

Midwest Hispanic voters could play pivotal role

In tight battleground states, tiny bloc could make a difference

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Washington - Hispanics make up a tiny piece of the electorate in the Midwest. And those who can vote are less likely than other groups to go to the polls.

Even so, the region is home to a number of battleground states where a small voting bloc could make a difference in the race for the White House.

In a tight race, Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain are vowing to court Hispanics in all 50 states, not just those traditionally known for their large Hispanic populations. Their efforts to reach Hispanics could be pivotal in Midwestern states - Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio among them - where the election could be decided by just a few percentage points.

"There's no question the campaigns understand the Latino community, especially in swing states, can make a difference if they're mobilized," said Janet Murguía, president of the National Council of La Raza and a Kansas City, Kan., native. "There's clearly an effort to go after the true swing states."

Obama recently unveiled what supporters called a historic campaign to spend \$20 million to target Hispanics in every state, including Wisconsin and elsewhere across the Midwest.

McCain has not committed a specific amount of money to target Hispanics, but campaign officials say he plans to campaign for Hispanic votes in places that previous presidential candidates have never been.

In Wisconsin, the two campaigns are working with Spanish-language newspapers such as Milwaukee's *El Conquistador* and other Hispanic media to get their messages across.

Obama plans to open a campaign office in the south side of Milwaukee, where many of the state's Hispanics live.

In 2004, Hispanics made up about 1.8 % of voters in Wisconsin, a state that Democrat John Kerry won by less than 1 percentage point. They made up about 1.3% of voters in Iowa. President Bush carried that state by just 1 percentage point.

Other states throughout the region weren't as close four years ago, but several - Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and even Indiana - could be tight in the fall.

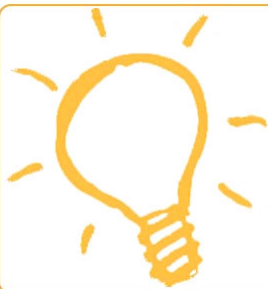
Any group could be pivotal

"For a close state, every little bit matters," said Charles Franklin, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Almost any group, no matter how small, could be pivotal."

But the campaigns' efforts to reach Hispanics in states such as Wisconsin may end up benefiting their parties in the long term rather than in the coming election, he said.

At 15% of the population nationwide, Hispanics are the fastest-growing minority group in the country. They now make up about 9% of the country's eligible voters - a number that also is growing.

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Where they have typically concentrated in states such as California, Florida and New York, more and more Hispanics are fanning out across the South and Midwest in search of jobs and a lower cost of living.

While Franklin said it's wise for the candidates to invest in the future of their parties with Hispanics in every state, they have more immediate concerns - winning in November.

He questions whether Hispanics in swing states where they don't yet have political clout will turn out in large enough numbers to have an impact.

At the polls

Four years ago, Hispanics nationwide made up less than 7% of voters who actually went to the polls. They made up about 1% of actual voters in Wisconsin, according to statistics kept by Voces de la Frontera, a Milwaukee immigrant rights group.

Hispanic groups across the country are trying to change that dynamic, encouraging legal immigrants to become U.S. citizens, registering citizens to vote and pleading with registered voters to show up on election day.

In Wisconsin, Voces de la Frontera has registered 1,500 people in the southeastern part of the state this year, said executive director Christine Neumann-Ortiz.

"This is a critical election for Latinos," she said.

Neumann-Ortiz, who has helped organize three major marches in Wisconsin to protest stalled immigration reform legislation in Congress, said she wants to put into practice a slogan they chanted on the streets: "Today we march, tomorrow we vote."

Hispanic activists say recent immigration raids and political rhetoric against illegal immigrants have inspired scores of Hispanics to become more politically engaged.

Large increases in Hispanic turnout occurred during the Democratic primaries this year in more than a dozen states, including Wisconsin, Ohio and Missouri, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

In Wisconsin, Hispanics made up 4% of Democratic primary voters this year, up from 3% in 2004.

Hispanics' perceptions

While they are becoming more active, Hispanics also are more likely to vote for Democrats than they were a few years ago, a scenario that many political observers attribute to a perception among many Hispanics after heated immigration debates in Washington that Republicans are anti-immigrant.

About 57% now say they are Democrats or lean that way; 23% align themselves with Republicans.

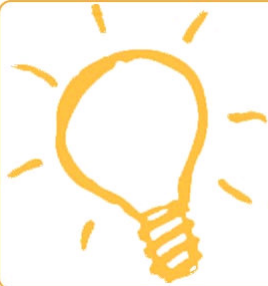
Even though Hispanics voted 2 to 1 in favor of Hillary Rodham Clinton over Obama in the primaries, the Illinois senator appears not to be having trouble attracting support of Hispanics nationwide for the general election.

Hispanic voters support Obama over McCain nearly 2 to 1, according to a recent national survey by Pew.

The immigration issue may be driving up some political participation, but it's not at the top of the agenda for most Hispanic voters.

Recent surveys show Hispanic voters rank education, the cost of living, jobs and health care as the most important issues in the November election. Immigration and the Iraq war are further down the

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list.

In Wisconsin, with its status as a battleground state, both candidates are working hard to reach every voter, their aides say.

"We're making a real commitment to Wisconsin that allows us to talk to a lot of different kinds of voters," said Phil Walzak, an Obama spokesman in Wisconsin.

Hessy Fernandez, a McCain spokeswoman on Hispanic issues, said the Republican Arizona senator is "going to work for every vote" in the state.

State leaders weigh in

Hispanic leaders in Wisconsin, however, argue that the two candidates can do a better job to reach out to the community.

While the Obama campaign has done more to reach Hispanics than previous campaigns, his staff needs to make the case more forcefully that he would be better for Hispanics than McCain on issues including jobs, education, health care and immigration, said Pedro Colón, a Milwaukee Democrat and the first Hispanic member of Wisconsin's Assembly.

"The way you reach Latinos is the same way you reach other people, but it has to be a concerted effort," he said.

Both parties are failing Latino voters, said Perfecto Rivera, a Hispanic Republican from Milwaukee.

"The Republican Party is not doing the job it needs to in talking about its track record of aligning themselves with Latino values, that being family, faith and community," he said.

Democrats, on the other hand, treat Hispanics as though they are interested only in what the government can do for them, he said.

"We're people who believe in work," he said. "All we want is opportunity, not handouts."

At a recent gathering of the League of United Latin American Citizens in Washington, both candidates promised to increase jobs, improve schools and fix the health care system while praising Hispanic contributions to the country.

"I represent the great state of Arizona, where Spanish was spoken before English was," said McCain, who also spoke fondly about a Hispanic prisoner of war he got to know during the Vietnam War.

The candidates also promised to fix the country's immigration system, saying they support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already in the country.

During his speech, Obama criticized McCain for saying that the country must secure the borders before taking on broader reforms.

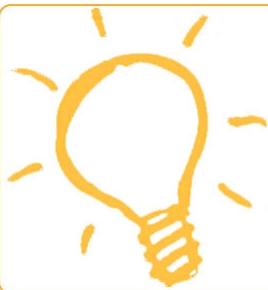
McCain was one of the main supporters of broad immigration legislation in the Senate before he began emphasizing stronger border enforcement as he tried to secure the Republican presidential nomination.

Obama reminded participants that many of them marched to demand immigration reform and pledged to make the issue a top priority if elected.

"That was the time to march," he said. "Now is the time to vote."

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