

The New York Times

NEW MEXICO OFFERS LOOK AT U.S. ELECTIONS OF THE FUTURE

By Fernanda Santos
September 29, 2012

Julio Maestas, 25, whose ancestors were among the area's original residents, and Anayeli Rivera, 22, whose mother was born in Mexico, knocked on doors along Valencia Street, taking the Obama campaign's message to veterans and retirees whose speech is a mix of English and Spanish.

New Mexico Democrats are intensifying their efforts to increase Hispanic voter turnout, a perennial quest here and across the country for a rapidly growing ethnic group that tends to vote in significantly lower percentages than other groups.

The results are being closely watched by national party leaders. The theory is that, with the Hispanic population growing in many states, the way New Mexico looks today is the way many states will look in elections down the road.

"The work we do in New Mexico will inform campaigns in the future, not only about how we go out and register Hispanics, but also from a messaging standpoint – what is it that Hispanic-Americans care about," said Adrian Saenz, the Obama campaign's national Latino vote director, in a telephone interview.

When the Obama campaign first planted a flag here five years ago, the landscape presented both challenge and opportunity. Outreach strategies of proven value in other states – like Spanish-language advertising, or even the notion of advertising in the Spanish-language news media – seemed to have minimal impact on New Mexico's Hispanics, who are more likely to speak English.

Voter-registration efforts were not as crucial; Hispanics, who are 47 percent of the state's population, make up nearly 40 percent of its electorate, the highest rate in the country. Get-out-the-vote efforts could not be discarded, but had to be tweaked: Hispanics still lagged in participation, but had deep political roots, influence and familiarity with the electoral process.

"We're well beyond the 'we're happy to be here' stage, well beyond 'Sí se puede,' " Hector Balderas, the state auditor and a Democrat, said over a breakfast of beans and scrambled eggs in Albuquerque, referring to the Latino rallying cry "Yes, we can" during immigration law protests.

New Mexico might be the least contested among the battleground states, even though a poll by The Albuquerque Journal from early September showed the race as close. Still, its unique demographics hold weighty significance for both campaigns, which have been on the ground trying, proving, improving and disproving strategies to engage Latino voters — eyeing both the November elections and the future.

The Obama campaign will open its 13th office here next Sunday, more than doubling its presence in the state over the previous month even as New Mexico leans toward Mr.

Obama. Eight of them are strategically positioned in areas with large numbers of Hispanics. On the ground, organizers have been given more latitude to experiment.

A meeting among volunteers and the campaign's national political director, Katherine Archuleta, happened around a kitchen table, as the women sat making tamales. To draw multiple generations to the same event, volunteers in Albuquerque's Westside neighborhood put together a car show; hundreds of people showed up. Mobilization efforts do not necessarily carry the "Votemos Todos" label – "Everyone Vote" – carried by events in other states that are specifically geared toward Latinos.

According to Census Bureau projections, by 2030 the Hispanic share of the country's population will nearly double, to 23 percent from 13 percent, while the non-Hispanic white population is likely to drop by 16 points, to 53 percent.

The number of school-age Hispanics has already increased by more than five million nationwide since 2000, while non-Hispanic whites dropped by three million. Over the coming decade, aging alone is poised to increase the number of Hispanics who are eligible to vote by 25 percent, according to the Census Bureau, stirring a profound transformation of the American electorate regardless of the size or consistency of the flow of new immigrants into the country.

"The trajectory is that places outside of New Mexico will start looking more and more like New Mexico, not just because of the number of third- and fourth-generation families or English-language preference, but because of the inevitable political power that, even if slowly, Hispanics are bound to acquire," said Gabriel R. Sánchez, a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico and the director of research at Latino Decisions, which studies Latino voting trends.

The state's secretary for economic development, Jon Barela, a Republican, said that "New Mexico can offer a lot of clues as to where the country is moving," as well as "validate the notion" that there is nothing incongruous about being Hispanic and being Republican. (Like many Hispanic elected officials here, Mr. Barela traces his roots to the settlers who were granted plots of land by Mexico before New Mexico became part of the United States.)

Just a little over a week ago, though, the Republican National Committee, which has been leading Mitt Romney's efforts here, pulled the campaign's Hispanic-outreach and communications directors out of the state. One Republican legislator complained, in private, that Mr. Romney "has given up" on New Mexico, while conceding that it may just not make sense to spend resources in a state that can deliver only five electoral votes.

Gov. Susana Martinez, also a Republican, criticized Mr. Romney's comment that 47 percent of Americans are government "dependents" who will vote for Mr. Obama, saying the poor "count just as much as anybody else." Already, she had declined to join him for his energy policy speech last month in Hobbs, a conservative enclave in New Mexico's oil country.

She is, however, going to campaign for him in Florida and Nevada, states where the Latino vote could tip the scale in November.

Bettina Inclán, Mr. Romney's director of Hispanic outreach, said the campaign still had a robust presence in the state, holding house parties, volunteer training sessions and round-table discussions for small-business owners.

The Obama campaign, meanwhile, has been here since 2009, when some of the same staff members who had led the efforts in the state ahead of the 2008 elections started making the rounds.

They have met Democratic ward leaders in Albuquerque, which has a mix of well-established Hispanics and more recent immigrants. They have heard from community organizers in southern New Mexico, where illegal immigration is still a relevant issue because of the area's proximity to the border.

And they have drafted local officials to make introductions and help the campaign make inroads in well-established Hispanic redoubts like Las Vegas and the South Valley of Albuquerque, where connections matter more than credentials, State Senator Linda M. Lopez said recently, before the weekly phone bank she attends to make calls for the Obama campaign.

In Las Vegas, Mr. Maestas and Ms. Rivera, students at New Mexico Highlands University, talked to voters about the reasons they support Mr. Obama. For him, it is the president's plan to improve the economy; for her, it is his focus on health care.

At the field office, Lillian Salazar, 68, a retired federal employee volunteering for a political campaign for the first time, said her choice was not partisan.

"I don't care if you're Republican or Democrat," said Mrs. Salazar, whose ancestors settled in the area hundreds of years ago. "I care if you listen. It matters what I have to say."