



GOP back to square one with Hispanics

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In January 2001, two days before President-elect George W. Bush moved into the White House, his top strategist, Karl Rove, told the Republican National Committee that “our mission and our goal” was make further inroads with Hispanics. Four years later Bush had accomplished just that, improving his share of the Hispanic vote to 44 from 35 percent.

Today, those gains are gone, as Republican John McCain won just 31 percent of the Hispanic vote.

“The percent of the white electorate is dropping every election cycle, and when you look ahead at America, black and Hispanic, by age bracket, there is a demographic trend that is obvious — our country is becoming more diverse,” McCain pollster Bill McInturff said on Thursday. “There are any number of states that McCain just lost that he got the same percent of the white vote that Bush did in 2004.”

When the Republican Party first aggressively courted the Hispanic vote in 1980, Ronald Reagan won 35 percent of the group, then just 2 percent of the electorate. This year it was 9 percent — more than a fourfold increase. In the same period, whites dropped from 89 percent to 74 percent of the electorate.

“It’s not that Joe the Plumber lost his symbolic power,” said one GOP opposition researcher. “It’s that the white working-class voters affected by it lost much of their power at the ballot box.”

In his run against President Carter, Reagan asked California adman Lionel Sosa to lead his Hispanic outreach, insisting it would not be a difficult task.

“Latinos are Republican,” Reagan told Sosa. “They just don’t know it yet.”

Sosa, who has since advised both Bushes and McCain, found that Latinos had too poor an image of the GOP to convince them that they were closeted Republicans. Instead, he pitched each candidate as one they could support without backing the party itself.

“We’ve never sold a Republican as a Republican,” Sosa said. “It’s never been about Hispanic voting Republican. It’s always been about Hispanics voting for one Republican.

“My approach has always been,” he said, “to stay a Democrat but just vote the best man.”

Bush had hoped to change that. Mexican President Vicente Fox was the first state visitor of the Bush presidency. In his second term, Bush taped Alberto Gonzales as the nation’s first Hispanic attorney general. Above all, Bush hoped that comprehensive immigration reform would sustain Latino support for Republicans in the long term.

Bush's success with Latinos came in part from translating the party's appeal to white religious and values voters to like-minded Hispanics.

In 2004, Bush won 54 percent of Latino Protestants. This year, Obama won 67 percent.

While the economic crisis eclipsed cultural values among all voters, the shift in the Hispanic vote was especially pronounced.

Luis Cortes, one of Time magazine's 25 most influential American evangelicals and a strong Bush supporter, says immigration is the reason.

Today Cortes is coy when asked how he voted. He said the immigration issue shaped his vote. "Of course it did. But I'm not going to say anything else," he said, then added, "I always vote in brown's interest, meaning Latino people's interest."

McCain's reputation among Hispanics was damaged when he backed away from his failed 2007 immigration reform bill in this year's Republican primary, as anger among the party faithful about illegal immigration led to a competition among the candidates to offer the most aggressively enforcement-oriented immigration plans. McCain said he would not vote for his own bill if it were to be reintroduced.

Polling, though, suggests that the impact on the Hispanic vote of the immigration issue, which rarely came up during the general election, may be overstated.

Two Pew Research Center polls in the past year found that the economy, education, health care and crime all trumped among Hispanic registered voters. Less than a week before Election Day, 6 in 10 Latinos said the economy was their top issue, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll.

Gallup tracking polls showed Obama's Hispanic support as low as 53 percent and as high as 66 percent, and McCain's support ranging from 27 to 38 percent — suggesting that many voters were open to both candidates.

McInturff sees the decline in Hispanic support for the GOP as a result of this election's playing field.

"When you look at the data," he said, Hispanics "are overwhelmingly negative about the economy, they weren't supportive of our effort in Iraq, and [they were against the party's stance on] immigration. Those were three very powerful issues." He added in reference to this year's results that "we shouldn't assume anything is really fixed."

Sosa, who says he is done with presidential politics, sees the problem as the same one that Reagan faced in 1980.

"We are not in a very good place again. I think the Republican brand has been highly damaged," Sosa said. "The Republicans are going to realize how much they need to regain what we have lost."