



TO: Members of the 111th Congress
FROM: Frank Sharry
RE: What the 2008 Elections Mean For the Future of Immigration Reform
DATE: January 28, 2009

The mission of America's Voice (AV) is to harness the power of America's voices and American values to win common sense immigration reform. Working with Benenson Strategy Group, Lake Research Partners, Bendixen & Associates, Hildebrand Tewes, NDN, and others, we analyzed the politics of immigration in the 2008 elections. This memo summarizes our top findings; for more, visit www.immigration08.com. Our analysis revealed that:

1. The illegal immigration "wedge" strategy employed by many Republican and some Democratic candidates failed spectacularly, and politicians who supported immigration solutions won over hard-liners.
2. Voters strongly support comprehensive immigration reform and expect action from the next Congress and President.
3. Latino and immigrant voters see comprehensive reform as a defining issue, and their vote made a difference in the Presidential, House, and Senate races.

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AV ANALYSIS: In 20 of 22 Competitive House and Senate Races, the Candidates Favoring a More Comprehensive Approach on Immigration Defeated their Hard-Line Opponents

Our analysis shows that in battleground House and Senate races, candidates supporting broader immigration reforms consistently beat out hard-line politicians. We looked at House races deemed competitive by The Cook Political Report a month before the election where the Democratic and Republican candidates held divergent views on immigration reform, and Senate races in this same camp. Reformers beat hardliners in 15 of these 17 House races and in all 5 Senate races. The same dynamic occurred in the Presidential contest, as President-Elect Barack Obama was an unwavering supporter of comprehensive immigration reform, but Senator John McCain had tacked right during the Republican primaries.

AV ANALYSIS: Immigration Attack Ads Didn't Add Up for Candidates

Our first-of-a-kind analysis on campaign issue ads shows that immigration attack ads were a bust for politicians who used them. According to our review of Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) data, this cycle a total of 234 immigration ads aired in 79 federal and statewide campaigns in 35 states, representing more than \$27 million in spending. The vast majority advocated a “crackdown” approach to immigration reform. In races decided by press time, only 32% of immigration ads favored winning candidates. GOP candidates, party committees, and outside group allies sponsored 78% of these ads, but only 17% were placed by winners.

AV PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH: Voters Want Real Solutions, Not Politicking

AV conducted a series of public opinion polls targeting voters in swing districts and nationwide. Following are the key findings from these polls:

- 1. Voters want and expect action on immigration reform.** While the economy was obviously the top concern for voters, nationwide 66% thought immigration was discussed too little during the 2008 election cycle and 57% said that immigration reform should be a high priority for the new Congress. These results were consistent with exit polling in battleground Congressional districts.¹ By a 56-6% margin, voters in swing districts said that the issue was discussed “too little” vs. “too much” in the 2008 cycle, and by a 46-15% margin they said “enacting immigration reform” is a high priority.
- 2. Voters prefer a comprehensive approach with legalization over an enforcement-only policy.** By a 57-28% margin, nationwide voters preferred “a comprehensive approach that secures the border, cracks down on employers who hire illegal immigrants, and requires all illegal immigrants to register and meet certain requirements to become legal” over “we need to secure our border, stop giving taxpayer funded benefits to illegal immigrants, and make sure that those who broke our laws by entering this country illegally are forced to leave.” The same was true for swing district voters by a 60-30% margin. Similarly, by a 60-33% margin, voters nationwide preferred comprehensive reform over enforcing current laws, described as “Congress should not pass amnesty of any kind. Instead they should enforce the laws currently on the books.” By a 64-30% margin, swing district voters agreed.
- 3. Voters support candidates who embrace a comprehensive approach over those who advocate deportation-only policies.** During the height of campaign season, in October 2008, we also ran a series of polls in swing districts and found that these voters overwhelmingly preferred candidates who advocate a comprehensive approach over solely focusing on border security, denying any benefits to undocumented immigrants, and requiring people who are in the country to leave. When we tested the public’s voting preference between one candidate supporting comprehensive reform (the Supporter) and another preferring enforcement and benefits cut-off (the Opponent), the Supporter led by a 57% to 33% margin. Support for

¹ VA-11, AZ-01, AZ-05, NM-01, WA-08, CO-04, IL-14, NV-03, and PA-11.

comprehensive immigration reform not only enhanced the public's view of a candidate on the issue of immigration, but it also increased voter support for that candidate along a variety of other dimensions, including voters' confidence in the candidate's approach to improving the economy.

