

The Latino strategic vote in the Obama era: Tough choices ahead

THE LATINO VOTE

Observers believe that the Latino vote is becoming increasingly central in American democracy. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, Latinos, who account for 15 percent of the total population in the United States, make up 9 percent of the electorate. Furthermore, Latinos are becoming a key factor in the electoral success of Democrats. In the past presidential election, 67 percent of them voted Democrat according to exit polls carried out by the same organization, in contrast to 31 percent who voted Republican. This figure represents a preference of more than two-to-one in favour of Barack Obama. The number increases for the youth vote (76 percent) and for females (68 percent). These figures represent a clear expression of the political force of Latinos, which will continue to increase given that they account for 50.5 percent of overall population growth in the country.

Given this demographic and political trend, it is clear that Obama must deal with the Latino social and cultural agenda in the near future. At some point in his first term in office, the president will have to address the main issues on the Latino agenda—migration and citizenship. Latino immigrants, many of them undocumented Mexicans, do not envisage improvements to their living standards without simpler access to some form of citizenship that offers them a set of basic human rights.

A Pew Hispanic Center study shows that, because of the economic crisis being experienced in the United States and throughout the world, immigrants not enjoying citizenship witnessed a significant decline in their income between 2006 and 2007. In this period, the income of immigrants without citizenship fell by 7.3 percent, in contrast to the national income average, which rose by 1.3 percent. Non-citizen households account for 7 percent of all American

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homes and 52 percent of all immigrant residences. Over half of the non-resident community are Latinos (56 percent) and 45 percent of them are headed by an undocumented immigrant. The disadvantageous situation of Latinos is related to the economic and social vulnerability of recently arrived immigrants, most of whom have only a high school education at best and are employed in blue-collar production and construction occupations or unskilled jobs in the service sector.

NON-RESIDENT VULNERABILITY

This vulnerability of non-resident, mostly undocumented, migrants is at the root of Latino disapproval of immigration policy trends during the Bush administration. A Pew Hispanic Center survey based on a sample of 2,015 Latino adults showed that 63 percent of Latinos interviewed perceived their situation as deteriorating while considerable numbers have experienced discrimination, such as being stopped by the police and questioned about their migration status (8 percent citizens and 10 percent immigrants). At the same time, 15 percent have found it hard to find or keep a job because of their ethnicity, and 10 percent have found it difficult to find homes or keep them for the reasons mentioned above.

As a consequence, according to the 2008 National Survey of Latinos by the Pew Hispanic Center, "More than four-in-five Hispanics (81 percent) say that immigration enforcement should be left mainly to the federal authorities rather than the local police; 76 percent disapprove of workplace raids; 73 percent disapprove of the criminal prosecution of undocumented immigrants who are working without authorization; and 70 percent disapprove of the criminal prosecution of employers who hire undocumented immigrants. A narrow majority (53 percent) disapproves of a requirement that employers check a federal database to verify the legal immigration status of all prospective hires."

Latino support for President Obama, together with the community's ever-increasing political power, should be reason enough for the new administration to address the community's vulnerable economic and social situation, offering policy alternatives such as easier access to citizenship. Generally speaking, through becoming citizens, immigrants are able to vote and to hold public

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office, as well as gain access to social benefits and full labour rights. In addition, they can extend citizenship to their children and apply for family reunification. All of these factors could help to reduce social, economic, and cultural vulnerability. However, access to citizenship is difficult for Latino immigrants because naturalization requires applicants to lawfully enter the country and gain legal permanent resident status. In addition, the law obliges immigrants applying for naturalization to understand, speak, read, and write some English, which is not the case for most undocumented Latino immigrants.

NEW FORMS OF CITIZENSHIP

However, it is also fair to say that President Obama cannot offer easy access to American citizenship for all immigrants, documented or otherwise. Realist American politics would not allow for a “migration without borders” approach. Nevertheless, Obama could consider, in response to Latino support and the community’s increasing political power, new forms of citizenship that are both parallel to national citizenship and narrower in scope. Some of these possibilities are normative, and have already been put into practice, while other models remain theoretical but politically feasible:

Denizenship. In *Democracy and the Nation State: Aliens, Denizens, and Citizens in a World of International Migration* (Avebury, 1990), Tomas Hammar has conceptualized *denizens* as documented immigrants living in some European countries who hold a job, pay taxes, and have access to social services, but are unable to vote or hold office.


Civic citizenship. This is the policy proposal of the Migration Policy Group to the European Union. It would guarantee a number of core rights to third-country, long-term residents in the EU so that they hold similar rights to those held by European citizens, such as the right to move within countries for work pur-

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poses. By holding civic citizenship, documented immigrants are treated in a comparable way to nationals of the host state. Civic citizenship includes the rights to: non-discrimination; residence; protection against expulsion; access to employment and self-employment; access to family reunification; access to education, vocational training, and recognition of qualifications; access to social security and social assistance; association and membership including membership in trade unions; participation in political life at the local level; vote in European parliamentary elections; and movement for work and study purposes to any state in the EU.

Universal citizenship. This is the academic policy proposal of CISAN. It is similar to denizenship and civic citizenship insofar as it extends some of the rights enjoyed by national citizens to immigrants (protection against discrimination, union rights, local electoral rights, and basic social rights to health, education, and housing). However, at the core of universal citizenship are the human rights to mobility (migrate/emi-

grate), children’s rights to family and to be free from violence, to justice and judicial security, and to personal security and freedom; therefore, universal citizenship is also extended to undocumented migrants. This extension relies on the moral obligations of well-off nations toward the worse-off, until such time as better global political economy relations allow for real social and economic development for poor countries. Universal citizenship is based on the de facto exercising of the right to work and provides four types of rights: rights to mobility, basic rights for a decent life, rights for the enjoyment of identity and difference, and political rights. See the CISAN publication *Migración, Globalización y Derechos Humanos: Construyendo la Ciudadanía Universal* (Estévez, 2009).

President Obama therefore has policy options to help the Latino community to improve their opportunities through access to citizenship without compromising American citizenship and realist political commitments to sovereignty. 

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