

The Coronado Project

Advocating a new Democratic electoral strategy
that explores the voting potential of Hispanics in the
Southwest, the Midwest and the South.

Lorena Chambers
Luis Elizondo-Thomson
Luis Navarro
Paul Rivera
Jesse Treviño

TO: Interested Parties

RE: A Partisan Perspective on the Pew Hispanic Center Report

DA: Wednesday, June 29, 2005

On Monday, June 27, 2005, the Pew Hispanic Center released a report titled *Hispanics and the 2004 Election: Population, Electorate and Voters* (www.pewhispanic.org). Pew's findings and a companion op-ed in The Washington Post strongly suggest that reports of growing Hispanic voting power are premature.

The Pew report minimizes the future expansion of Latino political impact by emphasizing a baseline of factors that focuses on low voter registration and participation rates and the ineligibility of young Latinos and immigrants to vote – and projects that baseline into the future as if set in stone.

The important point to consider upon reading the Pew report is not that the structural and demographic components of the Hispanic population in and of themselves will preclude the development of Latino political power for the next two decades. Rather, the more important and evident fact is that Latinos already are in a position to change the national political landscape – if only the Democratic Party would embrace their potential.

The Pew report cannot foresee the immediate impact Latinos can have on the national political scene – even now and with low registration numbers. In fact, a modest increase of only 127,014 Hispanic voters properly apportioned in Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada could have turned the national election in 2004. The problem is not that there are not enough Latinos around to change the political equation; it is that there are not enough who vote.

This is something that the Democratic Party can do something about, especially in light of the further credence that Pew gives to the 40-percent estimate (and not the widely reported 44 percent) of the Hispanic vote that George W. Bush received.

Democratic leaders should read between the statistical lines of the Census data cited in the Pew report and recognize the growth market that Karl Rove and Ken Mehlman are seeking to exploit. The Hispanic vote will become determinative sooner and not later, as Pew suggests, especially if elections continue to be close. Had the Democratic Party in Gore-Bush 2000 better understood the potential of non-Cuban Democratic Hispanic voters in Florida, for example, the fantasies of Bush-Rove-Mehlman would never have breathed past that election night.

The op-ed states that “[c]ultivating a solid Hispanic constituency will require a lengthy courtship.” We entirely agree. But we disagree that it is too burdensome a challenge that the Democrats cannot overcome, as the Pew report implies.

Population

There is no question that the Hispanic population is booming in the United States, fueled by high birth rates, continued immigration and slower rates of growth among the non-Hispanic population.

The challenge for Democrats is to convert the population growth into voters. The Pew report seems to throw cold water on that proposition, based upon decades of lagging Hispanic electoral performance. The Pew report specifically cites that “[t]he gap between the size of the Latino adult population and the number of Hispanic voters has been growing since at least 1972 *and is likely to continue growing given current trends.*” (Emphasis in italics added.)

The Pew report bases this prediction on their observation that only 39 percent of the Hispanic population is eligible to vote, as compared with 76 percent of whites and 65 percent of blacks. This statistic, based on the relative youth of the Hispanic community and high numbers of non-citizens, is daunting but misleading. The key deficits are in the lack of registration among the 39 percent of the eligible population and in the performance of those who are already registered.

Basing projections on future electoral performance on these numbers undervalues the dynamic and ongoing changes being experienced by the Hispanic population and electorate. A more informed analysis leads to the conclusion that Democrats can gain quicker traction in red states and re-enforce and expand their standing in blue states if they correct these two deficits.

Indeed, a state-based perspective paints a far different and more optimistic picture for Hispanic empowerment than Pew draws. Democrats can create a sustainable electoral majority by investing in an electoral strategy where Hispanics play a crucial role.

John Kerry lost Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico and Texas by varying margins, ranging from 5,988 in New Mexico to 1,694,213 in Texas. In every one of these states, there are currently more than enough eligible Hispanics over the age of 18, who if registered and turned out to vote, could overcome the Bush margin of victory.

These states currently account for 90 electoral votes, and because of population shifts will account for 114 electoral votes by 2030 as they continue to become more Hispanic.

With six million new Latinos becoming vote-eligible in the next eight years in states that can dramatically alter the electoral vote map, the Latino population’s weight in the Electoral College actually is growing in importance even faster than its rate of population growth. The only people who do not know it, however, are Democratic strategists and decision-makers.

The Electorate

If one accepts the Pew finding that “only one out of every four Latinos added to the U.S. population is an added voter,” or that “it took five Latino residents to produce one voter,” Democrats then have to ask why that is the case, and what the electoral potential for Democrats could be if that ratio were reduced.

