

The Power of the Immigrant and Latino Vote in the 2008 Election

Unprecedented Mobilization, Fueled by Immigration Debate, Could be Decisive

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2008 will be the year of the immigrant and Latino voter. Unprecedented numbers of immigrants are becoming citizens and registering to vote and the stakes—for candidates and voters—could not be higher.

The road to the White House passes through key “battleground” states with large numbers of Latino and immigrant voters like Florida, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico. These voters are also flexing their muscle in Senate and House races across the nation. While Latinos care about the economy, jobs, healthcare and national security like every other American, a candidate’s stance on immigration reform has become a threshold question for many Latinos. As the immigration debate has heated up these last few years, they are paying closer attention to how candidates engage on the issue. To them, it is not just a question of visas but values and whether they and their families feel welcomed in the United States. As Cecilia Muñoz, Senior Vice President at the National Council of La Raza recently said, immigration “tends to determine who the good guys are and the bad guys are for Latinos.”ⁱ

Analysis of current data on Latino and immigrant voters shows that this group is growing, mobilized, and passionately supportive of comprehensive immigration reform.

The Sleeping Giant is Awake, and Aware

In 2006, millions of immigrants and Latinos took to the streets to protest a deportation bill moving through Congress, and to call for comprehensive immigration reform. The passion of the immigration debate has galvanized immigrants and motivated them to apply for citizenship in record numbers. As a result, millions of new voters are preparing to cast their first ballots in November. These new citizens are joining long-time U.S. citizens of Latino background who are newly energized to turn out for the first time in years. Combined with the U.S.-born children and grand-children of immigrants who are coming into voting age, this wave has created a formidable force of Latino voters in 2008. Political scientist and Latino voting expert Matt Barreto of the University of Washington predicts turnout of over 9 million Latino voters in 2008, compared with 7.6 million Latino voters in 2004.ⁱⁱ

Non-governmental organizations have launched non-partisan voter registration and mobilization campaigns to bolster those numbers. The We Are America Alliance (WAAA) expects significant Latino turnout for Election Day 2008.ⁱⁱⁱ WAAA’s \$10 million field

component—My Vote, Our Future—is in the process of registering 500,000 new citizen voters and mobilizing one million to cast ballots on Election Day. WAAA is focusing its efforts on thirteen states with a high number of immigrant and Latino citizens, aided by last year’s surge in naturalization applications.

The alliance is well on its way to reaching its goals, and WAAA voters are getting ready to take their first steps in the journey to political empowerment. For example, WAAA registered over 83,000 new voters in Florida, 70,000 in California, 35,000 in Pennsylvania, 25,000 each in Texas and Illinois, 18,000 in Arizona, and 17,000 in New York. In Colorado, nearly 35,000 new voters registered by WAAA could have a decisive impact on the Presidential contest. In Nevada, the 52,000 new registrations from WAAA are almost 2.5 times the amount that state was decided by in the 2004 presidential election (George W. Bush won Nevada by 21,500 votes). And the nearly 40,000 new registrations from WAAA in New Mexico could be a major factor in a state that supported George W. Bush by less than 6,000 votes in 2004 and has an open U.S. Senate seat in 2008. Energized by their first leap into the political process, these new citizens will not rest after they cast their votes, and will continue to press their elected officials to enact laws that they support.

In a new nationwide survey, the Pew Hispanic Center found that immigration is a top priority for these voters. Nationwide, 93% of Latinos said that immigration was important to them (34% said “extremely important,” 46% said “very important,” and 13% said “somewhat important”).^{iv} This is true in the battleground states as well. A recent poll from NDN, conducted by Bendixen & Associates, asked Latinos, “How important is the immigration issue to you and your family?” In Florida, 79% of Latinos viewed immigration as important (51% “very important”); in Colorado, 74% viewed immigration as important (42% “very important”); in New Mexico, 80% viewed immigration as important (43% “very important”); and in Nevada, 86% viewed the issue as important (58% “very important”).^v

Regarding presidential preference, the NDN/Bendixen poll showed that “14 percent to 20 percent of the Hispanic electorate remains undecided, which translates into two percent to six percent of the statewide vote in each state—a percentage significant enough to tip dead even states into one camp or the other.”^{vi} A new poll from the NALEO Educational Fund poll also makes it clear that Latino voters are still making up their mind about the candidates; the survey shows that 30% of Nevada Latino voters have less than strong opinions about their preferred candidate or are undecided. The same is true for 25% of Florida Latino voters, 21% of Colorado Latinos, and 19% of New Mexican Latinos.^{vii}

Bottom line: the ranks of immigrant and Latino voters are growing in numbers, they will play a decisive role in sending the next President to the White House and electing the next Congress, and they care deeply about how immigration policy is handled. A portion of this electorate remains undecided about who they want in the White House next year, and the next several weeks will be crucial for both parties to win that vote.

