



RESURGENT REPUBLIC

MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Leslie Sanchez and Haley Barbour

DATE: April 23, 2012

RE: Dispelling the Myth of the Hispanic Monolithic Voting Bloc

As part of our Target Voter Series, Resurgent Republic sponsored four focus groups among Hispanic voters in Albuquerque, New Mexico and Las Vegas, Nevada. These respondents all voted for President Obama in 2008, but are undecided on the generic presidential ballot today. They also identified as Independents, and nearly 60 percent of the respondents leaned Democrat. Conducted by *Impacto* Group LLC, the focus groups were split between Spanish-preferred (first or second generation) and English-preferred/Bilingual groups (primarily third or fourth generation).

In 2008 less than one-third of Hispanic voters supported the Republican nominee for President (31 percent, down from 44 percent in 2004). A majority of Hispanic voters identify as Democrats both in name and at the ballot box, yet there is a sizable segment of Hispanic swing voters (20 to 30 percent) who lean Democrat but do not have a strong affiliation. In addition, these voters are primarily concerned about the direction of the economy and finding quality jobs. If conservatives are to increase their support among Hispanics, they will need to connect with these voters.

Compared to 2008, President Obama is underperforming among this critically important voting bloc in battleground states where Hispanic voters will be the determining factor. However, it remains to be seen to what extent, if any, conservatives can turn any disillusionment with President Obama into increased support this November.

Key Findings

These qualitative findings further dispel the myth of the Hispanic community being a monolithic voting bloc. The top priority for both the Spanish-preferred and the English-Bilingual respondents is the direction of the economy and improving their own financial security. The Spanish-preferred voters also hold a more unfavorable impression of the Republican brand. The English-Bilingual respondents share views similar to mainstream, middle-class swing voters interviewed by Resurgent Republic in separate focus groups. They are more likely to view their Hispanic culture as ethnicity, not immigrant status, and favor enforcement as part of immigration reform.

Additional key findings include:

- The top priority of Hispanic swing voters is the economy and these voters talk about a variety of financial ills in personal terms.
- While the Republican brand is viewed unfavorably among these Hispanics, President Obama's image is tarnished due to an anemic economy and failure to pass immigration reform.
- These voters believe the nation's immigration laws should reflect values of opportunity, hard work, and allow immigrants to achieve the American Dream.
- These voters are open to conservative education reforms, like school choice, greater accountability and increased parental involvement, but also favor measures like the DREAM Act.

President Barack Obama

- 1. These voters believe President Obama did not try hard enough to fulfill his campaign promise of passing immigration reform in his first year in office.** Both the Spanish-preferred and English-Bilingual respondents express concern that President Obama did not keep his 2008 campaign promise to press for immigration reform, especially during the first two years of his presidency when Democrats controlled Congress. Some feel "betrayed" by Obama and wonder if they can "trust him again." Moreover, respondents are somewhat mystified that the President made health care reform his top priority after emphatically promising during his campaign to strongly promote an immigration bill within his first year in office. These voters do believe congressional Republicans are to blame for blocking efforts on this issue, but there is also an undercurrent that Obama is using immigration reform as a political issue. According to one Hispanic voter, "The only time [President Obama] talks about immigration is when something happens or people are protesting."
- 2. When asked what things, if any, they dislike about President Obama, their feedback centers on "weak leadership."** Similar to non-Hispanic swing voters, President Obama holds solid personal appeal with this target demographic, especially the Spanish-preferred voters. Also like other swing voters, these respondents are disappointed and frustrated that Obama has not been able to "change" Washington. A majority of respondents cite Obama's "weak leadership" and political naiveté as weaknesses that have limited his ability to get the country on the right track. There's a sense that the President is not strong enough in dealing with Congress, which contributes to his inability to "make things happen." Compared to the non-Hispanic focus groups we've conducted, this leadership critique is more prevalent among Hispanic voters since immigration reform is still pending. Some even suggest Obama can be "wish-washy."

Even so, Hispanic voters do not solely blame President Obama, whether the topic is immigration reform or the economy. Regardless of the promises made during the campaign, they believe congressional Republicans are an obstacle, and similar to other demographic

groups we talked to, these Hispanics feel Obama needs more time to turn around the economy given the downturn he inherited. Even when reminded that Democrats controlled Congress for the first two years of Obama's presidency, their default response is to blame congressional Republicans for blocking the President's priorities, especially the Spanish-preferred voters.

