

A sign in English and Spanish outside a polling place in San Antonio, Texas.

Photo: Associated Press.

POLITICS

Who Is the Latino Voter?

By Maria Echaveste

Republicans fanned the flames of fear over national security and terrorism to hold onto power in the 2002 and 2004 elections, framing the debate in terms of who would keep the nation safer: Republicans or Democrats. Issues like health care, the economy and education got pushed aside by the strength of the White House message machine even in the 2004 election, when serious questions concerning the war in Iraq were gaining traction.

By 2006, facing increasing disenchantment with President Bush's conduct of the Iraq war, the Republicans tried to use a new version of the "who will keep you safe" strategy. This time, however, illegal immigration and the strengthening of the vulnerable southern border were to be the 3.0 version of the "war on terrorism" game plan. Yet being tough on illegal immigrants did not turn out to be the

"Hail Mary" pass that galvanized the conservative base to save the Republican majorities in Congress. Instead, it may have actually added to the points scored by Democrats with another part of the electorate — Hispanic voters.

But before Democrats can take the Hispanic electorate to the bank every election day, they need to do a better job of counting the votes. With respect to the real and perceived increase in Latino support in 2006, Democrats need to crunch the numbers and try to understand how the issue of illegal immigration played in Hispanic communities around the country.

If Democrats analyze the votes cast on election day, they may learn that Hispanics went to the polls with other issues on their minds (e.g., Iraq, the economy, corruption) but became more interested in voting in November 2006 because of the immigration debate. They may learn that

Latinos were just as concerned about illegal immigration as other Americans but were (and continue to be) quick to notice when legitimate concerns over a broken immigration system become the basis for attacking all Hispanics, regardless of legal status. Lastly, they may also learn that, like other Americans, Latinos expect Congress to tackle and solve the nation's problems. If Democrats now in control of Congress come home in 2008 asking voters to keep them in power without having addressed some of the toughest problems facing our nation, including our broken immigration system, Latinos, like other Americans, may decide to give control to someone else.

Amidst the general glee in Democratic campaign headquarters across the country as the November 2006 results came in, there was an additional reason to crow — initial post-election analysis indicated that Hispanics had returned to the Democratic column. In 2004, the Republicans had touted their inroads into the Hispanic community. That year, President Bush received about 40 percent of the Latino vote, an increase of about 10 percentage points from the 2000 election. Yet in 2006, Latinos preferred Democratic candidates at rates ranging from 67 percent (reelecting Governor Napolitano of Arizona) to 73 percent (electing Robert Menendez of New Jersey to the Senate).

