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TRPI

The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute

Conference Summary

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New Dimensions of Latino Participation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two pressing circumstances — the debate within the U.S. Congress on comprehensive immigration reform and the spring rallies that drew millions in major American cities — framed the discussion when the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) convened a symposium on “New Dimensions of Latino Participation,” in Washington D.C., June 7, 2006. Those convened included a United States senator, academics from various institutions, political consultants, and leaders from an array of Latino organizations.

One focus of the conversation was the role of Latinos in the U.S. Congress.

Whereas there were no Latino senators in 2004, three Latino senators now serve — Mel Martinez [R-Florida], Robert Menendez [D-New Jersey], and Ken Salazar [D-Colorado]. Participants focused on several other issues, including the need to politically engage the Latino business community, to add Latino voices to the nation’s policy discussions, and to bring into electoral politics the large number of prospective Hispanic voters who are currently not voting.

The central organizing theme of the conference was immigration, particularly recent events in Congress and the reactions in Latino communities. The immigrant

protests of spring 2006 — which brought millions into the streets — were discussed as a new and important energy that needed to be captured, harnessed, and brought within the political process. These protests, however, raised what for the moment appears to be an unanswered question about the range of outlooks within the Latino community itself. Specifically, what level of emotional connection does the more settled Hispanic community have with the issue of immigration reform, what degree of policy agreement existed across the community, and what community resources and organizations exist to create a cohesive Latino position on immigration reform and immigrant settlement?

Within electoral politics, two statements stood out. First, simple demographic trends are working to increase the influence of the Hispanic electorate, an increase that would be notably greater if concerted efforts were made to naturalize prospective Latino voters and to promote electoral participation. Second, at least in the short term, Latino partisanship is moving strongly toward the Democrats. While various reasons for this were discussed, the primary causes cited by the participants were, first, the strong opposition, primarily from Republican members of the House of Representatives, to comprehensive immigration reform, and, second and equally important, the terms of debate in the

Republican-controlled House, which are perceived by many Latinos as punitive and “mean-spirited.” Such terms are often taken by Latinos as an attack not just on immigrants, but also on the Hispanic community more broadly.

Immigration reform — whether enacted or not — will substantially frame what follows for the Hispanic community. If comprehensive reform is enacted, then it will be followed by the enormous task of legalizing, naturalizing, registering and motivating millions along the path to political participation. According to some participants, if comprehensive reform fails — which most present considered the likelier near-term outcome — then efforts to sustain political mobilization on behalf of undocumented individuals will need to be continued. The immigration debate is occurring, and to an extent is being driven by, a rising tide of nativism with the United States. Neither that tide, nor even the prospective creation of a ‘wall’ between this nation and Mexico, will put the question of illegal immigration to rest. That question will remain so long as would-be immigrants are “dying to live” — that is, braving the deserts of the American Southwest in efforts to join themselves to the American dream.

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Summarizing his own remarks to the symposium, U.S. Senator Ken Salazar closed with a thought that recapitulated much of what was said during the day: “Many who have worked on these issues speak of the Hispanic community as a ‘sleeping giant.’ There is a tremendously powerful voice there. We must make sure that that sleeping giant awakens and participates.”

THE ROLE OF LATINO LEADERSHIP

Senator Ken Salazar, one of the authors of the Senate-passed version of the immigration reform bill, described its passage as a hard-fought battle in which “we were not always sure we had the votes.” A coalition of Democratic and Republican supporters had met each

morning to map out strategy. “Poison pill” amendments designed to sink the legislation had been averted. In the end, supporters were able to produce 64 votes in favor of passage.

The Senate reform bill has three legs: First, it would increase border security; second, it would raise enforcement of U.S. domestic labor laws; and third, it would provide an approach — often termed “a pathway to citizenship” — for the 11 million undocumented individuals currently in this country. The third point, Salazar said, was the most controversial, and was at odds with the version passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. The Senator believed 80 percent of Republicans in the House of Representatives were opposed to this provision. He was strongly critical of the House-passed version, which he termed “mean-spirited,” saying, “it would make felons out of 11 million people and anyone who aided them.”

However — or if — the Senate and House versions were resolved, Senator Salazar noted that immigration reform would not go away. The issue involves treating humanely those people who are “dying to live” — that is, people dying in the desert while coming to the United States to share in the American dream. They were, he said, following “generation after generation, wave after wave of immigrants” who shared this ambition.

