

Bush Seeks to Boost Image With Minorities

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Body

Gov. George W. **Bush** told members of one of the nation's largest and most influential Hispanic groups today that he was on a mission to topple any stereotype that Republicans were insensitive to **minorities** and new immigrants.

And Mr. **Bush** **sought** to prove his own compassion by proposing to spend an additional \$100 million in federal money every year to expedite foreigners' applications for immigration.

"It doesn't matter what party you're from," he said, as he stood before more than 1,000 people at the annual convention of the National Council of La Raza. "You've got to admit: When it takes three to five years to process paperwork, that's too long. It's time to reform the I.N.S."

The Texas governor first called for an overhaul of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in an address last week to a meeting of the League of United Latin American Citizens in Washington. At that time, he proposed splitting the immigration agency into two operations, one dedicated to law enforcement and the other to providing services to immigrants.

Today, he also proposed the infusion of additional federal money for those services, saying the agency should hire more workers and institute performance incentives so that no immigration application languished for more than six months.

But Mr. **Bush** mentioned that plan only in passing, in the context of a fairly general assertion of his belief that his agenda, priorities and attitude of compassion should appeal to **minority** voters who had perhaps been suspicious of Republicans in the past.

He made that claim in a state where many Hispanic voters still feel profound resentment over the harsh tone of Republicans' successful quest several years ago to pass Proposition 187, which **sought** to deny public services to the children of illegal immigrants. Court challenges subsequently blocked implementation of parts of that policy.

Mr. **Bush** has acknowledged that he faces a formidable challenge in courting Hispanic voters in California. But he asked them today to judge him not by the past actions of members of his party but by the amount of time he was spending in densely Hispanic neighborhoods.

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"I like to be seen in neighborhoods where sometimes Republicans aren't seen," the governor said. "I like to fight that stereotype that sometimes we don't have the corazon necessary to hear the voices of people from all political parties and all walks of life."

Mr. **Bush** sporadically used Spanish phrases and words like "corazon," which means "heart," in today's speech.

Although Mr. **Bush** repeatedly announced his appreciation of diversity and his concern for **minorities**, he did not offer much detail about the specific policies he wanted to implement, or how they would help Hispanics or other **minorities**. He offered an only slightly altered version of his usual stump speech, framing some of his positions in terms of how they would benefit foreigners and recent immigrants.

He said that his tax cut proposals would help Hispanic entrepreneurs, that free trade would improve economic conditions in Mexico and that his push for educational accountability would lead to better test scores for **minority** children.

Mr. **Bush** spoke for 19 minutes. In contrast, Vice President Al Gore's appearance at the La Raza convention on Monday night lasted about an hour, and half of that time was devoted to answering questions from the audience.

Mr. **Bush** did not open the door to a similar exchange with the audience, although he did hold a brief news conference with reporters after he spoke. His speech was his only public event of the day, and it came on a week when he planned to spend every other day at home in Texas.

Mr. **Bush**'s appearance today reflected not only his effort to demonstrate concern for members of **minorities** and to project a sensitive, moderate **image**, but also his desire to compete seriously for California's 54 electoral votes -- 21 more than any other state -- or at least make the appearance of doing so.

Even if Mr. **Bush** does not carry the state, his campaign would like to give Mr. Gore a scare and a good reason to spend campaign cash on advertising in California's expensive media markets.

Making inroads with Hispanic voters, who represented about 13 percent of the Californians who voted in the 1998 elections, is a key part of Mr. **Bush**'s strategy in the state, which he has visited six times, including today, since the Republican primaries essentially ended in the spring.

As he has done in previous appearances, Mr. **Bush** introduced his nephew George P. **Bush**, the oldest son of his brother Jeb and Jeb's wife, Columba, and noted that Columba's Mexican ancestry made his nephew half-Hispanic. He told the members of La Raza how proud he was to have Hispanic blood in his family.

In calling for improvements at the immigration service, Mr. **Bush** was joining voices in both major political parties and staking ground that was anything but controversial. Douglas Hattaway, a spokesman for the Gore campaign, said Mr. **Bush** was defining a problem that was already on its way to being solved.

"Once again, **Bush** is playing follow the leader," Mr. Hattaway said. "Al Gore has long believed that we should streamline the I.N.S., and under the leadership of this administration, the I.N.S. has already cut the application time significantly."

Before Mr. **Bush** left the stage at the La Raza conference, he was presented with a birthday cake decorated to look like an American flag. Mr. **Bush**, who turns 54 on Thursday, said he did not have any special celebration planned.

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Graphic

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Photo: Gov. George W. **Bush** greeted Rosario Marin yesterday outside the San Diego Convention Center. (Associated Press)

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