



The New Electoral Landscape and What It Means for Immigration Reform:

Latinos, Asians, and New Americans Redefine 21st Century American Politics

December 2008

THE IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

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INTRODUCTION

The 2008 elections clearly demonstrated the growing power of the Latino, Asian, and immigrant vote. Not only did these groups turn out in record numbers, they also overwhelmingly rejected anti-immigrant politicians who attempted to use immigration as a wedge issue through hateful campaign rhetoric that is quickly becoming an unhealthy trademark of the Republican Party.

The following report illustrates the growing electoral clout of Latinos, Asians, and New Americans; provides data on how and why they voted; and demonstrates that immigration was an issue that motivated them to the polls. Election results from races in which immigration was a hot issue show that immigrant-bashing did not work as a campaign strategy. The report also provides evidence that a majority of *all* voters favor comprehensive immigration reform, and details early signs from the incoming administration and Congress that point to a new direction in immigration policy.

Politicians of all stripes would be wise to listen to the voices of ethnic and New American voters and not take them for granted. The analysis provided in the following pages points to the strength and growth of what may be the most important voting bloc in 21st century politics—one that now has the power profoundly to change American elections in the years to come.

“There’s been a lot of self-inflicted damage by Republicans. Hispanics—let’s take one group. Some political scientist did some calculations and told me that if Hispanics had voted in 2008 as they had done in 2004, McCain would have carried Florida, Nevada, and New Mexico. Totally self-inflicted wound by House Republicans, thinking, “Hey, let’s be really tough on immigration and let’s demagogue and let’s not work with President Bush to pass legislation.”

William Kristol, Founder and Editor of *The Weekly Standard*, on Fox News Sunday, November 9, 2008.

THE ELECTORAL POWER OF LATINO, ASIAN, AND NEW AMERICAN VOTERS IS GROWING FAST

Latinos Are a Rapidly Growing Share of the Electorate.

- Roughly **11 million** Latinos voted in this election, *up* from 7.6 million in [2004](#).
- According to [CNN exit polls](#), Latinos accounted for about **9% of all voters** (up from 8% in 2004) and Asians 2% (roughly the same as in 2004).
- The Pew Hispanic Center [estimates](#) that roughly 50,000 Latinos turn 18 each month and hence are eligible to vote for the first time.
- A [post-election survey](#) by the NALEO Educational Fund, impreMedia, and the Latino Decisions polling firm found that 92% of Latino registered voters cast ballots (up from 81.5% in 2004).
 - 39% of Latino voters were foreign-born.
 - 15% of Latino voters were voting in a Presidential election for the first time.

Republicans Are Losing Ground Among Both Latino and Asian Voters.

- [CNN exit polls](#) indicate that Obama defeated McCain by 67% to 31% among Latino voters, and 62% to 35% among Asian voters. This represents a pronounced decline in support for the Republican Party since [2004](#), when George W. Bush won 44% of the Latino vote and 44% of the Asian vote.
- According to [exit polling in Los Angeles](#) by Asian Pacific American Legal Center, Obama won the Asian American vote by 68% to 30%. Moreover, 24% of Asian American Republicans crossed party lines to support Obama, and 62% of unaffiliated Asian Americans voted for Obama.

From 2004 to 2008, Republicans Lost Ground with Latinos in Key States.

- In [Texas](#), where 20% of the electorate was Latino, Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 63% to 35%. In [2004](#), Bush won 49% of the Latino vote—only one percentage point less than Kerry.
- In [California](#), where 18% of the electorate was Latino, Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 74% to 23%. In [2004](#), Bush won 32% of the Latino vote.
- In [Florida](#), where 14% of the electorate was Latino, Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 57% to 42%. In [2004](#), Bush won 56% of the Latino vote.
- In [New Mexico](#), where 41% of the electorate was Latino, Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 69% to 30%. In [2004](#), Bush won 44% of the Latino vote.
- In [Nevada](#), where 15% of the electorate was Latino, Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 76% to 22%. In [2004](#), Bush won 39% of the Latino vote.

“An anti-Hispanic attitude is suicidal. As the party of Lincoln, Republicans have a moral obligation to make our case to Hispanics, blacks and Asian-Americans who share our values. Whether we see gains in 2010 depends on it.”

Karl Rove, former Senior Adviser to George W. Bush, in *Newsweek*, Nov. 24, 2008.

Even a Small Latino Electorate Can Make the Difference Between Victory and Defeat in a Close Election.

