

# The Changing Influence Of the Hispanic Vote

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Guadalupe Pérez/Cuartoscuro

Mexican migrants waiting in line for temporary entry permits. El Paso, Texas.

## HISPANICS ENTER THE U.S. POLITICAL ARENA

Hispanic voters entered the political mainstream in the 2004 election as a significant political force that showed not only numbers but swift decisions. The traditional assumption that Hispanics were a loyal hard vote for the Democratic Party was thwarted in this year's election. As a result, Latinos have achieved special recognition in this election. Clearly, the political parties will not take the Latino vote for granted,

and they will need to get closer to this voting group, addressing their concerns and political interests. And this is expected to increase, as Hispanics become registered voters more quickly than any other group in the United States.

Observers, media analysts and political pollsters were equally divided as to how Hispanics would vote in the 2004 presidential election. By mid-March, the *Wall Street Journal* equated the Hispanic vote to immigration proposals, giving little hope for President Bush among registered Latino voters. By mid-September the same newspaper documented the efforts of the Kerry campaign in Florida and the coun-

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terattack that the Bush Republicans launched to keep a tight control of Cuban-American voters.<sup>1</sup> Florida was considered at that time contested terrain, giving Kerry only a marginal advantage over Bush. The magazine *Business Week* published an article in July citing different polls by Hispanic organizations that supported the notion that more Hispanics favored Senator Kerry and most Democratic candidates. However, the same article also acknowledged how diverse and complex Hispanics' political agenda was and how difficult it would be for the candidates to accommodate it. However, Latinos' interests were more aligned with the rest of Americans than with an exclusionary segment of the U.S. society, showing that education, economy and health care played a critical role for Latino voters. If a presidential candidate wanted to win their vote, he needed to do more than just throw some Spanish phrases into campaign speeches.<sup>2</sup>

Most Hispanic news media also capitalized on the attention that the mainstream media paid to Latinos. *La Opinión*, a large newspaper printed in Spanish in Los Angeles, reported in July that Latinos would vote on a large scale for Senator Kerry.<sup>3</sup> Their polls indicated a 62 percent preference for Kerry over a mere 32 percent for President Bush. At the same time another Spanish-language newspaper, San Antonio's *La Prensa*, emphasized the importance of the Hispanic vote, and especially its relevance to southern Texas. This newspaper not only outlined the need for Latinos to register and vote but predicted a high turnout.<sup>4</sup> Even professional journals directed toward Hispanics in leadership positions in higher education pointed out the educational issues that Latinos should fo-

cus on in the presidential candidates' platforms. Most Latino magazines also reached out and underlined for their readers that education was the number one issue for Hispanics, as shown in multiple polls and statements from Latino leaders.<sup>5</sup>

What is clear from the media attention is that Hispanics were on the political screen of both political parties before the election. The parties approached that issue in different ways. The November 2 electoral results clearly stated that attention to Latino voters and their issues would pay off.

**While 54 percent of registered Latinos supported President Bush's initiative for temporary workers, 84 percent supported Senator Kerry's proposal that provided means to legalize current immigrants' status.**

#### HISPANICS CLOSER TO THE U.S. MAINSTREAM

While it is too early to disentangle the exact profile of the Hispanic vote, patterns in the exit polls can be noted. Hispanic votes reflect the polarization of the American electorate, not of the group itself. In fact, Hispanics are closer to the mainstream of U.S. society than other minorities in the United States. Hispanics are as divided as the rest of the U.S. on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and gun control, the three most divisive issues for Americans in the last 20 years.<sup>6</sup>

In the 2004 election, the Hispanic vote tended to follow a candidate not

a party. While most Hispanics voted for Senator Kerry (53 percent), many shifted their support from the Democratic Party and voted for President Bush (44 percent). This means that there was an increase of almost 9 net points of those who voted for President Bush vis-à-vis the previous election. However, those net points represent an impressive 26 percent increase in favor of the Republican candidate. The vote given to the Democratic candidate by Hispanics also was a solid 9-point decline for the Democrats (see table 1).

Interestingly, not only Hispanics increased their vote for the Republicans. There was also some desertion by African-Americans. However, as seen in table 1, the Black vote continues to be captured by the Democrats. Of all groups, almost 9 out of 10 blacks voted for Senator Kerry. As an ethnic or racial group, only Asians voted more Democratic, mirroring the pattern of African-Americans.

Hispanics also showed in the 2004 election that their importance is not only based on numbers but on the position of their vote, debunking a perception of loyalty and hard vote for the Democratic Party. Indeed, Hispanics who were considered a solid block for the Democrats showed that their vote is as changing and as important as any other vote in the country. For the Democrats, the challenge is to actively engage with the communities to cultivate and regain their preference.

