

The Trump effect: Could Arizona go blue for the first time in 20 years?; Democrats see an opportunity thanks to Latinos galvanized to defeat Trump.

Washington Post Blogs

June 18, 2016 Saturday 4:03 PM EST

Copyright 2016 The Washington Post All Rights Reserved

washingtonpost.com

Length: 1540 words

Byline: Philip Rucker

Body

PHOENIX - If there is one place where the dramas and subplots of Campaign 2016 collide, it is across the sprawling and scorching desert state of Arizona.

Here lives Donald Trump's restive base of white voters unsettled by the country's social transformation and fired up to dismantle Washington's power structure. Here also lies the Democrats' sleeping giant - an estimated 350,000 Latinos who are not registered to vote but who could mobilize against the presumptive Republican presidential nominee over his incendiary rhetoric.

Then there are the politicians. One senator, Jeff Flake (R), is a vocal Trump critic sounding the alarm about an electoral wipeout. The other, John McCain (R), -alternates awkwardly between his maverick persona and a Trump apologist as he navigates an unexpectedly difficult reelection race. Also on the ballot is Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a Trump backer whose long crusade against undocumented immigrants makes him a lightning rod.

This leaves the Democrats - who have withered away as the state took a hard-right turn in the Obama era - sensing their best chance in two decades to turn Arizona and its 11 electoral votes blue. They think that Trump, who campaigned in Phoenix on Saturday, is energizing a new generation of Latino voters who haven't participated in elections before.

"Everything that needs to happen on the ground is happening," said Fred DuVal, a longtime Democratic power broker here.

There is no recent reliable public polling in Arizona, but Democratic and Republican strategists said private research shows the presidential race as a toss-up.

Asked whether presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton has a path to victory here, GOP strategist Charles Coughlin conceded: "I believe it's there if she wanted to do it. Everybody always says, 'This is the election when Latinos turn out,' and it's never happened. But I can actually see that happening this time."

For now, the Clinton campaign is not targeting Arizona as a battleground state; its current advertising blitz includes eight other swing states.

Still, Clinton has hired Rodd McLeod, who ran former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords's campaigns here, as state director for the general election. He is recruiting half a dozen staffers, according to local Democratic officials, while the state party's coordinated campaign has deployed a field staff of about 70.

The Trump effect: Could Arizona go blue for the first time in 20 years?; Democrats see an opportunity thanks to Latinos galvanized to defeat Trump.

The Clinton team is assessing trends in Arizona to determine whether to make greater investments here, and officials were cagey when asked to detail their strategy. In a statement, Marlon Marshall, the director of state campaigns and political engagement, stuck to the Clinton campaign's national talking points: "We're hearing real doubts from voters in Arizona about Donald Trump's plans for a deportation force and his dangerous agenda on national security."

Clinton's footprint appears to be greater than Trump's. His state director, Charles Munoz, is based in Nevada, and a visit last week to Trump headquarters in Mesa revealed little evidence of an active campaign. There was one worker eating lunch at his desk, a roomful of empty cubicles and, other than a small pile of plastic yard signs, no Trump paraphernalia, brochures or fliers. The GOP's coordinated campaign has only one staffer, though party officials boast of an active volunteer corps and plans to soon open 14 offices.

The Trump campaign and Republican officials argue that carrying Arizona is pure Clinton fantasy.

"Arizona will stay red," Arizona Republican Party Chairman Robert Graham declared. "The progressive left should avoid the state of Arizona because it's a bad investment."

At GOP headquarters here in Phoenix the other day, executive director Avinash Iragavarapu presented a slide show with data to argue his case for why putting Arizona in play is "all big talk and wishful thinking." He pointed to the GOP's roughly 200,000-person advantage in voter registration as well as historical patterns: In 2012, for instance, Mitt Romney defeated President Obama, 54 percent to 44 percent.

Former Arizona governor Jan Brewer - considered the state's most popular Republican and a leading Trump surrogate - said Trump resonates here because he is speaking directly to voters' fury and anxieties.

"People in Arizona like straight shooters, no pun intended, and Mr. Trump speaks the simple truth in very straightforward terms," Brewer said. "I don't agree with everything that he says and the way that he says it, but in my opinion, he's a breath of fresh air."

"Everywhere I go, whether it be at malls or at Costco, people come up to me and are very, very excited about Donald Trump," she added.

But Trump is also a one-man motivator for Latinos, who make up about 30 percent of the state's population but just 18 percent of the electorate in the last presidential election.

