

America's Voice Political Analysis

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In 2008, Latino voters will play a decisive role in choosing the next President of the United States. The road to the White House passes through key battleground states with significant populations of Latino voters, such as Florida, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Conventional wisdom about the political alignment of these voters presents two questionable assumptions as indisputable “facts”: 1) Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) won the Latino vote in the Democratic primary over Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) because Obama has a “Latino problem”; and 2) Senator John McCain (R-AZ) has an “in” with Latino voters because of his role in the comprehensive immigration reform debate in Congress. For example, a recent *Christian Science Monitor* article stated that “Obama may have his hardest sell, however, with Hispanic voters... Obama’s trouble...could prove significant in the West, in places like New Mexico and Nevada that figure to be battleground states,” [*Christian Science Monitor*, June 24, 2008].

As is often true with “facts” like these, a deeper look at the data turns conventional wisdom on its head. The latest polls actually show Senator Obama beating Senator McCain handily among Latino voters. If the high water mark for Latino support of a Republican Presidential candidate is the 40% President George W. Bush won in 2004 [*Pew Hispanic Center*, “Hispanics and the 2004 Election: Population, Electorate and Voters,” June 2005], McCain is actually losing altitude with Latinos.

Latinos Overwhelmingly Favor Obama over McCain

As Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner pollsters Mark Feierstein and Ana Iparraguirre recently wrote on *Huffington Post*, “Obama is running well ahead of John McCain among Hispanics, and significantly better than John Kerry did against George Bush in 2004. Obama’s leads in national polls are due to his strong advantage (about 35 points) among Latinos. Take out Hispanics, and the race is effectively tied,” [*Huffington Post*, “Obama and Hispanics: Another Myth Exposed,” June 30, 2008].

A look at recent independent polls shows overwhelming Latino voter support for Obama over McCain:

- Latinos favor Obama 59% to 29%. “Obama has led McCain by about a 2-to-1 margin since Gallup began tracking general-election voting preferences in early March. Hispanics of differing demographic backgrounds all tend to solidly support Obama.” [*Gallup*, “Hispanic Voters Solidly Behind Obama,” July 2, 2008]

- Latinos favor Obama 62% to 28% *[NBC/WSJ poll, June 11]*
- Obama bests McCain 60% to 23% among all Latino voters, and 63% to 24% among Latino likely voters. *[Latino Decisions poll conducted June 1 – 12, 2008]* State and regional breakdown of the Latino Decisions poll:
 - California, Obama leads among Latinos 66% to 20%
 - New York, Obama leads among Latinos 65% to 20%.
 - Texas, Obama leads among Latinos 61% to 22%
 - Florida, Obama leads among Latinos 43% to 42%
 - Four southwestern “battleground” states, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Nevada, Obama leads McCain among Latinos 57% to 31%
- California Latino likely voters favor Obama over McCain 69% to 20%. *[Public Policy Institute of California]*
- Latinos favor Obama 62% to 29% *[Gallup poll, May 31]*
- Obama favored over McCain by Latinos 57% to 29% *[Reuters/Zogby poll, May 18]*

Of the battleground states with sizable Latino voting populations, McCain is truly competitive with Obama among Hispanics only in Florida – a state in which George W. Bush won a majority of the Hispanic vote in 2004.

Even in the Arizona 2008 primary election, exit polls showed that 68% of all Latinos who voted cast their vote for a Democrat, and only 32% voted for a Republican *[NDNBlog, June 13, 2008]*.

This enthusiasm gap is surprising, given the presence of the home-state Senator on the Republican ballot and the fact that Senator McCain received 74% of the Latino vote during his 2004 reelection to the Senate *[CNN Exit Poll Data, November 2004]*. Certainly, it does not bode well for Senator McCain’s prospects of capturing a large share of the Latino vote nationally and in his home state during the general election.

Latino Democratic Primary Voters Did Not “Reject” Obama

The myth about Senator Obama’s standing among Latino voters is based on false conclusions drawn from the Democratic primary, not an analysis of the dynamics surrounding the general election.

“It’s no longer fair to say that Obama has a problem with Latino voters; McCain does. This was a case of conventional wisdom that was never based on fact, just semi-informed speculation based on primary exit polling and bad stereotypes of Latinos.” *[First Read, NBC News, June 17, 2008]*

On Super Tuesday, Senator Hillary Clinton won Latino Democratic primary voters 63% to 35%, leading many to speculate that Senator Obama was unable to connect with Latino voters. However, Senator Clinton’s performance was actually a reflection of her popularity among

Latinos, not Senator Obama's unpopularity. Matt A. Barreto and Ricardo Ramírez, two leading experts on Latino politics, refuted this conventional wisdom in a recent *A Los Angeles Times* opinion piece:

"It is incorrect to equate Latino support for Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) in 2008 with anti-Obama or anti-black voting patterns. In multiple national surveys and in our own polling among Latinos in Nevada and California, we find that the Clinton advantage is driven primarily by her eight years as first lady and seven years in the Senate. By contrast, in April of last year, a national survey of Latino registered voters found that 35% had no opinion about Obama, compared with only 8% for Clinton. Even as recently as mid-January, the Field Poll reported that 27% of Latinos in California had "no opinion" about Obama. In short, while Obama has become well-known in a relatively short time among political observers, he did not rise to national prominence among Latinos until this campaign." [*Los Angeles Times, February 7, 2008*]

Put simply, Latino Democratic primary voters did not *reject* Obama but *chose* Clinton. After Clinton withdrew from the race Latino support decisively moved to Obama despite the 57% of Latino Democratic primary voters who voted for Senator Clinton. "The Latino vote was not anti-Obama during the primaries, and that going into the general election, he has easily built a large lead among Latino voters." [*Latino Decision/Pacific Market Research, June 16, 2008*]

Anti-Immigrant Politics Push Latinos Away From the GOP

As with most Americans, Latinos view the Republican Party as being on the "wrong side" of key issues such as immigration, health care, the war, and the economy. In addition, the Republican Party's embrace of harsh anti-immigrant campaign tactics and policies has clearly undermined its ability to attract and retain Latino voters.

