

Latino Voting in 2010 Partisanship, Immigration Policy, and the Tea Party

By James G. Gimpel

This *Backgrounder* makes three straightforward points. First, gains for Republicans as the result of Latino support in the 2010 election were, at best, modest. The gains were more notable in some races than in others, but overall the results remained consistent with historical patterns, in spite of the impressive gains made by the GOP among other voters. Latino voters, like other voters, continue to be driven primarily by party identification when they cast their ballots. Swing voting is not dramatic, though inter-election fluctuations in enthusiasm and turnout are more notable.

Second, whatever gains Republicans did make among Latinos had little to do with immigration policy, or policy positions taken for or against more generous immigration. To be sure, the recruitment of Latino Republican candidates helped marginally, as Hispanics, like other ethnic voters, often use surname cues to guide their vote when they are otherwise undecided. However, a fundamental lesson from this election is that Republicans can gain vote share among Latinos not by taking dramatically different positions on immigration policy, but when they recruit credible Hispanic candidates to run for major offices.

Finally, Hispanic voters were largely oblivious to the Tea Party movement during 2010, with a large share expressing no opinion about these myriad local groups and their issues. Overall, support for Republicans in locations with high Tea Party activity was neither higher nor lower than for Republicans in other locations. Their mixed reaction appears to correspond to research suggesting that Latinos were not particularly enthusiastic about going to the polls in 2010, with turnout running below 2006 levels (Lopez 2010a).

Overall Results

The national results have already been digested in previous papers and studies (Lopez 2010). In summary, exit polls indicated that Latinos cast 38 percent of their votes for Republicans in U.S. House races, compared with 60 percent for white non-Latinos (<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls.main/#>, accessed October 13, 2011). For the individual U.S. Senate races, Latino Republican support ranged as high as 55 percent for Marco Rubio in Florida, to the high-teens in the two New York contests. In California, Carly Fiorina won an estimated 29 percent of the Latino vote, and John McCain won 40 percent in Arizona. Even Sharon Angle, the Tea Party candidate who narrowly lost to Harry Reid, won 30 percent of the Hispanic vote in Nevada.

Governors' races were largely consistent with the Senate contests. In Nevada, Hispanic Republican Brian Sandoval reportedly won 33 percent of the Latino vote, slightly better than Angle. In spite of supposed blow-back from her support for Arizona's controversial new immigration law (Archibold 2010) Governor Jan Brewer won an estimated 28 percent of the Latino vote, not much less than the support received by Angle and Sandoval next door. Interestingly, Rick Perry in Texas did far better than Sandoval, winning an estimated 38 percent of the Latino vote against a Democrat, Bill White, who had made Hispanic support a cornerstone of his campaign. No exit polling results are available for the New Mexico governor's race, in which Republican Susana Martinez won a 54-46 per-



cent victory, but estimates of her Hispanic vote share according to late polling placed it in the 37-40 percent range (Haussamen 2010a, 2010b; Gomez 2010).

What is remarkable about the Latino vote for U.S. Senate in 2010 is how consistent it was with past results. It remained within a historically steady range, largely independent of the idiosyncrasies and personalities in particular campaigns. This stability reinforces the idea that the Latino vote is stable and predictable, guided mainly by party loyalty, shaped by the variable level of turnout from contest-to-contest, but mostly unmoved by issue appeals and campaign themes. In the following pages, I will lay out more evidence of this invariance, in addition to what I have written in previous CIS reports.

Past Mid-Term Results: Looking Back at 2006

It's easy to believe that Marco Rubio's 55 percent performance among Florida's Latinos was extraordinary only if you forget about 2006, the previous mid-term election. Viewed with recent electoral history in mind, however, this general election performance isn't very remarkable considering that Charlie Crist won 49 percent of Latino votes in his gubernatorial bid just four years before. Although it is true that Rubio faced two candidates in 2010 — Kendrick Meek (D) and Crist (I) — while Crist only faced one in 2006, last year Crist still managed to win 25 percent of the Latino vote, with Meek taking 20.