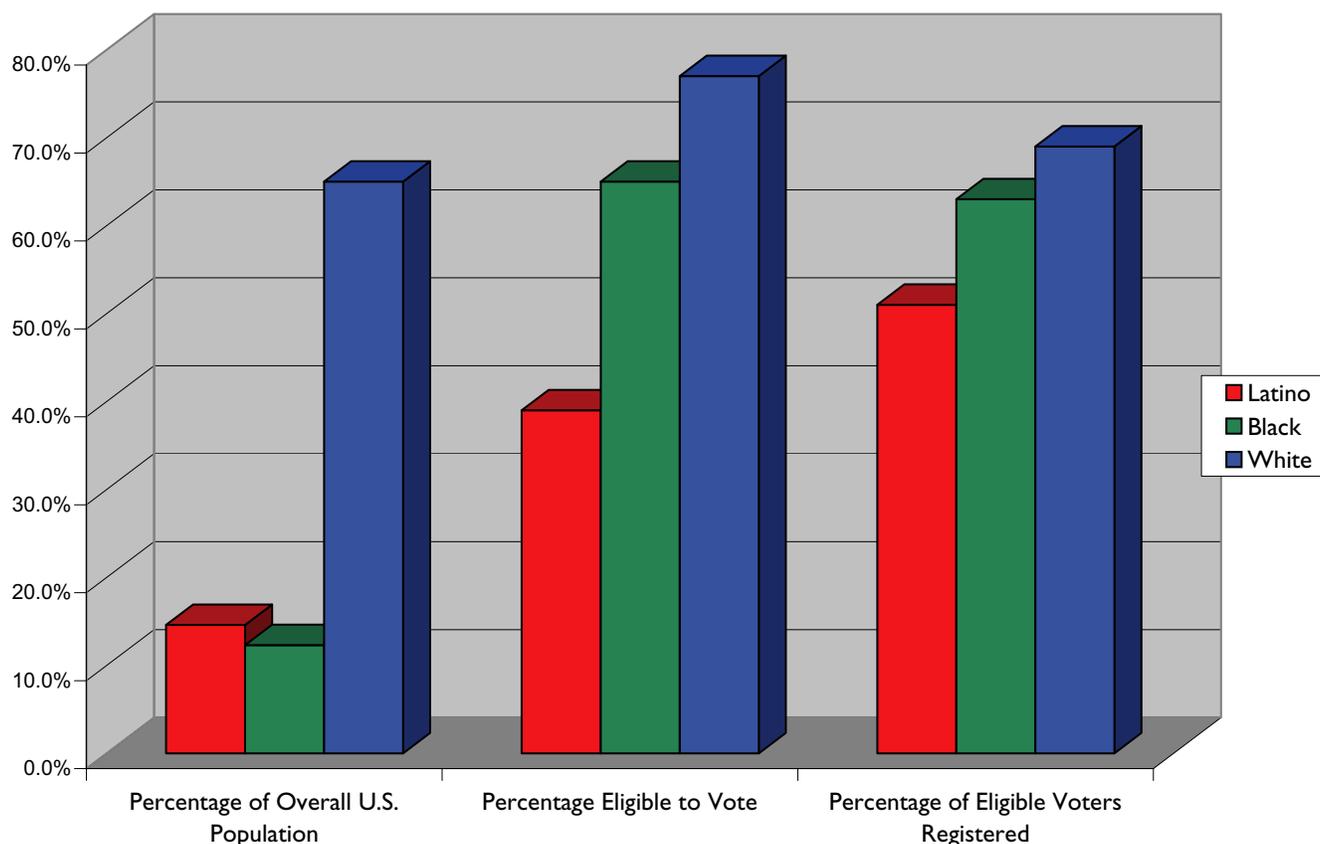
Broadly speaking, Latinos increased their support for

Democratic candidates nationally to 69 percent as compared to 58 percent in 2004, based on exit polls. When compared to the 2002 midterm election, there is no question that Democrats improved their support among Latino voters — then the spread was 61 percent Democratic to 37 percent Republican. Whether the change was plus 11 points as compared to 2004, or plus 8 points when compared to 2002, given the closeness of many elections in 2006, this shift is not insubstantial. Many are quick to point to the Republicans' strident and hostile tone toward immigrants as giving the Latino edge to Democrats. But before Democrats start to count on the Hispanic vote as a solid blue block, they should ask: "Who are these Hispanic voters?"

First, for several election cycles there has been a lot of hype about the potential increase in Latino voters. Part of the interest in this electorate is due simply to basic math. The Hispanic share of the U.S. electorate is growing — directly correlated to the growth in the Hispanic population as a whole (now almost 44 million people). Yet even though Latinos constitute about 14.6 percent of the total U.S. population (as compared to 65 percent white, 12.3 percent black), the percentages of both eligible voters (39 percent as compared to 77 percent white and 65 percent black) and registered voters (51 percent of eligible voters as compared to 69 percent white and 63 percent black), are significantly

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Eligible and Registered Voters, 2006



less than other groups. This can be explained in part by the large percentage of Latinos who are not citizens and the greater percentage of the Hispanic population (as compared to the broader public) that is under 18.

