

BUSH LOOKS TO DIVIDE INS WOOLING LATINOS, HE SAYS AGENCY'S 'MIXED SIGNALS' ARE A PROBLEM

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Byline: RON HUTCHESON, Mercury News Washington Bureau

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Body

Texas Gov. George W. **Bush** told a Latino audience Monday that he intends to split the Immigration and Naturalization Service into two **agencies** to help ease the way for legal immigrants.

In a speech to the League of United Latin American Citizens, **Bush said** the **agency's** dual role of enforcing immigration laws while processing legal immigrants "sends **mixed signals** to the people we're trying to help."

The Republican presidential candidate also distanced himself from anti-immigration forces by denouncing the "English only" movement. While **Bush said** he supports border enforcement, the thrust of his remarks was to strongly endorse immigration and cultural diversity.

The nation's 32 million **Latinos** are the fastest-growing segment of the American population. They are expected to cast 5.4 percent of November's vote. Their growing political strength, especially **in** mega-states California, Texas, New York and Florida, makes them a top target for both major political parties. Vice President Al Gore is scheduled to speak to the LULAC convention Friday.

Bush's outreach to Latino voters has been a hallmark of his political career **in** Texas. It illustrates his effort to project "compassionate conservatism," a stance that broadens his political appeal beyond that of such Republicans as former California Gov. Pete Wilson, whose strident opposition to Mexican immigrants alienated them from the GOP.

LULAC, which claims 115,000 members, is the nation's oldest and largest Latino group.

"Texas is a better place for the Hispanic influence," **Bush said**. "Family values don't stop at the Rio Grande river. People are coming to America because they are moms and dads trying to feed their children. As long as people are coming to feed their families, our country must be mindful that they're human beings as well."

Bush said splitting the **INS** would let one **agency** focus on law enforcement while the other concentrated on service to legal immigrants and foreign visitors.

"People ought to be asking the question, 'How can I help you, what can I do to help you fill out paperwork?' We ought to be **saying** loud and clear to people that the **INS** is to help families and to help people understand the maze of rules and regulations," he **said**.

Bush received a standing ovation.

His Democratic rival criticized his proposal, as did anti-immigration groups, for different reasons.

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"We don't need to create another bureaucracy," **said** Doug Hattaway, a Gore representative. "We can strike the right balance between law enforcement and customer service under a streamlined **INS**."

Hattaway **said** the Clinton administration is working with Congress on a plan that would establish separate lines of authority for the two roles within the **INS**.

Ira Mehlman, a Los Angeles-based representative of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a leading anti-immigration group, **said Bush's** emphasis on customer service is misplaced.

"The customer here is the American public. When you start viewing immigrants as customers, it changes the whole dynamic," Mehlman **said**. "We are the people who are offering this privilege to people from other countries."

In rejecting efforts to make English the nation's official language, **Bush said** he favors "English plus" programs that promote bilingualism.

"English-plus **says** we're all Americans, and proudly so."

Democrats countered **Bush's** message of open arms to immigrants by attacking his record **in** Texas. State Sen. Mario Gallegos of Houston accused **Bush** of ignoring the plight of shantytowns along the Texas border with Mexico.

Yet Gallegos acknowledged that **Bush** had made inroads into the traditionally Democratic Latino community. The state lawmaker **said** his trip to Washington was funded by the Texas Democratic Party to help blunt **Bush's** appeal to **Latinos**.

"The guy's got the money. He's going to send the message, and if you don't have anybody countering the message, it sticks. That's been happening," Gallegos **said**. "No more free rides."

Graphic

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PHOTO: ERIC DRAPER -- ASSOCIATED PRESS

George W. **Bush** greets audience members during the League of United Latin American Citizens convention **in** Washington on Monday.

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