Ironically, New York in 2006 was a better year for Republicans among Latino voters than 2010, even though 2006 was widely understood to be a strong Democratic year. The same could be said for California, where Arnold Schwarzenegger won 39 percent of the Latino vote in his first regular election in 2006, performing far better than last year's candidate, Fiorina. Similarly, in Arizona, Republican Senate incumbent Jon Kyl won 41 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2006, while the Republican gubernatorial nominee that year took 26 percent. In sum, it is not unprecedented for a popular Republican incumbent to win 40 percent or more of the Latino vote in Arizona and do even better in Florida. The precedent is quite recent, in fact.

By the standard of 2006, then, Latino support for Republicans in 2010 looks considerably more ordinary than some accounts would suggest. While the white non-Hispanic vote was tipping lopsidedly in favor of Republicans across the country — Mark Kirk in Illinois, Roy Blunt in Missouri, Kelly Ayotte in New Hampshire, and Rob Portman in Ohio — sweeping each of them to 60 percent-plus victories, the Hispanic vote remained about where it had been in previous years. With the exception of Rubio, Hispanic vote shares for Republicans were distributed from the low teens to the low-40s, the same as in previous midterms.

Why in the *very* Republican year of 2010 was the GOP performance among Latinos so typical, so predictable? Several reasons stand out and I address them in turn.

The Durability of Party Identification

The first one has been oft repeated in several previous CIS publications (Gimpel 2003; 2004; 2007; 2009): The Hispanic vote is heavily Democratic, and party identification is the principal predictor of vote choice. Party identification, in turn, is very stable, mainly because voters don't revisit it very often. Party affiliation has been called a "standing decision" by political scientists, more akin to identity than to opinion (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Key and Munger 1959). Partisan commitments also increase with age as attachment is reinforced rather than weakened through the life-cycle (Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg 2008, Chap 7; Stoker and Jennings 2008; Jennings and Markus 1984; Converse 1969). Changes in party identification occur mostly in younger people, and among those with very weak attachments to begin with.

Fluctuations in the percentage of Latinos voting Republican or Democratic in recent years have more to do with the varying level of engagement among partisans in each camp rather than the persuasive power of a particular

campaign. There is not very much evidence showing that voters engage in “policy voting” — taking candidates’ issue positions into account when casting their vote — once their basic partisan predispositions are taken into account.

Take the controversial Arizona law against illegal immigration as an example. Is there any evidence that opposition to that law was influential on decisionmaking in the 2010 election, either in Arizona or elsewhere? To answer this question, we use widely available polling data and standard statistical methods. There is no reliance here on secret, internal polling, or elaborate methods involving hidden or poorly understood assumptions.

First, according to more than one survey, Latinos themselves were hardly unanimous in opposition to the Arizona law. For instance, tabulations from a May 2010 NBC-Telemundo survey with a Hispanic oversample found the Hispanic population somewhat divided on the matter, with 30 percent reporting either moderate or strong support, perhaps surprising since only 26 percent of the Latino respondents were Republican identifiers. This margin increased slightly to 34 percent when considering only the Latino respondents who were registered voters (see Table 1).

Table 1. Latino Support for Arizona Illegal Immigration Law

Response	All Latinos	Registered Voters
Strongly Support	18.7 %	21.3 %
Somewhat Support	11.7 %	13.0 %
Somewhat Oppose	7.0 %	7.0 %
Strongly Oppose	58.3 %	53.9 %
Not Sure/Don't Know	4.3 %	4.8 %
Total	100.0 %	100.0
N	300	230

Source: NBC-Telemundo Immigration Survey, May 2010.

The important question is whether views on policy have any impact on how people vote. To test this, Table 2 (p. 4) presents results of a simple regression analysis of intended vote for U.S. House on party identification and opinions about the Arizona law. The first two columns of the table show that once we account for party identification, opinions about the Arizona law are not a statistically important influence on intended vote.

