



To: Interested Parties
From: America's Voice
Re: The 2012 Elections & Immigration
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Having just finished covering the most expensive presidential campaign in U.S. history, political journalists were quick to analyze how the President had cast aside the doubters and won his re-election by a resounding margin.

While some pointed to the re-election campaign's success in defining their Massachusetts-based challenger as an elitist lacking core convictions, many chose to highlight the President's record performance among Latino voters as an election outcome with more lasting political significance.

In fact, the President won close to a record percentage of Latino voters for a presidential candidate from his party – a crucial fact in an election cycle featuring the greatest numbers of Latino voters in history. The President's historic appeal to Latino voters was a major factor in helping him win the Latino-heavy battleground states of Colorado, Florida, Nevada, and New Mexico.

While we could be talking about President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election, the above paragraphs also describe George W. Bush's triumph in 2004.

In 2004, President Bush received approximately 40% of the Latino vote nationwide in his campaign against Democratic nominee John Kerry. Just eight years later, Republican nominee Mitt Romney received only 23% Latino support of a much larger Latino electorate in his race against President Obama.

The Republican Party's precipitous decline among Latino voters is due in large part to the GOP's embrace of a hard-line immigration stance in the intervening years. And it's a lesson for both the GOP and Democrats as they move forward from the 2012 election cycle.

- **For Republicans:** Without a significantly improved performance among Latino voters, the Republican Party's future as a nationally competitive political party is in doubt. And while the Latino electorate's disconnect from the current Republican Party runs deeper than immigration alone, it will be impossible for the GOP to get a hearing on its other issues unless and until they work to pass real immigration reform.
- **For Democrats:** While the post-election commentary on immigration and demographics has mostly focused on Republicans, the 2012 cycle offered essential takeaways to Democrats as well – namely, that while the political ground has shifted, they have work to do to solidify Latino support and that immigration is an issue Democrats need to "lean into."

In the following pages, we provide a recap of the 2012 election cycle and what it means for the new politics of immigration.

Democrats Lean into the Issue and Gain Politically

- **President Obama was in trouble with Latinos before announcing deferred action for DREAMers.** On September 7, 2011, Gallup reported that Obama's monthly approval rating had sunk to a "new low" — 48 percent — with Latinos, and he was facing fierce criticism from Spanish language media and from immigrant advocate for failing to keep his promise to make immigration reform a priority and for ramping up deportations to record levels.
- **President Obama turned his prospects around with the June 15, 2012 DACA announcement.** Latino Decisions (which happened to be conducting a poll of Latino voters in key battleground states when the President made the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) announcement) found a huge spike in Latino enthusiasm among respondents polled after the President's announcement, compared to those polled before.
- **The reaction by voters overall was more positive than expected.** In 2007, Rahm Emanuel famously said that immigration is the third rail of American politics. His message to Democrats (and later to President Obama): touch immigration reform and Democrats lose. As if haunted by his ghost, the White House was very concerned before making the announcement that the backlash would be severe. They feared that conservatives would mobilize in opposition, swing votes would be affected, while Latinos and progressives would say "this isn't enough." In fact, not only did Latino and immigrant voters become more enthusiastic after the announcement, progressives were thrilled, swing voters favored the move, and Romney and Republicans were divided and defensive. According to a bipartisan election eve poll taken for AVEF by Lake/Tarrance of all voters, a majority, 57%, supported the decision (46% strongly) with 26% opposed. Supporters included 75% of Democrats, 60% of independents, 35% of Republicans, 66% of African-American voters and 52% of white voters. Of note: the reaction was so positive that well before Election Day one member of the President's campaign brain-trust pointed to President Obama's June 2012 DREAMer deferred action program announcement as the turning point in the overall 2012 presidential election.