- In [Pennsylvania](#) (where 4% of the electorate was Latino), Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 72% to 28%. Obama won the state 55% to 45% (a [margin](#) of about 606,000 votes).
- In [Indiana](#) (where 4% of the electorate was Latino), Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 77% to 23%. Obama won the state 50% to 49% (a [margin](#) of about 25,000 votes). A [preliminary analysis](#) conducted for the IPC by Rob Paral and Associates found that Obama received the votes of nearly 24,000 more Latino New Americans than John McCain. Latino New Americans accounted for only 2% of the electorate.
- In [Virginia](#) (where 5% of the electorate was Latino), Obama defeated McCain among Latino voters by 65% to 34%. Obama won the state 53% to 47% (a [margin](#) of about 232,000 votes). A [preliminary analysis](#) found that Obama received the votes of approximately 35,000 more Latino New Americans than McCain. Latino New Americans accounted for only 3% of the electorate.
- In [North Carolina](#), a [preliminary analysis](#) found that Obama won by approximately 14,000 votes, yet received the votes of nearly 26,000 more Latino New Americans than McCain. Latino New Americans accounted for only 2% of the electorate.

LATINOS AND ASIANS CARE ABOUT IMMIGRATION—AND IT SHOWS

Obama won the overwhelming majority of Latino and Asian votes.

- [Polling](#) conducted for [America’s Voice](#) by Bendixen & Associates, before and on the day of the election, found that Obama won the **Latino immigrant vote by 78% to 22%**.
- Although the economy was the issue of dominant concern, **89%** of Latino immigrant voters reported that immigration is “somewhat important” or “very important” to them and their families.
- According to [exit polling in Chicago](#) by the Asian American Institute, Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community, and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, 91% of Latino voters and 81% of Asian voters supported Obama.

- **66%** of Latino voters identified the creation of a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants as an important immigration issue.
- **25%** of Asians also identified legalization as a primary immigration concern, while 38 percent identified the faster processing of immigration petitions for family unification.
- **70%** of Latino voters and 46% of Asian voters said the Republican Party is “not favorable” to immigrants.

Voters in general, as well as Latinos, support comprehensive immigration reform and oppose deportation-only policies.

- According to [polls](#) of general election voters conducted for [America’s Voice](#) by Lake Research Partners and Benenson Strategy Group, **55% of voters in general**, and 61% of Latino voters in particular, believe that although it is not the single highest priority, immigration reform should be a high priority for the new Congress.
- **66% of all voters** and 59% of Latino voters believe immigration was discussed too little during this election season.
- **67% of all voters** and 71% of Latino voters believe that illegal immigrants “should be required to register and become legal,” rather than leaving the country or being allowed to stay only temporarily.
- **67% of both Obama voters and McCain voters support legalization.**
- **57% of all voters** and 74% of Latino voters support comprehensive immigration reform as opposed to enforcement-only measures.
- **64%** of Obama voters and **49%** of McCain voters favor comprehensive immigration reform.
- **62% of all voters** and 69% of Latino voters favor making illegal immigrants become legal taxpayers, as opposed to leaving the country.

“The very divisive rhetoric of the immigration debate set a very bad tone for our brand as Republicans... there were voices within our party, frankly, which if they continue with that kind of rhetoric, anti-Hispanic rhetoric, that so much of it was heard, we’re going to be relegated to minority status.”

Senator Mel Martinez, on NBC’s Meet the Press, November 9, 2008

- **Swing district voters are no different:** The America’s Voice [polls](#) also found that, among voters in swing districts, 60% support immigration reform that includes legalization of illegal immigrants, 64% favor a comprehensive approach to reform as opposed to enforcement-only, and 67% support making illegal immigrants become legal taxpayers.
- A [post-election survey](#) by the NALEO Educational Fund, impreMedia, and the Latino Decisions polling firm found that, despite the paramount importance of the economy to Latino voters, 68% believe it is “extremely important” or “very important” for immigration to be addressed within the first year of the new administration.

IMMIGRATION AS A “WEDGE” ISSUE IS DECLARED DEAD: PRO-REFORM CANDIDATES TROUNCE DEPORTATION-ONLY CANDIDATES

- An [analysis](#) by [America’s Voice](#) of 22 “battleground” races for House and Senate seats found that pro-immigration-reform candidates beat enforcement-only “hardliners” in 20 of the races—meaning that the hardliners were not able to turn immigration into a winning wedge issue.