The immigration debate coincided with the rise of the Hispanic presence within Congress. Both Senator Salazar and Senator Mel Martinez [R-Florida] had taken lead roles on the issue. Each had been first elected in 2004, their elections coming, it was noted, not from states that had traditionally sent many Latinos to Congress — such as California, Texas, and New Mexico — but from Florida and Colorado.

Senator Salazar reported that his own participation in immigration reform had been sought by senators of both parties, including Ted Kennedy [D-Massachusetts] and John McCain [R-Arizona]. Early in his term, Senator Salazar had met privately with Senator McCain. At that meeting, Senator McCain had presented a copy of the Arizona Republic, which reported that 400 people had died in Arizona’s desert while trying to enter the United States. Senator McCain, noting that such events had been happening for years, told Senator Salazar, “We need to find a solution. I want you to be part of that effort.”

Senator Salazar said that his and Senator Martinez's involvement with the issue would continue; both would likely be appointed to the Senate conference committee if one was established to negotiate with its House counterpart. As both are freshman senators, this would be an unusual move, but it reflected recognition that both senators have a distinctive role to play on the issue. He added that cooperation extended beyond immigration reform: his office and that of Senator Martinez commonly consulted on matters of shared concern, and with Hispanic members of the House, as well.

The presence in Congress of three Latino senators [Robert Menendez, appointed to fill a vacant seat in New Jersey, is the third] is one measure of the rise of a new Hispanic leadership. Leadership, participants noted, is a function that extends beyond electoral politics. In some areas, that leadership was more potential than realized. If, said the head of one Latino organization, one looked at the broad range of policy discussion within the country — on budget, social security, and foreign policy — “the lack of Latino voices was startling.” The Latino business community, a source of resources and leadership, has yet to be strongly connected to broader civic and political issues. With regard to the Hispanic electorate, various participants spoke of the numbers who could become citizens, vote, and take part in the policy process, but had not yet done so.

A final form of leadership was noted: leadership in the public arena. The recent street demonstrations manifested a new level of participation. That potential, many stressed, must be realized: The street demonstrations, one stated, “are a beginning point. Latinos must participate more broadly; they need to register to vote and take part in the political life of this country.” This, many noted, would not happen automatically. For example, Proposition 187 in California brought a ‘spike’ in political participation among California Latinos, but little infrastructure was created.

THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION PROTESTS

As the congressional immigration debate proceeded, many of the subjects of that debate marched in demonstrations in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere, the scale and scope of which took much of the nation by surprise. While large, the marches had

their roots; they reflected a decade's work in the Latino community by local advocates of immigration reform, labor unions, the church, and others. The marches, one presenter said, “reflected the organizing work of many people, people not in the spotlight and often overlooked.”

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The marches made two central, implicit statements: “We are visible” and “We are here.” One presenter suggested that given the presence of children, the overwhelming peacefulness and the lack of stridency, the demonstrations could not fairly be termed ‘protest marches.’ They were, rather, “immigrant promenades” that allowed people to take to the public space and make a “luminous statement” of their existence.

One presenter, who represented an organization that seeks to restrict immigration into the United States, argued strongly that the marches had been counterproductive to the goal of immigration reform. The sheer numbers involved dramatized for the general public the scale of the problem; the marchers appeared not as “uninvited guests asking for forgiveness, but as one more grievance organization issuing demands,” and, finally, the “radicalism” of some — signs saying “This is our continent” and the display of Mexican flags — had offended mainstream sensibilities.

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The question was raised of parallels between immigrant rights efforts and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, a speaker noted that the Civil Rights Movement provided inspiration, lessons on organizing, and “the reassuring example” that it too had experienced disagreement within its ranks. On the other hand, a second speaker argued that the place of blacks within American society was unique: however much the definition of ‘mainstream’ had been widened over time, blacks had remained ‘the other.’ The key division

in American life, he noted, was “not between black and white, but between black and non-black.”

A larger question — whose answer was unclear — was how the broader Latino community regarded the immigration issue. One speaker doubted that immigration reform was “the clear, cutting pivotal issue for the Hispanic voter;” a second asked whether “the effervescent motive” that prompted the demonstrators to take to the streets was shared by the native-born Latinos who constitute the bulk of the Latino electorate. Polling data cited show that, over time, the issues of most concern to Latinos are education and the economy; immigration generally ranks lower. One presenter noted that the Hispanic community was fundamentally divided between native-born citizens and newer arrivals. An individual’s view of immigration issues commonly reflected how close to the immigrant experience they personally were.

