



HE'S TAKING NAMES

Antonio González has a single goal: to register enough voters for a record Latino turnout in November's presidential election

The key to this fall's pivotal election may rest inside a nondescript two-story building just east of downtown. That's the California office of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, a national, nonpartisan voters-rights group founded in 1974. The organization is credited with a dramatic rise in both Latino voter participation and in the number of elected Latino officials.

This year, the group is launching an unprecedented registration campaign for the November general election. With Latinos having played a huge role in the California primary and in other states with large Latino populations, their impact on the election is being closely followed by the media and political observers. It's no surprise, then, the project's president, Antonio González, was named one of *Time* magazine's 25 most influential Hispanics in America in 2005.

On the morning after the California primary, in which Latinos represented 30 percent of all Democratic voters and 13 percent of Republicans casting ballots, the voluble González graciously turned off his incessantly ringing cell phone and sat down for a conversation with *Ciudad* Editor-in-Chief Oscar Garza.

Starting with California and including other heavily Latino states, has the vote gone the way you expected?

Pretty much. It's interesting how each cycle brings this new iteration of attention to Latinos. Back in the day, we didn't get any national attention at all.

The result here was pretty straightforward. There's a lot of hype out there

now. The story was, Hillary Clinton courted the Latino vote, and she got it. But once Barack Obama started competing for it, he got a piece as well. Even though she held her 60-plus points she [had been] headed for 80 points. So she can say "Latinos delivered the election for me." And he can say, "Once Latinos know me, they'll support me."

For me, what was important is you had pretty good participation from Latinos, which is not normally the case in a primary election. You had an investment in the Latino vote from campaigns. You had a lot of Latino leadership getting engaged—elected officials, community leaders. And you had increasing attention paid to issues that we care about—immigration, driver's licenses, and the war. And maybe the caper of it all is that the front-runners on the Democratic side and the front-runner on the Republican side are all saying they're pro-immigrant. And, one would not have expected that, particularly on the Republican side.

Why do Latinos seem particularly engaged this year in the primary process?

It's because they have a chance. In the previous presidential cycles the Latino-influenced states were not front and center in the process. That isn't a



In California's February 5 presidential primary, Latinos accounted for 30 percent of all Democratic voters. Left and opposite page: Scenes from a polling place in Boyle Heights; below: Hillary Clinton won the Latino vote in California, but Barack Obama made inroads in subsequent primaries.



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guarantee of influence and attention, but Latino leadership in all of the camps took advantage of the opportunity.

And, you know, the media had a new toy. One of the hilarious parts about this campaign is what I call the "baboso factor," which is the number of dumb, white reporters who all of a sudden crown themselves experts in the Latino vote and just say *babosadas*. They have no idea what they're talking about, but they're experts, expounding on the nuances and modalities of the Latino vote. They're utterly and completely wrong, but they got the camera, they got the bright lights, and now there are a hundred Latino vote experts. It's hilarious.

And it's only going to get worse between now and November.

Yeah, you know, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

There's been a lot of attention paid to whether Obama can count on support from the Latino community.

And the first thing people talk about is the supposed latent racism among Mexican-Americans toward blacks. Why does it still continue to be forwarded as a reason he's not getting more Latino support?

This story was a plant from Sergio Bendixen, Clinton's Latino-vote pollster, who came out with a statement: "The Hispanic voter—and I want to say this very carefully—has not shown a lot of willingness or affinity to support black candidates." It started a firestorm and coincided with this [strategy], *Let's blacken, let's Jesse Jackson-ify Barack Obama*, to the shame of the Clinton campaign, with Bill Clinton front and center.

Any honest look at the records in any of the elections where you have black members of Congress, or black mayors, or black candidates for a statewide office, where there are Latino voters, [it] shows—with very few exceptions—heavy Latino support for them. Not that there's not prejudice, because there is. Just like

there's black prejudice against whites and Latinos, and there's white prejudice against blacks and Latinos. It goes all around. This is America, you know, everybody's prejudiced. But it doesn't express itself in elections.

For those Latinos who are supporting Obama, do you sense there is a solidarity among minorities, or is it more, This is my guy because of where he stands on issues?

Hillary and Bill have what we call Clinton Mexicans, a class of Latino leaders whom they created. And then, in the communities, there are people who have been around for 20 years. The Clintons were good to them. So you ask for the vote, you invest in the vote, you have relationships, you get loyalties. Loyalty's a treasured value in the Latino community.

Then you look at the Obama people, and it's basically the Latino left and the immigrant-rights movement. For them, they couldn't excuse Hillary Clinton's vote for the war. There is an understanding of

the Clintons equivocating on issues when push comes to shove. They'll be fine if you're within an issue that's for all workers, or for the good of the nation. But if it's an issue where it's a Latino interest versus some other interests, you're not OK.

The other group that's with Obama are the wannabes. What do you do if you're not a big [wheel] but you want to be one someday? There ain't no seats for you with Clinton. That train is filled. So you say, *Well, I'm gonna look somewhere else to be on the train*. And then as John Edwards and Bill Richardson dropped out, most if not all of their supporters went with Obama.

Let's look forward to November. Regardless of which candidates end up winning the nominations, what's the role of the Latino vote going to be in the general election?