Latino Voters: The New “Soccer Moms”?

During the 1996 Presidential race, an advisor to Republican candidate Bob Dole called U.S. “soccer moms” the “key swing voter who will decide the election.”^{viii} In the 2000s, Latino and immigrant voters have emerged as the “new soccer moms,” poised to play a key role in determining who wins the Presidency and key House and Senate races.

In 2004, George W. Bush won approximately 40% of the Latino vote nationwide, but polls today show weaker support for the Republican Party among this demographic.^{ix} The Pew Hispanic Center recently found that Latinos favor Senator Obama over Senator McCain 66% to 23%.^x In their research, 76% of Latino registered voters rated Senator Obama favorably, in comparison to a 44% favorability rating for Senator McCain.^{xi} Obama leads among Latinos in the Gallup daily tracking poll by an average of 59% to 30% over the past month.^{xii} And a *Wall Street Journal* poll shows Latino voters favoring Obama over McCain 63% to 30%, while the poll shows the candidates tied with the general electorate.^{xiii}

These numbers are repeated in the hotly-contested “battleground” states. In Colorado, Senator Obama leads McCain among Latinos 56% to 26%; in Nevada, 62% to 20%; and in New Mexico, 56% to 23% according to the NDN poll. In Florida, a state where George W. Bush won a majority of Latino support in 2004, Latino voters’ preference is now evenly divided between the two candidates.^{xiv} And a new NALEO Educational Fund survey shows Latino voters who have made up their minds favoring Obama 63% to 15% in Colorado; 55% to 14% in Nevada; and 61% to 20% in New Mexico, with the candidates in a near statistical tie in Florida.^{xv}

When asked “which party has done a better job on immigration” by NDN/Bendixen, Latino voters favored generic Democrats by the following margins: in Florida, 48% to 29%; Colorado, 48% to 14%; New Mexico, 46% to 19%; and Nevada, 58% to 20%.^{xvi} The NALEO Educational Fund poll finds that nearly two-thirds of Latino voters in Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada believe the Democratic Party has the most concern for the Latino community, while only 6%, 4%, and 7% respectively chose the Republican Party. In Florida, 40% of Latino voters say the Democratic Party has more concern for the Latino community, while 20% choose the Republican Party and one-third say there is no difference.^{xvii} And a Pew Hispanic Center survey found that 49% of Latinos “say that the Democratic Party has more concern for Hispanics, while just 7% say the Republican Party has more concern. Since 2004, the share of Hispanics who say that the Democratic Party has more concern for Hispanics has increased by 14 percentage points.”^{xviii}

While overall Latinos are trending strong for the Democrats, Spanish-dominant, foreign-born citizens of Latino origin are considered the ultimate swing group. Republican strategist Karl Rove and President George W. Bush recognized this early on, and devised campaign strategies targeting this particular segment of Latino voters. According to NDN, the GOP doubled its share of the Latino vote from 1996 to 2004 by prioritizing outreach to Spanish-dominant Latino

citizens. The group highlights then-Governor George W. Bush's outreach in Spanish language media in Florida in 2000, and says this strategy was "critical to Bush winning the presidency."^{ix}

NDN writes: "English-dominant Hispanics have stayed reliably Democratic, holding throughout this time at about a 2:1 ratio (2004: 65%-34%). The movement towards Bush has come from the Spanish-dominant, as they have gone from 82%-18% Clinton-Dole in 1996 to 52%-48% Kerry-Bush, while increasing from 30% of the Hispanic electorate in 1996 to 48% in 2004."^{xx} In 2008, approximately half of all Latino voters, representing nearly 5% of the overall American electorate, are Spanish-dominant. Both parties are paying significant attention to these voters, running major ad campaigns in Spanish language media attacking each other on the immigration issue, and it will be interesting to see how they vote in November 2008.

Voters Expect Action on Immigration Reform

Latino and immigrant voters follow the immigration debate closely, and they expect Congress and the President to pass comprehensive immigration reform. The NALEO Educational Fund poll found that immigration reform is a top issue for Latino voters, trailing only the economy, the war in Iraq, and health care as a priority.^{xxi} NDN's research shows immigration reform beating out health care on the issues list, trailing only the economy and the war in importance to these voters.^{xxii}

The NDN survey found strong support for comprehensive immigration reform among all voters, with 67% of Florida voters favoring reform, 69% of Colorado voters, 66% of New Mexico voters, and 67% of Nevada voters. Support for comprehensive immigration reform among the Latino electorate was even higher, with 78% of Latino voters in Florida, 74% in Colorado, 73% in New Mexico, and 76% in Nevada approving of the policy. According to the recent Pew Hispanic survey, similar percentages of Latinos oppose enforcement-only measures like workplace raids and bringing criminal charges against undocumented workers.^{xxiii}

Latino and immigrant citizens will turn out to vote in record numbers this November. 2008 will prove to be a political turning point for these voters, who now know that the ballot box holds the power to shape their future and the future of their families. After they flex their new political muscles in November, immigrant voters will be ready to hold the politicians they help elect accountable on the issues that matter to them and their loved ones. Comprehensive immigration reform will be at the top of that list.

