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FRUSTRATED HISPANICS ARE DOWN ON THIS YEAR'S MIDTERMS

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Hispanic voters appear likely to sit out this year's midterm election in even larger numbers than usual, potentially depriving Democrats of a voting bloc that could make the difference in several tight races.

Many Latinos are angry that efforts to overhaul federal immigration policy are stalled in the Republican-led House, voters and advocates say. But they also are disappointed that President Barack Obama put off any executive action on the issue, including a potential ratcheting back of deportations, until after the election.

That disenchantment with both parties would cost Democrats more, because Hispanics vote Democratic by a wide margin. Some activists are calling on Hispanics to boycott the balloting.

In addition, the national parties and many congressional and gubernatorial candidates haven't mounted the sort of robust Latino-outreach efforts common in presidential-election years. A growing number of Republican-backed state laws requiring potential voters to present identification for a ballot could further depress Hispanic turnout, advocates say.

"There are a lot of headwinds facing the Latino vote right now," said Cristóbal Alex, president of the Latino Victory Project, which seeks to nurture Hispanic leaders and donors.

Latino turnout rates typically trail those of other groups, especially in midterm years. In 2010, 31% of eligible Hispanics cast ballots, compared with nearly 49% of whites, according to a Pew Research Center analysis.

But largely because of population gains, the absolute number of Hispanic voters has steadily increased. The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials projected earlier this year that 7.8 million Hispanics would vote this year, up from 6.6 million in 2010.

Low Hispanic turnout would hurt Democratic senators in states such as Colorado and North Carolina with significant Latino populations, imperiling the party's control of the chamber. It would also damage Democratic candidates for governor in states like Florida and Georgia. According to exit polls, Mr. Obama won 71% of the Hispanic vote in 2012, and in 2010, 60% of Hispanics supported Democrats in House races.

Inaction on an immigration fix "is disappointing to Hispanics and rightly so," said Annette Taddeo, the Latina running mate of Florida Democratic gubernatorial candidate Charlie Crist. But "the best way to get [lawmakers] to do their job is to show our strength and vote in large numbers."

Advocacy groups like the National Council of La Raza are making that pitch: "to see the act of voting as a way of standing with the community and holding people accountable," said Clarissa Martinez-De-Castro, the group's deputy vice president.

The Democratic National Committee recently launched a national campaign of Spanish-language radio ads, part of a seven-figure effort, urging Latinos to prove doubters wrong and head to the polls. "It's time to rise up," the narrator says. "We can't stay home."

Republicans, for their part, are trying to blame Mr. Obama for inaction on immigration and are making an economic pitch to Hispanics. The Republican National Committee now has staff in 10 states dedicated to helping campaigns target and mobilize Latino supporters, deputy political director Jennifer Sevilla Korn said.

But advocacy groups say Hispanics have largely written off the Republican Party, thanks to campaign rhetoric by many candidates that is seen as anti-immigrant and the GOP's role in blocking immigration legislation. Still, if voters stay home, Democrats won't benefit, said Matt Barreto, principal at polling firm Latino Decisions. A June survey by his firm found that if the president failed to take some kind of executive action on immigration, 54% of Hispanic registered voters would be less enthusiastic about going to the polls and 57% would be less likely to back Democratic candidates.

Mr. Obama's approval ratings among Hispanics fell to 52% in August, from 75% in December 2012, according to Gallup. A Wall Street Journal/NBC News/Telemundo poll in early September, largely conducted just before Mr. Obama delayed action on deportations, found only 11% of Latino registered voters felt "very positive" about the GOP, while 13% felt that about the Democratic Party.

After Democratic senators from Arkansas, Louisiana, New Hampshire and North Carolina voted to back an unsuccessful Republican effort to limit Mr. Obama's authority to take executive action on immigration, the Latino organization Presente Action, which says it has 300,000 members, exhorted Latinos not to cast ballots in those Senate races.

"It's fundamentally important that we start taking to task those elected officials that don't adequately represent us," said Arturo Carmona, executive director of the group.

Canvassers with voter-registration groups say frustration among Hispanics has made it harder to sign up new voters. "They're telling us left and right that they're disappointed the president didn't act on immigration," said Leo Murrieta, national field director for Mi Familia Vota. "But even more, that the Republican House didn't do anything."

Though Latino outreach by campaigns overall is anemic, some are making a concerted effort, potentially boosting turnout in certain states. In the Florida governor's race, both leading candidates chose Hispanics as running mates, hired staff specializing in Latino outreach and regularly visit Hispanic-themed events. In the Colorado Senate contest, a quarter of Democrat Mark Udall's turnout targets are Latino, and he has run Spanish-language TV ads and deployed Hispanic surrogates, said communications director Chris Harris.

Advocacy groups also are pushing to turn out Latinos. In Florida, the National Council of La Raza is focusing on Hispanic voters who cast ballots in presidential elections, but not midterm ones. In that state, Latinos make up 14% of registered voters, up one percentage point from four years ago.

One recent morning, NCLR canvasser Ana Iris Melendez knocked on doors in a heavily Hispanic neighborhood in Miami, offering to help voters sign up to receive absentee ballots.

Many seemed to not be paying attention to this election and voiced complaints ranging from a lack of well-paid jobs to the failure to pass an immigration overhaul.

"We've been let down so many times, I don't know who to support," said Maria Molina, an 84-year-old registered Republican. "I don't know if I'm going to vote."