



BACKGROUND

To embrace and uphold our tradition as a nation of immigrants.

Immigrants and the 2002 Elections

(N.B. In general, election analysts rely on extrapolations of Latino and Asian voting behavior as a proxy for the “immigrant” vote. The Forum realizes the weakness in such a broad comparison, and regrets that data is not available on a national level to make more targeted analyses. 2002 was even more unusual in terms of vote analysis as Voter News Service, the body that normally conducts and reports exit polls using demographic traits, declined to release its numbers citing accuracy concerns. This analysis was prepared using news reports and isolated exit polling data available in some cases.)

State-Wide Races

The 2002 election showed that immigrant voters are on the ascent in terms of political power. They are increasing their impact from local elections to state-wide races, most obviously in the governors races in states that have an established history of integrating newcomers. Some results show that candidates who can put aside politics and concentrate on policies that matter most to these constituencies will attract immigrant voters, regardless of these voters’ stated party preferences.

Take, for example, the Governors races in New York, California, and Florida. These are traditional immigrant “gateway” states in which immigrant voters are already considered an important constituency. Republican Governor George Pataki (NY) increased his share of the Latino electorate substantially (from 25% in 1998 to 40-50% in 2002, according to the Associated Press) as he sailed into re-election, despite the fact that over 70% of New York Latinos are Democrats. Pataki’s success among Latinos was attributed in part to his stances on issues such as stopping military bombing on Vieques, Puerto Rico, and granting Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Colombians. Moreover, Governor Pataki conducted significant, inclusive outreach to the Latino community, winning endorsements and support from Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, the National Latino Officers Association, El Diario/La Prensa (a New York City newspaper), and singer Marc Anthony, among others. Pataki also earned strong backing from Asian Americans; despite the fact that 56% said they were Democrats, 65% of Asian Americans polled in New York City voted for Pataki in 2002 (according to data from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)). Pataki’s popularity among Asian voters, however, did not carry over to and was not influenced by their feelings for George W. Bush himself. Just 22% of those polled by AALDEF rated President Bush favorably, while 70% found his performance average or poor.

In California, Democratic Governor Gray Davis stung immigrants close to the election when he declined to sign driver’s license legislation important to that community. In this heavily Democratic state with the largest immigrant electorate, Governor Davis lost substantial support among Latino voters between 1998 (when he garnered 78% of the Latino vote) and 2002 (when he won just 65%), according to the Los Angeles Times. Davis also lost support from Asian Americans in Southern California; he captured 61% of the vote in 2002, down from 67% in 1998, according to data from the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC). Davis’ ambivalence toward or negation of issues important to the immigrant community contributed to Republican Bill Simon’s stronger than expected showing, both generally and among immigrant voters. These results should encourage Governor Davis

and other politicians of both parties to consider promoting policies that these communities see as important.

In Florida, Governor Jeb Bush demonstrated political savvy by reaching beyond the traditionally Republican Cuban voters to capture the loyalty of other Latinos. Non-Cuban Latinos now make up approximately 70% of the state's Latino population. Bush garnered an impressive 51% of the non-Cuban Latino vote (according to a Fox News exit poll) by focusing on issues that resonate with this group. He also ramped up his Spanish-language campaigning, using culturally-sensitive messages and tactics to appeal to Spanish-dominant immigrant voters. In contrast, some Latinos voiced discontent with Democratic candidate Jim McBride's underwhelming outreach to Latinos. Still, Governor Bush's popularity among this constituency did not translate into gains for other Florida Republicans. The New York, California, and Florida results all show that candidates' positions on policies that galvanize immigrant voters are key; this group will often vote more on a candidate's qualifications than political affiliation.

In other races of interest, Iowa Governor Tom Vilsak (D), who has seen immigrants as a solution to Iowa's declining workforce, won re-election despite the very vocal criticism over the past couple of years from supporters of the restrictionist Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). In Texas, Tony Sanchez was out-bid by incumbent Governor Rick Perry (R), despite garnering 87% of the Latino vote. However, analysts predict that this could be the last state-wide election in Texas in which a candidate can lose such a large percentage of the Latino vote and still win the race. In Colorado, Governor Bill Owens (R) beat his closest opponent, Democrat Rollie Heath. His success among Latinos was attributed to his recent record on pro-Latino issues, including his opposition to the failed anti-bilingual education ballot measure and his support for Jesús Apodaca, the immigrant student who gained news attention when the restrictionist Congressman Tom Tancredo (R-6th/CO) tried to have him deported in September 2002.

