

Published: 11.08.2004

Bush owes 'gracias' to Latino voters

By **C.J. Karamargin**
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

President Bush owes Jesse Aguilar a small debt of gratitude.

The 72-year-old Tucsonan was among a legion of Hispanic Democrats across the country who helped the president win a second term.

Although Aguilar voted for Al Gore four years ago and Bill Clinton in 1996, he bypassed his party's choice for president this time and cast his ballot for Bush.

"I just think he has the right ideas," the retired printer said. "Stem cell research, abortion, marriage - on issues like that, I just like his philosophy. I trust him."

Exit polls from Tuesday's election show that Aguilar could be part of a national trend that has the power to reshape American politics.

Bush captured as much as 45 percent of the Hispanic vote nationally, up 7 percentage points from 2000 and only 1 point shy of the record set by Ronald Reagan two decades ago.

As in past presidential contests, a majority of Hispanics voted Democratic on Nov. 2. But the 54 percent of Hispanics who backed John Kerry represents a dramatic 18-point drop from the support Clinton received in 1996.

Those numbers are mirrored in Arizona, a state with a surging Hispanic population. Democrats once seriously thought they had a chance at carrying Arizona, but Bush won here by 11 points - 5 points better than he did in 2000.

"That's the proof he made inroads among Hispanics," said Antonio Gonzalez, president of the William C. Velasquez Institute, a research group with offices in Texas and California.

While Gonzalez believes the exit polls might be overstating Hispanic support for Bush nationally, there is little question the president ran strong among Hispanics in Arizona.

"Arizona was one of the places where the conservative strategy worked best," Gonzalez said, though not entirely because of the Bush campaign. Republicans here ran a disciplined operation and mounted an especially effective get-out-the-vote effort, but other factors played a role.

One was Proposition 200, the initiative that blocks some public services for illegal immigrants. It passed easily - with considerable Hispanic backing. But it also divided the Hispanic community and attracted a large number of non-Hispanics to the polls, Gonzalez said.

Another factor was Republican Sen. John McCain, a popular figure among all

Arizona's Hispanic vote

2004

56%

John Kerry

43%

George Bush

2000

65%

Al Gore

34%

George Bush

1%

Ralph Nader

Source: Associated Press

Political notebook

• Did family whining have a role in what is seen by some as a Kerry blunder at the Grand Canyon?

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How the Southwest voted

Arizona, 10 electoral votes

- Bush - 55 percent
- Kerry - 44 percent

Colorado, 9 electoral votes

- Bush - 52 percent
- Kerry - 47 percent

New Mexico, 5 electoral votes

- Bush - 50 percent
- Kerry - 49 percent

voters who put his "substantial political throw-weight" squarely behind Bush, Gonzalez said. McCain won a fourth term.

Perhaps most significantly, the Kerry campaign unwittingly abetted Bush's effort by calling an early halt to its Arizona advertising, particularly on Spanish-language radio and television stations. "They didn't put the money into Hispanic media," Gonzalez said. "They punted."

Kerry backers agreed that pulling the plug on the ads posed a problem. Doug Wilson, the former Tucsonan who ran Kerry's campaign in Arizona, said he was "frustrated" at his inability to respond to Bush's ad blitz.

U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva used the same word.

"One of our frustrations was that every time you turned on Univision or Telemundo, there was a Bush ad," the Tucson Democrat said. "We didn't have a way to fight back. There was no presence. You have the Bush campaign constantly on television and radio, and you have the Kerry campaign almost nonexistent. That has an effect."

The result in Arizona was the same throughout the Southwest. New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado have become vital, if not completely solid outposts of red-state America. All have large Hispanic populations. All were at some point considered winnable by Democrats. All received more attention from Kerry than Arizona. And all - unlike Arizona - were won by Bush by 5 percentage points or less.

Had Kerry been able to wrest those three states from Bush, he would now be preparing to take the oath of office as the 44th president.

For Kerry's "Yankee campaign," the Southwest was like a reserve parachute that was never used, Gonzalez said.

Grijalva criticized the campaign's "cookie-cutter approach" to the region, an approach that ignored local advice about the best way to harness the Hispanic vote.

Bush's gains with Hispanic voters are apparent across the country. Exit polls give him 56 percent in Florida, 35 percent in Ohio, 39 percent in Nevada, 43 percent in New Jersey, 45 percent in New Mexico and 49 percent in Washington. Even in reliably Democratic California, the president snagged 31 percent of the Hispanic vote, up from 23 percent four years ago.

In Arizona, Kerry won four of 15 counties - Apache, Coconino, Pima and Santa Cruz. But it is in Yuma County where the Massachusetts senator's inability to attract Hispanic voters might be clearest. A little over half the county is Hispanic. All of it is in Grijalva's 7th Congressional District. Bush won the county, but so did Grijalva.

"That shouldn't happen," the congressman said. "That's the top of the ticket."

The same phenomenon occurred in Colorado: Only there it was evident in a high-profile statewide race and not tethered to a single ethnic group. Exit polls showed that low-income voters backed Bush over Kerry but supported Democratic senate candidate Ken Salazar over Republican Pete Coors. Salazar is Hispanic.

As Robert Deposada, president of the Washington-based Latino Coalition put it, Hispanic voters can now "make or break" political futures in a some states.

None of this comes as a surprise to Hispanic Republicans such as Armando Rios Jr., a 35-year-old investor who last year ran for a City Council seat on Tucson's predominantly Democratic West Side.

"The Democratic Party is a great party," Rios said, "but I really think they've lost touch with the mainstream, and you're beginning to see that reflected in how people vote."

Bush's "phenomenal showing" in Arizona, Rios said, can in part be traced to Hispanics and other Democrats who no longer feel bound to vote for a candidate just because he or she has a "D" next to his or her name. "Those days are over," Rios said. "It comes down to who the candidate is."

But issues also matter, said Nacho Gomez, a 62-year-old retired ironworker who is on the executive committee of the Pima County Republican Party. "The goals and ideals of the Republican Party are more in line with the goals and ideals of the Hispanic community," Gomez said. "The Republican Party offers a better way to go."

Nevada, 5 electoral votes

- Bush - 50 percent
- Kerry - 48 percent

Source: Associated Press

Convincing Southern Arizona Hispanics of that, however, won't be easy. The latest voter registration numbers show that Democrats still enjoy a 30,000-voter edge in Pima County. Some of the most solid Democratic areas are the most Hispanic.

Signature Democratic issues such as education, jobs, the economy and civil rights remain of paramount concern to many of these voters, Hispanic and non-Hispanic alike, Grijalva said. But last week, Republicans succeeded at mobilizing voters - again, Hispanic and non-Hispanic alike - by touting traditional conservative moral issues on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion.

"We could sense it on the street as we were going door to door," he said. "But I don't believe this has the lasting power and strength to hold on, or that this represents a permanent trend."

"The test for Democrats," Grijalva continued, "is to understand there's a disconnect. There's not a disconnect at the local level. There's a disconnect at the national level."

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