This is a serious setback for the Democratic Party, which believed that Hispanics were to be trusted as loyal constituents similarly to African-Americans. In fact, just before the Democratic Party national convention, the National Committee explicitly said that

**TABLE I**  
**1996-2004 ELECTIONS VOTE PROFILES**  
**(IN PERCENTAGES)**

	PARTY	1996	2000	2004	2000-2004 PERCENT CHANGE
<b>Total vote</b>	Dem	49	48	48	0%
	Rep	41	48	51	6%
	Ind	8	2		
<b>Gender</b>					
Men 46	Dem	43	42	44	5%
	Rep	44	53	55	4%
	Ind	10	3		
Women 54	Dem	54	54	51	-6%
	Rep	38	43	48	12%
	Ind	7	2		
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>					
White 79	Dem	43	42	41	-2%
	Rep	46	54	58	7%
	Ind	9	3		
Black 12	Dem	84	90	88	-2%
	Rep	12	8	11	38%
	Ind	4	1		
Hispanic 8	Dem	72	62	53	-15%
	Rep	21	35	44	26%
	Ind	6	2		
Asian 2	Dem	43	54	58	7%
	Rep	48	41	41	0%
	Ind	8	4		
<b>Source:</b> Table and calculations prepared with data from CNN exit polls, AP and Edison/Mitofsky, NBC, CBS and ABC (www.exit-poll.net).					

Hispanics were to play a prominent role in 2004. Yet, the party ultimately failed to reach that so-called prominent constituency. This also illustrates a serious problem for the Democratic Party: the loss of connection with its traditional rank and file. More people who are expected to vote Democratic based on ethnicity, income and education are deserting it for lack of outreach and representation.

The increase in Latino votes for Bush in 2004 as compared to the 2000

election is a research project in itself. For instance, in Texas, where Bush was governor, Latinos voted for him at higher rates than in the previous election. In 2004, 59 percent of Hispanics voted for Bush as opposed to 43 percent who voted for him in the 2000 election. Clearly, in a political party that has more detractors of immigration than supporters, Bush was able to dodge the waves of his own party's ultra-conservative members. Also, one thing that President Bush was able to

ignore was the anti-immigrant right. That is the new analysis of conservative media outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*, where Jason Riley wrote about how the GOP acknowledged the importance of the Hispanic vote and decided to go with an outreach agenda.<sup>7</sup>

Part of the reason for the Latino vote increase in favor of President Bush in 2004 is explained by a steady and directed campaign strategy to win what they perceive as a swing vote. So, the Republican Party paid special attention to swing voters, especially to the Hispanic electorate. In fact, after the election most Republican political strategists in TV news shows acknowledged that their party focused special attention on swing states and swing voters. The strategy focused on swing states like Pennsylvania, Florida and Ohio, which according to an analysis published seven days before the election by the *New York Times*, were what was needed to win the entire election.

HISPANICS' PREFERENCES IN THE  
2004 ELECTION

In 2004, the electorate was faced with two candidates with completely different styles, ideology and approaches to solving the U.S.'s problems. Latinos were no different from the rest of the electorate, and that shows that they were aligned closely to issues and priorities.

There is general perception among political analysts, journalists and even more markedly by some members of political parties that Hispanics respond to issues in an inverse way to the rest of the population. The recent survey of the Pew Hispanic Center on political and civic attitudes of Latinos (con-

**TABLE 2**  
**IMPORTANT ISSUES RANKED BY LATINO VOTERS**

ISSUES	PERCENTAGE RANK
Education	54
Economy and jobs	51
Health care	51
U.S. campaign against terrorism	45
War in Iraq	40
Crime	40
Social security	39
Moral values	36
Taxes	33
Federal budget deficit	30
Immigration	27

**Source:** The 2004 National Survey of Latinos: Politics and Civic Participation. Pew Hispanic Center.

ducted from April to June 2004) showed that Hispanics in general were not significantly different from the rest of the population.<sup>8</sup>

The significant change the survey showed was that Latinos were looking at the issues on the basis of self-interest and not based on political parties' assumptions. For many who have not studied Hispanics closely, it was easy to place immigration at the very top of the Hispanic agenda. That was a very misplaced assumption since immigration was ranked last by registered Latinos. At the top of the agenda were issues such education, the economy and jobs and health care. As seen in table 2, the war on terror and the war in Iraq were ranked after more local and domestic issues.

In examining the topics ranked by registered Latinos, it is important to note some issues around immigration. First, 60 percent believed that immigration helps the economy, however almost one third (31 percent) believed that immigration depressed wages and affected their income and employment

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opportunities. Moreover, if the questions focused on immigration policies, then almost 46 percent believed that the number of immigrants accepted in the U.S. should be kept at the same levels, and only 16 percent thought that immigration needs to be reduced. While 54 percent of registered Latinos supported President Bush's initiative for temporary workers, a majority (84 percent) supported Senator Kerry's proposal that provided means to legalize their status. This seems to show that Hispanics are very well aware of immigration issues and that they support certain comprehensive measures; but

immigration as a topic ranks very last on their list of issues to be considered in voting in the presidential election.

