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JEB BUSH BUILDS HIS CASE FOR HISPANIC SUPPORT

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Jeb Bush spoke in personal terms Wednesday to Hispanic evangelicals about his faith, his family and his hopes for overhauling the immigration system, part of a broader effort to aggressively court Latino voters who deserted the Republican Party in 2012.

His appearance before the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference came a day after Mr. Bush – a not-yet-official contender for the GOP presidential nomination – visited Puerto Rico, where he reiterated support for statehood and displayed his Spanish language skills.

The appearances showed him laying the groundwork for a strategy that could pay dividends both in some GOP primaries and in a general election, reinforcing his supporters' claim that Mr. Bush is the candidate uniquely suited to draw more Hispanic voters to the party.

In remarks delivered partly in Spanish, Mr. Bush told the evangelical group the U.S. immigration system is broken and must be fixed. He also said millions of undocumented workers should have the chance to earn legal status. "This country does not do well when people lurk in the shadows," he said.

He touted his record as Florida governor of improving Hispanic student performance. He spoke of his love for his wife, Columba, who is from Mexico. And he recounted his conversion 20 years ago to Catholicism, the dominant religion among Hispanics.

"I discovered in Christ the grace to do the Lord's work," Mr. Bush said. "Today in America, it is important to respect and to protect Christians acting on their faith, not just talking about their faith."

Evident in Mr. Bush's upbeat, aspirational message were echoes of his brother, former President George W. Bush, who also built a strong connection with Latinos and evangelicals.

Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an immigration advocacy organization, said Jeb Bush's early Latino outreach differentiates him from other candidates and presents him as both inclusive but still very conservative. "The Bush family has always seen around the political corner," he said. "This is another example."

Mr. Bush's appearances this week before Latino audiences sparked derision from Democrats, with the liberal group Emily's List suggesting that he had put on his "Hispanic hat" to address the evangelical conference.

"It's going to take a lot more than speeches and empty rhetoric to convince Latino voters that he is on our side," said a statement from Emily's List.

Mr. Bush is running in a year that the GOP field features two candidates of Cuban heritage – Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas – who also hold promise of drawing Latinos to the party. Mr. Cruz on Wednesday appeared in Washington before the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, where he said his conservative economic policies would attract Hispanic voters.

Mr. Cruz said that in his 2012 Senate race he drew strong support from Hispanic voters – especially among small-business owners and their families. “That points to the avenue for people who believe in free enterprise to do exceptionally well in the Hispanic community,” he said.

The effort by Mr. Bush and other 2016 GOP candidates to woo Hispanics comes after the party’s poor showing among those voters in 2012, when Mitt Romney garnered only 27% of the Hispanic vote. That was down from the GOP high-water mark in 2004, when George W. Bush won a second term with 44% of the Hispanic vote.

In Houston, Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, warned that if Republicans don’t embrace immigration changes, they will discard a constituency – Hispanic evangelicals – that shares many values with the GOP. “Republicans must cross the Jordan of immigration reform to step into the promised land of the Hispanic faith electorate,” he said. “They must.”

While Mr. Rodriguez had tough words for GOP immigration hard-liners, he called Mr. Bush a “blessing for our nation,” saying that he not only speaks Spanish, but he speaks the language of faith and family.

Mr. Cruz, by contrast, said Mr. Romney did poorly among Hispanic voters not because of his immigration policy but because Hispanics didn’t believe he understood people like them. Efforts to build GOP support among Hispanics will have little impact in the earliest primary states, where there are relatively few Hispanic voters, especially among Republicans. In Iowa and New Hampshire, only 2% of registered voters were Hispanic in 2012, according to census data.

In Florida, Hispanic voters make up a significant share of the GOP primary electorate, said Whit Ayres, a GOP pollster and author of a new book, “2016 and Beyond: How Republicans Can Elect a President in the New America.” Exit polls in 2012 showed about 13% of people who cast GOP primary ballots were Hispanic, including about 8% of Cuban heritage.

“Until we get more Hispanics to say they are Republicans, their importance is primarily in the general election,” said Mr. Ayres, who is advising Mr. Rubio’s campaign.