

## VIEWPOINTS

# The elusive Hispanic electorate



**EDWARD RINCON**

One has to wonder what guides the thinking of today's campaign managers as they attempt to influence the voting behavior of the emerging Hispanic population.

In his recent bid for Texas governor, Clayton Williams used several tactics to attract Hispanic voters, including speaking Spanish, dancing to mariachi music, wearing a sombrero and putting the bulk of the media effort into Spanish-language media. The results? Ann Richards received almost 80 percent of the Texas Hispanic vote, as estimated from exit polls by the Southwest Voter Research Institute. Where did Clayton Williams' campaign go wrong?

First, Clayton Williams should not have relied so heavily on a Spanish-language campaign to influence Hispanic voters. Indeed, polls of Hispanic voters by Southwest Voter Research Institute confirm that Texas Hispanics receive the majority of their political information from English media, not Spanish media. Moreover, the Spanish-language audience includes a disproportionate number of Hispanics who are recent immigrants, relatively less educated and non-citizens — an audience that has the least likelihood of voting in elections.

Second, the more likely Hispanic voter, who happens to also be more educated, is not likely to appreciate superficial attempts — such as speaking Spanish, wearing a sombrero and dancing to mariachi music — to get his or her vote. Such tactics, especially from non-Hispanic candidates, hardly address the issues facing Hispanic communities today.

Being Hispanic is no guarantee for getting the Hispanic vote. While current discussions regarding redistricting alternatives for Dallas have concentrated on the creation of two "safe" districts for Hispanics, it will take considerably more than population counts to get a Hispanic elected in any district. The proportion of non-citizens (12 to 15 percent) and the youthful age of Hispanics work against their overall voting strength.

Equally important, however, is the relative lack of awareness of Dallas' Hispanic leaders. In a recent survey of Dallas County Hispanics by Rincon & Associates, respondents were asked to indicate which Hispanic individual would best represent their needs and concerns on the Dallas City Council. Surprisingly, 77 percent responded that they did not know, while Domingo Garcia and Adelfa Callejo were mentioned more often than others (9.3 percent and 4.0 percent, respectively).

This leadership vacuum among Hispanics probably stems from the fact that the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area was the second-fastest-growing metropolitan statistical area in the U.S. over the past decade. There are many recent Hispanic residents in Dallas who simply are not familiar with the Hispanic and non-Hispanic leadership, nor the issues that they represent. Also, few Hispanics have historically occupied highly visible offices in Dallas city government.

As efforts to attract the Hispanic voters intensify, campaign managers and candidates would be wise to exercise a little more common sense in their media strategies. Both English and Spanish-language media should always be employed to reach Hispanics with culturally sensitive messages that focus on issues significant to Hispanics.

Hispanic candidates cannot assume that their surnames, ethnicity or "safe" districts will get them elected without an intensive campaign to ensure that Hispanic voters will recognize their names clearly and the issues they support.

And last, the common perception that Hispanic voters are apathetic should be laid to rest. Indeed, voter turnout among Hispanics in South Texas counties approaches 80 percent. The same levels could be achieved in Dallas through a combination of aggressive registration drives, culturally sensitive advertising in English and Spanish-language media, and candidates who can get the Hispanic voter excited about the election issues. Candidates and their managers who recognize these issues and strategize accordingly will go a long way to getting support from the Hispanic voter.

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