The election results also seem to indicate that security concerns and the war in Iraq played important roles in the election. As noted before, Latinos mirrored the rest of the population in terms of their ranking about these issues. The only topic that was not closely matched was moral values, which for most Americans who voted for Bush was the number one or two issue of importance.

THE ELECTION AND HISPANIC INFLUENCE IN THE U.S. POLITICAL ARENA

The Washington Editors Association official publication declared another winner in the election: Hispanic voters.<sup>9</sup> The article said that the expanding population in key swing states capture more attention during the campaign, as expressed by the U.S.\$12 million spent in political advertising. According to the advertising news magazine *Advertising Age* both political parties increased almost three-fold what was spent in the 2000 election to influence Hispanics.<sup>10</sup>

Both parties recognized the importance of the Hispanic vote. Republican Party officials have tried to underline that the GOP no longer stands for the white-only party. The outreach examples in New York and Florida where steady efforts by Rudy Giuliani and Jeb Bush to connect the Republican Party with an electorate considered fundamentally Democratic seemed to work out. The Democrats, as seen in some parts of the Midwest like Ohio and Indiana, disconnected themselves

from their grassroots constituency letting Republicans refocus their efforts in states where the vote was volatile and insecure.

The election brought some important lessons for the parties, politicians and the media. First, it is clearer than ever that Hispanics are an important political force along with the rest of the Americans. As Hispanics move more generations into the social fabric of the United States, more of them will clearly identify with the core political values of the rest of Americans. Second and later generations of Latinos, while fundamentally identifying with the core values of other Americans, also become more distanced from the interests of their parents' and grandparents' homelands. Moreover, as more Hispanics move up on the social ladder their presence will be more evident in the national political arena.

Second, the dominance of the Mexican-origin population with almost two-thirds of the total number of Latinos tilts the scale in favor of its agenda. While this is a promising opportunity for Mexican-Americans, it is clear that their residence and location mostly in the Southwest makes a cohesive agenda a logistical nightmare. That could explain the election results, where clearly Hispanic political attention focuses on the issues and not on political party affiliations. Mexicans are still the prime segment of the Latino population with almost 65 percent of the total. The next group of importance is Puerto Ricans with 15 percent, then Cubans with 6 percent, and then South and Central Americans with an equal share of almost 5 percent each. That diversity not only brings different perspectives to each group's attitudes and perceptions based on their particular

experience in the U.S., but also underlines their regional location.

Third, Hispanics' experiences are similar to the Italian migrant experience in the U.S., not only because of their religious (conservative) Catholic background but because of their (low) educational level as well. Also, like Italians, Hispanics tend to rely more on their own people to find work than on getting jobs in government like Irish immigrants did at the end of the 1800s and the first decades of the 1900s. In fact, more Hispanics are succeeding as entrepreneurs and small business owners, replicating the social and economic mobility patterns of Ital-

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ians in most of the twentieth century. This will have an impact on the speed of affiliation to the economic core values of the rest of the society. The sooner a Hispanic cohort moves onto the social and economic ladder of the American society, the more closely that group identifies itself with the core values of Anglo-America.

The 2004 election simply focused attention on the importance of Hispanics in the U.S. electorate. It also underlined the fact that Americans are fundamentally divided, as are Latinos. At a time when division seems to be the norm, Hispanics are also divided by origin, residence, migrant expe-

rience and other socio-demographic factors. The challenge for a prosperous future for all is what former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said on the show "Meet the Press" the Sunday after the election: "Now the challenge is to unite the country." If only President Bush could achieve that. ■■■

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jackie Calmes, "Bush gambit for Hispanic vote fizzles: immigration proposal is victim of presidential inattention and resistance in both parties," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2004, p. A4, and Jose De Cordoba "Kerry seeks Cuban-American beachhead; Bush travel restrictions could create an opening for the Democrat in Florida," *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 September, 2004, p. A4.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Star and Paul Magnusson, "It takes more than a little Español," *Business Week*, 12 July, 2004, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Maribel Hastings, "Los probables votantes Latinos se inclinan por John Kerry," *La Opinión* (Los Angeles), 23 July, 2004, p. 1A.

<sup>4</sup> "Su voto es su voz," *La Prensa* (San Antonio), March 21, 2004, p. 2, and "Se espera participación record de Latinos en elecciones del 2004," *La Prensa* (San Antonio), 21 March, 2004, p. 2A.

<sup>5</sup> *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* (New Jersey), 17 May, 2004, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Hispanic Center, "The 2004 National Survey of Latinos: Politics and Civic Participation" (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Foundation, July 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Jason L. Riley, "Ignore the Anti-Immigrant Right; Bush Did," *The Wall Street Journal* (New York), 22 November, 2004, p. A15.

<sup>8</sup> The Pew Hispanic Center, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> *The Kiplinger Letter*, Washington, vol. 81, no. 45, November 2004, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ira Teinowitz, "Pols spend big to court Hispanic vote," *Advertising Age*, vol. 75, no. 33 (Chicago), 16 August, 2004, p. 3.