



Election Priorities: Latinos vs. Blacks

By Matt Sanchez

The multi-ethnic American unity that resulted from the “melting pot” of the 19th and early 20th Centuries has long-since cooled into the fuzzy landscape of identity politics. The racial middleman, the Hispanic-American, has been more likely to identify with white Americans than blacks. Like the categories for a national census, the 2008 race for the White House has become a demand to be counted by color. The rivalry between somewhat “black” and sometimes “brown” is a political contest that may stereotype the future of American politics.

There is a pride among Hispanics that causes tension between them and blacks. It is politically correct to deny that this tension exists. But it is real nevertheless.

“The average Latino is very geared toward the American dream. They overcame a lot of obstacles to get here and they want to work hard to improve their lives,” said Armin (not his real name) a hedge fund manager for one of New York's most prominent financial institutions. Born in Cuba, Armin speaks proudly of how his parents lost everything and fled to New York from the Castro government. It's a sad story, but with a strong pride of self-reliance and a deep disdain for communism, most Cubans Americans will end the tale on a happy note. A financial and social “they lived happily ever after.”

For many Hispanics, the main reason for coming to the United States is to work. The idea is to earn both a living and a bit of stability, two things often denied in many developing Latin American nations. “The work ethic is why many Hispanic Americans have tension with African Americans,” said Armin. “I'm not even sure black Americans even believe in the American Dream.”

In just over two years in the Senate and a sparse public record, questions of whether Obama has the experience to become the president are valid, but less discussed is whether the senator from Illinois merits consideration for the job. There is almost a sense of entitlement to the Obama claim to the American presidency, an entitlement felt by black voters out of historic injury and conceded by many white voters out of social guilt. To some Hispanics, the Obama candidacy is perceived as the presidential version of Affirmative Action, and like any government entitled program there is always someone benefiting at the expense of another.

A Duke University study of the racial attitudes between African Americans and Latinos revealed that “58.9 percent of Latinos felt few or almost no blacks are hard-working.”

Mexican president, Vicente Fox, created a small scandal when he noted that Latinos in the United States will do work “that not even blacks will do.” This figure of speech has worked its way into Spanish and is commonly repeated throughout the United States. In New York, where Hispanics outnumber blacks, it is difficult to ignore that there are few Latino beggars on the streets, and fewer black busboys in the restaurants.

“As a community, I just don't trust them” said “Daniela,” a Hispanic caller to a local Los Angeles NPR station. “To have a black president would make the black community feel like they own the entire country.” This state-

ment was given anonymously when uncomfortable truths about racial divides are more likely to be openly expressed.

There is some statistical data to back Daniela's mistrust. According to the Duke University study led by political science professor Paula D. McClain, 56.9 percent of Latinos polled felt few or almost no blacks could be trusted. The shocking part of the study was that it was taken in Durham, North Carolina and among newly arrived immigrants who had very little previous exposure to black populations.

Not All Latinos Are the Same

"There is a growing interest among Latinos in the Obama candidacy," said Luis Maes, the National Coordinator for Latinos for Obama, a group associated with the Democratic National Committee Hispanic Caucus under the 'Casa Blanca Project.'

Born in Columbia and raised in the United States, Luis Maes is a rare Hispanic political guru who has worked on campaigns both here and throughout Latin America.

When asked about the tensions between the black and Hispanic communities Mr. Maes was quick to reply. "I call these community problems "black and brown issues," said Mr. Maes. "We both know the Latinos in the United States are a diverse group." Maes is correct that "Latino" or "Hispanic" is an umbrella term used for a variety of peoples extending from Chile to Puerto Rico. "Support for a candidate is a little more complex than how the media portrays it."

Nevertheless, Hispanics do have common ground, and the majority of them, with the notable exception of Cuban-Americans, do vote Democrat. In 1989, Latino New York voters overwhelmingly supported the first black mayoral candidate over his Republican rival, Rudolph Guliani. Coming out of the violent 1980s, New Yorkers believed a black leader could help solve the racial tensions that had plagued the city. Unfortunately, Mayor Dinkins' term was marked by deep racial strife. Dinkins' Latino support dropped from 75% to 62%, enough to hand the mayoralty over to a Republican in a town where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by over five to one.

In Harlem, renowned for the historical Harlem Renaissance, blacks are no longer the majority as new arrivals from the Dominican Republic and Mexico dominate whole neighborhoods.

Formerly black-owned barbershops are a gathering point for the new communities. More than a place to get a haircut, many Dominicans will spend their free-time at a barbershop discussing sports, business and politics.

At one shop, I spoke to a few men hanging around. Although Ruben could physically pass for an African American, he sees the differences between blacks and Hispanics as more than skin deep. "Latinos care a lot more about the family," he surmised, and many Hispanics agree.

In New York, Hispanics are arriving in great numbers, as black Americans who flooded the city after the 1st World War begin to move out. Geographically, the African American population is moving and consolidating in enclaves, many are returning to the South, but Hispanics are going to where the jobs are. In New York's Long Island, the Mexican population has grown exponentially and shows no signs of abating.

"We're 'opening paths' said Ruben proudly about the growth of the Dominican community in Harlem. The men waiting on the wooden bench for their weekly haircuts agreed.

"78% of Latinos say that they have the most in common with whites and the least in common with blacks,"

said professor McClain, citing the Duke University study.

"We're actually pretty depressed about a lot of our findings," she told the university newspaper.

In the struggle for political and social climbing blacks and Latino consider each other as rivals and non-minority Americans as referees. In today's democratic race, the color white is truly perceived as neutral and it shows. In California, the country's most populated state and home to the largest concentration of Hispanic voters, Hillary won the Latino vote by a margin of nearly 3 to 1.

"The groups that are having the most tension are low-income Latinos and low-income blacks," said Latinos for Obama representative Luis Maes.

Maes feels most Hispanics are simply choosing the Clinton brand over Obama strictly due to name-recognition. With the increase in publicity, Obama has become more popular among Latino voters, he comfortably won the Latino vote during the "Potomac Primaries."

Maes feels education may play a role, although this observation comes from his personal political acumen rather than any empirical statistical data.

"It just seems that the more educated the Latino voter is, the more they get to know Obama," said Maes who has a master's degree making him a small minority among many Latinos who often do not complete high school. "Latino voters will vote for Obama if they get to know him."