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Say "conservative" not "Republican" to woo Latinos: Tea Party



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Corrie MacLaggan
Reuters

9:01 p.m. CST, January 12, 2012

AUSTIN, Texas (Reuters) - Preaching a conservative message is a better way to connect with the growing U.S. Hispanic community than to mention the Republican Party by name, the nation's first Hispanic tea party group president said at an Austin forum on Thursday.

"Whenever the word 'Republican' is used, it was almost like an automatic wall that falls," George Rodriguez, president of the San Antonio Tea Party, said at a conference organized by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation. "Yet when we used the word 'conservative,' people were more responsive."

Warned off by fiery Republican rhetoric lashing out at illegal immigrants in the last electoral cycle, U.S. Hispanics voted by a two-to-one margin for President Barack Obama over Republican rival John McCain in 2008.

And in the 2010 Texas gubernatorial race, 61 percent of Latino voters chose Bill White, the Democrat, over Republican Governor Rick Perry, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

To reverse that allegiance, Rodriguez said that conservative Texans have to overcome established voting patterns.

"For some reason, these folks continue to vote liberal, only because their parents did," he said. "When you ask them, 'Why do you vote like that?', they don't know, they don't know, they just do it."

Getting a message out to the Hispanic community, which at 50.5 million people is the largest minority in the United States, is hampered by the absence of conservative talk show firebrands and commentators in the Spanish language, he said.

"There is no Rush Limbaugh in Spanish," he said. "There's no Sean Hannity in Spanish."

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Torres, who helped bring the number of Hispanic Republicans in the Texas House from zero to five when he was elected as part of the Republican sweep in 2010.

A veteran Democratic representative, Aaron Pena, brought the number to six when he switched to the Republican Party after the election, and Hispanic Republicans formed their own caucus.

The assumption that Hispanics care only about a narrow set of issues - such as immigration and welfare program - reinforces the belief that Latinos are a monolithic group of Democratic voters, said another panelist, U.S. Rep. Francisco "Quico" Canseco, a San Antonio Republican.

"This is a view that the Democratic political establishment would like Republicans to have and thus minimize the effort to engage the Hispanic community and leave the Democrats all alone to reap the benefits of a fast-growing demographic," said Canseco, who unseated Democrat Ciro Rodriguez in 2010.

Rebecca Acuna, a spokeswoman for the Texas Democratic Party, told Reuters that it's no coincidence that the Texas-Mexico border region is heavily Democratic.

"It'll be hard for Republicans to convince Latinos that they want them in their party when they don't even want them in this country," Acuna said.

Rodriguez said that his tea party group has plenty of Hispanics. At least 40 percent of the people in his 6,000-name database of supporters are Hispanic, he said.

"When somebody says that the tea party scares Hispanics, tell them to come to San Antonio," Rodriguez said.

(Reporting By Corrie MacLaggan; Editing by Tim Gaynor)

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