A survey of Hispanics several months later by the Pew Hispanic Center revealed similar results. This time (August-September) a larger share of the Latino respondents disapproved of the Arizona law, but that did not seem to influence their candidate preference for the upcoming House elections once their party identification was taken into account (see Table 2, Column 3). It does matter marginally in this survey for more informed Latinos who are registered voters (Table 2, Column 4). But for many specific immigration policies, viewpoints are so associated with party identification that these opinions have no independent sway on voter decisionmaking (Table 2). A Pew Hispanic Center report based on this survey also pointed out that Latinos were divided on just what to do about illegal immigration, with 28 percent favoring “no punishment” at all, 13 percent favoring deportation, and 53 percent favoring some kind of penalty, but not deportation (Lopez, Morin, and Taylor 2010b). With the Arizona governor winning about the same percentage of the Latino vote that Arizona Republicans commonly win, it’s hard to conclude that signing the measure into law made much of a difference.

In fact, it’s not just opinion on the Arizona law that seems to matter much less once we know whether a Hispanic voter is a Republican or a Democrat, but opinion on a host of other issues as well, including views on workplace raids; requiring a national identification card; allowing illegal immigrants who graduate from U.S. high schools to benefit from in-state tuition rates at state-run colleges; and changing the Constitution to require parents to be legal residents before granting citizenship to their newborn children. The upshot is that a candidate changing positions on these issues in 2010 was unlikely to make much difference to the way Latinos vote (see Table 3, p. 5). Of the issues included in the analysis in Table 3, only the construction of additional border fences had an influence on Latinos’ choice of U.S. House candidate independent of party loyalty. None of the other issues mattered.

The Limited Relevance of Immigration Policy and Politics in 2010

Some analysts and interest groups treat Hispanic voters as if they are always preoccupied with the issue of immigration, and always take the liberal side of the immigration debate. If so, Republicans would have done far more poorly among Latinos in 2010 than they did. But, as I've pointed out above, Republicans did about as well as they generally do, not appreciably better or worse. This predictability in support and opposition is because like non-Hispanics, few Hispanics decide how to vote based on a single issue. Although it is true that Latinos care more about immigration, on average, than non-Latinos do, that doesn't mean it's the only or even the primary issue informing their political outlook. When the economy is especially sour, Hispanic and non-Hispanic voters understandably point to jobs and the economy as their major concern.

Where did immigration rank as a policy priority in 2010? Evidence from several surveys, asking the question in different ways, provides an answer. In the Pew Hispanic Center's survey, respondents were asked whether a series of seven issues was "personally important" to them in the fall congressional elections. The ranking of this set of issues appears in Table 4, indicating that immigration was ranked as the foremost issue by no more than 12 percent of Hispanics, in fourth place behind education, jobs and health care.

Table 2. Latino Vote Preference for House Elections, Controlling for Party Identification and Opposition to AZ Illegal Immigration Law

Variable	All Latinos b (SEb)	Registered Voters b (SEb)	All Latinos b (SEb)	Registered Voters b (SEb)
Constant	.349 (.631)	.252 (.677)	-.098 (.555)	-1.104 (.670)
Republicans	-1.786* (.383)	-1.914* (.456)	-1.122* (.176)	-.964* (.216)
Democrats	.880* (.251)	.877* (.281)	1.195* (.188)	1.445* (.231)
Opposition to AZ Law	.082 (.159)	.144 (.180)	.412 (.281)	.875* (.334)
-2 log-likelihood	183.20	132.18	439.69	293.13
% Correctly Predicted	87.1	89.1	88.9	90.8
% Null Model	66.7	68.9	72.7	74.3
N	265	207	776	559

Logistic Regression Estimation. Cell entries are coefficients (standard errors).
 Dependent variable: 0=Intend to vote Republican; 1=Intend to vote Democratic.
 Statistical significance: *p≤.05, two-tailed test.
Source: NBC-Telemundo Immigration Survey, May 2010 in columns 1 and 2;
 Pew Hispanic Center National Survey of Latinos, August-September 2010 in
 columns 3 and 4.

In a survey conducted in the summer by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a large sample of Latino and non-Latino respondents were asked whether each of 14 issues was "very important," "somewhat important," "not too important," or "not important at all," for the congressional elections in November. The summary of the percentages indicating that an issue was very important appears in Figure 1 for both Hispanics and non-Hispanics. The issues have been ordered running from left to right according to their importance for the Latino subsample. Immigration ranks eighth among the 14 issues listed, above the banking system, but below the budget deficit in importance. For non-Hispanic respondents, immigration ranked tenth.

