

# The Coronado Project

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To: Interested Parties

Re: Stuck at the Crossroads: The Latino Vote in 2008

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Two years ago, the Coronado Project released the “Crossroads” memorandum. The memorandum asserted that the Democratic Party had arrived at a crossroads: Faced with a Republican Party that had made clear inroads into the Hispanic community, the Democratic Party had to change the way it tries to win elections by capitalizing on the rapid growth of the Latino population and recognizing the increasing volatility of the Hispanic electorate. (The original memo can be read or is available for download at [www.coronadoproject.com](http://www.coronadoproject.com)).

The memorandum advocated a series of specific reforms, including:

- Terminating the party’s reliance on transactional relationships with minority political interests.
- Initiating multifaceted empirical research to gauge minority voting behavior.
- Investing in message delivery to communities of color in correlation to their importance to Democratic vote goals.
- Developing a strategy for the recruitment and election of candidates of color.
- Developing and empowering Latino and African American political operatives in decision-making roles.
- Understanding that communities of color need to create their own political capacity for the betterment of themselves as well as the Democratic Party.
- Respecting, understanding, and acting on the changing demographics of the party.

Many of these reforms have yet to be initiated, much less institutionalized. There have been encouraging signs: Two Democratic Presidential campaigns are currently managed by Hispanics, there is progress with hiring on the Hill and in the committees, and the DSCC performed unprecedented voter research in 2006. But these sporadic and isolated examples are insufficient. The Democratic Party and national Hispanic organizations must do more to leverage latent Hispanic voting power to win the White House and to cement our fragile progressive majorities in Washington and in the states.

## **The Hispanic Imperative**

Media reporting and Census-based studies touting the Hispanic vote as the next big thing or a sleeping giant have grown tiresome. Despite overwhelming demographic evidence, few progressive funders and Democratic strategists truly appreciate the depths of the opportunity at hand. Thinking about Hispanics in the context of the future misses the point entirely. The opportunity is clear and present.

Since November 2004, approximately 1.5 million Hispanics have turned 18. By November 2008 that number will approach 2.4 million. The swelling of the registration-eligible Latino population is further enhanced by increased Hispanic naturalization – meaning that in 2008 more than 2.5 million Hispanic Americans will have acquired the opportunity to cast a ballot for president for the first time.

This historic growth, mostly in states and markets outside the standard Democratic slate of battleground states, affords Democrats a golden opportunity to expand the Electoral College map beyond the antiquated general market strategy that left Democrats out of the White House in 2004 and on the wrong side of the burgeoning demographic divide.

Leveraging incremental Hispanic voters in the Southwest, the Midwest, or the South enables Democrats to place many more electoral votes in play. Hispanic growth, especially in the South, can now transform once solidly Republican congressional districts into achievable pickup opportunities. Democrats should not think of these Hispanics as just tomorrow's voters. Many of these individuals already live in the marginal states that can expand Democratic electoral-vote margins.

These new voters and many of the existing registrants in these states have never been exposed to a paid national Democratic message, nor effectively engaged by previous presidential campaigns. These voters are up for grabs and remain a potent pool of potential Democratic voters. They are a small portion of a larger potential electorate to come.

If Democrats learn nothing else, it should be that winning national elections and earning the Hispanic vote are one and the same. Failing to change our strategy would place our tenuous majorities in Congress at risk and limit our ability to expand the Electoral College playing field in ways that could impact both the national election and down-ballot races.

Democrats cannot wait until one of the contenders emerges as the nominee or until after the party convention in Denver. Branding, messaging, and relationship development are cumulative exercises, and for an audience as neglected and segmented as Hispanics in these states are, the work to register, persuade, mobilize, and turn out these voters must start now.

Crafting and executing this strategy are tasks that surpass the reach of any one organization or any single campaign cycle, and they appear to be beyond the grasp of the party itself – but it doesn't mean that the party or progressive organizations can delay much longer, especially in an election cycle that is already proving to be anything other than conventional.

