

The 2008 Elections and The End of the Republican Barrio?

It's Immigration Stupid

Hispanic Faith Voters embody the wildcard, and *de facto* swing vote in the 2008 Presidential elections. While the rest of the country reverts to the 1992 Presidential playbook and argue that this November will primarily center around economic issues (Democrats) and security (Republicans), Hispanic Americans and more significantly, Hispanic faith voters from the barrios of Los Angeles to Spanish Harlem and all points in between vociferously state, "It's immigration stupid".

Undoubtedly, the 2008 elections represent a *tipping point* as it pertains to one of the fastest growing segments of the electorate, Hispanic faith voters. Will these voters continue to gravitate towards the Republican Party as demonstrated in the 2000 and 2004 elections? On the other hand, will this election write the obituary of Hispanic faith voters and the GOP in a manner reminiscent with the 1960 Presidential elections when African American voters began the mass exodus from the GOP (today faithfully supporting Democratic candidates with over 90% of their vote)?

Who is the Hispanic Faith Voter?

Hispanic Faith voters stem from the Evangelical Christian community and the Catholic Charismatic fellowships. For example, a typical voter profile from Florida will include the following descriptors: attends a Pentecostal church, mid 40's, middle class and both socially and politically engaged. These are the children of the Reagan revolution, the moral majority and the Pro-Life movement.

While our parents championed the cause of economic viability via supporting the Democratic Party, our generation wanted to connect the dots from the Pulpit to the voting booth. I remember one Sunday afternoon after the Pastor spoke on abortion asking my parents why they supported candidates who championed abortion rights. My same parents who shouted AMEN during the Pastors sermon now eloquently justified their position by stating that these candidates cannot really influence the abortion debate, however, they do champion the cause of the poor while Republicans represent the interests of the rich.

Correspondingly, Hispanic faith voters stem heavily from both Generations X and Y, speak both Spanish and English fluently, resonate with a strong social conservative belief system yet embrace a populist economic policy.

Hispanic Faith Voters and The GOP

Why are these voters important? Without the aforementioned voter, Bush would never have won Florida in 2000 and 2004. Without this voter, who today plays a major role in such swing states such as New Mexico, Florida, Ohio, Arizona, Nevada and others, the Republican Party cannot succeed in a National election.

To comprehend how the Hispanic faith vote may influence the 2008 elections we must first appreciate how the GOP stood ready to capture over 50% of the Latino vote. For example, in 2004, (44%) of Hispanics voted for George W. Bush. A more impressive metric stems from the evangelical wing of the Hispanic populous, where, according to Pew Research, (56%) of Hispanic Protestants(the vast majority embracing an evangelical thread), supported the Republican ticket. In addition, the Pew survey revealed that Latino evangelicals are twice as likely as Latino Catholics to identify with the Republican Party (37% vs. 17%). Moreover, Latino evangelicals also are far more likely than Latino Catholics to describe themselves as conservative (46% vs. 31%).

Parenthetically, this election should, for all practical purposes, continue to increase the GOP's Hispanic participation. After all the fastest growing segment of America's evangelical community, Hispanic evangelicals, resonate with the traditional family values platform of the Grand Old Party. Correspondingly, the 2007 Pew survey exposes a constituency more conservative on social values than even their white counterparts. For example in respect to gay marriage (86%) of Hispanic Evangelicals, oppose gay marriage, compared with 67% of white evangelicals. Furthermore, while (61%) of white evangelicals oppose abortion, an overwhelming (77%) of Hispanic, evangelicals repudiate the practice.

Similarly, we cannot deny the Bush Factor. George W. Bush reached out to Hispanics like no other GOP Candidate in history. He matched Bill Clinton's "I feel your pain" outreach to the Black community, with "I speak your language" mantra. The border state, taco eating, baseball loving, broken Spanish speaking Governor, resonated with the Latino community. He wooed us like no other.

Research scholar Dr. Gaston Espinosa, an expert on Hispanic faith and values voters considers the Bush factor significant." Hispanic Evangelicals voted for Gore in 2000 but Bush in 2004 because of the proactive outreach Bush made to both Latino Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Bush saw the Latino Evangelical vote increase by 30% and Latino Catholic by 7% in one election cycle because of his support for faith-based initiatives, prayer in school, school vouchers, and work with Mexican President Vicente Fox, Spanish-language speeches, and targeted outreach to Latino Evangelical and Catholic clergy", he added.

Moreover, Bush took Reagan's assessment of Hispanics as natural conservatives to the next level and argued that Hispanics personify the quintessential compassionate conservative idea.