This distinction is reflected in political attitudes. The native-born — who represent 75 percent of Latino voters — are much more likely to favor stronger border security with Mexico and stricter enforcement of U.S. labor laws for undocumented workers. In one survey, native-born individuals favored hiring more border guards by a 50-41 margin; immigrants, on the other hand, opposed this by a 21-69 margin. Further data reinforced the view that the Hispanic community was not of a single mind on immigration reform: perhaps one-fifth of Hispanic voters believe immigration quotas should be lowered, and one-third believe undocumented workers drive down wages. This mix of perspectives complicates the task of arriving at a single, simple agenda on immigration within the Latino community.

This, in turn, prompted the larger question: “What do Latinos want?” One presenter noted that this question falsely assumed the existence of a “typical Hispanic voter.” What a given Latino wanted, it was noted, depended on whether he or she was born in the United States or when he or she came here; on level of education; and whether he or she is a member of the working poor or a middle class professional. The Latino community’s concerns — with education, employment and social security — were broadly shared across society. This underscored a remark from Henry Cisneros [former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development], “The Hispanic agenda is the American agenda.” One

speaker, a pollster with one of the major political parties, noted that Latinos consisted of “really 40 different communities,” a variety with implications for political expression. Perhaps, a second presenter said, the Latino community was less able to articulate a broad agenda than has the African American community because, for example, “the status of Puerto Rico is not an issue in East Los Angeles.”

But whatever the variety of the Latino community, participants agreed that the community would coalesce if it saw itself as under attack. As multiple speakers noted, while views on immigration reform varied, Latinos generally paid attention to how that issue was discussed. The tone of that discussion serves as “a kind of proxy for what level of respect” an office-holder has for the Latino community. Several speakers noted that “rhetoric that demonizes, mobilizes.” One presenter who had studied Cuban Americans noted that as a group they had not faced the same obstacles to citizenship; therefore, “path to citizenship” was a less pressing issue. However, “Anti-Latino rhetoric mobilizes Cuban Americans.”

WHAT EFFECT WILL THIS HAVE ON THE LATINO VOTE IN 2006 AND 2008?

Whatever issue mobilizes the Latino community, the question remains: What electoral expression will that energy take? For many years the community has been called a “sleeping giant.” Senator Ken Salazar urged that “we should all be wedded to the task” of bringing the energy of the recent demonstrations into a political framework. There were, he noted, five million Latinos eligible for citizenship who had not yet naturalized. If Latinos had the same participation rate as white Americans, 2.7 million new voters would be added. That vote would exercise considerable leverage, as it is concentrated in such key Electoral College states as Texas, California, and Florida. Even without large new registrations, simple demographics will raise Latino influence. Given the current level of support in the Latino community for the Democratic Party, demographic shifts could move Nevada into that party’s column in the near future and Ohio by 2020.

The Hispanic vote is notable not only for its size, but also because it is “persuadable” — that is, not yet “locked in” to either major political party. In 2004, the

Bush campaign noted that the share of undecided Latino voters — perhaps 11 to 14 percent — was considerably greater than for other groups, and focused resources accordingly. The share of the Hispanic vote Bush received was put at 40 percent, higher than the reported 35 percent drawn in 1984 by Ronald Reagan, the previous Republican highpoint.

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Those present disagreed on the basis of Bush's appeal in that election. One argued that it was personal: "His body language, his way of talking, is very Texan; to some degree, he is the first Spanish president" — akin to the way some had described Bill Clinton as the first African American president. A second participant said it reflected the divisions in the Latino community: Bush's gains had come largely among first-generation Hispanics; people with "no history with America." Second- and third-generation Hispanic voters, he added, have stronger linkages with American society, linkages that tie them to the Democratic Party. A third argued for an ideological tie: Hispanics were supportive of cutting taxes, favored extensions in private health care over public expansion, and were conservative on social issues. This last statement was challenged: polling data consistently reported that Latinos held mixed views on abortion, were conservative on gay rights, strongly favored gun control, and strongly favored 'big government' in health care and education. It was agreed that Bush and the Republicans had courted the Latino vote. President Bush, said one, was "sensitive to the issues," and nearly 10 percent of his appointments were Hispanic.