In 2008, the threats to the Democratic-Progressive coalition may not come solely from the Right, but from the emergence of a well-funded, third-party candidate in the form of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. His demonstrated willingness to spend massive amounts of money to reach voters – especially Hispanic voters – could damage Democratic efforts to develop a long-term relationship with the Hispanic community.

To win in 2008, Democrats must invest significant resources in relevant research, effective message development and meaningful civic engagement. Democratic leaders and strategists however, are complacent, content with the results of the recent mid-term elections. Their false confidence is misplaced, based on a superficial understanding of what happened in 2006.

### **The Risks of Misinterpreting 2006**

The results of the 2006 mid-term elections prove that Hispanic voters respond to the national political environment in ways similar to the broader national electorate. The results also demonstrate that Hispanics are neither simple base-voters nor swing voters and that they remain volatile and decisive actors in national elections.

It is difficult to compare exit poll data on Hispanic vote share in the 2006 mid-terms with data from previous elections. The 2002 exit data was not released because of data problems experienced by the exit poll consortium, and mid-term elections differ greatly from presidential year elections. Still, the numbers show that the Republican share of the Hispanic vote fell significantly from 40 percent in 2004 to 28 percent in 2006.

Despite claims to the contrary, there was no comprehensive or coordinated partisan Hispanic branding or civic engagement for the 2006 election that could account for the swing, though the exit polling shows Democrats still picked up considerable support among Hispanics. The question is why?

The answer is simple: Hispanic voters, just like many of their Anglo counterparts, voted against this President. Like many other voters, for Hispanics the driving issue was the war in Iraq. An additional factor, however, motivated many Hispanics. The shrill anti-immigrant, anti-Hispanic rhetoric spewing from the Right drove a wedge between Hispanics and the GOP. It was not solely the issue of immigration itself but the heated rhetoric surrounding it that motivated Hispanic voters in 2006.

Hispanics did not move towards the Democrats as a result of intensive mobilization efforts or through the delivery of a coherent message by the party or progressive organizations. Instead, Hispanics treated the election as a referendum on the status quo, and helped create the anti-incumbent wave against the Republican President and Congress that swept Democrats to power.

Progressive decision-makers and Democratic strategists should not conclude that since Hispanics moved without a real investment in messaging or mobilization in 2006 that a similar strategy of neglect will yield positive results in the future. If the Democratic strategy is to simply wait for the Hispanic tide to periodically crest in response to Republican racism, Democrats may be left high and dry.

Depending on events, Hispanic voters – especially young voters – can move to or away from either major party and might well be attracted to an independent presidential campaign. The 2006 results cannot be used to justify anything other than the need to take the new path outlined by the Coronado Project in 2005.

## **Charting a New Direction and Expanding the Map**

An effective 2008 Hispanic strategy can solidify the party's victories in the states Senator Kerry carried, help the next Democratic nominee win states Senator Kerry narrowly lost, and for the long term put the party well over the electoral vote threshold. Democrats will also secure or achieve majorities in the Congress and the state legislatures – critical to long-term legislative and redistricting interests. The path forward leads to and through the statehouses as well as to the White House.

For too long, however, Democrats and some Hispanic strategists have engaged in a short-sighted and small-minded debate whether Hispanics are base voters or swing voters. The argument itself is a perilous false choice for Progressives and for Hispanics, as strategists generally decide to pursue only one of the two strategies, and then how to achieve that singular strategy as cheaply as possible. The Hispanic community defies such labels and must be approached with strategies as complex as the community itself.

There are two Hispanic electorates – those who vote regularly and a growing segment of surge voters that votes once every four years in presidential elections. The regular voters are older and more Democratic. The surge voters are younger, less ideological and far less familiar with or connected to either major party.

This volatile “surge” segment of the electorate and the large pool of potential unregistered voters present both promise and peril for Democrats and directly raises the question of causation: Why do too many Hispanics vote Republican, why are so many Hispanics non-voters, and why are so many eligible Hispanics not registered?

