NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

GOP in a jam when it comes to Latino vote

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 10, 2012

Students protest at a Republican primary campaign stop for Mitt Romney in Mesa, Ariz., Feb. 13. (EFE/Gary Williams)

Analysis

Politics occurs at the intersection of ideas, personalities and demographics. To win an election, a candidate needs good ideas, a personality conducive to persuading others those ideas are compelling, and an appreciation of who makes up the electorate. As the 2012 election takes shape, and Mitt Romney appears certain to become the GOP nominee, the Republicans find themselves in a jam.

Romney chose to make immigration an issue on which to display his conservative bona fides, placing him on the wrong side of that issue with the fasting-growing sector of the electorate, Latinos. And, given his ?Etch A Sketch? reputation for changing positions to suit his political needs, Romney is almost uniquely ill-suited for the task of pivoting from pandering to the base to win the primaries and tacking back to the center to win the general election in November.

A FOX News poll released in early March paints a dire warning for the GOP. In a head-to-head matchup, President Barack Obama took 70 percent of Latinos to Romney?s 14 percent. The other GOP presidential hopefuls did even worse, suggesting that the entire GOP brand has suffered as the issue of immigration played itself out in a series of presidential debates last autumn with candidates vying with each other to see who could be most harsh in their opposition to issues that matter to Latinos, such as the DREAM Act.

Four years ago, Obama garnered 73 percent of the Latino vote and Sen. John McCain took 27 percent, according to exit polls. McCain, unlike Romney, had previously supported comprehensive immigration reform and, as a senator from Arizona, had developed long-standing ties with the Latino community. Indeed, the FOX News poll also indicated that 40 percent of Latinos who voted for McCain in 2008 now intended to vote for Obama, while only 38 percent said they intended to vote for Romney.

?If Republicans were deliberately aiming to destroy their party for all times with Latinos, they should keep doing what they are doing,? Tara McGuinness of the progressive Center for American Progress told *NCR*.

That is not mere spin. Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas recently told Politico: ?You can?t win without doing well among Hispanic voters, and I don?t think it?s any secret that the primary has not been particularly helpful from the standpoint of the tone.?

That doesn?t mean that this election will be a cakewalk for Democrats.

Robert Aguirre, president of the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders (CALL), a national organization of Hispanic business and professional people, argues that Obama?s record on Hispanic issues is so bad that the GOP should be reaping the benefits.

Aguirre recently wrote that Obama ?has broken up more families through deportation than any president in history. His economic policies have resulted in a disproportionally adverse impact on Hispanics by sharply increasing our unemployment and our poverty rates.?

Yet, the FOX News survey showed that Hispanics overwhelmingly approve of the job the president is doing. A jaw-dropping 73 percent of Latinos approve of Obama?s job performance. Among all Americans, that number has fluctuated in the 40s most of the past year.

Latinos are not only the fastest-growing part of the electorate nationwide, they are also overrepresented in certain key swing states. In 2008, Obama won three states in the Southwest with large Latino populations: New Mexico, Colorado and Nevada, ceding only Arizona to native son McCain. This year, it is difficult to see how a Republican nominee can garner 270 electoral votes without putting at least one of those states back into the GOP column. Virginia has seen a significant uptick in its Latino population: In the northern Virginia suburbs of the District of Columbia, they could swing the entire state toward Obama. In North Carolina, Latinos provided Obama with his margin of victory in 2008.

No Republican candidate can win the White House without Florida in his column. Florida?s Latino population was once overwhelmingly Cuban-American, a bastion of support for the GOP. But today, Puerto Ricans and other non-Cuban Latinos outnumber the Cubans in Miami. Puerto Ricans are citizens but they have faced the same ethnic prejudices as their non-citizen fellow Latinos, and they can detect the racist overtones in the policy debate about immigration reform. They certainly grasped how out of touch both Romney and Rick Santorum were when the two campaigned in Puerto Rico and emphasized the need for English to be the official language of the U.S. Should the island henceforth be known as ?Rich Port??

During the primaries, Romney needed to find a way to outflank the more conservative candidates, appealing to the tea party base on an issue that struck a visceral chord. By choice or happenstance, immigration became that issue. Romney?s greatest mistake so far was to tout ?self-deportation,? the idea that you can enforce anti-immigration laws so severely, you do not need to round up undocumented workers -- they will choose to leave voluntarily. The former governor of Massachusetts did not come to that idea on his own. It is the brainchild of Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, an unpaid advisor to Romney and a coauthor of anti-immigrant laws in Arizona and Alabama. The genealogy of ideas might escape the attention of the mainstream media, but if you have ever watched news on Univision, you know that it regularly devotes lengthy segments of airtime to explore issues with a depth that NBC no longer permits itself. Latino voters may be among the most well-informed members of the electorate, and on an issue as important as ?self-deportation,? they are going to be fully informed by the time November rolls around.

Of course, immigration is not the only issue that concerns Latinos, but it is different from other policy concerns. ?The issue of immigration is not a matter of legalisms or triplicate documents,? said Professor Stephen Schneck of The Catholic University of America in Washington. ?It?s about mothers and children, about keeping families together, and about affording people the dignity they deserve regardless of whatever papers they have. The

political party that really gets this at an existential level will be the political party that becomes the home of the Latino vote.?

Latinos are also overwhelmingly Catholic and the Catholic church has been at the forefront of the fight for comprehensive immigration reform for decades. But, in recent months, the issue of religious liberty has dominated the statements coming from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The two issues overlap at times. The conference recently filed an amicus brief supporting the Obama administration?s challenge to an anti-immigrant law in Arizona, and the bishops cited their religious liberty concerns as part of the reason for opposing the law. But anti-immigrant laws have not been the focus of religious liberty statements. If the bishops de-emphasize immigration this election season and are seen to be focusing exclusively on the Health and Human Services contraception mandates, Latinos will notice.

More importantly, if the bishops allow themselves to be seen as overly partisan and siding with those who have pandered to the tea party by fighting immigration reform, they will lose a great opportunity to affect the political culture for generations.

?One thing that America?s Catholic bishops should consider is that the flood of Catholic Latinos that will soon dominate the Democratic Party in places like Arizona and Texas has the potential to dramatically shift that party?s openness to pro-life concerns,? Schneck said. ?The rise of a Latino movement within that party could be a long-term game-changer for the church?s relationship with the Democrats.?

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/10/2014 - 07:13*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/gop-jam-when-it-comes-latino-vote