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G.O.P. STRATEGY FOR HISPANIC VOTERS: IT'S THE ECONOMY

By Kirk Johnson
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PUEBLO, Colo. – For many years, and multiple election cycles, Republicans talked about the growing Hispanic vote in America like moonstruck, misunderstood boys at a high school dance. They could not connect, despite believing that they shared much in common, especially with socially conservative, religious Hispanic voters who would one day realize how charming Republicans could be.

Now, with the Hispanic vote poised to become a deciding factor in several crucial swing states, Republican leaders think they have found a fresh approach – an appeal to Hispanics' growing distress over the sluggish economic recovery – and they are trying to woo people like Arnold L. Gallegos.

Mr. Gallegos has been a committed Democrat all his life, born and raised in this Southwest-tinged city two hours south of Denver. But as a struggling small-business owner, he said his politics are wavering.

"I don't know what to think anymore," said Mr. Gallegos, 66, sitting in the one-room office of his company, a shuttle van service with six part-time employees.

George W. Bush won re-election in 2004 with 44 percent of the Hispanic vote, appreciably more than Republican candidates had drawn before. In 2008, President Obama won with the help of 67 percent of the Hispanic vote, which in 2010 was also credited with helping to save the Nevada seat of the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, against a spirited Tea Party opponent.

This year, it is expected to be even more important, especially as the Hispanic populations have risen substantially in several swing states – places like Colorado and Nevada, where generations of political calculus are being transformed by this growing demographic group that is generally aligned with the Democrats.

The big question that could ripple through the swing-state belt is how strongly that Democratic alignment will hold this time – and for the Republicans, whether the tough anti-immigrant talk that has often laced through this year's presidential primaries will create headwinds among Hispanic voters that will be tough to counter. Mr. Obama's support last time was less than some other Democratic presidential candidates received: President Bill Clinton in 1996 and Michael S. Dukakis in 1988 both had slightly stronger numbers.

"If it's only 60 percent, then states such as Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico are going to be in play; if it's 80 percent, he will probably win those states," said John J. Pitney Jr., a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College in California. "A lot of it is going to depend on the state of the economy."

Mr. Gallegos's shuttle service, which he founded a decade ago and financed with a mortgage on his house, survived the Great Recession. But if economic recovery is lifting all boats –

and Democratic hopes in the White House – Mr. Gallegos has not seen it. Rising costs over the last two years, especially for fuel in recent months, he said, are now shaking things to their foundation.

He voted for Mr. Obama – who visited this city of 106,000 people three times in 2008 – but the best he can say about a vote this year to give the president four more years is a lukewarm “probably.”

“Something has got to get better, and it’s got to happen fast because I’m about at the end,” Mr. Gallegos said.

Not even the most optimistic Republican is expecting a majority of Colorado’s Hispanic vote to swing suddenly to the red side of the ballot in November. The historic links, especially strong in this blue-collar industrial city of steel-making and railroads, are still there. Statewide, Mr. Obama got 61 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2008, according to exit polls. Senator Michael Bennet, a Democrat narrowly elected in 2010, credited a strong showing in Hispanic Colorado with part of his margin of victory.

Democrats also have a prominent spokesman and symbol in Lt. Gov. Joseph A. Garcia, who was president of Colorado State University in Pueblo before his election in 2010 alongside Gov. John Hickenlooper, the former mayor of Denver. Mr. Garcia said in an interview at the Capitol that his goal, beyond helping Mr. Obama and other Democrats this fall, is to get more Hispanics registered to vote and involved in public life, thus amplifying their voices in the state’s long-term political mix. Though they represent only one-fifth of Colorado’s total population, Hispanics account for one-third of the students in kindergarten through 12th grade, he said.

“They’re young, and they’re the future,” he said.

But Republican leaders say they have reasons for optimism, too. Representative John Salazar, a Hispanic Democrat who represented Pueblo and a huge rural stretch to its west – and is the brother of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar – lost his re-election bid in 2010, at least in part, people in both parties say, for failing to close the deal with Hispanic voters. And leaders in both parties are also thinking hard about 2004, when many Hispanic voters in Colorado supported Mr. Bush, helping him win the state with a 53 percent majority.

The economic pain of recession and slow recovery – disproportionately felt in Colorado by lower income and less educated residents, who make up a significant portion of the Hispanic base – is also powerful fuel for an argument that something different might be better, Republicans say.

Here in Pueblo County, the unemployment rate was 10.6 percent in January, according to state figures, up from 9.8 percent in December, and 2.2 percentage points higher than the statewide total. Nearly one-third of foreign-born Hispanics who have been in Colorado less than 20 years live at or below the poverty line, according to the census.

The state’s Republican Party chairman, Ryan Call, who is fluent in Spanish, said the party has focused on two main thrusts: recruiting local Hispanic Republicans to run for office to foster a greater grass-roots sense of party identity, and hammering on the message that the Democrats have not kept their promises to Hispanic voters.

In a state where native-born Hispanics outnumber new immigrants, Mr. Call said the goal was to erode the cultural link that has connected Hispanics to the Democrats, primarily by

focusing on the here and now of jobs and economics. Hispanics make up 20 percent of Colorado's population, compared with 16 percent nationally. Pueblo and its surrounding rural areas, though, are 41 percent Hispanic, the residents often descended from old Southwest families who have been in North America for centuries, since the Spanish Empire days.

"The Democratic Party of their parents and grandparents is no longer the same Democratic Party," Mr. Call said.

As for issues like abortion or same-sex marriage that Republicans here once talked about as an inroad to reaching socially conservative Catholic and Evangelical Christian Hispanic voters, one might need a microscope to find those.

"We will see some of that in discrete and appropriate ways," Mr. Call said.

Democrats say they have a big head start this year compared with 2008 – and against the Republicans, who are still scrapping among themselves. The campaign's national Latino vote director, Adrian Saenz, 41, a Texan who was Mr. Obama's state director in New Mexico in 2008, started his new job in November, organizing field offices and identifying points of focus from North Carolina, where a small, young Hispanic population has surged, to Las Vegas.

Mr. Saenz's expertise is the West; he was a senior aide to members of Congress in Texas and New Mexico, and worked for Senator John Kerry's campaign for president in 2004, also in New Mexico.

Mr. Garcia, the lieutenant governor, said his greatest allies in the effort to engage and energize Hispanic voters were the Republican presidential hopefuls. In debates and speeches on the primary trail, he said, they have competed with one another to talk tough about ethnicity, education and the path to citizenship in ways that do not play well in Hispanic Colorado.

"The Republicans just keep digging a deeper hole," he said.

Or revealing the truth, as people like Fred Brown might put it. Mr. Brown, 48, an auto mechanic in Pueblo, is Hispanic on his mother's side and is nobody's idea of a Democratic stalwart. He hates most of all that Hispanics get pigeonholed. "Anybody but Obama," he said, in identifying his presidential preference.