

As Latinos Go, So Goes the Nation
With Lisa Garcia Bedolla
Associate Professor, Education and Political Science
Chair, Center for Latino Policy Research
UC Berkeley
July 2012

How Democrats and Republicans reach out to Latinos in 2012 will help determine which party will hold the majority in the coming years. About 22 million or more Latinos will be eligible to vote this fall...and turnout may be as high as 12 million...which would be a huge increase over 2008. And many of those potential voters live in the battleground states of Colorado, Florida, New Mexico and Nevada. The Latino vote has tilted overwhelmingly toward the Democrats in recent years...and if the trend continues, that small portion of the electorate could have a significant impact in a close race.

But Latinos' symbolic role may be even more important than their ability to affect electoral outcomes. Over the past few election cycles, both political parties have reached out to Latino voters. Yet, as my colleague [Arlene Dávila](#) of New York University argues, much of that outreach on the Republican side was designed to make non-Latino voters see the G-O-P as more moderate. But with the recent intensification of anti-Latino immigrant rhetoric within the mainstream of the Republican Party, it will be more difficult for Mitt Romney to appeal to Latino voters. To earn their trust, he would need to disavow the strongly nativist arm of his party, something that until now he has been unwilling to do.

President Obama has his own problems with Latino voters, stemming from his administration's historic levels of deportations and his inability to deliver on

immigration reform. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 59 percent of Latinos disapprove of Obama's deportation policy; as one in four Latinos reported knowing someone who has been detained or deported within the last year. Obama's recent support for the DREAM Act will help, but the president needs to understand that his administration's lack of movement on comprehensive immigration reform has hurt the Democratic Party's standing with Latino voters.

This is not to suggest that immigration is the only issue they care about – quite the contrary. When surveyed, they rank education and jobs as the top two issues that matter the most. And not all Latinos are immigrants. In fact, about two thirds of Latinos were born here. But most have friends or family members who are immigrants and they take offense at laws such Arizona's SB 10-70 – which requires non-residents to carry documents detailing their immigration status ...and orders law enforcement officers to request papers from anyone they think "looks illegal." Latinos, even those who are native-born, feel targeted.

Therefore -- the political parties' positions on immigration issues have become a proxy for their stances toward Latinos in general. Republicans, because of their harsh rhetoric, have alienated Latinos. And with no other alternative, they've stayed with the Democrats. According to recent polls, the president holds a 45-point lead over Romney among Latinos, a lead that mirrors the gap in 2010.

For now, that gap will not be felt so strongly by Republicans because the Latino voting bloc lags behind its population size. But, Latinos and other voters of

color will soon be the nation's majority. Latinos already comprise the largest minority group in the US and we now know that the majority of births in the United States are non-white. Clearly, the country's demographics are shifting.

Here in California, we've already seen this demographic change. When the state Republican Party chose to run campaigns based on nativism and exclusion, Latinos turned out in record levels --- for Democrats -- which has transformed state politics, making it unlikely that any Republican will win statewide office in California for the foreseeable future.

Right now, the U.S. has no formal system for integrating immigrants into the political process. So we look at Latino political integration as a barometer of how well the United States is able to incorporate its immigrants. So far, the jury is out. Neither party is doing a great job, but the Republicans seem to be especially unable to pitch a party tent that substantively includes Latino immigrants. If, at the national level, Republicans don't move away from nativist policies and accept that Latino immigrants and their children form part of the fabric of American society, they themselves will be in the minority throughout the 21st century.

I'm Lisa Garcia Bedolla.