

Most Latinos didn't buy GOP message

Although we will need to wait a little longer to know the outcome of the presidential election, exit polls conducted by the Willie Velasquez Research Institute among Latino voters in California and Texas precincts confirm one thing: Latino voters steadfastly rejected the Republican message of "compassionate conservatism."

Indeed, election night exit polls revealed that 81 percent of Latino voters in California supported the Gore-Lieberman ticket, while only 19 percent backed the Bush-Cheney team.

In Texas, Latino voters also strongly rejected the Bush strategy. An impressive 68 percent supported Al Gore, while only 32 percent went for George W. Bush.

So what went wrong with the Republican strategy?

Considerable time and money were devoted to appealing to the Latino voter — an investment that was unparalleled by previous Republican campaigns.

But rather than take Latino voters seriously and address the specific issues that concerned them, GOP strategists tried the old snake oil formula and expected it would make Latino voters fall in love with Mr. Bush and forget that he was a Republican.

The snake oil formula included such things as the showcasing of George P. Bush, the governor's Latino nephew, which apparently had more significance to the Bush family than to Latino voters.

Various Spanish-language commercials presented the governor as a likable man, concerned about family values and just the type of home boy with whom you would like to have a beer

Then, there were the various photo ops with Hispanic children and Mexican President-elect Vicente Fox and the governor's well-known opposition to English-only legislation.

But in the meantime, the Bush Latino campaign was suffering significant damage along several fronts.

Democrats were successful, for example, in describing how the Bush legacy earned Texas embarrassing recognition for environmental pollution, weak hate-crime and gun-control legislation, significant teacher shortages and a misguided investment of state dollars in a testing system that is admired primarily by politicians while hated by teachers and students.

Indeed, the best-designed standardized test has limited value in an educational system that lacks a standardized learning environment — where low-income minority youths are more likely to have teachers without the required certifications, frequent shortages of books and materials, parents who lack the basic skills and time to help with homework, and school counselors with too many students to be effective.

Latinos, in particular, knew that Mr. Bush and his fellow Republicans didn't support affirmative action, showed weak support for bilingual education and aggressively fought proposed immigration legislation that would help to unite Latino families.

Also, Latinos were aware of the role that Republicans Phil Gramm and Kay Bailey Hutchison played in blocking the appointment of highly qualified Latinos to key court positions.

And few Latinos appreciated the unyielding character assassination of President Clinton and Mr. Gore, two political figures that Latinos view with great affection.

Unquestionably, the unprecedented attention devoted to Latino voters by both parties was instrumental in assuring a record Latino voter turnout. And while few major news networks reported on the political preferences and issues that were important to Latinos in this presidential campaign, organizations like KERA should be commended for initiating a national public opinion poll of Latinos and producing a series of TV programs on Latino voting issues, which reinforced the message to Latino voters that their vote does count. More important, those programs served to educate Latino voters about the key issues that differentiated the presidential candidates.

In planning for the next presidential campaign, political strategists would be wise to do a little more homework on the Latino electorate.

Indeed, the Latino election results clearly demonstrated that the traditional snake oil strategies definitely have lost their charm.

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