



November 2, 2006

To: Editorial writers, producers, reporters, columnists
Fr: Dr. Robert P. Jones, Director and Senior Fellow
Center for American Values in Public Life at People For the American Way Foundation
Re: Latinos on Values, Religion, and 2006 Vote: Findings from the American Values Survey

A national survey conducted in August by the Center for American Values in Public Life at People For the American Way Foundation explored the intersection between religion, values, and political behavior among American voters. The American Values Survey includes responses from a national sample of 2,502 Americans, with additional over-samples of Hispanics and African Americans. The Latino sample included 500 respondents.

The survey found that Latino likely voters are solidly supporting Democratic candidates in the 2006 midterm elections and that Latinos hold more progressive views than the general population on a range of issues, including controversial social issues such as specific legal rights for same-sex couples.

Prospective 2006 Vote and Party Affiliation

Exit polling data from 2004 indicated that Latinos voted for Democrat John Kerry over Republican George Bush 53 to 44 percent. In 2006, Hispanics appear to be supporting Democrats by an even greater margin (59 to 24 percent). This 35-point Democratic advantage among Latino likely voters is twice the margin for the public as a whole. Beneath that large margin is evidence that many Latinos are moving further away from swing voter status and becoming part of the Democratic base. A plurality of Latinos identify as Democrat (35 percent) with another third identifying as independent. Only 20 percent of Latinos identify as Republican.

Hispanic Catholics are an even stronger Democratic voting block. In 2004 they reported voting for Kerry over Bush (69 to 31 percent) while Hispanic Protestants reported voting for Bush over Kerry 63 to 37 percent. Among that latter group, only 30 percent plan to vote for a Republican congressional candidate (23 percent are undecided), an enormous drop-off.

Not all of these moves away from the GOP, however, have translated into direct Democratic gains. The 20-point drop in support for Republicans between 2004 and 2006 has only translated into a 6 point gain for Democrats, with 17 percent of Latino likely voters remaining undecided.

Values and Issues

Latinos, like Americans generally, place jobs and the economy at the top of a list of issues that would be most important in deciding how to vote. Abortion and gay marriage ranked at the very bottom of top priorities, for Hispanics (chosen as top priority by 3 percent) and Americans generally (5 percent). Hispanics are slightly more likely to cite Medicare and Social Security,

health care, and immigration, and slightly less likely to cite the war in Iraq or terrorism, but they broadly reflect the concerns of the public as a whole.

When asked to choose which kinds of issues are more important in the United States today, issues like poverty and health care or abortion and gay marriage, nearly three-quarters of Hispanics (73 percent) chose poverty and health care. That very strong number is slightly lower than the public as a whole (85 percent), whites (84 percent), or African Americans (93 percent), and likely reflects higher Hispanic opposition to abortion. Overall the survey indicates that while Hispanics are more likely to support legal restrictions on abortion, very few cite abortion as the most important issue in deciding their vote.

For most Latinos, like most Americans, voting on values does not mean voting against gay and lesbian rights. When asked what comes to mind when they think about voting their values, only 8 percent chose restricting access to abortion and 7 percent chose keeping marriage between a man and a woman. These issues ranked far below the honesty and integrity of the candidate (33 percent), eliminating poverty and guaranteeing access to health care (25 percent), and protecting personal freedoms and individual choices (19 percent). The proportions were similar to those of the public at large, with Hispanics more likely to cite abortion and slightly more likely to cite poverty and health care.

Latinos' views on LGBT issues are complex. By more than two to one (64 percent to 30 percent), Hispanics agree that gays and lesbians in long-term committed relationships should be able to have the same rights as married couples in areas of hospital visitation, health insurance, and pension coverage. This support is higher than the general public, which supports family recognition for gay and lesbian couples but by a somewhat smaller margin of 58 percent to 38 percent. Among major religious groups, Hispanic Catholics are the strongest advocates of providing specific legal rights for same-sex couples.

