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## OPINION: THE GOP'S LATINO OPPORTUNITY

By Leslie Sanchez  
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In winning re-election, President Obama carried nearly all the same demographic groups as in 2008, but by smaller margins. The major exception: Hispanics, America's fastest-growing bloc. Having given Mr. Obama 67 percent of their votes in 2008, they gave him 71 percent this time.

This has alarmed Republicans. Mr. Obama had offered Hispanics little more than a broken promise to reform immigration in his first term, yet he scored the largest victory among them since Gerald Ford visited Texas in 1976 and tried to eat a tamale without removing its husk.

Mitt Romney's margin of defeat among Hispanics in Nevada (47 points) and Colorado (52 points) made those states unwinnable. In Florida, where Republican winners routinely carry the Hispanic vote, he lost it by 21 points. Mr. Romney carried Arizona but lost Hispanic voters there by an astonishing 55 points. In 2004, George W. Bush lost Arizona Hispanics by only 13 points.

Republicans – even outspoken ones like talk-radio and Fox News host Sean Hannity – are now claiming to have changed their views on immigration. Columnist Charles Krauthammer was frank with his prescription: “Yes, amnesty. Use the word. . . . The other party thinks it owns the demographic future – counter that in one stroke by fixing the Latino problem.”

Such open-mindedness is laudable and probably necessary, but the immigration issue is no silver bullet. And Mr. Krauthammer's phrase – “the Latino problem” – helps illustrate the real problem. For too long, Republicans have been content to cram Hispanics into gerrymandered Democratic districts and forget about them. Some GOP candidates consciously avoid targeting Hispanics too aggressively, lest they actually turn out to vote.

In 1983, Republican pollster Lance Tarrance wrote a private memo urging the Republican National Committee to “redouble our efforts to attract the Mexican-American populations. We need to ‘double our budget’ in this area if we stand any chance for the future.” This warning went unheeded.

In 1999, when I worked in the RNC press shop, Chairman Jim Nicholson told me the GOP deserved an “F” for its outreach efforts to date. Republican presidential contender Bob Dole had won just 21 percent of Hispanics in 1996. A Univision survey from 1998 had shown that Hispanics overwhelmingly believed the Republican Party either “ignores me” (41 percent) or “takes me for granted” (22 percent). This left plenty of low-hanging fruit.

Mr. Nicholson invested heavily in outreach, hiring a brain trust of Latino marketers and political strategists. We surveyed which Hispanic populations – by region, age, sex, acculturation and ethnicity – would be most receptive to our message. We trained and deployed more than 40 surrogates with various levels of proficiency in Spanish and expertise in key issues. We customized everything. Surrogates of different Hispanic ethnic

backgrounds spoke to different communities in different states, and ads varied state to state and community to community.

In tandem with then-Gov. George W. Bush's popularity among Hispanics (he was, remember, a Spanish-speaking presidential candidate from a border state), our efforts helped Republicans more than double their share of the Hispanic vote over the next two presidential cycles, reaching 44 percent in 2004.

The winning Republican message for Hispanic voters was similar to what the party would have said to any group with a strong work ethic, a healthy distrust of government (often acquired from experience in home countries), traditional views on family and social issues, and an affinity for entrepreneurship. The Census revealed in 2010 that Hispanics were creating new small businesses at 2.5 times the rate of the general population.

Yes, Hispanics tend to vote Democratic, but they have far more in common with people who already vote Republican. This makes them a very persuadable constituency, but only for politicians who speak to them – and listen.

Republicans seeking good news might calculate that Mr. Obama has hit the modern Democratic ceiling with the Hispanic vote; RNC research in 2000 suggested the GOP could count on nearly 30 percent Hispanic support nationwide, absent a strong third-party showing. But as the Hispanic population grows in crucial states, Republicans must improve their margins just to remain competitive. That work begins when they recognize they have a "Latino opportunity" instead of a "Latino problem."

*Ms. Sanchez, author of "Los Republicanos: Why Hispanics and Republicans Need Each Other" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), was director of the White House Initiative on Hispanic Education (2001-03).*