

President Obama And Latinos in the U.S.

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In spring 2006 when millions of Latinos took to the streets in major cities throughout the U.S. to protest against the punitive measures toward undocumented immigrants and their families contained in bill HR-4437 approved by the House of Representatives in December 2005, one of the most popular slogans shouted over and over in Spanish was “*Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos*” (Today we march, tomorrow we vote). The 61-percent voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election was the highest in the past 40 years. Even though voter participation rose in general, “Latinos increased their share of the national vote to 9 percent from 8 percent in 2004 according to the national exit poll.”¹

While Latinos’ political clout is a force to be reckoned with, especially in states where they make up a sizeable proportion of the population —such as California, Texas, New Mexico, Florida, Arizona and Colorado— their importance as voters nationwide is significantly less than the 15 percent they represent in terms of the U.S. population. There are many voting-age Latinos who were unable to vote because they are not U.S. citizens, either because they have not been in the U.S. long enough to qualify for citizenship, or for some reason they have not yet decided to become U.S. citizens, or because their status in the country is irregular or undocumented.



Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

In response to the massive demonstrations in 2006, several Latino community organizations and media companies joined together in an unprecedented campaign “to incorporate Latinos as full participants in the American political process.”² They launched what was described as “a comprehensive civic engagement strategy” using the slogan “*Ya es hora*,” which translates to “now is the time” (curiously enough this phrase, in English, frequently resonated in Obama’s speeches and rallies as well). The stated objective was to remove barriers that have prevented Latinos from becoming full participants in U.S. democracy. Thus far, the campaign has been organized around two main objectives or phases. The first phase (*Ya es hora ¡Ciudadanía!*) was aimed at encouraging and “assisting eligible legal permanent residents apply for U.S. citizenship.” It contributed significantly to 1.4 million Latinos applying for U.S. citizenship in 2007. The second phase (*Ya es hora ¡Ve y Vota!*) focused on registering and mobilizing Latinos to vote in the 2008 presidential elections. Judging from the aforementioned increase in the Latino vote in 2008, it appears to have been quite successful.

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Furthermore, Latinos voted overwhelmingly, by a margin of 2-to-1, for Barack Obama. “Obama carried the Latino vote by sizeable margins in all states with large Latino populations. His biggest breakthrough came in Florida, where he won 57 percent of the Latino vote in a state where Latinos have historically supported Republican presidential candidates.”³ His margin among Latino voters was even larger in other states: 78 percent in New Jersey, 76 percent in Nevada, 74 percent in California, 72 percent in Illinois, 69 percent in New Mexico, and 63 percent in Texas.⁴ Obama won heavily among both male and female Latino voters (with margins of 64 and 68 percent respectively) and especially among young Latinos (76 percent) as was the case nationwide for younger voters.

It should be pointed out, however, that Obama was not the favorite among Latinos early on in 2008, when they voted for Senator Hillary Clinton by a margin of nearly 2-to-1 in the Democratic primaries. According to Pew Hispanic Center experts, “No other major demographic voting group in the country swung so heavily to Obama as Latinos between the primaries and the general election.”⁵ At the same time another shift took place in terms of the issues. In the early months of 2008, during the debates among each party’s candidates for the nomination, immigration reform was a widely discussed topic, but later in the year it was barely mentioned in the debates between the two final contenders.

The faltering U.S. economy came to the fore as the number one concern overshadowing practically everything else. With unemployment on the rise and no end to further layoffs in sight, it is highly unlikely that the new president, or anyone in Congress, will be proposing measures to increase guest worker programs and/or to allow currently undocumented workers to remain in the U.S. and continue working there, with some sort of legally recognized status. Thus, although both presidential hopefuls had at one time pledged that they would overhaul the immigration system during their first year in office, there is not much likelihood that this issue will be dealt with at all during the new administration’s first year. In fact, immigration reform is something that may not even be acted upon during President Obama’s first term in office—he may or may not have a second term—depending on how quickly his economic recovery measures can be implemented and how effective they prove to be.

The official unemployment rate rose to 7.2 percent in December 2008, the highest since 1993. This official rate, however, seems to tell only part of the story. There is an



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alternate measure of unemployment that includes “part-time workers who want full-time work” and “anyone who has looked for work in the last year.” That rate rose to 12.5 percent in November, the highest reported since such calculations began in 1994.⁶ Nevertheless, even this more realistic figure may not tell the complete story since there are many discouraged workers who do not have a job and are not looking for one because they are convinced that they will not find work that pays anywhere near as well as the last job they had. Needless to say, these discouraged workers and many of the recently unemployed are not competing for the types of low-skilled, low-paying jobs held by most undocumented immigrants—who have also been severely affected by growing unemployment—but their rising numbers will not provide a favorable climate for immigration reform.