The Economy and Political Climate

- 1. The top priority of Hispanic swing voters is the economy and they talk about a variety of financial ills in personal terms, especially the Spanish-preferred voters.** The economy is the top concern for these Hispanic swing voters, and there is a long list of influences that sour their mood in this regard: rising food and gas prices; incomes staying the same or declining; personal financial woes; high number of layoffs; increased competition for fewer job openings; as well as deteriorating situations in health care and housing. One Spanish-speaking male in Las Vegas was worried that if he silenced his cell phone during the focus group session he might miss a job call. Several other voters talked about having to accept lower quality jobs or part-time work out of necessity. A Hispanic voter summed up the financial pressure by saying, "Every price is going up and my income hasn't gone up in years.... We're pinching just to pay."
- 2. Many believe the situation for the Hispanic community is worse, but remain optimistic and hopeful for the future.** Regarding the direction of the country, these voters use descriptors such as "worried," "nervous," "insecure," and "frustrated." These sentiments lead many of these voters to say the situation for the Hispanic community is worse today compared to 2009 or at least not improving quickly enough. They feel it could take many more years before Hispanics and Latinos are truly equals regarding treatment and opportunities. Yet these Hispanic voters end with an optimistic hope for the future. They cite examples of seeing more Hispanics on television, progress in education, and believe fewer Hispanics "are changing their names to get hired." Their optimism is strongly rooted in a patriotic belief that "the United States always has the power to overcome," and they proudly voice their gratitude for living in America when friends and relatives face more significant challenges overseas.
- 3. There's a perceived link between persistently high unemployment for Hispanics and education and job training opportunities.** After seeing a chart outlining the national unemployment (for everyone and the Hispanic community), respondents are not surprised that unemployment in the Hispanic community is higher than the national average. They acknowledge the unemployment rate has gradually declined in recent months, but also say things are moving too slowly, particularly for Hispanics. Voters in all four groups had a thorough understanding of "underemployment" and many know someone in this category. Some describe themselves, or their spouse, as working at a job making less money than they used to. Many link the persistent unemployment in the Hispanic community with a lack of opportunities, including education and job training. These voters want to hear more about the creation of quality, family-supporting jobs in 2012.
- 4. Hispanic voters express concern about increased spending and escalating debt, but they do not solely blame President Obama.** Some respondents are aware of the growing deficit and debt but did not know how much it has increased since 2009. Many were surprised the deficit is worse now than when President Bush was in office, which raised concerns about

their children and grandchildren having to pay for this mistake. For the most part, these voters do not place blame President Obama for the rapid escalation, arguing the crisis he inherited – two wars, weak economy, housing bust, and rising unemployment – contributed to the downward trajectory.

- 5. Not surprisingly, the Republican brand is tarnished among these Hispanic voters, especially the Spanish-preferred respondents.** Despite being viewed as sharing some important beliefs (pro-business, pro-jobs, low taxes, small government, and a strong military), the Republican Party is not seen as representing the best interests of the Hispanic community. Overall, the Republican brand is perceived unfavorably and described as a party “for the rich,” “out of touch with ‘our’ community” and “not sharing ‘our’ values.” Respondents feel Republicans, while conservative, lack compassion, are often too conservative, and are to blame for blocking President Obama’s priorities. Hispanic voters do give Republicans credit for sticking to their beliefs, though.

More interestingly, many of these Hispanic voters say that no one from either political party is talking to them or listening to their concerns. They want “change” and an alternative to the situation for themselves and their families.

Immigration

- 1. In their own words: the values Hispanic swing voters say immigration laws should reflect.** In all four groups, respondents were asked what kind of values immigration laws should reflect. There was a great deal of discussion about seeking opportunity, hard work, achieving the American dream, fairness, humane treatment, impartiality, and concern over the separation of families. As a result, they see immigrants as having a positive impact on society. As one Hispanic voter said, many “don’t want to leave their family, but many have to [in order] for a better opportunity.” When asked why she was visibly emotional during this discussion, a Spanish-speaking woman in Las Vegas detailed the following story:

“Because I have seen a lot of things. One time I was in McDonalds with my grandchildren and I saw a young girl with her baby about 8 months old. This other girl came and grabbed them kissing and crying and she asked the baby’s mother if she could take the baby in her arms. This girl explained ‘I had to leave a child like this and right now she would be this same age.’ She hugged him and carried him and I almost cried. There is a lot like that...mothers who have to come here and leave their children back home with their grandmothers so they can all survive. And, that is very sad. It hurts my feelings.”