The answer to these questions is simple – benign neglect. Had Democrats and Progressives taken advantage of the last twenty years – or even the last two election cycles – to develop a brand relationship with Hispanic voters, or worked to create and empower effective civic engagement vehicles, the prospects for the future would be far brighter. Now, the challenge to Democrats, Progressives and Hispanics alike is to change the pattern of neglect and apathy and to forge new vehicles for empowerment.

The episodic commitments to the Hispanic vote prevent Democrats from winning elections and from delivering on progressive policy and legislation. The recent debate over comprehensive immigration reform demonstrates how Democrats and Progressives continue to miss opportunities to incorporate Latinos to their brand.

## **A Detour – The Failure of Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

Congressional Democrats and the White House were caught off guard by the inability of pro-immigrant groups to mobilize meaningful support for reform. Many well-intentioned policy experts sought to influence Members of Congress directly, but the deep passion within the Hispanic community – with millions of people on the streets and countless conversations over the table and at the worksite – was never channeled by even the most-committed advocates into the kinds of engagement that moves policy into law.

The incoherence and inaction of the Democrats, Hispanic organizations, and immigration advocacy groups contrasts starkly to the well-funded and coordinated messaging campaign of the anti-immigrant forces within the Republican Party and their outside allies. The anti-immigrant position was amplified daily and sustained for months by conservative talk-radio hosts and organizations. They used press relations and paid media to stoke voter anger against comprehensive immigration reform.

In comparison, progressive voices were only represented by non-partisan issue advocacy policy organizations, many of which were ethnically based. These groups lobbied Senators directly, but did little to mobilize community support. While these tactics remain an important component of creating good policy, they lack the sophistication of achieving good politics or actual legislation. These progressive organizations simply could not deliver the message that nervous Democratic Members of Congress desperately needed to hear in the face of white-hot constituent complaints and phone calls.

The message that needed to be delivered was simple: Your vote for comprehensive immigration reform will be seen as a vote for the Latino, Asian, African, Caribbean, and other immigrant communities. These groups will protect you from your opponents next fall with money, support, boots on the ground, and votes for your campaigns. With no political protection for a tough vote, and lacking an effective media response to the daily vitriol spewing from the Right, the safe play in Congress was to make the issue evaporate if at all possible, if only to stem the one-sided tide of constituent anger.

Intent on keeping any bill alive, and lacking a comprehensive public advocacy or political campaign in support of the vote, the groups' policy-first approach – which would have accepted a proposal that dismantled family-based immigration, lacked meaningful worker protection, and abandoned many due process guarantees in immigration proceedings – had two fatal flaws beyond the substance of the proposal.

First, by insisting on passage of any bill, the groups placed Democratic Members of Congress and their progressive allies in an untenable position. The final Senate bill was so watered down with concessions to anti-immigration Republicans (many of whom never intended to vote for reform in the first place) that it unquestionably would have harmed the Hispanic community. Yet the groups demanded passage even though the community was divided, Republicans were divided, and Democrats were divided.

Second, the approach presupposed that Democratic House Members would have fixed the Senate bill and voted for immigration reform in the face of public opposition without meaningful support and protection from Latino and Asian voters. This approach ignored the electoral reality of each specific state and district and the intense pressure being brought to bear on Democratic Members across the country.

Without any effective communication or civic engagement structures to harness the emotions and concerns of the Hispanic community to provide our elected officials political cover or to persuade them to fight on, Democrats and Progressives missed yet another opportunity to cement a relationship with the Hispanic electorate.

When did this failure begin? Was it when millions of immigrants and supporters took to the streets, not realizing that they were stirring anti-immigrant passions among Anglos who were made nervous by overt signs of national and racial pride? Was it the lack of follow-up to identify, register, or mobilize the marchers to use them as part of a real issue campaign or for the midterm elections? Or was it, as Univision anchor Jorge Ramos suggested in a post-mortem opinion piece, inevitable – given the lack of marketing or messaging to counteract the anti-immigrant groups' xenophobic cries of “amnesty”?

Whatever the strategic and tactical mistakes, a major progressive policy initiative failed. Consequently, the media have adopted the Republican talking points and are branding the 110th Congress as unable to deliver on the promises of this new majority. This failure is a setback, but understanding the shortcomings of that political fight can educate Democrats on the path they must now take to maintain their majorities and enact policy.