These survey results are hardly convincing evidence that immigration was a leading issue as the fall campaign approached, even among Latinos. Moreover, the smaller percentage of Hispanics indicating that the social issues of abortion, "gay" marriage, or "same-sex" marriage were very

important policy priorities offers little support to arguments that any large number of Hispanics will move to the Republican Party because they share a common moral outlook. It appears that these moral and social issues were quite far from the minds of most Hispanic voters.

Some expected the GOP's calls for stricter enforcement of federal immigration laws to be followed by a substantial drop in Republican support among Latinos in 2010. But this isn't what resulted, precisely because immigration policy plays only a limited role in defining Latino politics. Nor did widespread GOP support for the controversial Arizona law spell doom for Republican candidates, even those in Arizona. Usually, the few Hispanics who rank immigration as their top priority in surveys are firmly in the Democratic camp, among the most immovable of partisans. Those who do not view immigration as the most critical issue might be slightly more persuadable, but also use party identification as their principal voting cue, the same as non-Hispanic Americans.

Latino Ambivalence about Tea Party Politics

If there was anything distinctive about the 2010 election cycle, it was the emergence of the Tea Party movement. As the recession dragged on, late in 2009, a small but growing number of Tea Party groups, both libertarian, and traditionally Republican, became more explicitly focused on the 2010 elections. They first focused attention on the

Table 3. Latino Vote Preference for House Elections, Controlling for Party Identification and Immigration Policy Positions (Registered Voters Only)

Variable	Favoring In-State Tuition for Undocumented	Disapproving More Workplace Raids	Maintain Birthright Citizenship	Disapproving National Identification Card	Disapproving Border Fence Construction
	b (SEb)	b (SEb)	b (SEb)	b (SEb)	b (SEb)
Constant	.576 (.518)	.177 (.579)	.387 (.719)	.212 (.534)	-.797 (.601)
Republicans	-1.140* (.213)	-1.128* (.208)	-1.141* (.208)	-1.143* (.208)	-1.050* (.212)
Democrats	1.362* (.222)	1.275* (.223)	1.308* (.221)	1.314* (.222)	1.379* (.232)
Position on Policy	-.029 (.369)	.281 (.312)	.133 (.362)	.274 (.300)	.870* (.311)
-2 log-likelihood	303.78	307.42	308.95	310.92	292.04
% Correctly Predicted	90.0	89.2	89.5	89.4	89.4
% Null Model	81.3	70.8	78.3	55.2	58.5
N	618	618	618	618	618

Logistic Regression Estimation. Cell entries are coefficients (standard errors).

Dependent variable: 0=Intend to vote Republican; 1=Intend to vote Democratic.

Statistical significance: *p<.05, two-tailed test.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center National Survey of Latinos, August-September 2010.

Table 4. Ranking of Issues by Importance to Latino Voters, Fall 2010

Issue	Percent
Education	24.8 %
Jobs	21.6 %
Health Care	19.7 %
Immigration	11.8 %
Federal Budget Deficit	9.3 %
The Environment	7.0 %
The War in Afghanistan	5.0 %
None of These	.7 %
Total	100.0 %

