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GOP POLLSTER: REPUBLICANS NEED TO WORK ON IMMIGRATION MESSAGE

By Peter Nicholas
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A veteran GOP pollster warned that the Republican Party may shut itself out of the White House for the foreseeable future unless it improves its showing among Latinos and puts forward a message that appeals to this fast-growing voting bloc.

Whit Ayres, speaking to reporters Thursday morning, said that Republicans wounded themselves in the presidential race in the way they've discussed the sensitive issue of immigration.

In their bid to win the party's conservative base, Republican presidential candidates have taken a tough stand on illegal immigration.

When he was still in the race, Herman Cain suggested using an electrified fence to tamp down on illegal border crossings. Front-runner Mitt Romney has touted a kind of "self-deportation" scheme, in which people living in the U.S. illegally leave on their own because they can't find work or opportunities that make it worth their while to stay. By contrast, President Barack Obama has pushed a comprehensive immigration overhaul that would provide a path to legal status for the 11 million people living here illegally.

"The immigration debate and the tone of some people in discussing it hurt the Republican Party. I don't think there's any way you can deny that," Mr. Ayres said.

Pointing to demographic changes sweeping the U.S., Mr. Ayres said that Republicans can't afford to lose the Latino vote by 2-1 margins, as was the case in the 2008 presidential contest.

"If we don't do better among Latinos we're not going to be talking about how to get back Florida in the presidential race. We're going to be talking about how not to lose Texas going forward," Mr. Ayres said. "And you can't possibly put the pieces together in the electoral college if you concede California, New York, Florida and Texas to the Democrats."

Not that Republicans can't recover. One hopeful sign is the ascendance of Latino elected officials in important states: Sen. Marco Rubio in Florida ("The Michael Jordan of American politics," Ayres said), and governors Brian Sandoval of Nevada and Susana Martinez of New Mexico, he said.

Mr. Ayres, who is currently unaligned in the Republican presidential primary fight, said that "with the right message and with the right outreach we will do better, in part because we're not stupid. We can count."