The Candidates' Immigration Positions Mattered To Latino Voters

- **President Obama crushed Mitt Romney among Latino voters nationwide and in each of the 11 battleground states polled:** According to an election eve poll of 5,600 Latino voters conducted by Latino Decisions, Obama won Latino voters' support over Mitt Romney by historic margins — a whopping 75%-23% margin nationwide, including: in Colorado, Obama won Latino voters by a massive 87%-10% margin; in New Mexico, by a 77%-21% margin; in Nevada, by an 80%-17% margin; in Ohio, by an 82%-17% margin; and in Virginia, by a 66%-31% margin. Even Florida's traditionally more conservative Latino voters supported Obama over Romney by a 58%-40% margin.
- **Immigration is a personal and defining issue for Latino voters:** The poll found that 60% of Latino voters nationwide "know somebody who is an undocumented immigrant." While ranking second on the "most important issue" question, immigration ranked first in several states currently experimenting with draconian anti-immigrant approaches, such as Arizona (plurality of 48% said immigration) and North Carolina (50% said immigration). The foreign-born subset of Latino voters — a group with direct personal experience with immigration policy — preferred Obama over Romney by an 80%-18% margin, was more likely to rank immigration as the number one issue our leaders should address (39%), and was more likely to know an undocumented immigrant (66%).
- **President Obama's DREAMer announcement boosted Latino voter enthusiasm:** President Obama's June 2012 announcement of the DREAMer deferred action program made 58% of Latino voters nationwide "more enthusiastic" about President Obama, while 32% of nationwide respondents said it had "no effect" on their enthusiasm for the President (only 6% said "less enthusiastic"). This enthusiasm was particularly high in some of the key battleground states that tipped President Obama's way in large part because of overwhelming support from Latinos — the announcement made 62% of Colorado Latinos and 61% of Nevada Latinos "more enthusiastic" about President Obama.

- **The high Latino vote turnout mattered.** More than twelve million Latino voters went to the polls on election day, up 26% from 2008 and doubled from 2004. Obama's huge margins amongst Latino and Asian voters well exceeded his margins of victory.
- **Mitt Romney's hardline immigration stances hurt him among Latino voters:** Romney's support for mandatory E-Verify, "self-deportation," and ending the DREAMer deferred action program made 57% of Latino voters nationwide "less enthusiastic" about supporting Romney, while only 7% of Latinos said it made them "more enthusiastic" about Romney's candidacy (27% said it "had no effect" on their level of support). Of note, "less enthusiastic" responses were particularly high in Colorado (68%), California (62%), Ohio (62%), and Nevada (61%) – four states that voted against Romney, in part due to overwhelming opposition from Latino voters. As we've noted, Romney's run to the hardline right on immigration during the GOP primaries was unnecessary, as Republican primary and caucus-goers are actually more pragmatic than hardline on immigration.

Asian-American Voters Made a Historic Showing For Democrats in 2012

- **Asian-American and Pacific Islander voters supported Obama and Democrats by a surprisingly large margin in 2012.** The media-sponsored national exit poll showed 74% of Asian-American voters supporting Barack Obama, while 25% supported Mitt Romney. An election-eve poll of Asian-American voters conducted by Asian-American Decisions for AALDEF showed a 72%-26% split for Obama and a 73%-27% split for Democrats in House races.
- **This represents a substantial swing to Democrats from four years ago—and an even more substantial swing from twenty years ago.** Asian-American support for Obama in 2012 was 12 percentage points higher than in 2008, according to the National Exit Poll. Exit polls from past elections show that Al Gore got 54% of the Asian-American vote in 2000, and Bill Clinton got only 31% in 1992.

