

'Mexican Mitt' just does not get immigration

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Body

Lately, much noise has been coming from the Republicans about how immigration is not that big an issue for Hispanics and how it will not turn Latino voters away from Mitt Romney, their presumptive presidential contender.

The economy, not immigration, is the No. 1 issue for Latinos, they say. And the economy is Romney's strongest point, they argue.

I have news for them: As poll after poll makes clear, even if it is not at the top of their list of concerns, there is no more defining issue than immigration for the nearly 20 million Latinos who are eligible to vote.

Yes, it is true that, not surprisingly, Hispanics share the concerns of the rest of the population. But it is also true that a politician's attitude towards immigration is decisive in earning the trust of Latino voters.

Recently, both Latinos and general voters were polled by The Wall Street Journal/NBC/Telemundo. The research confirmed once again what many of us already knew: Latino voters see immigration as very important. It also ratified that even if for other voters immigration is not as important, they are far more open to practical solutions than what Romney and Republicans believe.

According to the poll, when Latino voters were asked if they could tell the presidential candidates one thing, "immigration reform" was the second most popular answer, closely behind "fix the economy."

Even more to the point, when asked whether President Obama or Romney would do a better job "dealing with immigration," 55% said Obama and only 16% chose Romney.

"President Obama continues to poll well with Latino voters because he's leaning into the (immigration) issue," said Frank Sharry, America's Voice executive director. "Because of his restrictionist immigration policies and dismal Latino numbers, Romney has a lot of work to do if he wants to emerge victorious in November," Sharry said.

He certainly does. So much so that even his fellow Republicans have publicly criticized him for his extreme immigration positions.

"I would just have a different policy from what he has espoused," said the influential former Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, who also made clear he disagrees with Romney's self-deportation approach to solving the undocumented immigration problem.

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Barbour wasn't the only GOP figure to take Romney to task. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush endorsed him and is a member of his Hispanic Steering Committee, but was critical of the candidate's immigration ideas which he defined as offensive and narrow.

"Don't just talk about Hispanics and say immediately we must have controlled borders," said Bush, whose wife is Hispanic. "It's kind of insulting, when you think about it. Change the tone would be the first thing. Second, on immigration, I think we need to have a broader approach."

Harsh and thoughtless as they have been, Romney's words are not the only problem. Few Latino voters will forget Romney's visit, hat in hand, to notorious Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, to abjectly beg the aging lawman for his endorsement.

Arpaio, as nasty a character as you will ever find, could - after years of abuse and mistreatment of Hispanics - finally get what's coming to him. The self-styled "America's toughest sheriff" and his office were sued for racial profiling against Latinos and are currently facing their accusers at a Phoenix federal court.

Conservative pundit George Will has said that Romney needs at least 31% of the Latino vote to win. If he is right, we can safely say that "Mexican Mitt" (as he is fondly called because of his Mexico-born ancestors) has a snowball's chance in hell of becoming our first Mexican-American president.aruiz@nydailynews.com

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