- 4. Voters support citizenship over temporary status.** Voters overwhelmingly supported permanent status and citizenship for undocumented immigrants over temporary status: 67-13% of voters nationwide, 71-17% of Latino voters, and 67-10% of swing voters. Just 14% of voters nationwide, 8% of Latino voters, and 16% of swing district voters preferred an enforcement-only approach when given those three options.
- 5. The public sees comprehensive immigration reform as consistent with, not working against, our nation's economic recovery.** Nationwide, 62% of voters said "We would be better off if people who are in the United States illegally became legal taxpayers so they pay their fair share," vs. 21% who said "We would be better off if people who are in the United States illegally left the country because they are taking away jobs that Americans need." Swing district voters agreed, supporting the former statement over the latter by a 66-23% margin.

AV PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH: The Republican Approach to Immigration Pushed Latinos Away

AV and America's Voice Education Fund also conducted polling of Latino voters before and after the election and analyzed voter turnout. Here are our main findings:

- 1. The Latino vote is large, growing, and trending more Democratic than ever.** The Latino vote was 9% of the electorate in 2008 (approximately 11 million voters), an increase of over 3 million voters since 2004 and nearly double the Latino turnout of 2000. After supporting Kerry by approximately 56-40% against Bush in 2004, Latinos supported Obama 67-31% against McCain—the largest shift among all major demographic groups this election.
- 2. Latinos are changing the electoral map.** In Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada, states Bush won in 2004, the Latino break towards Democrats in 2008 was a major factor in Obama's victories there and in Democratic House and Senate pick-ups as well. Additionally, the impact of immigrant voters and their children was felt in other states across the nation, including new immigrant states like North Carolina and Virginia, according to analysis by the Immigration Policy Center.
- 3. Key demographics that used to support the Republican Party are making huge shifts toward the Democrats.** In 2004, Spanish-dominant Latino voters supported Kerry narrowly over Bush 52-48%. This group was a key factor in Bush's strong showing among Latinos, winning between 40 and 44% of the overall Latino vote. According to AV's research, this year Spanish-dominant voters went for Obama over McCain 75-25%. Another important subset, Latino evangelicals, also trended Democratic in 2008 and favored Obama by a 17-point margin in mid-October polling, despite having supported Bush 63% in 2004.

4. Immigration reform was a key factor driving Latino voters away from the Republican Party and into the Democratic camp. In AV's survey, 89% of Latin American immigrant voters said the immigration issue was important to them and their families, including 63% who called it "very important." Before the election, the Pew Hispanic Center found that 93% of Latino voters see the issue as important and, by a 49%-7% margin, Latinos believe Democrats have more concern for Hispanics, while just 7% choose the Republicans. These findings were also echoed in separate polls conducted by NALEO and NDN before the election.

Lessons to Learn for Both Parties

The Republican Party has an opportunity to learn from the results of the 2008 elections and re-orient itself toward solutions that work for swing voters, Latinos, and a solid majority of voters overall. If it fails to [learn these lessons](#), the GOP could cede large swaths of the electoral map to the Democrats for a generation. If it works with the Democrats to tackle this and other issues, the GOP is back in the game.

The Democratic Party also has an opportunity to win if it tackles comprehensive reform. As the Party in charge of both houses of Congress and the White House, the American people and Latino voters will be expecting real results from the Democrats on this issue.