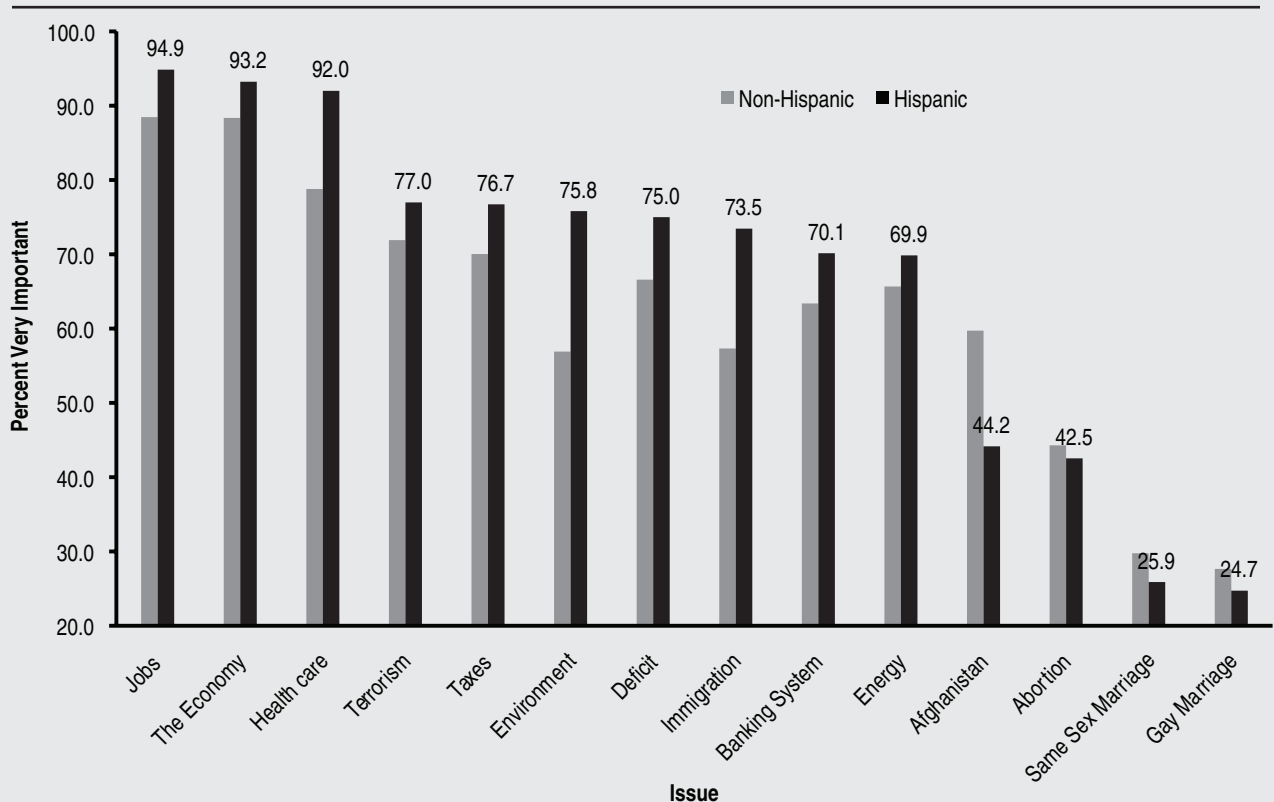
Source: NBC-Telemundo Immigration Survey, May 2010.

coming Republican primaries, supporting candidates they knew would hold the line on taxes and spending, while targeting for defeat incumbents and other Republicans who were less trustworthy on these issues. Eventually, attention turned to the general elections, contributing to significant wins in the U.S. House, and mixed success in U.S. Senate races.

What citizens expressed throughout 2010 at Tea Party events did vary, though the core message was fiscal and economic (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011, 31). Some were clearly expressing identity — that they were Republicans who identified with the small government, anti-debt, anti-regulatory message of the Tea Party. Others were not identifying with the opposition party, but were objecting to the present administration’s policies — mostly the spending and economic stimulus plans. Though not positioning themselves in the midst of a political party, they wanted the world to know that they are still in opposition to the current administration.

Still others showed up voicing disapproval of the sustained economic problems that began under the previous administration, but continued well beyond 2010. These complaints were not only about the policies of the present administration and their failure to improve conditions, but about the dire economic conditions themselves. Combined, these expressions generated an election cy-

Figure 1. Percent Indicating an Issue is ‘Very Important’ in the Coming Congressional Elections, July - August 2010



Data values shown are for Hispanic respondents.
Source: Pew Religion and Public Life Survey, July 21 - August 5, 2010.