To some minds, GOP gains in 2004 raised the possibility that the Republicans would gain 50 percent of the Hispanic vote in the 2008 election. That prospect, all agreed, had faded. According to one Republican Party activist, the "Republican moment" in the Latino community has passed. Indeed, both liberal and conservatives speakers predicted a "perfect political storm" was brewing for the GOP in the Hispanic community, centering on the unresolved issue of immigration reform. While Bush favored reform, he had been unable to carry his party.

One presenter noted that whatever the president's wishes, "the racist elements in his own party are trying to sabotage reform, and every national figure opposing reform is a Republican."

The GOP's political problem is straightforward: to hold the House of Representatives in the 2006 election, it must retain its conservative base — the group mostly strongly opposed to immigration reform. To win the 2008 presidential election, it must draw 40 percent or more of the Latino vote, the group most likely to be offended by immigration opponents. In this connection, one presenter noted that the "get tough" rhetoric that some Republicans brought to the issue of immigration reform was "just as bad as the immigration bill the House had taken." Little likelihood was held out that the Republican Party would resolve its differences on immigration: the Senate coalition favoring the bill "falls apart if the 'pathway to citizenship' is eliminated, but 'pathway to citizenship'" is at the core of opposition in the House.

A second factor threatens Republican prospects within the Hispanic community. Between 1998 and 2000, the GOP made efforts to recruit Latinos for local political offices — city council, school board, and others — that are the starting rungs of political advancement. That effort has not been sustained. As a consequence, one participant noted, the GOP "literally has no farm club" — no cadre of Latino officeholders who someday could seek higher offices.

Already, there is strong evidence that the Hispanic community is moving toward the Democratic Party. In part, this reflects shifting priorities within that community. In 2003, Latinos rated national security/terrorism as an issue of more concern than jobs/economy by a 60-30 margin. Today, those numbers have reversed. Further, the Democratic Party itself is viewed more favorably. One poll of Latinos gave the Democrats a 41 point advantage as the party "in touch with the Hispanic community;" a Democracy Corps poll of Latinos gave the Democrats a 44 point advantage as being more "accepting of different cultures."

SUMMARY

Dr. Louis DeSipio, of the University of California, Irvine, summarized the day's discussion into a series of observations. He conceded that the immigration debate

was central to the future of the Latino community, but asserted a central point had been missed — the greatly increased role Latinos would themselves play in shaping that event. This reflected both the new leadership role of Latinos in Congress and the spread of what he termed a “new tier” of Latino organizations, the hometown associations that had “formed out of immigrant aspirations and hopes.” Given this, “both elected and unelected individuals are ensuring there is a Latino voice in the advocacy that needs to be done.”

Dr. DeSipio noted that the “American agenda” had expressed itself in recurring waves of nativism: the Alien and Sedition Acts at the turn of the 19th century; the Know Nothing movement in the 1850s; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; and in the restrictions on immigration in the 1920s. Currently, a nativist wave appeared to be rising. He characterized the earlier waves as brief in duration and narrow in target. The wave in the 1920s, however, had been long-term and made a major impact on American life. He regarded the current wave as likely to be longstanding. This, he said, offered an opportunity: “The longer the debate, the increased opportunity there is for immigrants to organize.”

Dr. DeSipio stated that however the current immigration reform debate was resolved, that resolution would frame what followed. If no bill passed, action would focus on the actors already engaged. Protest organizers would

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seek ways to continue to attract attention, alliances would be built with the ‘second, the third and beyond’ generations of Hispanics, and registration and voter education would become core issues.

If a reform bill is passed, the circumstance will be more complicated. Earlier immigration reform legalized three million people, but at least one-half of these did not complete the naturalization process and become citizens. The Senate immigration bill, he noted, did not create a path to citizenship; it created a path to permanent residency. Major community efforts would be required to move such individuals into full citizenship.

His view was that immigration reform would not be enacted this year or next. The issue, then, would remain. The building of a ‘fence’ on the border would not end unauthorized immigration. If, as he thought possible, the current nativist wave lead to restrictions on legal immigration, then those very restrictions would raise the pressure for illegal immigration. He closed by returning to his starting point: that the Latino community itself would be the shaper of its future.

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TRPI Mission Statement

The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute advances informed policy on key issues affecting Latino communities through objective and timely research contributing to the betterment of the nation.

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