A few Latinos have been named to prominent positions in the Obama administration. Cecilia Muñoz, senior vice president for the National Council of La Raza’s Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation, has been designated as the director of intergovernmental affairs. Two Latinos were chosen as cabinet members: Ken Salazar as secretary of the interior and Hilda Solis as secretary of labor. Bill Richardson, governor of New Mexico, whom many Latinos had hoped might be appointed secretary of state, was originally selected to be secretary of commerce but later declined the nomination because of a pending investigation into whether his administration gave lucrative contracts to a political donor. Latinos and Latino organizations are hoping that still more Latinos will gradually be appointed to positions in the Obama administration. The new president and his advisors and staff face many daunting challenges as they take the reins of government.

Even before taking office, President Obama put his economic team to work on engineering an “Economic Recovery Plan” which he described as “a two-year, nationwide effort to jumpstart job creation in America and lay the foundation for a strong and growing economy.”⁷ When announcing this initiative, he also warned, as he has on various occasions since then, that things will probably get worse before



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they begin to get better. A couple of weeks later, in early December, Obama for America Campaign Manager David Plouffe launched a call over the Internet for people throughout the U.S. to either host or attend a “Change is Coming House Meeting” in their neighborhood on December 13 and 14 to discuss and make suggestions about the best ways for the country to move forward. The key areas or issues mentioned in the message were the economy, energy and health care. Obviously any and all subjects should be open for discussion in meetings of this sort. However, given the urgency of other matters at this time, it is probably safe to say that immigration reform will not get much attention for the next several months.

Meanwhile, concern is mounting in Mexico over all the economic problems it will have to confront in the coming months. Economic growth will no doubt be seriously impacted by the recession in the U.S. —because the Mexican economy has become even more vulnerable to fluctuations in the U.S. business cycle since NAFTA was signed— in addition to all of the endogenous economic difficulties. As communities and families prepared to receive migrant workers returning home for the holiday season, doubts arose as to how many of them might be returning home for good because they had lost their jobs in the U.S. In 2008, the flow of remittances declined for the first time in many years and the number of those leaving the country to seek work north of the border also seems to have dropped somewhat. This is obviously not because things have gotten better in Mexico; it just shows that viable job opportunities in the U.S. are disappearing as well right now. As things get worse before getting better, those most affected by the economic downturn will be lower-income families and households, many of which are Latino.

Obama’s position on immigration reform stems from a recognition that the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has risen tremendously since 2000 and that those seeking legal entry to the U.S. have to wait far too long for their applications to be processed.⁸ He has referred to the current immigration system as dysfunctional and broken.

He favors increased border security and voted for additional fencing along the border. He advocates “cracking down on employers who hire undocumented immigrants.” Furthermore he believes that “Immigration raids are ineffective... and have placed all the burdens of a broken system onto immigrant families.” Thus far Obama seems to be committed to supporting a system that would somehow allow “undocumented immigrants who are in good standing to pay a fine, learn English, and go to the back of the line for the opportunity to become citizens,” which implicitly means they would not be deported nor have to leave the country voluntarily. He has also advocated putting “greater emphasis on keeping immigrant families together.”

However, none of this is likely to happen early on in the Obama presidency. Interestingly enough, Obama has also stated the belief that the U.S. needs “to do more to promote economic development in Mexico” in order to decrease the flow of undocumented immigrants.⁹ This, of course, is another discussion that will have to be postponed until the U.S. economy turns around. It would also be heartening if the Mexican government would seriously confront the fact that it needs “to do more to promote economic development in Mexico” in order to stem the flow of undocumented emigrants to the U.S. That might eventually provide a better basis for dealing with the degree of *de facto* labor market integration that has already taken place between Mexico and the United States, and which will no doubt continue in the future, one way or another, as soon as the U.S. economy begins to grow again. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Mark Hugo Lopez, “How Hispanics Voted in the 2008 Election,” Pew Hispanic Center, November 5, 2008, updated November 7, 2008, <http://pewresearch.org.pubs/1024/exit-poll-analysis-hispanics>, accessed December 10, 2008.

² See the *ya es hora* website at www.veyvota.org, <http://www.veyvota.org/cms.php?contentId=7&lang=en>, accessed December 10, 2008.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ David Leonhardt and Catherine Rampell, “Grim Job Report Not Showing Full Picture,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/06/business/economy/06idle.html?th&emc=th>, accessed December 6, 2008.

⁷ Text of Obama’s Radio Address, *The New York Times*, November 22, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/us/politics/23otext.html?ref=politics>, accessed November 24, 2008.

⁸ See the Obama website, www.barackobama.com/issues/immigration/, accessed December 2, 2008.

⁹ *Ibid.*