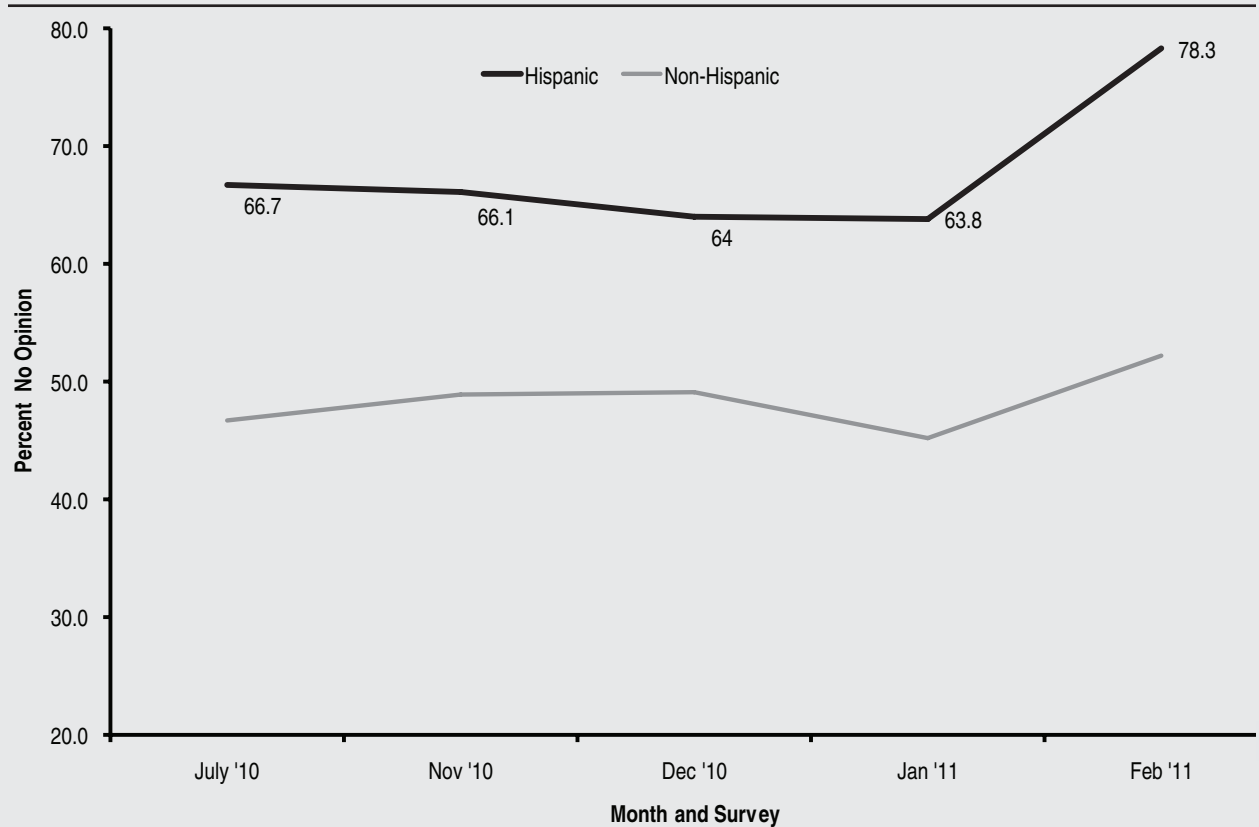
cle that Republican candidates interpreted to be about three things: jobs, rising government debt, and stopping the big-government agenda of the Obama administration.

Where were Latinos with respect to Tea Party politics? We have already noted that a majority supported Tea Party-endorsed candidate Marco Rubio in Florida, but that does not mean they did so because he aligned himself with the Tea Party. Their support could have been largely a function of the predictable party loyalties of Hispanic Floridians, more of whom identify as Republicans — a legacy of Cuban-American Cold War politics. The lack of a GOP surge among Latinos in 2010 suggests that the Tea Party was of little interest or importance to Hispanics nationwide, although there was some activity in scattered locations.

