



GOP Struggles to Lure Latino Votes

By Jamie Goldberg and Jennifer Baires

March 14, 2012

BURLINGAME, Calif.--Rocky Chavez, a former Undersecretary of the California Department of Veterans Affairs, is a proud Republican. Chavez joined the GOP while serving with the Marines in Korea, attracted to the party's stance on education—ensuring that teachers are paid on merit—and the strong belief in a free market economy.

These issues, he says, are salient with Latinos throughout the state as well. But as he campaigns against two Republicans for an open assembly seat in San Diego's 76th district, where Latinos are nearly a third of registered voters, he is increasingly frustrated by his party's failure to address the single issue of paramount importance to them—immigration reform.

"It's a lot easier being a Latino Democrat than a Latino Republican candidate," he said during a recent interview.

A Path to Residency

If the party is serious about gaining more Latino support, he added, it would have to come up with a comprehensive immigration reform policy that includes a path to residency for immigrants in California.

"If you don't answer that, you're not going to get anywhere with Latinos," he said.

Chavez is part of a small, but increasingly vocal segment in the Republican Party calling for a moderate stance on immigrant rights.

"I am more fearful of a higher graduation rate of engineers and scientists in another country, than I am fearful of who is mowing my lawn," he said.

The party's desire to appeal to Latino voters is a matter of survival. Nearly 22 million Latinos in the United States are eligible to participate in this year's election—the most ever and up by more than 2 million since 2008.

Republicans have a particular challenge in California, where one-quarter of the electorate is Latino and only 18 percent of those are registered Republicans, slightly lower than the national figure of 20 percent.

Chavez was one of nearly a dozen candidates featured at a "Latino Town Hall" at the recent California Republican Convention, held in the San Francisco area. Billed as a chance to exchange views and have an open discussion about Latino concerns, the Town Hall failed to live up to expectations for many who attended.

"Democrats Have Won PR War"

Teresa Hernandez, a long time Republican activist who chairs the Lincoln Club's Immigration Reform Subcommittee and ran for office in 2009, was one of them. As the Town Hall conversation repeatedly veered away from immigration, she gamely called on the panelists to face up to the issue.

“I think we can all agree that Democrats have won the PR war,” Hernandez said. “How do we get Latinos into the Republican Party? We know Hispanics are pro life, family, etc. But the real issue is immigration and unless the Republican Party comes through with a solution on immigration we won’t get (the Latino vote).”

But Tom Del Bacarro, chairman of the California Republican Party, repeatedly turned the conversation away from immigration to issues like education and jobs. When asked about the Party’s failure to respond to Latino concerns with a comprehensive immigration reform policy, Del Bacarro sidestepped the question by blaming Democrats for the Republicans anti-Latino image.

“Democrats for their part have a vested interest in a non-solution for immigration reform,” Del Bacarro said. He implied that without immigration reform, Democrats could continue to paint Republicans as anti-immigrant.

Some Republicans pointed to other solutions to court Latinos. Luis Alvarado, who chairs the board of directors of the Republican National Hispanic Assembly of Greater Los Angeles, agreed that the problem is in the message to Latinos. But his solution is to get Latinos to care more about other issues.

“We’ve allowed the Latino community to believe immigration is the most important thing,” Alvarado said. “There are other issues that affect the Latino community.” The Republican Party needs to focus on making Latinos feel like they are stockholders in society, he said, adding that Latinos should care about issues like education and energy.

For other Latino Republicans, like Mario Rodriguez, former vice chair of the California Republican Party, another approach to courting the Latino vote is electing Latino candidates.

“We have candidates,” Rodriguez said. “We as a party just need to get out there and get behind these candidates to show these Latinos that we care. We do need to go to the community. We don’t go to the community enough.”

GOP Endorsed Only Two Latino Candidates

Officially the Republican Party has only endorsed two Latino candidates this year—Bill Batey for Assembly District 61 and Gilbert Gonzales for State Senate District 25. They have not endorsed a candidate in Chavez’s race.

The final California State filing deadline was March 14, and roughly 46 Latino Democrats and only 16 Latino Republicans have filed to run in 44 races for Congress, or the California State Senate or Assembly. But, Republicans don’t have the best track record for getting Latinos, or any minority group candidates, in office. There are no Latino, Asian or black Republicans serving in the state’s Senate, Assembly or congressional delegation.

Michelle Rivas, of the Twin Rivers Unified School District, said the party is unwilling to do the obvious to attract Latino voters and banish its image as anti-immigrant.

The solution, she said, is for the party to endorse, “candidates who aren’t so extreme in their views. We say that we are the party with strong family values, but when we don’t work to keep families together, it looks like we’re giving mixed messages.”