security credentials with the country at large, Obama has deported more than one million of illegal immigrants in three years. Although he gave directives to his ICE agents to focus on those with a criminal record, the fact is this puts him at odds with the community and undermines his canvassing efforts and Latino youth outreach in the neighborhoods.

On the other hand, given the deep discontent with the economic situation, the Republican Party is missing a great opportunity to bring at least some part of the Hispanic vote back to their party. While GW Bush got 44% of the Hispanic vote in

2004, John Mc Cain got only 31% in 2008. In the Senate, he had been a supporter of immigration reform and had cooperated with Edward Kennedy to introduce a comprehensive immigration reform bill that failed. Once he became a presidential candidate, he was bashed by the other candidates in the primary and completely changed his tune, saying he did believe in border security first. Such is the nature of primaries and their transformative power. This same kind of rhetoric still permeates the Republican primary today and is alienating Hispanics faster than any Crossroads ads bashing Obama.

Just like the rest of the population, the main concern of Latino voters is slow economic growth coupled with high unemployment. However, they cannot ignore the offensive rhetoric that Republican primary candidates are spewing in order to energize their white rural base. Immigration has turned out to be a fundamental wedge issue among GOP candidates, and probably the one that allows them to throw the most “red meat” to the Tea Party wing of the electorate. Rick Perry, for example, was lambasted for his sensible, moderate immigration stance of allowing some undocumented Latino high school graduates living in the State of Texas to pay the same lower tuition rates as the rest of Texas residents. Herman Cain called for an electrified fence to prevent Mexicans from entering the United States (later he claimed it was a joke and apologized, but very few could see the humor in it). Michelle Bachman had earlier raised the issue of the so-called “anchor babies” whose mothers “purposefully” come to the United States to give birth so that their children will be US citizens; this led to the formation of a whole movement within the extreme wing of the party to change the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees citizenship to those born here. Responding to this demand, a group of GOP lawmakers very irresponsibly formed a committee to give “serious consideration” to the issue. Of course this is all a political move. This *is* a country of immigrants, and getting rid of the 14th Amendment would mean casting away one of its most valued foundational principles. One wonders if anti-Obama Spanish-language ads will be enough to counteract what seems to be a GOP all-out effort to offend not only Latinos but all citizens born here from immigrant parents.

Historically, with the exception of the early arrived Cuban-Americans and other smaller Latino elites in Miami, Hispanic voters flock naturally to the Democratic Party because it is the party that focuses on jobs, public education, redistribution of wealth and welfare benefits, all values that are in line with what most Latino immigrants expect from the government. However, many are social conservatives and on social policies like abortion and gay marriage, they are ideologically closer to Republicans. The 2010 mid-term elections resulted in 30 Latinos being elected to the US House; and although Democratic candidates won the Latino votes, in most cases by wide margins, there were three important exceptions: a young Cuban, Marco Rubio, got elected to the US Senate in Florida, and two governorships were also won by Republican Hispanics (New Mexico and Nevada). Marco Rubio is constantly mentioned among the pundits as a likely GOP vice-presidential candidate, and by the way he consistently ducks the issue of immigration reform, he will accept it if offered. As these important recent victories show, there appears to be an opening for the GOP to recover some swathes of the Latino electorate.

Republican tough rhetoric on tall electrified fences, on denying services and ending birth citizenship rights for immigrants’ children will most likely subside immediately after the primary election. Once results are known and the anointed candidate starts his

national campaign, the tone will be completely different. However, this kind of insensitive, offensive talk about Hispanics on the part of the candidates is neither prudent nor wise. At the ballot box, strong emotions often trump rational arguments, and even if they blame the president for the state of the economy and feel somewhat neglected by Obama, Hispanics will probably continue to favor Democrats over Republicans. As recognized by responsible voices within the GOP establishment such as Jeb Bush, this is a long-term strategic problem for the party.

In 2010, Senator majority leader Harry Reid was very close to losing his seat to a Tea Party candidate when he decided to mobilize the Latino base: he promised them he would bring the DREAM Act to the floor again. This bill, which would allow undocumented students a path to citizenship if they meet certain requirements, including making good grades in school and serving in the military, had been removed from the Congressional agenda until 2013. By simply saying he would bring it back to the floor for debate, Harry Reid won the election, as Latinos came out *en masse* to vote for him.

Both parties should consider taking a page out of Senator Reid's playbook. Whoever reaches out and strongly insists on rational Immigration Reform, thereby reassuring Hispanics they too can have their share of the American dream, will greatly enhance his or her chances of winning a large percentage of the Hispanic vote and with it, the White House. For their part, Hispanic voters should realize the potential of their own demographic power and bring it to political fruition.

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