"The climate is ripe for something to happen here. . . . When we're out there, the name Donald Trump elicits a response, and most of the time it's a negative one," said Francisco Heredia, national field director of Mi Familia Vota, a Phoenix-based organization that tries to increase Latino civic engagement. The group will begin a major voter registration drive later this month.

Surveys show that Clinton enjoys a 3-to-1 advantage over Trump among Latino voters. Flake, who is up for reelection in 2018, warned of the long-term consequences of Trump's inflammatory rhetoric about Hispanic immigrants.

"We can't afford to alienate and demonize the largest-growing demographic out there," Flake said, drawing a historical parallel. "Back in the '60s, we Republicans lost the African American vote that we still haven't gained back."

Asked what Trump could do to ensure a win in Arizona, Flake said: "Come up with a more realistic immigration policy than build a wall and make the Mexican government pay for it, walk back the Muslim ban, stop talking about getting rid of libel laws. Should I go on? I think we're not in a good position. I think Mr. Trump is not where he needs to be to win a general election."

Arizona is not the only red state where Trump is vulnerable. In Georgia, Democrats dream of capitalizing on the large black and growing Latino populations to put the state in play. And in Utah, one of the nation's most solidly

The Trump effect: Could Arizona go blue for the first time in 20 years?; Democrats see an opportunity thanks to Latinos galvanized to defeat Trump.

Republican states, a recent poll had the race tied. Resistance to Trump among Mormons, who make up a majority of Utah's voters, is intense; Romney is a leader of the "Never Trump" movement.

The Mormon resistance may have an effect in Arizona as well. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints counts more than 400,000 members here, which is roughly 6 percent of the state's population. If enough Mormons vote against Trump or stay home, it would depress his vote total.

The swing vote here traditionally is moderate Republican women - and doubts about Trump's character have softened his support with this bloc. Arizona has a celebrated history of electing female executives, including Brewer and her predecessor, Democrat Janet Napolitano, which is another reason Clinton's allies feel bullish.

That is why Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick (D) is encouraged about her underdog race to unseat McCain. Kirkpatrick's strategy is to saddle McCain with Trump's baggage and convince Arizonans that their senior senator has lost his independence.

"The fact that John McCain supports Trump is just another example that he's changed, that he's not the maverick," Kirkpatrick said. "He wouldn't even stand up to Donald Trump when Trump insulted him. He's not going to stand up for us."

McCain declined a request to be interviewed for this article.

The last Democrat to win Arizona in a presidential election was Bill Clinton in 1996, and friends here said he sees it as a personal crusade to help his wife carry the state this year. He made several trips to Arizona this spring and is planning to return for a fundraiser in a few weeks, local Democrats said.

But even if he and others smell opportunity, party strategists think it is unlikely that Clinton would fully invest here because other battleground states, such as Ohio, will always be higher priorities.

"It's very unlikely that Arizona will be the 270th electoral vote. If it does go blue, it's more likely to be the 357th electoral vote," said Mitch Stewart, a senior official on Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns. "Even though there is likely an opportunity, Arizona will likely be towards the back of the line as far as battleground states and money that's being spent."

Still, Arizona Democrats think they can galvanize anti-Trump voters without the resources of a presidential targeting operation.

Activists gathered at a Mexican restaurant in Phoenix one night last week for a meeting of the local Democracy for America chapter were almost gleeful about their good fortune. Donna Stebbins, the group's leader, said she normally has to be prolific on social media for messages about the campaign to break through. But not this time.

"People are so animated here," she said. "With what Donald's doing, we don't even have to post much. 'Donald Trump is having a no good, very bad week' - that's all I posted today."

Said state Rep. Jonathan Larkin, a Latino Democrat: "Trump has given us a lot to work with, that's for sure."

philip.rucker@washpost.com

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Web Blog

The Trump effect: Could Arizona go blue for the first time in 20 years?; Democrats see an opportunity thanks to Latinos galvanized to defeat Trump.

Subject: VOTERS & VOTING (91%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2012 (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); ELECTIONS (90%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2016 (90%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (89%); US ELECTORAL COLLEGE (78%); POLITICAL CANDIDATES (78%); HEADS OF GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS (77%); TRENDS (77%); POLITICS (77%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (76%); IMMIGRATION (68%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (68%); DEPORTATION (68%); NATIONAL SECURITY (60%)

Industry: MARKETING CAMPAIGNS (73%); MARKETING & ADVERTISING (73%)

Person: DONALD TRUMP (89%); JEFF FLAKE (79%); HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON (79%); JOHN MCCAIN (58%); GABRIELLE GIFFORDS (57%)

Geographic: PHOENIX, AZ, USA (73%); ARIZONA, USA (95%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: June 20, 2016