Republicans lose ground among Hispanic voters; Democrats perceived as being on 'right side' of immigration issue

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Body

WASHINGTON -- **_Republican_** gains **_among Hispanic voters_** evaporated in Tuesday's election, and some party leaders are blaming harsh rhetoric on **_immigration_** for the reversal.

Cutting into the **_Democrats_**' traditional advantage **_among Hispanic voters_** was a key to both of President Bush's election victories. In 2004, when the president was at the top of the ticket, 44% of Hispanics surveyed after they cast their ballots said they voted **_Republican_**.

This year, the figure dropped to 29%.

The decline is significant because Hispanics are fast becoming a crucial voting bloc. Census figures show Hispanics make up at least 10% of the population in 11 of the 28 U.S. House districts that switched from **_Republican_** to Democratic hands on Tuesday.

Strategists from both parties say the vocal opposition of some **_Republicans_** to a proposed **_immigration_** bill that would give an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants a chance at citizenship drove Hispanics back to the Democratic camp.

"This time there is no doubt they felt **_Democrats_** were on the **_right side_** of the **_immigration issue_**," says Lionel Sosa, a **_Hispanic_** ad executive who has advised **_Republicans_**. One of the Democratic Party's top-ranking Hispanics, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, agrees. He says Bush's decision to bow to conservative pressure and sign legislation authorizing construction of a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border "sent a terrible signal."

Bush backs citizenship for many of the people who are here illegally, as do a number of potential 2008 GOP presidential candidates, including Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Sam Brownback of Kansas. But House **_Republican_** leaders blocked a path to citizenship in the **_immigration_** bill and GOP conservatives such as Indiana's John Hostettler made their opposition a campaign **_issue_**. Some members of the party believe that backfired.

"There has been too much of an anti-immigrant tone," says Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, R-Fla., a Cuban immigrant. He argues that Hispanics are "a natural" **_Republican_** constituency because they are entrepreneurial and socially conservative. But Diaz-Balart adds, "When people start to **_perceive_** that immigrants are being put in the same category as a threat to national security, it's hard to get your message across."

In Hostettler's close race, the six-term congressman appeared with representatives of the Minutemen, a controversial citizens group that has been patrolling the border, and ran ads touting his opposition to "the nightmare of amnesty." In Arizona, **_Republican_** Randy Graf ran an advertisement showing a blonde-haired child walking toward a slowly opening door as a voiceover delivered statistics about crime and other problems caused by the nation's "open door" border.

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Both Hostettler and Graf **_lost_**, a point likely made by House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi when she talked to Bush Thursday. She asked for his help in passing a bipartisan **_immigration_** bill when she and fellow **_Democrats_** start running Congress in January. "Those candidates who ran largely on **_immigration_** did not succeed," she says.

Gabrielle Giffords, the **_Democrat_** who defeated Graf, also carried Cochise County, Ariz., along the U.S.-Mexican border where frustration with **_immigration_** is highest. Gifford says she believes **_voters_** there preferred her because "people want solutions, not slogans."

Immigration could be key in a House race still to be decided. In Texas, GOP incumbent Henry Bonilla is in a runoff with **_Democrat_** Ciro Rodriguez, a former lawmaker, in a district where more than half the population is **_Hispanic_**.

Bonilla is one of only two **_Hispanic_** lawmakers who backed a controversial House bill that would make it a crime to assist illegal immigrants. He says he's taking a get-tough approach to protect his border constituents from crime and illegal drug trafficking.

But Sosa, who lives in the district and describes himself as Bonilla's friend, worries that some **_Hispanic_** residents may misinterpret his stand. "I have told him that in my opinion he should soften his position," Sosa says.

He says the election results don't mean the GOP has **_lost_** the **_Hispanic_** vote. "It means **_Republicans_** need to have a much higher sensitivity about how Latinos feel about their worth and the worth of immigrants," he says.

Contributing: Jill Lawrence

Graphic

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