Local Races

In states with new immigrant populations, immigrants broke through in state legislatures and local offices, laying down a strong foundation for the future. Georgia elected three Latinos to its state legislature, marking the first time in history a Latino was elected to this body. This is a state that saw nearly 300% growth in its Latino population between 1990 and 2000. Latino and other immigrants in Georgia could be the sleeping giant when it comes to election results for the foreseeable future, vastly changing the landscape of the debate in this southern state. History was also made in Michigan, Iowa, and Minnesota when three immigrant candidates became the first Asian Pacific Americans in these state's assemblies: Korean American adoptee Hoon-Yung Hopgood (D-MI), Indian immigrant Swati Dandekar (D-IA), and Laotian refugee Laos Cy Thao (I-MN).

In Florida, Juan Carlos Zapata (R), an activist in the Columbian community, won a seat in the Florida state House of Representatives representing District 119 in Miami-Dade County. He is the first Colombian-American to serve in the state legislature.

Federal Races

As to the federal races, immigrants were definitely a factor in 2002, although data on the immigrant vote in this arena was sparse. In several races, however, a candidate's stance on immigration was the subject of debate and the results showed that, even in a security-focused climate, it was still more popular to be pro-immigrant than anti-immigrant. The restrictionist group FAIR circulated a "no

amnesty pledge” among all Congressional candidates before the November election, and of the handful that signed the pledge very few won office. While these candidates’ losses cannot be attributed to their restrictionist stance on immigration, that stance did not help them win. In the Iowa race for Senator, incumbent Tom Harkin (D) beat Representative Greg Ganske (R-4th) 54% to 44%. Ganske had tried to play the anti-immigrant card, accusing Harkin of being soft on illegal immigration. (As Chair of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, Harkin has been a leader on restoring access to public benefits for legal immigrants.) Despite his favorable rating from immigration restrictionists, Ganske failed to make his case to the Iowa public and he lost his chance at the U.S. Senate.

In a ploy similar to Ganske’s, Pennsylvania Representative George Gekas (R-17th) thought he would be “safe” in his seat by trumpeting his hard-line stance on immigration as Chair of the House Immigration, Border Security, and Claims Subcommittee. In July 2002, Rep. Gekas introduced legislation that would have drastically reduced family-based immigration, eliminated the diversity visa program, and cut refugee admissions. While this bill never had a chance of passage, Rep. Gekas thought it would be an intelligent rallying tool and talked it up during his campaign. Instead, Gekas was retired after seventeen years of service by Representative Tim Holden (D-6th), who was initially viewed as having little chance of besting Gekas, given the make-up of the district for which they were fighting. (Pennsylvania lost two seats in Congress after the 2000 Census, explaining why the two incumbent Congressmen were squaring off against each other.)

Will Republicans Take The Ball And Run With It, Or Run The Other Way?

In the election of 2002, Republicans made significant inroads with immigrant voters when they took positions viewed favorably by this growing portion of the electorate. Republicans are still divided on immigration, however. Now that the party has control of Congress and the administration, will they use their control to advance proposals that appeal to this growing constituency, or will they fall into a protectionist posture preparing for elections in 2004?

With this portion of the electorate growing, the Republican party will have to continue improving its share of the immigrant vote. Democrats will have to work harder than ever to prove that they deserve the loyalty of this group. A 2002 survey of Latinos in the U.S. indicated that the battle for party affiliation has an uncertain outcome. While registered Latino voters more strongly identify as Democrats, affiliation becomes less strong among unregistered Latino citizens—where the percentage who self-identify as independents beat out both parties—and less strong still among Latino future citizens—where identification as independent was about the same as the percentage who identified with both parties combined. Much more than parties, Latinos do care about immigration, with 85%, for example, favoring the legalization of undocumented workers. For both parties, Election 2002 showed that being pro-immigrant is not an election loser, and can in fact help win elections at all levels.

Arguably the biggest issue on the table is comprehensive immigration reform: legalizing the current undocumented population, reducing backlogs that keep families separated, and opening up legal channels for people to come here to work in the future. Early on, President Bush distinguished himself on this issue by engaging in high-profile discussions with Mexican President Vicente Fox. Their goal was to work together on a migration accord that would reduce border deaths and align immigrant admissions with market forces. A high-level working group was named to conduct the negotiations for both sides, but this process was put on hold after September 11, 2001.

This issue is of paramount importance to immigrants with family members who have been kept out of the country or pushed underground due to our outdated laws. It is also of vital importance to the

undocumented workforce, which is waiting for its contributions to be recognized by a country that benefits so much from its labor. If a Republican-controlled Congress and Administration can accomplish comprehensive immigration reform along the lines outlined above, the Republican Party will be in a position to take credit for this big win. If Republicans drop the ball on this issue—an issue which they have already put on the table—Democrats will be in a position to step forward and ask this constituency to give them a chance. This is a situation in which the best policy is also the best politics, for both political parties. Immigrant voters are watching to see how both parties handle the issue in the coming months.

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