George W. Bush received approximately 40% support from Latinos in 2004. This number could become the high-water mark of Latino support for a Republican presidential candidate unless the GOP undergoes a major realignment on their immigration stance.

Since 2004, Republican opposition to immigration reform legislation and support of harsh, anti-immigrant policies has pushed Latinos into the Democratic fold.

- Partisan Gap Grows: 57% of Hispanic registered voters "now call themselves Democrats or say they lean to the Democratic Party, while 23 percent align with the Republican Party—a 34 percentage point gap in partisan affiliation among Latinos. In July, 2006, the same gap was just 21 percent. In 1999, it had been 33 percent." [*Pew Hispanic Center, Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote?, 12/6/07*]
- Nearly Half of Latino Voters Say Democrats Are More Supportive of Latinos than Republicans. By a 44% to 8% margin, Latinos say the Democratic Party has more concern for them than the GOP [*Pew Hispanic Center, Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote?, 12/6/07*]
- Nearly Half of Latino Voters Believe Democrats Do a Better Job Handling Illegal Immigration. By 41% to 14% margin, Latino voters say the Democrats are doing the

better job of dealing with illegal immigration than the Republicans. Approximately 26% say neither Party is better, nor 12% say they don't know. [*Pew Hispanic Center, Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote?, 12/6/07*]

McCain Squeezed Between His Immigration Record and Republican Party Politics

Although John McCain was once a champion of comprehensive immigration reform, his position on immigration has shifted under pressure from his own party. After bruising public debates in Congress over immigration reform in 2006 and 2007 that divided the GOP, most Republicans embraced a policy of heavy enforcement and the deportation of undocumented immigrant workers already here. Following the defeat of the 2007 immigration bill, McCain began a shift to the right in order to revive his flagging prospects in the battle for the Republican nomination by announcing a "border security first" position for the Republican primaries.

This attempt to appease the anti-immigrant base of the Republican Party has been greeted unfavorably by Latino voters. As the *Politico* recently reported, John McCain "dismayed Latinos last year when he stepped back from his immigration bill that would have tightened the borders and legalized undocumented immigrants. As boos and hisses from angry Republican conservatives grew louder at campaign events, he switched course and vowed to 'first' secure the borders. Were his failed bill to come up again, he would not vote for it, he said." [*Politico, "McCain's Immigration Zigzag," June 20, 2008*]

This stands in contrast to the view of most Democratic candidates, including Senator Obama, who generally embrace common-sense immigration reform that combines border security, a crackdown on illegal hiring and workplace exploitation, reforms to our legal immigration system, and the requirement that immigrants here illegally get legal by passing background checks, learning English, paying taxes, and getting to the back of the citizenship line.

In the general election campaign Senator McCain has begun to inch back to the center on immigration reform, arguing that border security should come first, followed by a "truly" temporary worker program, to be followed by fair treatment of all immigrant workers. What is not clear is whether Senator McCain favors one bill with trigger mechanisms within it – an approach that could be termed comprehensive – or a set of three independent measures that start with enforcement first – an approach that is not comprehensive.

The difference is not a minor one. An enforcement-first approach composed of separate pieces of legislation would likely result in enforcement-only policies that would make a bad situation worse for immigrants, workers, local communities, and employers. Instead of solving the problem, it would drive illegal immigration further underground. As a nation, we have tried enforcement first for 20 years, and it has resulted in the chaos of the dysfunctional status quo. On the other hand, a comprehensive approach promises to replace illegal immigration with legal, controlled, and orderly immigration, which would result in the control the public rightly demands.

As the campaign unfolds, we will be interested to see if Senator McCain returns to his previous and courageous embrace of comprehensive immigration reform or not. If he does so, he risks the wrath of an anti-immigrant wing of the GOP that is estimated by experts at approximately

35% - 40% of the party's voters. Will they rebel and stay home if he clarifies his position in favor of comprehensive reform? On the other hand, it might be worth the political risk. Many believe that best policy and the best politics is for McCain to unequivocally support a comprehensive solution that would enable him to compete more effectively for much needed and currently lacking support among Latino voters in key states, and help lead his party out of the wilderness. It could well be that McCain cannot win the Presidency unless he wins swing Latino voters in swing states. And with immigration reform a defining issue for many Latino voters, especially Spanish-dominant Latino voters, the outcome of the immigration debate in the 2008 presidential election could prove decisive.

America's Voice is the newly-founded communications and rapid-response arm of a reinvigorated campaign to advance immigration reform. Its goal is to build the public support and political power necessary to enact broad immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for the estimated 12 million immigrants working and living in the U.S. without legal status.