ⁱ "McCain Revives Immigration Debate -- in Spanish Only," *Washington Post*, "The Trail" blog, September 15, 2008: http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/09/15/mccain_revives_immigration_deb.html.

ⁱⁱ Kathy Kiely, "Polls: Latinos favor Obama in 3 important battleground states," *USA Today*, September 10, 2008: http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-09-09-Hispanicvote_N.htm.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.weareamericaalliance.org/> for more information.

^{iv} Pew Hispanic Center, "Hispanics See Their Situation in U.S. Deteriorating; Oppose Key Immigration Enforcement Measures," September 18, 2008: <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/93.pdf>.

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- ^v “New NDN Polls Find Overwhelming Public Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in Key Battleground States,” NDN and Bendixen & Associates, September 10, 2008: <http://ndn.org/hispanic/immigrationpolls.html>.
- ^{vi} “New NDN Polls Find Overwhelming Public Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in Key Battleground States,” NDN and Bendixen & Associates, September 10, 2008: <http://ndn.org/hispanic/immigrationpolls.html>.
- ^{vii} NALEO Educational Fund, “2008 Latino Vote Survey in Key Battleground States,” October 7, 2008: http://www.naleo.org/downloads/2008NALEO_Latino_Voter_Survey.pdf.
- ^{viii} “Bring on the soccer moms,” *The Independent*, November 1, 1996: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19961101/ai_n14078881.
- ^{ix} “Bush’s Hispanic Vote Dissected,” *Washington Post*, December 26, 2004: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26119-2004Dec25.html>.
- ^x Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics See Their Situation in U.S. Deteriorating; Oppose Key Immigration Enforcement Measures,” September 18, 2008: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/956/hispanic-survey-2008>.
- ^{xi} Pew Hispanic Center, “2008 National Survey of Latinos: Hispanic Voter Attitudes,” July 24, 2008: <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=90>.
- ^{xii} America’s Voice analysis based on Gallup Daily Tracking Poll: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/108040/Candidate-Support-Race.aspx>.
- ^{xiii} “Latino Voter-Registration Drive Likely to Aid Obama,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2008: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB12229983940873309.html>.
- ^{xiv} “New NDN Polls Find Overwhelming Public Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in Key Battleground States,” NDN and Bendixen & Associates, September 10, 2008: <http://ndn.org/hispanic/immigrationpolls.html>.
- ^{xv} NALEO Educational Fund, “2008 Latino Vote Survey in Key Battleground States,” October 7, 2008: http://www.naleo.org/downloads/2008NALEO_Latino_Voter_Survey.pdf.
- ^{xvi} “New NDN Polls Find Overwhelming Public Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in Key Battleground States,” NDN and Bendixen & Associates, September 10, 2008: <http://ndn.org/hispanic/immigrationpolls.html>.
- ^{xvii} NALEO Educational Fund, “2008 Latino Vote Survey in Key Battleground States,” October 7, 2008: http://www.naleo.org/downloads/2008NALEO_Latino_Voter_Survey.pdf.
- ^{xviii} Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics See Their Situation in U.S. Deteriorating; Oppose Key Immigration Enforcement Measures,” September 18, 2008: <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/93.pdf>.
- ^{xix} NDN, “Hispanics Rising II: An Overview of the Growing Power of America’s Hispanic Community,” May 30, 2008: <http://www.ndn.org/hispanic/hispanics-rising-2.html>.
- ^{xx} NDN, “NDN Political Fund Releases New Poll of Hispanic Voters,” July 19, 2006: <http://www.ndn.org/hispanic/HSCpoll.html>.
- ^{xxi} NALEO Educational Fund, “2008 Latino Vote Survey in Key Battleground States,” October 7, 2008: http://www.naleo.org/downloads/2008NALEO_Latino_Voter_Survey.pdf.
- ^{xxii} “New NDN Polls Find Overwhelming Public Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in Key Battleground States,” NDN and Bendixen & Associates, September 10, 2008: <http://ndn.org/hispanic/immigrationpolls.html>.
- ^{xxiii} Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics See Their Situation in U.S. Deteriorating; Oppose Key Immigration Enforcement Measures,” September 18, 2008: <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/93.pdf>.