Even so, the gap between registered voters (about 8.6 million) and eligible voters (17 million), make community activists, Hispanic political leaders, political operatives and political parties keenly interested in this electorate. Additionally, as Latinos have settled in the South and Midwest — beyond the traditional receiving states of New York, California, Texas and Florida — the potential impact of even a small increase in voting participation by this population generates nervous attention from politicians at all levels of government. Whoever can design and implement a program that significantly reduces the gap between registered and eligible voters and increases the voter participation rate of this electorate will be in a position of significant political and policy influence. (Alas, that's a story for another day.)

Analysts of Latino voting behavior routinely describe the Hispanic population as diverse, coming from different countries and including both the native-born and recent immigrants. But that does not even begin to describe the diversity. One fact that is not clearly understood but bears underscoring is that the vast majority (75 percent) of Hispanic eligible voters are native-born and of that number almost half (48 percent) are third generation or more (U.S.-born of U.S.-born parents). This means that an issue like immigration may not resonate equally across the Latino community or have the emotional salience many would expect.

When almost 50 percent of the Latino electorate is third generation or more, trying to stroke the immigrant heart strings may be a little harder. In that sense, Hispanics may be echoing the pattern of previous immigrant waves as they assimilate and acculturate. This is certainly true when it comes to language — by the third generation, less than 5 percent of Americans of Hispanic descent speak Spanish. Certainly, the further removed from the immigrant generation, the less in common Hispanic-Americans may have with recent arrivals, including being able to communicate in Spanish.

These facts may help explain why Senator Kyl, an Arizona Republican, received 41 percent of the Hispanic vote in spite of his strong anti-immigrant positions. As ground zero for the immigration debate and home of the Minutemen, one would have assumed that in Arizona the Hispanic electorate would decisively reject a politician with extreme views like Senator Kyl. Yet they did not. Hispanics also voted 48 percent in favor of a statewide initiative making English the official language. While technically unrelated to immigration enforcement, English-only initiatives are often

proxies for concerns that immigration — illegal and legal — is out of control.

Yet restrictionists cannot claim a complete victory. In this very same border state a founder of the Minutemen who ran primarily on an anti-immigrant platform, Republican Randy Graf, lost decisively to Democrat Gabrielle Giffords in the race for an open House seat. Giffords is an advocate for comprehensive immigration reform, including the legalization of millions of undocumented residents. Her nuanced approach was likely appreciated by voters, especially Hispanics who comprise 18 percent of this district.

Equally important, in a stunning upset Republican incumbent J.D. Hayworth, also campaigning hard against illegal immigration, lost to comprehensive immigration reform advocate and Democrat, Harry Mitchell. What exit polls revealed about these two races, and other races across the country, was that voters did not accept the immigration debate as the latest version of the “national security and terrorism” message. American voters seemed to understand that immigration reform is a highly complex issue and, moreover, it was not uppermost on voters' minds. The silver bullet hoped for by the Republican House leadership turned out to be made of lead.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that a balanced approach to immigration reform, including the legalization of millions, is not the Achilles heel that some Democrats had feared. Before Republicans and even conservative and Blue Dog Democrats conclude that they can safely take a tough, anti-immigrant stance without being harmed at the ballot box, they should remember that 50 percent of the Hispanic electorate is either foreign born or has at least one foreign-born parent. For that part of the electorate, the harsh immigration views held by some politicians may be a negative or even a motivator to participate in elections.

In a national poll conducted just before the 2006 election by the National Council of La Raza and the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, 50 percent of Hispanic registered and likely voters indicated that they were “more enthusiastic” about voting this year than in previous elections. Seventy-five percent of respondents rated their interest in the election between eight and ten on a scale of one to ten as compared to 6 percent when polled in late September 2006. Also, though only 9 percent of those polled listed immigration as their most important issue — ranking education, the war in Iraq and the economy and jobs as more important — more than half of those responding said that immigration was one of the most important issues deciding their vote.

These nuances are evident in the results of two Colorado races. In the 7th Congressional District, Democrat Ed



Photo courtesy of the office of Loretta Sanchez.