First, many Americans, Hispanics among them, were barely aware of the Tea Party movement well into the middle of the year. According to the Pew Religion and American Life survey conducted in July 2010, fully 37 percent of Latino respondents had heard nothing about the Tea Party, compared with 17 percent of non-Latinos. When asked in a follow-up whether they agreed or disagreed with the aims of the movement, two-thirds of Latino respondents had *no opinion* either way (see Figure 2). Of the 33 percent of Latinos surveyed who did have an opinion, it was about evenly divided between support and opposition.

Later in the campaign, one might expect Tea Party awareness to rise among all voters, and this does happen. By November, only small percentages of respondents to Pew’s November election poll reported not having heard of the Tea Party. But that doesn’t mean that any of the survey respondents had well-defined views about the grassroots

Figure 2. Widespread Ambivalence about Tea Party Politics:
Percent Reporting Having No Opinion about the Tea Party, July 2010 - February 2011



Source: Pew Religion and Public Life Survey, July 21-August 5, 2010; Pew Center for People and the Press, Political Surveys October 2010-February 2011.

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movement. In July, 66.7 percent of Latino respondents expressed no opinion (favorable or unfavorable) about the Tea Party, and that figure was about the same: 66.1 in November polling, with it rising into the 70s in the early months of 2011 (see Figure 2). Among the non-Hispanic respondents there is less uncertainty — consistently 15-20 percentage points less across these months, but again with the fog apparently rising after the 2010 election.

As for supporters, the Tea Party finds few among the Latino population — at election time it was only half of what support ran among non-Latinos: 14 to 28 percent. By February 2011, Hispanic support for the Tea Party was estimated at 12 percent, compared with 23 percent among non-Hispanics.

The lack of enthusiasm for the Tea Party among Hispanics should come as no great surprise given the related evidence we have mustered. Though not strictly a Republican movement, Tea Party protests did have a sense of middle-class grievance, centered in suburbs. It would not be as attractive to a population that is situated predominantly in the Democratic camp, concentrated in larger cities, and earning lower incomes. The Hispanic population with the most positive view of Tea Party politics was in Texas, not in Florida or Arizona, although solid majorities of Hispanics across all of these states reported having no opinion either way.

Certainly Latinos were not on board the Tea Party bandwagon in any large numbers throughout 2010. This helps to explain why we observe such muted support for Republican candidates among Hispanics generally, in spite of a pro-Republican wave nationwide. Tea Party politics may have bolstered GOP prospects among marginal and independent white voters, but did far less to excite independent-minded and Democratic Hispanics. If the Tea Party had anything to offer Latino voters, they didn't make it abundantly clear. And resistance to a Republican-aligned movement by a Democratically aligned electoral bloc should be expected.

Conclusions

The 2010 elections were an electoral earthquake, overwhelmingly favorable to the Republican Party. Yet in spite of the most dramatic Republican victory since 1994, we observe no surge for Republicans among Latino voters. Even in the locations where the Republicans recruited strong, credible, winning Latino candidates, there was no tidal wave of Latino voters rushing to the Republican side. Comparisons across offices and campaigns show that the Sandoval and Martinez candidacies were good for only a few percentage points. Marco Rubio did better, but not vastly better by recent historical standards within Florida.

This constancy of support has its basis in the stability of party identification, and the irrelevance of specific issues and policy pronouncements to vote choice. Voters may divide in their views on a wide variety of matters, from favorite ice cream and cola drink, to what should be done to stimulate the economy, but that doesn't mean any of these opinions influence the decision in the voting booth. Vote choice and policy viewpoints are best predicted by party preference and that is not easily changed by the tools available to campaigns. While the Tea Party was helping Republicans rack up impressive victory margins in many election contests around the country, this frenzy of activity was largely lost on Latino voters who were directing their attention elsewhere.

Where does this place the determined Republican efforts to make in-roads among Latino voters? It is not hopeless, but it will take time. The recruitment of high-quality Latino candidates is a promising start, and probably the best route. Changing policy positions on immigration doesn't hold much promise, though, because it's political party loyalty that needs to be changed, and that is not easily accomplished. It will be through the upward economic mobility of the Hispanic population across several decades and generations that will yield more Latino Republicans. That gradual pattern of movement is also consistent with longstanding patterns of ethnic and immigrant political life in American history.

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