

We Who Support Obama Must Reach Out to Latinos

**A DailyKos.com Diary Entry, a My.BarackObama.com Blog Entry, and
An E-Mail Sent to My Political List**

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Latinos represent a vast, mixed group of voters with great influence and potential. They have determined outcomes in primary elections; they will continue to do so, very likely in the upcoming Texas primary; and in the general election, they can make the difference between a President Obama and a President McCain for the next four, or eight, years. What have we done to reach out to Latinos? And what can we do better?

There is good news and bad news when you consider Latino voting. The good news begins with the fact that despite much-publicized inroads made by George W. Bush in the last presidential election—[which were perhaps significantly overstated](#)—Latino voters continue to identify with Democrats by a more than two-to-one margin. Also good news is that in 2004, [according to U.S. Census figures](#), of the more than 27 million Hispanics of voting age, about 16 million were citizens (about 18 million now); and of those, over 9 million were registered, 82% of whom voted (compared to 89% of all registered voters who voted), representing 6% of the total votes cast. The bad news is that means almost 7 million U.S. Hispanic citizens (some 42% of those eligible to vote) did not register, let

alone vote—over twice as many votes as put George W. Bush in the White House! Obviously, registering Latinos and getting out their vote is extremely important to the success of our campaign; but that depends upon our effectively reaching out to them and seriously addressing their concerns.

As we all know, Sen. Clinton has been getting a larger share of the Latino vote in the primaries so far, which has been key to her winning such big states as New York, New Jersey, and California. Fortunately, polls show that these votes are not so much votes against Sen. Obama as much as for the Clinton legacy. [As Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said](#), the Bill Clinton presidency represented "great years for working families. ... They were years when the minimum wage was raised, the years when we invested in housing." To its credit, the Clinton campaign reached out early and well to Latinos, as by naming the first Latina presidential campaign manager, Patti Solis Doyle, and by lining up endorsements from such respected Latino leaders as Mayor Villaraigosa, Henry Cisneros, Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), and Dolores Huerta.

Unfortunately, the perception became what [Roberto de la Garza](#), a specialist in Latino politics at Columbia University, told the Spanish-language news service EFE: "The reality is that [Obama] has not been much in touch with Hispanics."

Fortunately, that perception appears to be changing, at least in some quarters. As Sen. Obama has said, "As Latinos get to know me, we do better." And there is evidence to support that claim. [Exit polls show](#) that a clear majority of Latino voters do respect Sen. Obama as a leader and value his new ideas; they will back him if he wins the nomination.

And according to Angelo Falcón, president of the National Institute for Latino Policy, there is no evidence that Latinos will not back a black candidate—that is an old stereotype often used to divide two core Democratic constituencies. [As Sen. Obama said after winning the South Carolina primary](#): "When I hear the cynical talk that blacks and whites and Latinos can't join together and work together, I'm reminded of the Latino brothers and sisters I organized with and stood with and fought with side by side for jobs and justice on the streets of Chicago. So don't tell us change can't happen."

So what can the Obama campaign do better to reach out to Latino voters? Well, the endorsement by Sen. Edward Kennedy helped a great deal, although [by some accounts it was too little, too late](#): It did come after the first primaries and caucuses, and many Latino voters were born after the senator's legendary brothers were assassinated. Nonetheless, Ted Kennedy

has done a great deal of work on his own for the rights of working families and ethnic minorities; his endorsement of Sen. Obama's candidacy made a big impression on many Latino and other Democratic voters.

Likewise, [Sen. Obama's recent endorsement by the Mexican American Democrats](#), a statewide organization in Texas, could make a significant difference in that upcoming primary.

[On the issues](#), although Sen. Clinton connects with many Latino voters with her strong stands on the economy and health care, Sen. Obama counters not only with his pragmatic plans on those issues but also with his support for driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, which Sen. Clinton does not support, and his promise to work for an immigration policy with a path toward legalization during his first year in office.

Over all, [Sen. Obama has been making significant inroads among Latino voters](#), reducing Sen. Clinton's previously extreme advantage. Nonetheless, there remains much work to be done. But to reach out to Latino voters requires an understanding of who they really are and what they really care about most.

Latinos comprise a great variety of people, including many of racially mixed backgrounds. Two trends that emerge when studying exit poll data show distinct differences in voting patterns based on [region](#) and age. One particularly significant factor to consider is that Latino voters tend to be younger than voters in general. [According to Maria Teresa Petersen](#), Executive Director of [Voto Latino](#): "Exactly 50% of the 18

million [Latino] voters eligible to vote are under 50 years old. And this is a generation growing up in the era of anti-immigrant politics. This is why they marched and this is why they are voting. Immigration is more than an issue. It's a great catalyst. The candidate who understands this will win the Latino vote in the future, including the near future."

It is worth noting that like among other young Democrats, [young Latino Democrats are trending heavily towards Obama](#).

But reaching Latino voters also requires getting past the stereotypes. For example, Ms. Petersen also gave this word of caution: "Candidates are spending tens of millions of dollars trying to capture the attention of Latino voters, mostly in the Spanish language media. ... But what the campaigns haven't figured out is that 79% of the 18 million eligible Latino voters consume media in English. ... So, it's terrific that they're targeting 21% of the voters with Latino messages, but when will they learn to target us with Latino ads in English?"

How best then to reach out to Latino voters? According to the [United States Hispanic Leadership Institute](#):

The Latino vote is not new in American politics but it has certainly captured the attention of political parties and candidates like never before. The modern phenomenon of the Latino vote was popularized during the 1960 presidential election of John F. Kennedy. "Viva Kennedy" clubs

sprouted up throughout the Southwest and in other states with growing Latino populations including Illinois. Since that time two national organizations have been created for the sole purpose of registering, educating, and getting Latinos to vote. They are the [Southwest Voter Registration Education Project](#), established in 1974 and now based in Los Angeles, and the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (formerly the Midwest Voter Registration Education Project), established in 1982 and now based in Chicago. There are literally hundreds of multi-service organizations currently involved in registering Latinos to vote, but only two have been created for the sole purpose of empowering Latinos through the electoral process.

History

Thousands of nonpartisan voter registration campaigns have been organized and conducted over the last 30 years. The methods most commonly used to register voters during the 1970s and 1980s included door-to-door, rallies, festivals, churches, and at government agencies. In the 1990s methods were expanded to include motor-voter. In this decade technology has made it possible for more people to get involved in registering voters without ever leaving home.

Indeed, [Voto Latino](#), a nonpartisan organization that has been registering thousands of new

voters, uses technology and pop culture to reach out to young Latinos.

And then there is this, a challenge I recently received from a Latino member of the DNC:

"When will he [Obama] commit to a ten million dollar program for voter registration, education, and GOTV/GITV [Get Out The Vote / Get In The Vote] for the Spanish surnamed voter?" As he continued, "loyalty is a two way street." *[I would later learn from this now-former DNC member that the Obama campaign came through with a twenty million dollar program!]*

As both the USHLI and SVREP say, "Su voto es su voz"—your vote is your voice. And if we wish those votes—those voices—to say loud and clear "Obama" this spring and this fall, we need to reach out more and reach out more effectively. And that begins and ends with getting to know the vibrant, diverse U.S. Latino communities and what they care about most. After all, as with any group—let alone [the fastest growing ethnic group in the nation, including one of every seven of us](#)—if we want their votes, we had better represent their interests well.