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THE HILL



Prescription for Dr. Dean: A Hispanic center

By Mickey Ibarra

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The Hispanic vote is up for grabs. The alleged Democratic lock on this constituency is a myth. And, if the Democratic Party refuses to make the investment required to build an effective long-term strategy to restore its traditional market share of Latino voters, Democrats will continue to lose presidential elections and more.

OP-ED

Postmortem analysis of the 2004 election results generates two incontrovertible conclusions: Democratic efforts to register Hispanic voters were inadequate, and Democratic efforts to mobilize those who were registered were ineffective. The Kerry campaign preferred messages crafted on the fly to thoughtful message development and placement. The Democratic Party never spoke to the Hispanic mind, never touched the Hispanic heart.

The results were predictable: Hispanics stayed home. Voter turnout in Latino precincts was the lowest in the nation.

The best evidence tells us that 7.5 million Hispanics voted in 2004 - an impressive 27 percent increase over 2000 figures. But a closer look reveals some troubling trends. The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) estimates that if the gap in the turnout rate between Hispanics and African-Americans had been halved, an additional 1.7 million Hispanics would have gone to the polls in 2004. The NCLR also notes that if Hispanic registration and participation had not slipped, if they merely held steady between 2000 and 2004, 400,000 more Hispanics would have voted.

Right now, the Hispanic trend is befriending Republicans. In 1996, 21 percent of Hispanics voted Republican in the presidential election. In 2000, this figure jumped to 34 percent, and in 2004, it rose again - to 39 percent according to some polling experts, to 44 percent according to others. In just eight years, the Republican Party has doubled its share of the Latino vote.

This trend is not irreversible. But turning it around demands immediate action, a fact reflected in a key demographic: Today six million Hispanics are aged 10 to 16; between now and the 2012 elections, the Hispanic voting-age population will grow by 60 percent.

If the Democratic Party is to benefit from this explosive increase, things must change. The Democratic Party must change. Governor Dean's first priority, as new DNC chair, must be to overcome the Democratic Party's systemic failure to attract and retain Latino voters. Democrats must earn the Latino vote.

Yes, there's a natural and historical affinity between the Democratic Party and the Hispanic community. But that is not enough to guarantee the Democratization of the Hispanic vote.

Toward that end, the establishment of a Democratic Hispanic Strategy Center is essential. A center charged with the responsibility of building a master plan to reclaim and reenergize the

Hispanic vote. This strategy center's foremost challenge would be to create a base of knowledge for winning Hispanic support.

And this knowledge - not guesswork, not hunches, not presuppositions - would guide the development of campaigns that speak effectively to the Hispanic electorate. It would serve as the research and development hub responsible for developing methodologies that move Latinos to register and vote for Democrats.

Only such a center, supported by the Democratic National Committee and other partners, with a budget that cannot be diverted to other priorities and with autonomy that cannot be diluted, can guarantee that, as Hispanic voting clout grows, it will serve as a source of comfort and victory - not a source of irritation and defeat - for the Democratic Party.

Ibarra, who owns a Washington public affairs firm, was chairman of the DNC Hispanic Caucus until his appointment as a senior aide to President Clinton in 1997.

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