We would like to think of this election as the national iteration of what we experienced in California in 1994, '96, and '98, when we had a big anti-immigrant

backlash. There was a conventional wisdom among Republicans that if you bash immigrants—later it spread to women and blacks—you could win elections with what were called wedge issues. And within the Democrats there was this [attitude of], *Sorry, we can't help you on these issues. You're on your own*. And the Latino response was, *Fine, then we're going to register a million voters. And we're going to vote like crazy, support our friends, and punish our enemies*. And that era is what transitioned California from a swing state to a blue state. And, unfortunately for the Republicans, they paid the price. They made the bed. They decided to do that racial division.

What are your registration goals for November?

We want to drive up the Latino vote to 12 million—it's nearly 10 million now—the biggest increase ever. We're looking at tripling to quintupling our production—300,000 to 500,000 new voters. We're raising money and setting up programs.

Are there new registration initiatives this time out?

We're drilling down more in churches because of immigration. We're drilling down more in schools because of youth [issues]. We're drilling down more with Latino leadership, Latino-owned businesses, and Latino organizations. It's a big endeavor. We're looking at a 15–20 state game and a \$10 million operation.

Let's talk about immigration. If it had not been for September 11, there might be a new immigration policy already in place. How is the World Trade Center attack still affecting that debate, especially now that there are Mexican immigrants in every part of the country?

Well, September 11 set us back 10 years. I think that's a bottom-line calculation. It's not logical. Legal, permanent-resident Arabs from an allied country enter America through our border with Canada and strike a terrorist act. What's the big domestic [CONTINUED ON PAGE 76]

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response? Build walls on the border with Mexico to keep out hungry Mexican workers. This has never been a logical response in America. So when the country gets scared and angry, the worst comes out. And we're living it.

You go to Maricopa County, Arizona, and it's a police state. If you're a Mexican walking in the wrong neighborhood, you will be picked up and arrested. Later they figure out [you're legal]. You want to sue? Fine, you won't win. You complain, and your business will get raided by immigration. You're an elected official and you challenge them, the sheriff will open an investigation and start spying on you and tapping your phones.

We have police states within America. It's like fiction, but it's true.

George W. Bush got more Latino votes than any Republican presidential nominee ever before. Why wouldn't his party figure out some way to maintain if not build on that?

I think John McCain would, but he's just a prisoner of what his party and the White House have done for the last eight years. Absent major policy initiatives that in essence [would] mean the Republican party is moving to the center, you can't get long-lasting support among the Hispanic community. Because we're not on the right. Some of us are in the center, some of us are center left, a few of us are on the center right.

We're a working-class constituency with an immigrant twist. That's not going to change. When Bush couldn't deliver, his right took advantage and said, *Your thesis is dead*. They look at the numbers and say, *We might've gotten [as much as] 45 percent of Latino voters in '04, now we're down to 19 percent. Boss, you were wrong. So, ya estuvo.*

And how about on the Democrat side? Whether it's Obama or Clinton, what's the immigration debate going to be? There is this notion that all Latinos think the same about immigration, but that's not true.

Well, when you have 50 million

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people, you can't be homogeneous. That being said, you can put Latinos' opinion on immigration reform in a pretty clear box. It's pretty distinct from non-Latino thinking—it is for inclusion, for legalization, for working on some kind of deal with Mexico, and against stupid, border-wall myths. It's not pro-immigration, but a pro-immigrant perspective.

The general campaign will be important because what you want is for the Obama position to be embraced by Clinton, which is, *We're going to do immigration reform in the first year, and it's going to be generous legalization*. Things like driver's licenses are irrelevant. Immigrants shouldn't be scapegoated. We're not there yet, but we're significantly closer than we were.

What's expected from young voters? One of your focuses is registering high school students who will be of voting age by November, and also college students. Is that going to be a big factor in the elections?

This may be a sea change, one of those elections where you have a confluence of forces, an openness. You have a lot of fresh ideas getting into the mix, new constituencies. The youth [interest] appears to be like what we saw in 1992 with Bill Clinton's first election, where it was a driving force.

The issues are pretty compelling. The collapse in home mortgages, the ongoing war, immigration reform, economic uncertainty—it makes for a pretty powerful cocktail, a change cocktail. And when you have that, it generally means high turnout. It generally means more big idea campaigns. And there are pretty big differences between the campaigns, between the parties. Especially with McCain's long-term commitment to the war in the Middle East, that's a pretty big deal.

What's going to be the story the morning after the general elections regarding Latino voters?

I don't think there is any doubt that you'll have a record-breaking Latino turnout. We're headed toward a massive increase in registration and voting. I can't tell you what the partisanship of it will be because so many things can change over the [campaign]. I think you'll see a *chile verde* flavor getting onto the menu of both campaigns.

And what does this mean for Latino empowerment?

Presidential elections, for Latinos, are a time for definition. We get big leaps in our votes, and you get a new chunk of leadership emerging and new sectors energized. It looks like this election it's going to be young people. And that's a good thing. It's a revitalizing thing.

If we play our cards right, we may be able to move our agenda forward in Washington in a way that we haven't for 20 years. And that can have ripple effects beyond what any of us think. I would look to what the 1986 amnesty did for our community. [The Immigration Reform and Control Act was passed in an effort to secure the border, granting legal status to 2.7 million undocumented immigrants who had been residing in the United States since before 1982.] There were tremendous implications, all positive, in the Latino community that we felt for 15 years.

We could be approaching that type of moment. I don't know if it will be around immigration reform or a more populist economic policy, or universal health care, or a repositioning of America's place in the world toward being more of a good neighbor and less of a cop. But all those things have enormous implications for us and for generations to come. ■