The Tipping Point: Immigration

Then what is the concern? Why would these compassionate conservatives break away from the Republican Party? Immigration. It is not that Hispanic faith voter's desire or support amnesty. Quite the contrary. Hispanic Christian voters overwhelmingly support a call for an end to illegal immigration and the protection of the borders. The great divide exists in the question of what to do with the 12 million undocumented. While Tom Tancredo and his supporters presented a policy that reinforced a xenophobic and nativist thread hidden in the crevasse of the Republican establishment, Hispanic faith voters fought for immigration reform that reconciled the three formative pillars of our nation: the rule of law, our Judeo/Christian value system and the pursuit of the American Dream.

Meeting with former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Speaker Denny Hastert, Sen. Trent Lott and Sen. John McCain, I expressed two years ago the possible short term and long term ramifications to the relationship between Hispanic faith voters and the GOP if immigration reform legislation did not succeed. With unbridled assurance, I pointed then to the November 2006 elections as a primer of forthcoming elections and predicted a definitive decline in Latino support. Inevitably, the predictions painted an accurate picture of trepidation and angst amongst Hispanic faith voters as GOP support fell from 44% in 2004 to 27% in 2006.

Thus, the question in the hearts and minds of Hispanic faith voters in this unprecedented elections season asks, "Is the Republican Party the party of xenophobia, nativism and Anti-Latino demagoguery or is the GOP the party of faith, family and values regardless of the color of skin, vernacular proficiency or preference of condiments (salsa)"? Should we vote for McCain in light of his support of Comprehensive immigration reform or should Latino Evangelicals shy away from the party that did refused to repudiate the polarizing and vicious rhetoric.

Four years ago, we mobilized and encouraged members in close to 20,000 congregations to analyze candidates according to the traditional evangelical rubric: Life and Marriage. Nevertheless, this year offers a stark difference. Hispanic evangelicals and faith voters recently discovered that our white brothers and sisters who resonate with a Pro-Family agenda also embrace a predominantly anti-immigrant reform agenda. Reina Olmeda, a Pentecostal Latina Pastor, expressed the sentiment of Hispanic evangelicals. "We're caught between the proverbial rock and the hard place. We either vote for a party that

resonates with our beliefs but does not want us or with a party that wants us but does resonate with our beliefs”, she stated

The End of the Republican Barrio

With much trepidation, the Hispanic faith voter looks to the Democratic Party for a viable alternative in this electoral conundrum. Undoubtedly, the Democratic Party stands poised to make significant inroads in the Hispanic values vote since this November 4, 2008 may very well be an extension of June 28, 2007 when immigration reform legislation failed in the Senate. Immigration legislative failure on behalf of the Republican Party nationally equates to Proposition 187 in California where Governor Pete Wilson alienated Hispanic voters and surrendered the legislative branch of the Golden State to the Democratic Party for years to come.

Although Hispanic Evangelicals resonate with the social values platform of the G.O.P, on economic and social justice issues, the Democratic Party can easily capitalize on a kindred constituency. Latino evangelicals do not fall in the same contextual framework of white evangelicals. While white evangelicals, in vast majority, limit their political and social agenda to abortion and marriage issues, Hispanic Evangelicals adhere to a broad agenda that includes Health care reform, education, alleviating poverty, Darfur, Aids, Climate change and immigration reform in addition to marriage and life issues.

Yet the greatest indicator of troubles times as it pertains to Republicans and Hispanic faith voters can best be expressed by the activism of a die hard Republican operative Rev. Mark Gonzalez. Mark represents a walking billboard for the Hispanic versions of Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, Council on National Policy and Christian Coalition. Just yesterday, Mark captured the collective disappointment by stating his primary objective is to register voters in the 10 most Hispanic populated states and he does not care if they vote Democratic or Republican as long they vote and demonstrate that Latino Christians represent a deliverable constituency.

At the end of the day, Hispanic Evangelicals may very well embody the quintessential swing vote. Not a constituency married to the Christian right or the Christian left but rather the standard-bearers of Christian equilibrium. While historically since 1960, African Americans vote overwhelmingly Democratic and white evangelicals Republican, Latino Christians may force the both the Democratic Party and the GOP to move towards the center in order to capture the Latino vote.

On November 5, 2008, the headlines across our nation may very well contextualize the story of the first woman, African American or oldest President ever elected. Yet, at the end of the day, an equally important headline stands posed to present the repudiation by the nation's largest ethnic community of one political party and the embracing of another. These elections may very well embody a point of gravitas in respect to the Hispanic faith community as the Republican Party stands juxtaposed between the end of the Republican barrio and the future of immigration reform.