



FRIDAY
NOVEMBER 1, 2002

The San Diego Union-Tribune.


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12 issues for \$10.00
 1 month for \$10.00
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 6 months for \$35.00
 1 year for \$60.00
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Latinos move from Democratic camp

By Shawn Steel

Regaining competitiveness for Latino votes has been a critical but elusive goal of the Republican Party, which has spent millions on various outreach initiatives that have so far yielded less-than-hoped-for progress. However, new evidence that recent Democratic dominance of the Latino vote seems to be weakening means that goal is not as Quixotic as some think.

ELECTION

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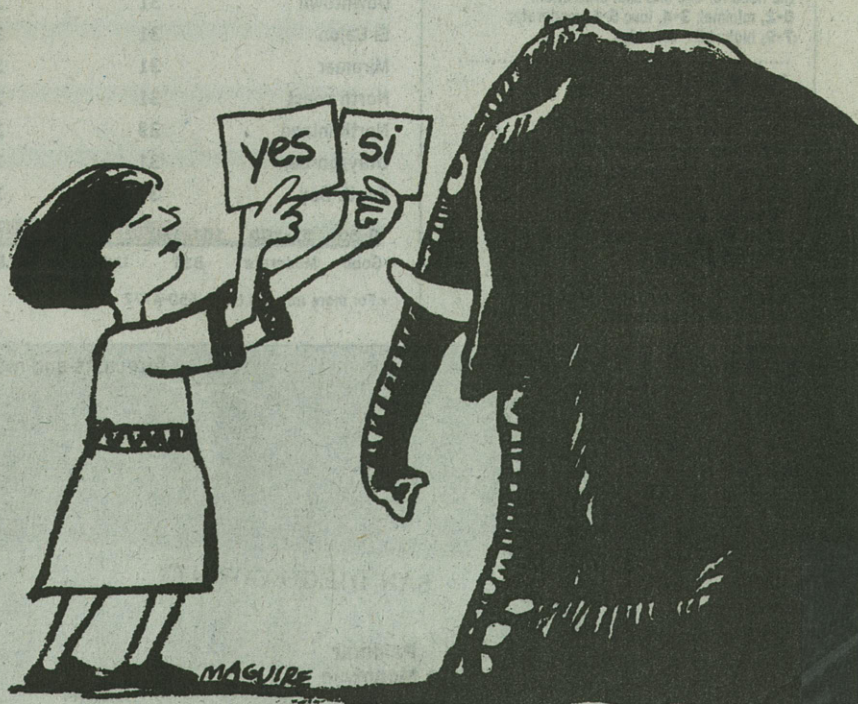
A new *Los Angeles Times* poll shows that Gov. Gray Davis' support among Latinos stands at 57 percent — a sharp decline from the 71

percent of the Latino vote he received in 1998. The Latino Caucus of the Democratic Legislature has refused to endorse Gray Davis' re-election. Perhaps this is why Davis is ardently courting Latino votes he once considered safe, this late in his campaign.

The implications of those numbers is amplified by a recent Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation National Survey of Latinos. The survey confirmed current Democratic dominance among Latinos, finding 49 percent of Latinos identify as Democrats, and 20 percent as Republicans. Delve below these overall numbers and you begin finding opportunities for Republicans to attract more Latino voters.

For instance, given a generic choice about whom they trust with the economy, Latinos prefer Democrats to Republicans, 54 percent to 27 percent. However, when the same question is posed with a real-world choice between President Bush and congressional Democrats, Latinos were evenly split, 42 percent to 42 percent, strongly indicating President Bush's courtship of Latinos is making serious progress.

The Pew survey uncovers a great opportunity for Republican growth among the nearly 25 percent of Latino voters between 18 and 29. While their GOP affiliation is consistent with Latinos overall, they are dramatically less loyal to the Democrats — only 34 percent self-identify as Democrats. Nearly half do not identify with either



Barrie Maguire

party, presenting Republicans with a golden growth opportunity.

Unfortunately, the Pew Survey is not all sunshine for the GOP. For example, 55 percent of Latinos prefer to pay higher taxes to support a larger government. The Democrats flaunt this statistic with glee as vindication of their pro-government ideology and proof of their immovable dominance of the Latino vote.

Certainly, this is a troubling statistic for Republicans, at least in the short run, since belief in small government is central to our party's identity. It is also a perfectly understandable attitude given that 41 percent of Latinos who are U.S. citizens immigrated from countries with generally corrupt, often brutal, governments. By comparison, American government must seem the epitome of efficiency, generosity and kindness.

On the bright side, 38 percent of Latinos stated a preference paying lower taxes and having a smaller government. Taken together with Latinos' social conservatism, there is undeniably a solid foundation for re-building Republican competitiveness for the Latino vote.

Republicans also can take comfort in the inexorable progress of time. Earlier immigrant groups have drifted from the Democratic to Republican column as they raised families, bought homes and

ascended the economic ladder. Indeed, the Pew poll bears this out. Fifty-four percent of foreign-born Latinos describe themselves as Democrats, but among U.S.-born Latinos, that number declines to 45 percent.

These numbers, taken together with the history of previous immigrant groups, strongly indicate current Democratic dominance will wane and more Latinos will turn to the Republican Party as an alternative.

Long-term trends aside, political parties and candidates live in the here and now. Experience demonstrates the overriding importance of the top of the ticket: Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton both strengthened their party's relationship with Latino voters.

Likewise, the GOP's Latino fortunes largely rest on President Bush, who has been actively wooing Latino voters since his first campaign for Texas governor. The Pew survey indicates his labors are bearing fruit, and Davis' weakness among Latinos presents a genuine opening for Bush to make similar inroads in California, home to the largest and most heavily Democratic Latino population in the nation. Political parties can undertake all the outreach programs they like, but in the final analysis the success of such efforts heavily depends on having a popular, respected candidate.