

Once-moderate Perry now inflames Latinos

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Body

The eyes of the Republican Party are on Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who seems to be inching closer toward announcing a presidential run. Perry has reached out to donors in New Hampshire, scheduled a trip to South Carolina in August, and last week told The Des Moines Register he feels "called" to run for president.

If he runs, Perry will be the lone candidate from a state with a sizable Latino population. But though Latinos have helped him succeed in Texas, he has not always returned the favor.

Perry was once a moderate amigo of the Hispanic community. He appointed Texas' first Latina secretary of state and the first Latina to the Texas Supreme Court. In 2001, he signed the Texas Dream Act, allowing undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition. He called the idea of a border fence "nonsense" and said that an Arizona-style immigration law would not be a good fit for Texas. These are all good reasons why Perry won 39% of the Latino vote in the 2010 governor's race.

Since then, Perry has made a sharp right turn, courting Tea Party and evangelical voters. In the last legislative session, he pushed a bill that would have banned local governments from prohibiting police from asking about the immigration status of people they detain, despite Latino concerns about racial profiling. He signed a Voter ID Act, requiring all voters to present photo identification. Advocacy groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund have denounced this law as an attempt to disenfranchise minority voters.

Perry's education record is abysmal. In his last budget, he cut \$4 billion from public school funding, though Texas ranks 44th in per capita expenditure on students and 43rd in graduation rates. He has refused to raise taxes or tap a \$9.4 billion rainy day fund for schools.

Perry touts Texas' relatively low unemployment rate and economic growth. True, the state's unemployment rate is 8.0%, lower than the national average of 9.2%. But the Hispanic unemployment rate in Texas is 9.4%. What's more, Texas ties Mississippi for having the largest percentage of its population earning minimum wage. These figures suggest Hispanics are not fully sharing in the state's economic prosperity.

In a presidential race, Perry will need to attract Latino voters. If he hopes to be successful nationally, Perry would do well to look back at his positive track record on behalf of Texas Latinos when he started out as governor, as opposed to the detour he took when he began toying with the idea of running for president. Why mess with a successful formula?

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