The GOP's Future & Immigration

- **The demographic writing on the wall says that Republicans must be more pro-immigrant and willing to reach out to Latino voters.** The 2012 election results have sparked a frenzy of Republican and conservative soul-searching about how they can avoid a repeat of the 2012 election cycle for future national elections. One of the most universal acknowledgements is that the Republican Party must do better among the rapidly-growing Latino voter population and, concurrently, that the Party must change its dominant, hardline immigration stance. As Republican strategist Ana Navarro tweeted, "Mitt Romney self-deported himself from the White House."
- **Twenty percent of Latinos would be willing to vote Republican if the GOP had more tolerant positions on immigration. That extra 20% would put Republicans in reach of regaining the White House.** One-in-five Latinos voted for President Obama in 2012 but said that they would be open to voting for Republicans if the Party leads on immigration. Combining this subset of Obama voters with the 23% of Latinos who voted for Mitt Romney, a pro-immigration reform Republican Party would be poised to again achieve the 40% threshold of Latino support that George W. Bush received in 2004 and many analysts say the GOP will need going forward to remain a nationally competitive party, especially as demographic trends accelerate for the 2014 and 2016 elections.
- **The GOP's demographic problems will only get worse from here.** Noting the long-term implications of the Republican Party's "Latino problem," former Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN) noted that the 2012 elections were, "a clarion call that we have to [respond to]. Soon we are going to have to start worrying about Texas and Arizona. Unless we step up, we are going to be the minority party." Similarly, newly-elected Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) told Ryan Lizza of the *New Yorker*, "If Texas is bright blue, you can't get to two-seventy electoral votes. The Republican Party would cease to exist. We would become like the Whig Party."

- **The coalition of voters that represent America’s future supports immigration reform.** In addition to Latino voters, other portions of the electorate that are growing in size, such as Asian-American voters and younger Americans, are overwhelmingly supportive of immigration reform with a path to citizenship. Meanwhile, the small share of the American electorate that is opposed to immigration reform is mostly comprised of voting groups losing electoral clout, such as older and rural conservatives.
- **Romney made a strategic blunder by going hard right on immigration in the primaries – GOP voters are more practical on immigration than assumed, while the general electorate is decidedly pro-immigration reform.** In a post-election forum held by the Harvard University Institute of Politics, even former Romney campaign manager Matt Rhoades admitted that the candidate’s hard-right tack on immigration during the primary was a mistake. It simply isn’t that big of an issue for most Republican primary voters, but it is a very big issue for Latinos the GOP needs to win in the general election. The issue consistently ranked lowest on the list of 2012 Republican primary and caucus-goers’ voting issues in nearly every Republican primary, while Republican caucus-goers in Iowa actually preferred the Gingrich immigration approach to Romney’s. The Pew Research Center found that the public supports a path to citizenship by a 72%-24% margin, while among potential Republican-voting political typology groups the pollsters identified, Libertarians supported the path to citizenship option by a 66%-32% margin and Main Street Republicans by a 58%-39% margin, while Staunch Conservatives were split at 49%-49%. Additionally, the general electorate is decidedly pro-immigration reform. Consider the response from 2012 voters to this question asked in the network exit polls – “should most illegal immigrants working in the United States be offered a chance to apply for legal status or deported to country they came from?” By a whopping 65%-28% margin, Americans support the “apply for legal status” option. And as noted, President Obama’s DACA announcement also was broadly supported by the electorate as a whole.

Down-ballot Races in 2012 Mirror National Trends

- **In House and Senate races across the nation in 2012, advocates for immigration reform won overwhelmingly.** In the lead up to November 6th, America’s Voice tracked a range of competitive House and Senate races where Latino, Asian, and naturalized citizen voters could prove decisive. A post-election scorecard documents how the immigration issue played out in several House and Senate races across the country—and what each race’s outcome means going forward. In six Senate races America’s Voice identified as Races to Watch for Supporters of Immigration Reform, supporters and champions of immigrant rights won four —and there are already signs that the two winners who opposed reform may be changing their positions. In fifteen House races America’s Voice identified as Races to Watch for Supporters of Immigration Reform, supporters and champions of immigrant rights won ten, growing the ranks of pro-immigration reform lawmakers in the House. While five races were won by anti-reform politicians, the demographic writing is on the wall for them and their party.
- **Just like in 2010, Latino voters’ overwhelming support for the Democratic Senate candidates in 2012 helped keep the U.S. Senate in Democratic hands.** Latino voters’ support for Democratic congressional candidates over GOP candidates – 77%-23% – was consistent or may have even slightly over-performed President Obama’s Latino margin over Mitt Romney (75%-23%). In Arizona, Democrats kept Richard Carmona competitive with Jeff Flake by supporting Carmona 83%-17%. In California, Dianne Feinstein coasted to re-election, winning Latinos 79%-20%. In Florida, Bill Nelson won re-election in large part due to 59%-40% support among Florida Latinos. In Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren’s victory was made possible in part by overwhelming support from Latinos (86%-14%). In Nevada, Latino voters supported Shelley Berkley by a 79%-20% margin. In Ohio, Latino voters supported Sherrod Brown’s re-election by a 80%-20% margin. In Virginia, Latino voters provided the margin for Tim Kaine’s close election by supporting him at a 70%-29% clip. And for Republican strategists who think Latino competitiveness can be achieved solely by recruiting more Latino Republican candidates, the poll found that winning Texas Senate candidate Ted Cruz (R) only received support from 35% of Texas Latino voters – issues such as immigration matter more to Latino voters than ethnicity.

