

Winning the Hispanic Vote, or Si Habla Español?

Tag: The handwriting on the wall appears to be in Spanish. George Bush and Carl Rove can read it, can the Democrats?

By Michael Coblenz

President Bush recently nominated Carlos Gutierrez, the CEO of Kellogg Co., to be his new Commerce Secretary. This is the second prominent Hispanic that Bush has nominated to a senior political position since his reelection. The first was Alberto Gonzales, Bush's nominee for Attorney General.

Liberals may scoff at these appointments as mere symbolism. Some might even go so far as to suggest that these appointments are little more than tokens to appeal to (and perhaps hoodwink) a growing demographic. But these appointments represent a strong Republicans effort towards Hispanic voters, and Democrats need to develop a strategy to deal with it.

Hispanics are the fastest growing minority in the country. Their total population grew by approximately 57% from 1990 to 2000. Hispanics made up about 9% of the total U.S. population in 1990, and just over 12.5% in 2000, surpassing African Americans and the largest non-white population group. And Hispanics are also significantly younger than the white and African-American population, meaning that their percentage of the overall population will continue to grow, even without increased immigration.

And now, thanks to aggressive tactics by the Republicans, Hispanics are increasingly voting Republican. Approximately 35 % voted for Bush in 2000: 44% voted for him this year. If this population trend and shift in voting patterns continue, Democrats will be the minority party for a long time to come. That is the handwriting on the wall.

Republicans are trying to appeal to Hispanics on two issues, and Democrats had better understand both if they ever hope to compete.

The first issue is religion and family values. Hispanics are very religious, attending church at rates rivaling that of conservative Christians, and their culture is centered around family. Republicans claim these issues as their own, and much ink has already been spilled analyzing whether Democrats can ever compete on these issues.

But these nominations clearly show that the Republicans are trying to appeal to Hispanics (and others) as the party of opportunity and advancement. Both Gutierrez and Gonzales have wonderful biographies, and are perfect examples of the United States as the land of opportunity. Both rose up from humble beginnings to become successful professionals.

Gonzales, the son of migrant farm workers, joined the Air Force in hope of advancing himself. He did so well that he was accepted to the United States Air Force Academy. After two years at the Academy he transferred to Rice University, the most prestigious university in Texas. After Rice he went to Harvard Law School, and then got a job at Vinson & Elkins, one of the top law firms in Texas, where he was one of the first Hispanics to make partner. It was at V & E that he came to the attention of then Governor Bush, who eventually hired him as his chief counsel as Governor of Texas. In 1997 Bush nominated Gonzales as Texas Secretary of State and in 1999 Bush appointed him to the Texas Supreme Court. When Bush became President, he brought Gonzales with him, again as chief counsel.

Gutierrez's biography is very different, but equally impressive. He was from a wealthy Cuban family, but they fled from Cuba with nothing when he was seven. He attended school in the U.S. then moved with his family to Mexico in the early 1970's. He began working for Kellogg as a truck driver in Mexico City in 1975, and eventually rose to be the director of the companies operations in Mexico. He then moved to Canada to take over Kellogg's operations in Canada, and finally returned to the United States as a senior corporate executive. He became president of Kellogg Co., in 1998, and CEO the next year.

Both men are examples of what a person can achieve with hard work, ambition, intelligence and talent. They embody what many Hispanics (as well as most immigrants and in fact most Americans) hope for themselves and their children.

The tacit message in these nominations is that these men achieved because of their own effort and not because of quotas or affirmative action. This will allow Republicans to present themselves as the party that rewards hard work, the party that gives people and hand up, and not a hand out.

And how will the Democrats respond? If past behavior is any guide, they will simply remind people that they are the party of civil rights: that without the hard work of the Democratic Party people with Hispanic surnames would never have had opportunities. This is nice, it is important, but it is entirely backward looking. The Democrats cannot assume that because they were the party of civil rights, they will forever retain the loyalty of minority voters.

The best response would be to use these nominations to remind people of how the Republicans reward a select few while they seek to deny opportunities to most Americans. For example, Gonzales' life changed when he was accepted into the Air Force Academy, and the U.S. military has the strongest affirmative action program in the country. Why then are the Republicans trying to eliminate all vestiges of affirmative action in government programs? Gutierrez advanced at Kellogg in Mexico. Could he have done the same in the United States?

Democrats should learn a lesson from Republicans, and use these nominations to their advantage. But to do that they must do more than brush off their high school language books.

¿Entiende?