- Of the 15 House Republicans who lost their seats on November 4, ten were members of the Immigration Reform Caucus, which has opposed a path to citizenship for the country's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants. This includes Rep. Virgil Goode, who narrowly lost his seat in Virginia's 5th district, although he has demanded a [vote recount](#).
 - **Senate Sweep by Pro-Reform Candidates**—Pro-reform candidates won Senate seats in Colorado (Mark Udall-D), North Carolina (Kay Hagan-D), New Hampshire (Jeanne Shaheen-D), New Mexico (Tom Udall-D), and Oregon (Jeff Merkley-D).
 - **House Pro-reform Candidates Win Handily**—Pro-reform candidates won House seats in Arizona's 1st (Ann Kirkpatrick-D), 5th (Harry Mitchell-D), and 8th (Gabrielle Giffords-D) congressional districts; California's 11th district (Jerry McNerney-D); Colorado's 4th district (Betsey Markey-D); Connecticut's 4th district (Jim Himes-D); Idaho's 1st district (Walt Minnick-D); Illinois' 11th (Debbie Halvorson-D) and 14th districts (Bill Foster-D); New Mexico's 2nd district (Harry Teague-D); Nevada's 3rd district (Dina Titus-D); New York's 29th district (Eric Massa-D); Ohio's 1st (Steven Driehaus-D) and 16th (John Boccieri-D) districts; and Virginia's 11th district (Gerald Connolly-D). Meanwhile, the notoriously anti-immigrant mayor of Hazelton, Pennsylvania—Lou Barletta (R)—lost to Paul Kanjorski (D) in the 11th district.

CHANGE ON THE HORIZON: EARLY INDICATIONS FROM INCOMING ADMINISTRATION POINT TO THE POTENTIAL FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM

- In nominating Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano to lead the Department of Homeland Security, the incoming administration is tapping someone who has both experience with a variety of enforcement measures as well as a clearly stated position in favor of comprehensive immigration reform. In June 2007, on the [editorial pages of the Washington Post](#), Governor Napolitano wrote:

“State measures, however, will never substitute for federal legislation that addresses all aspects of immigration, from border security to employer sanctions to pathways to citizenship. It is fundamentally unfair and unrealistic to suggest that our system remain as it is and ignore the 12 million who ran the gantlet at the border and managed to find work in our country. It is not ‘amnesty’ to require these individuals to earn the privilege of citizenship, as have the millions of immigrants who came before them.”
- Two prominent Senators have recently cited the need and potential for change:
 - Senate Leader Harry Reid, in an interview with the [Gannett New Service](#) on November 23, 2008, *“On immigration, there’s been an agreement between (President-elect Barack) Obama and (Arizona Republican Sen. John) McCain to move forward on that. ... We’ll do that.”*
 - Senator Mel Martinez, on NBC's [Meet the Press](#), November 9, 2008, *“The very divisive rhetoric of the immigration debate set a very bad tone for our brand as Republicans... there were voices within our party, frankly, which if they continue with that kind of rhetoric, anti-Hispanic rhetoric, that so much of it was heard, we’re going to be relegated to minority status.”*

- Conservative thinkers like William Kristol, Karl Rove and the Wall Street Journal's editorial board are all urging a more inclusive and welcoming stance towards immigrants moving forward:
- *“An anti-Hispanic attitude is suicidal. As the party of Lincoln, Republicans have a moral obligation to make our case to Hispanics, blacks and Asian-Americans who share our values. Whether we see gains in 2010 depends on it”*. – [Karl Rove](#), former Senior Bush Advisor, writing in *Newsweek*, November 15, 2008.
 - *“There's been a lot of self-inflicted damage by Republicans. Hispanics—let's take one group. Some political scientist did some calculations and told me that if Hispanics had voted in 2008 as they had done in 2004, McCain would have carried Florida, Nevada, and New Mexico. Totally self-inflicted wound by House Republicans, thinking, “Hey, let's be really tough on immigration and let's demagogue and let's not work with President Bush to pass legislation.”* – [William Kristol](#), Founder and Editor of *The Weekly Standard*, on Fox News Sunday, November 9, 2008.
 - *“Immigration wasn't a dominant issue this fall, and other factors contributed more to the GOP defeat. But the political reality is that Republicans who thought that channeling Lou Dobbs would save their seats will soon be ex-Members. Meanwhile, exit polls showed that the Republican share of the Hispanic vote fell to 31% this year from more than 40% in 2004. The demographic reality is that the GOP can't win national elections while losing such a large share of the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the country.”* – The conservative editorial board of the [Wall Street Journal](#), December 2, 2008.

CONCLUSION

Latino, Asian, and New American voter turnout was at an all-time high in 2008. The power of these voters is now undeniable, and immigrant-bashing has become a losing campaign strategy. All signs indicate that the incoming administration and Congress will tackle immigration reform, and that the leadership of the Republican Party is rethinking its position on the issue.

The analysis provided in this report should serve as a bellwether to politicians of all stripes that immigration is a serious issue which impacts not only undocumented immigrants, but also their neighbors, extended families, and the nation as a whole—and that it is an issue which will inform their voting. The majority of American voters now support sensible and workable solutions that support our economy and work to strengthen, rather than divide, America's communities. Americans have spoken and now the only question is whether or not policymakers will listen.