California Offers Cautionary Tale for a GOP that Refuses to Evolve on Immigration

- **Anti-immigrant Republicans in California have been put on notice—those unable to keep pace with the changing demographics of their district are retiring, or being retired.** Since the days of [Proposition 187](#) in 1994, California's Latino and Asian-American voters have led the way in rejecting anti-immigrant candidates. Latino voters throughout California preferred Democrats over Republicans in 2012 congressional races by an overwhelming 80%-20% margin, according to [election-eve polling of Latino voters in California](#) conducted by Latino Decisions. For the full California 2012 race recap, see [here](#). With the [election results finally settled](#), it's clear that anti-immigrant Republicans in California who did not keep pace with the changing demographics of their district are either retiring, such as Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-CA), or being retired, as happened to Rep. Bilbray, Rep. Bono Mack, and Rep. Dan Lungren (R-CA) in 2012. The remaining Republicans in the California delegation – especially those like Rep. Jeff Denham (R-CA) who eked out narrow victories in 2012 – can expect similar fates in future election cycles if they refuse to evolve on immigration. Beyond California, the Golden State's role as a cautionary tale of immigration politics in 2012 could be especially relevant for states such as Arizona, Nevada, and even Texas.
- **In California, even former Republican strongholds are turning blue.** With California's changing demographics becoming more and more pronounced each election cycle, even former Republican strongholds are under threat. As the *Los Angeles Times* [noted](#), "Orange County was once an instant synonym for Republican power, and the GOP's dominance looked impregnable." Yet even Orange County "has faded from red to pink with the emergence of Latino voters, who are repelled by the party's stand on immigration." Such is the story of current politics in California – which could be the story of politics in the future for the national Republican Party, unless they change their anti-immigrant ways.
- **The election of Rep. Raul Ruiz shows what happens to Republicans who neglect to reach out to Latino voters.** In addition, the Beltway publication Politico titled a [recent article](#), "Raul Ruiz Win Tells Story of Election 2012," noting that, "If the growing sway of Latinos in American politics was the story of election 2012, Raul Ruiz's triumph in California's 36th Congressional District was a dramatic subplot. The son of migrant farmworkers who scraped his way through UCLA and then Harvard Medical School, Ruiz dislodged Rep. Mary Bono Mack, a 14-year fixture of the Republican Conference who didn't seem to fully appreciate the district's fast-growing Hispanic population until it was too late."
- **In the defeat of Rep. Brian Bilbray, anti-immigrant extremists have lost one of their own, and their policy positions have been put on notice.** Rep. Brian Bilbray (R-CA) has long been a leading anti-immigrant Member of Congress, having worked as a [lobbyist](#) for the Federation for Immigration Reform (FAIR, which the Southern Poverty Law Center designates as a [hate group](#)), and currently chairing the extremist [House Immigration Reform Caucus](#). Yet after California redrew its congressional districts last year to reflect continued demographic change, Rep. Bilbray lost to Democrat Scott Peters in the redistricted California 52nd District – an encapsulation of the California Republican Party's current problems, and a potential harbinger of things to come for the national GOP. As a result, the anti-immigrant movement lost a key champion in Congress and Bilbray became one of several cautionary tales about the changing nature of immigration politics to emanate from California in 2012. Like many districts in California, Latino and Asian-American voters comprised more than one-fifth of the eligible voters in the 52nd District where Bilbray met his defeat.