### **The Crossroads and the Way Forward**

The central argument of the original Crossroads memorandum was that Democrats had to change the way they manage their elections. As it relates to Hispanics, recycling the failed strategic framework of past elections foolishly risks the outcome of future elections and places Democrats and Progressives at a long-term competitive disadvantage. The near-surrender of the South, the state of Texas, and the Southwest has only further delayed the branding and civic engagement efforts needed to leverage Hispanic citizens into voting for Democrats. It is time to open up the map.

Democrats and Hispanics, working together and using the correct strategies, can elect Anglo and African-American Democrats from districts whose demographics are changing underneath Republican incumbents. For example, the institutionalized Democratic neglect of Hispanics and African Americans in the South not only has ceded too large a portion of the Electoral College to the Republicans, it has given them a free pass in congressional districts that based on demographics should be far more competitive.

Democrats and Progressives cannot expect to ride the powerful wave of Hispanic demographic growth without making a real investment. Democrats have reached the inevitable juncture where they must take the obvious road into a future in which Democrats and Progressives invest in Hispanics and, in turn, the Hispanic community delivers victories for Democrats and Progressives.

Progressive funders must lead – and demand – reform. Stale messages, broken channels and unaccountability must give way to new ideas, new methods and metrics.

To win in 2008 and beyond, Democrats and Progressives must break the cycle of exploitation between national organizations and communities of color. Investing in the top-down national organizations that purport to deliver Hispanic voters simply through paid communications or through paid voter contact just will not work now or in the near future, especially with a younger, more diverse and exploding Hispanic electorate or with African Americans, Asians and Native Americans whose communities are also changing at a dynamic rate.

These communities are simply too important to allow the Republicans to further chip away at the Democratic base. The pattern of last-minute paid communications, seasonal and underfunded earned media efforts, and outsourced civic engagement must end. The Democratic Party must rise to the moment and work with these communities to create and test new vehicles for engagement and communication.

For Hispanics, Progressive funders should invest in two new, accountable strategies. First, there is a pressing need for a consistent and long-term branding effort with Hispanics. Those efforts must move beyond the typically small, only-in-Spanish and usually late investments made by existing national organizations. Rather, more segmented and longitudinal programming in English and Spanish, conducted efficiently in a targeted fashion, is required.

These investments, not solely linked to the election cycle, should especially target young Hispanics – even those who are not yet eligible to vote – and must include an exploration of the newer and relevant channels through which these young Hispanics gather information and network with one another.

Second, there is a need for long-term civic engagement efforts. Rather than invest in mostly Anglo national organizations who parachute into local communities at election time and leave nothing behind (allowing them to come back four years later and leave nothing behind again), funders should instead identify and incubate organizations within the Hispanic community to register, persuade, and mobilize Hispanics during and after each election. Once and for all “teach someone to fish,” rather than continue to support profiteering models that actually exploit communities of color with few provable results.

Funders should seek new models of engagement or demand that existing organizations prove why new, proposed models should not be used. This is especially and immediately necessary in light of the changed political environment that has upset long-term GOP designs on the Hispanic vote.

By deciding to frame the immigration debate as a fight for America’s cultural identity, the Republican Party has rejected Karl Rove’s long-term strategy of incorporating Hispanics into a right-leaning association. Republican failure on immigration does little to solve the challenges the Democratic Party and Progressives confront to attain and consolidate a national progressive base that consistently can hold Congress and reliably contest each presidential election.

The massive amounts of work that need to be done indicate the Democratic Party and its Progressive allies are overwhelmed by the challenge the Latino vote presents, but it is a journey that must be taken. Properly meeting this challenge will require Hispanics to do the work to achieve their own political empowerment and maturity from Democrats to accept and cultivate that empowerment.

Hispanics are ready. The last remaining question is whether Democrats have the strength to take the next step forward, for the formidable electoral potential of Hispanics to remake the political map sits, untapped and waiting, just beyond the crossroads.