These voters express mixed feelings regarding immigrants. On one hand they recognize that many are good and hardworking people, follow the rules and contribute to society if given a chance. On the other hand, they express frustration when undocumented immigrants get help when they cannot. The Spanish-preferred respondents are quick to note that undocumented immigrants pay taxes through purchases (they do not delineate between consumption and payroll or income taxes). The English-Bilingual respondents say that immigrants should be held to the same standards as citizens and believe learning English is necessary to getting ahead.

Similar to our previous polling among Hispanic voters, the majority of respondents in both groups favor immigration reform that leads to legal status or citizenship. Most notably among the Spanish-preferred respondents, they clearly differentiate between individuals who follow the rules but fail to have the correct documentation and others who blatantly participate in criminal activity. All respondents feel that enforcement alone has not worked. Instead they suggest a combination of enforcement and earned citizenship, especially among the English-Bilingual voters.

- 2. There is little awareness of the increased deportation rates under President Obama, and the Spanish-preferred and English-Bilingual groups respond differently to this topic.** In all four groups, a majority of respondents were not aware of an increase in deportation rates. When presented with a chart showing the increase in deportations from 2000 to 2010, the Spanish-preferred voters believe there is little justification for the increased rate and believe it is affecting the Hispanic community at large, not just criminals. Respondents are concerned that undocumented people are hiding to avoid being deported, unable to rent housing and afraid to go outside of their immediate community. They see this as unfair, inhumane and want something done about it immediately. In addition to President Obama, these voters believe state laws are also to blame for increased deportations. While they still favor a comprehensive approach to immigration reform, the English-Bilingual voters were not as alarmed by the increased deportation rates due to their emphasis on enforcement.

Education

- 1. The Spanish-preferred and English-Bilingual groups are mostly sympathetic to allowing in-state tuition for children of undocumented immigrants who meet certain conditions.** The majority of the Spanish-preferred respondents believe when it comes to education opportunities the children of undocumented immigrants should not be penalized for their parents' decisions because these children "don't know any other country" and "believe themselves to be American." In fact these voters believe there would be even greater long-term problems for society if children of undocumented immigrants were not able to "have the same future and opportunity as everyone else." The English-Bilingual groups were sympathetic to offering in-state tuition to these children, but also question the fairness of doing so while they themselves did not receive such benefits. Even so, most of the respondents in both groups feel it is sensible to allow in-state tuition at public colleges to children of undocumented immigrants who are here by no fault of their own and have graduated from an American high school to further their education and become productive members of society.
- 2. Hispanic voters place a high priority on education reforms that increase parental involvement.** Based upon all four groups, respondents believe that parental involvement is crucial to the success of their children's education and would like to see more ways that schools can help parents get involved. High dropout rates and low college completion rates among Hispanics were cited as great concerns. Many also feel the education system can be improved in part through reforms like more school choice, teacher training, and accountability. One longer-term concern related to this issue is that younger generations will have fewer opportunities if things continue on the current path.

- 3. Hispanic voters respond favorably to investing in education, but also stress the importance of increased oversight and accountability to ensure improved results.** A majority of respondents in Albuquerque and Las Vegas feel the federal government needs to invest money in the public school system to help Hispanic children. They believe students – particularly minorities and those in their inner-city neighborhoods – are falling behind, and the problem will never improve until schools and teachers have the money and resources they need. Yet this does not mean these voters support throwing good tax dollars after bad. For example, the Nevada Hispanics strongly favor more oversight of education spending to improve the state’s efficiency and to better focus resources.

HISPANIC VOTER FOCUS GROUPS

The Target Voter Series is a project of 24 focus groups among Obama Independents who are undecided on the generic presidential ballot. The focus groups are taking place in 11 battleground states among six key demographic groups (Suburban Women, Young Voters, Seniors, Independents, Hispanics, and Blue Collar Catholics). This is the fifth of six memos to be released in the series.

Albuquerque, New Mexico
March 27, 2012
Spanish-preferred / English-Bicultural
Conducted by *Impacto* Group LLC

Las Vegas, Nevada
March 28, 2012
Spanish-preferred / English-Bicultural
Conducted by *Impacto* Group LLC