

Hispanics give Bush high marks

Cynics determined to downplay President Bush's support among Hispanic voters cling to three assumptions: that any support is limited to how the commander-in-chief has fought the war on terrorism and might now fight a war against Iraq; that Hispanics backing Bush are assimilated and wealthy and wooed by tax cuts; and that support for Bush doesn't transfer to other Republicans.

All three assumptions may be false, according to a very significant poll of 1,000 Hispanic adults by McLaughlin & Associates' Opiniones Latinas conducted on behalf of the Washington-based Latino Coalition.

According to the survey, Bush's approval rating among Hispanics registered to vote stands at 68.4 percent. That is consistent with Bush's overall approval rating, which hovers between 65 percent and 70 percent.

And Bush's high marks with Hispanics extend beyond the war on terrorism to cover the rest of his agenda. Sixty-nine percent approve of the work Bush has done on education. Fifty-three percent support his performance in both foreign affairs and the economy. And 52 percent back his stance in support of immigration.

These Hispanic boosters for Bush are not who you think they are. Assimilated? When asked whether they preferred to be interviewed in English or Spanish, only 45 percent chose English while 55 percent chose Spanish.

Among those who chose Spanish, Bush's approval rating shot up to 74 percent. It was 62 percent among English-speakers.

Figures like these make you wonder whether Republicans are shooting themselves in the *cabeza* by pushing English-only laws. Bush also did very well—earning a 74 percent approval rating—with Hispanics not registered to vote, including many non-citizens.



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Pampered? Over 60 percent of respondents to the poll had an annual household income of \$40,000 or less, 67 percent didn't have a 401(k) plan and only 56 percent owned a personal computer.

The biggest surprise is that Bush's Hispanic appeal appears to have coattails after all. True: More than twice as many respondents identified with the Democratic Party as with the Republican Party — 48 percent to 23 percent. But when the question turned to which party's candidates voters would support in congressional elections this fall, the Republicans fared better. Democrats came out on top by only 12 percentage points, 44 percent to 32 percent.

In response to a similar question in last year's poll, Democrats enjoyed a 34-point advantage.

What's going on here? Republicans would like you to believe they whittled away the Democrats' edge with Bush's Hispanic outreach efforts and the \$1 million Spanish-language news program that the Republican National Committee put on the air in a half-dozen U.S. markets.

No doubt, those things helped. Yet why credit the GOP exclusively for what could be the start of a major realignment of an important part of the American electorate? You don't gain that much ground that quickly without the other guys making some serious mistakes.

The Democrats' first blunder was ignoring the potency of Bush's appeal to Hispanic voters. When the president sprinkled Spanish into speeches, Democrats scoffed.

Then they tried to scare voters. During Richard Gephardt's recent appearance at the annual conference of the National Council of La Raza, the House minority leader invoked a popular Spanish saying to urge that Hispanics judge the GOP by the company it keeps. The inference was that said company was anti-Hispanic.

But Democrats' biggest miscue was succumbing to the temptation to put their own interests before those of Hispanic voters. The temptation was greatest during last year's redistricting process. Congressional Democrats set the tone when they brokered a deal with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, promising its members committee assignments in exchange for assurances that the Hispanic members would stand by Anglo Democratic incumbents running against Hispanic challengers.

Especially skittish Democrats like Rep. Martin Frost of Texas camped out in state capitals as legislators drew new congressional districts.

Frost was rewarded with a low-risk, low-effort "dream district" — about 60 percent minority but no more than a third Hispanic. That diminishes the prospect of drawing Hispanic challengers in primaries until after the 2010 census. No matter that the Democrat represents a region — North Texas — where the Hispanic population grew by more than 100 percent in the 1990s. Consider that affirmative action for a 20-year congressman who was obviously insecure about his own ability to attract Hispanic votes.

Neglect. Fear-mongering. Conniving. That has been, for the last year, the Democratic recipe for keeping Hispanics loyal. Bush's recipe of inclusion was more palatable to a constituency fed up with being taken for granted and hungry for respect.

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