Representatives Linda (center) and Loretta Sanchez (right) with Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Perlmutter was routinely attacked for being soft on illegal immigration. In a district where the previous congressman, Republican Bob Beauprez, had won by 55 percent; where registered Republicans outnumber registered Democrats by 36 to 30 percent; and where 16 percent of the electorate is Hispanic, Perlmutter won hands down. Voters deemed Perlmutter's support for comprehensive immigration reform, stronger employer enforcement and a path to legalization for the undocumented a more realistic solution to the problem than the proposals of his opponent, the Republican Rick O'Donnell, who advocated sending high school boys to patrol the border to help build their character by combating illegal immigration.

In Colorado's 4th District, Republican incumbent Marilyn Musgrave squeaked by Democratic challenger Angie Paccione, 46 percent to 43 percent (104,876 to 97,670). This district also has a sizeable Latino population at 17 percent. The real story was that the third party candidate Eric Eidsness walked away with 25,880 votes or 11 percent, half of which could have given the Democrat the victory. Paccione had run a tough anti-illegal immigrant ad, stressing enforcement. Initial analysis indicates that about 14 percent of the Hispanic vote went to Eidsness. While the

ultimate result in this race cannot be completely attributed to Paccione's tough anti-immigrant stance, it certainly seemed to have been in the mix.

Finally, in the hotly contested and closely-watched 11th District of California, incumbent Richard Pombo lost to Democrat Jay McNerny (53 percent to 47 percent, by 10,500 votes). While most of the attention on this race was focused on Pombo's terrible environmental record and his connections to disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, one shouldn't ignore the fact that the district is 19.7 percent Hispanic. Notwithstanding that agriculture — a sector heavily dependent on undocumented Hispanic farmworkers — is one of his district's top industries, Pombo refused to endorse proposals that would have legalized that workforce. There were several voter registration and mobilization efforts targeted to Latino voters and preliminary results seem to show that Hispanics overwhelmingly supported the Democratic candidate.

The only way to reconcile these various results in Arizona, Colorado, California and across the country is to go back to the basics. Hispanics are diverse: they differ linguistically and ethnically as well as by country of origin and time in the U.S. And that diversity must be minutely

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examined, analyzed and absorbed if political parties, particularly Democrats, ever hope to really make the Hispanic electorate a reliable part of the base.

Thus, the support for English-only policies among Hispanics in Arizona can be understood if one realizes that a significant part of Arizona's Hispanic electorate has been in the country for more than three generations. But those same Hispanics rejected the anti-immigrant platforms put forth by Republicans Graf and Hayworth, preferring Democratic candidates who offered more balanced and nuanced approaches. And while Hispanics in Colorado's 4th district share some characteristics with Arizona Hispanics, they seem to have been turned off by Paccione's anti-immigrant rhetoric and some of them may have decided to support the third party candidate rather than the Democrat.

As the 2008 election campaign starts heating up and candidates begin making plans to court Hispanic voters, they also ought to try to understand the impact of the immigration debate on the 18–24 cohort of the Hispanic population. Anecdotal stories are circulating around the country regarding the politicization of the young — high school and college students — who participated in the spring 2006 immigrant mobilizations. For many, this was their first foray into civic engagement. Many young people demonstrated on behalf of their parents and thus became

highly sensitized to this polarizing issue. Many are likely to continue to feel the responsibility to register to vote on behalf of noncitizen parents and relatives. Their thus far untapped energy and motivation should not be lost on political organizers. These young people may be particularly sensitive to harsh rhetoric from either party.

The reality is that the immigration issue is not the key to lock in the Latino vote. However, candidates who take aggressive anti-immigrant positions run the risk of alienating at least some part of the Hispanic electorate. They may also unwittingly motivate previously uninvolved Hispanic citizens to register and vote. In the polarized and closely-divided country that we live in, where elections are increasingly decided by minute percentages, increased participation by any segment of the population becomes important. And given the demographic trends, the participation rate of this population should be of great interest to political observers of all stripes, Republican and Democrat alike.

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A 2006 Latino voter registration drive in Los Angeles.



Photo: Getty Images.