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Unregistered Hispanic voters lean to Democrats

BY CASEY WOODS

The longer a Latino is in the United States, the more likely he or she will identify with the Democratic Party -- possibly even in Florida, where the Republican leanings of Cuban Americans have made it an exception to the national trend, a new study states.

"Florida is distinctive, as we know, but there are still elements of that Democratic advantage even in the state of Florida for all Latinos, especially in terms of the potential of registering new individuals," said Luis Fraga, a University of Washington political science professor who worked on the survey. "For those who are citizens and not registered to vote . . . the Democrats have a potential advantage even in the state of Florida."

Among Florida's Hispanic U.S. citizens who are not registered to vote, 32 percent identify with the Democratic Party and 24 percent identify with the Republican Party, according to the Latino National Survey. Nationally, 42 percent of unregistered Hispanic citizens lean Democrat, while 16 percent lean Republican.

HISPANIC ATTITUDES

The study was drawn from more than 8,600 phone interviews conducted nationwide with Hispanics in 2006, covering attitudes on topics including pan-ethnic identity, assimilation and political parties. Its researchers bill it as the "largest social science survey ever conducted" on Latinos in the United States.

On the issue of culture, the study found that more than 90 percent of Hispanics or Latinos -- whether newly arrived immigrants or U.S. citizens who are second- or third-generation Hispanic -- believe English should be learned to assimilate into U.S. society. A similar percentage wanted to maintain their fluency in Spanish and ties to their culture.

But, in these fluid political times, what's happening now -- particularly in the presidential campaigns -- was the hottest post-presentation discussion topic.

PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

Of particular interest: the debate over the Hispanic vote in the heated race for the Democratic presidential nomination between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Some, including local pollster Sergio Bendixen, who is now working with Clinton, have suggested in the past that Hispanic voters have not shown an "affinity" for black candidates.

"It's a ludicrous claim that Latinos won't vote for a black candidate," said professor Gary Segura, a University of Washington professor. "The Clinton campaign is pushing the argument that Obama could be unelectable in the general election."

The researchers presented the findings at a breakfast meeting at the Miami City Club in downtown Miami hosted by Florida International University's Metropolitan Center and Maurice Ferré, a former Miami-Dade County commissioner and former mayor of Miami.

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