Hispanic support for same-sex marriage generally mirrors broader public opinion on this issue, with 26 percent favoring marriage, 33 percent favoring civil unions, and 35 percent favoring no legal recognition. When those who did not support marriage equality were provided a guarantee that no church or congregation would be forced to marry same-sex couples, support for allowing these couples to legally marry climbs from 26 to 42 percent; this 16 point increase in support was larger among Hispanics than any other racial, ethnic or religious group. Overall, Americans initially support marriage equality at 28%, rising to 40% with the guarantee that churches would not be forced to marry same-sex couples. Hispanics, however, are slightly more conservative on the issue of adoption by qualified gay and lesbian adults; while the public is evenly divided, a slim majority of Latinos oppose equal adoption rights.

On a range of issues that draw supermajority support from the public at large, Hispanics are even more strongly in favor of progressive policies and principles: guaranteed health insurance (77 percent Hispanic support); a minimum wage hike to \$7.25 an hour (92 percent Hispanic support); good diplomacy as the best way to ensure peace (72 percent Hispanic support); and stricter environmental laws and regulations (81 percent Hispanic support).

Differences between U.S. and Foreign-Born Hispanics

There are significant differences in public opinion between U.S.-born Hispanics and foreign-born Hispanics. Ironically, given the anti-immigrant fervor employed as a campaign tactic by many ultra-conservative candidates, foreign-born Hispanics hold more conservative positions on a number of issues.

While U.S.-born Hispanics are as likely as the public to think the country is off on the wrong track (69 percent), only 48 percent of foreign-born Hispanics think this, a 21-point difference. And while U.S.-born Hispanics are less likely to approve of President Bush's job performance (32 percent approve, 60 percent disapprove) than the public at large (38 percent approve, 55 percent disapprove), foreign-born Hispanics have slightly more favorable views of the President's job performance (40 percent approve, 46 percent disapprove).

On abortion, the views of U.S.-born Hispanics are generally in line with the rest of the public, while foreign-born Hispanics hold considerably more conservative views. Thirty-eight percent of U.S.-born Hispanics believe abortion should be legal always or most of the time, compared to only 11 percent of foreign-born Latinos and 37 percent of the public. Many more foreign-born Hispanics believe abortion should be illegal except in cases of rape, incest or a woman's life (64 percent foreign-born, 43 percent U.S.-born; 47 percent of the public) and illegal with no exceptions (23 percent foreign born; 17 percent U.S.-born; 13 percent of the public).

Gender and Generation Gaps

Hispanic men are significantly more likely to approve of President Bush's job performance (45 percent) than Hispanic women (27 percent). Hispanic men are nearly twice as likely to think the country is headed in the right direction (27 percent to 15 percent) than Hispanic women, although majorities of both believe that things have gotten off track.

Not surprisingly, those attitudes are reflected in a higher percentage of women than men who are planning to vote for Democratic congressional candidates, though the voting gap is smaller than the opinion gap. Two-thirds of women and 52 percent of men plan to vote Democratic (a 14 point gap), though 24 percent of both plan to vote Republican. Many more men are undecided.

Hispanics, like other Americans, reflect major generational divides on some social issues. For example, 63 percent of Hispanics 60 and over oppose adoption by qualified gay and lesbian adults, while a solid majority of Hispanics under 30 (59 percent) support equal adoption rights.

Religious Affiliation and Orientation

The majority of Latinos are Roman Catholic (65 percent) and a growing number are Protestant (22 percent). The American Values Survey classifies respondents using four broad religious orientations (traditionalists, centrists, modernists, and secular), which are based on a set of questions on religious belief, behavior, and the importance of religion to people's lives. Latinos are more likely than the public to be classified as centrists (57 percent compared to 50 percent of the public) and slightly less likely to be classified as either traditionalist or secular. When asked to self-identify, Latino Christians are more likely to say that they are liberal/progressive than traditional (30 percent vs. 27 percent), a significant difference from Christians overall who identify as more traditional than liberal/progressive (41 percent vs. 27 percent).