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Latinos organize to flex political muscle

BY BILL LAMBRECHT
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WASHINGTON - After the 2004 presidential election, Mickey Ibarra, an ex-Clinton White House aide and strategist, convened 50 Hispanic Democratic leaders in hopes of answering this question: "What in the world just happened to us?"

What had happened was a startling electoral shift in which Republicans captured more than 40 percent of the Latino vote in the presidential election, doubling the GOP share of just eight years earlier.

By appealing aggressively to immigrants on social and economic issues, Republicans had shattered Democratic dominance of the nation's fastest-growing population and put the building blocks in place for a powerful GOP coalition in the 21st century.

But with deep fissures in the party over immigration and the dramatic Latino mobilizations across the country in recent weeks, the Republican electoral strategy seems threatened.

A Senate stalemate and hard-edged, House-passed legislation seeking to deport illegal immigrants and tighten border security were the main focus recently by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators.

But the message from Los Angeles to the National Mall in Washington was broader: America's new immigrants intend to flex political muscle that matches their burgeoning numbers.

"Today, we mobilize. Tomorrow, we vote," said Ibarra, a consultant who recently co-founded the Hispanic Strategy Center in Washington.

Ibarra referred to the street protests as "a watershed event" in American politics, one that presents peril for Republicans hoping to build on their 2004 success. But he said Democrats are at risk, too.

"The Democrats have to decide now whether they want a campaign issue or they want a solution. The Latino community will be watching, and they know the difference," he said.

But do those street protests translate to votes? Ibarra observed that roughly one-third of the immigrants are too young to vote, one-third are ineligible because they lack citizenship and of the remaining third, only half or so vote.

In protests last week, Hispanic leaders vowed to conduct voter registration drives to increase political power in the short term. In the long term, that power is virtually assured, according to projections showing that the Hispanic electorate in the United States will more than double to 20 million by the 2020 presidential election.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., was in the midst of one of the protests, when upwards of 100,000 people gathered in Chicago last month, and it took him 20 minutes to walk one block to the dais in Federal Plaza.

"I've never seen a larger crowd in my life. I was stunned. It's the kind of thing you don't find in America," he said.

Durbin disputed Ibarra's assertion that Democrats, in addition to Republicans, are jeopardized by anger over the congressional impasse.

On the eve of the Easter recess, a fragile bipartisan compromise at rewriting immigration proposals collapsed in the Senate after Democrats refused to permit votes on amendments proposed by conservative Republicans, including some limiting the number of undocumented immigrants who could be eligible for citizenship.

Durbin, the Senate's second-ranking Democrat, said that since the protests, he sees increasing momentum to bring the legislation back to the floor. President George W. Bush could play a pivotal role in unifying the GOP, he said.

"The Democrats are identified with the compromise plan," Durbin said. "It's the Republicans who are struggling with it. I want to see a bill passed, and I don't think we give up any ground as a party by inviting Republicans to join us."

Hispanic leaders said that if Congress fails to act, the impression left with voters would be the anti-immigrant sentiments in the legislation that passed the Republican-controlled House.

They contend that the fallout could be felt as early as the congressional elections in November, in which Democrats are expected to gain seats.

Several GOP strategists disagreed, saying proposals to crack down on illegal immigration play well in many parts of the country.

Indeed, recent polls reflect ambivalence on immigration issues among voters just beginning to think seriously about government policies they might prefer.

A recent Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 75 percent of Americans believe that too little is being done to stop illegal immigration. But in the same poll, 60 percent said people in this country illegally should have a way to become legal and get citizenship.

Neil Newhouse, a strategist advising many GOP candidates this fall, acknowledged that his party has a mixed message on immigration. But that's not necessarily bad, he said.

"Because there's not one unified Republican message on immigration issues, it allows Republican candidates across the country to shape their own," he said. "This issue has gone from a back-burner issue to leading the nightly news. It's taken off as a dramatic issue, and voters have concerns."

The size of the crowds and the emotions flowing suggest unpredictability.

James Gimpel, a University of Maryland political scientist who teaches courses on immigration politics, said immigration hasn't been a major issue in elections outside of regions with heavy Hispanic populations.

"But this year, that could change, and all the politicians are at home right now trying to figure out how," he said.

The immigration debate might or might not have an effect on congressional elections this year, but presidential aspirants and strategists are looking ahead to 2008.

Arizona Sen. John McCain, a leading GOP hopeful, has staked out the position of reformer by co-authoring the Senate compromise along with Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.

McCain's efforts have drawn scorn from groups favoring immigration restrictions. McCain remarked to a Michigan crowd that he would pay any among them \$50 an hour to pick lettuce for a season in Arizona, making the point that immigrants take jobs many Americans refuse.

Afterward, ProjectUSA, an East Coast group formed to combat illegal immigration, began taking mock applications on its Web site for McCain & Co. Lettuce-Picking.

Meanwhile, Senate President Bill Frist, R-Tenn., also a prospective presidential contender, has criticized provisions that would allow undocumented workers to seek U.S. citizenship without traveling a hard road that includes paying fines.

Still another potential GOP presidential hopeful, Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo, has become the leader in Congress of those favoring tougher

immigration rules and building a security barrier along the border with Mexico.

Colorado is among the "Cactus Corridor" states where Democrats see themselves profiting over the Republicans' conflicting views. More than 100,000 Latinos have moved to Colorado this decade, characteristic of the migration that has changed the electorate in California and across the Southwest.

As the last two presidential elections proved, the outcome can be decided by a single state, and Democratic strategists believe that lasting impressions being formed by new Hispanic voters could shape elections for years.

Simon Rosenberg is president of the Washington-based New Democratic Network, a group that has been a pioneer in trying to reach immigrant voters with Spanish-language political ads.

"If all that stands at the end of the year is the House bill that would arrest, deport and brand undocumented people as felons, Republicans are risking a permanent generational problem with millions of Hispanics," he said.