The current performance gap among Latinos is a function of many causes, and high among them is Democratic neglect. Democrats over time in critical localities and states have missed opportunities to cement their relationship with local Hispanic communities, so that what is required now is a major, national rebuilding effort. The good news is that there are enough eligible Hispanics right now to make an electoral difference should Democrats make the right

decisions. The appropriate investments now will yield strong dividends for Democrats sooner rather than later.

Of greater concern to Latino Democratic leaders rather than a re-telling of the poor performances of the past is the potential of the 2010 Census. The Census will count the resident population, and state-by-state redistricting efforts will be based on those findings. The Hispanic population is certain to grow in almost every state and in almost every district. In many local, legislative and congressional districts, it will not matter that a large segment of the Latino population is not eligible to vote because of age or citizenship status. This is both boon and hazard if we are content to making local gains slowly and not project our presence nationally.

As some districts become increasingly Hispanic, it will take fewer voters to turn elections, due to the decrease or departure of the non-Hispanic citizen population. If left alone, those districts over time will be low-performing as compared to non-Hispanic districts. If targeted for continuing, partisan activity, they can quickly yield gains for the party that seizes the opportunity. In any political equation understanding the power of subtraction is as important as the power of addition. Thus, while we add population, we also suffer the voter-registration and voter-participation rates that Pew cites.

Therefore, once redistricting has been completed, there will be districts with significant Hispanic populations, even majority Hispanic Districts, where due to the combination of non-citizenship, poor voter registration and poor voter performance, those districts will not be represented by Hispanics.

While not engaging in a substantive discussion on whether Hispanic interests and constituents are best served by Hispanic elected officials, we simply state that a significant metric of Hispanic political empowerment is the rank and number of Hispanics in elective office. It is important for Democrats to ensure that Latinos feel they can find opportunity and advancement in the Democratic Party, and party leaders must recruit, support and elect candidates reflective of the district.

As we recommend in our “Crossroads” memo, Democrats must commit to partisan voter registration efforts – based on careful data research, new technologies and tested organizational methods. The voter registration efforts must be matched by the development of new and sophisticated communications channels to ensure that Hispanics are receiving the Democratic message. And more efficient and accountable mobilization methods to get these new voters to perform must be institutionalized.

Voters

The Democratic Party must invest – now – in comprehensive market research to better understand who its voters are and where its voters live. One of the new standards by which the Democratic Party’s relationship to all communities of color will be measured – and by which it can find electoral success – is in its investment in polling and in demographic and market research to understand the views and habits of voters of color.

The findings of the Pew report generally underscore the complexity of the Hispanic population and electorate. It notes how Hispanic voters are different from the overall Hispanic population. They tend to be more English-dominant and -proficient, better educated and economically stronger than their non-voting counterparts. That does not mean anything other than the Democratic Party must find messages, themes and motivations that bridge any and all differences

within the Latino population groups – an achievable objective in this age of target, niche and segmented marketing.

Pew also notes that religion may have been a factor in the increased Bush performance among Latinos – that while Catholic performance was essentially unchanged from 2000, Protestant Hispanics voted in greater numbers for the incumbent and as a greater share of the Hispanic electorate. This new development is no small wrinkle, and it harkens back to the need to develop the messages and the messengers to properly state the Democratic Party's message to the Latino community in a way that puts in proper priority an agenda that speaks to the overall advancement of the Hispanic population rather than single-issues based on fundamentalist thinking.

Conclusion

The Pew report's statistics are not incorrect; rather they simply assume that nothing will change them. Democrats must not be blinded to the possibilities of our time by static data that while accurate does not point to the immediate potential impact that Latinos can have as early as next year and certainly heading into 2008.

Some might wonder, then, about Julián Castro's recent defeat for the mayoralty in San Antonio. His defeat was caused by the lack of Hispanics voting for *him* -- not because not enough Hispanics voted. His loss can be attributed to the number of Hispanics who voted for his opponent, Judge Phillip Hardberger, a lifetime liberal Democrat who for more years than Castro has been alive has honed close relationships with many Hispanics in San Antonio. Castro received only two-thirds of the Hispanic vote. Had he performed at Antonio Villaraigosa's level in Los Angeles among Hispanics (84 percent) or had done more to turn Hispanics inclined to support him, he would have won.

There are more than enough Hispanics to win elections for Democrats. Our challenge is to dismiss the re-tellings of the past and get about the business of creating the winning strategies for the future.