

New York in 2004

Political Blues for Hispanics

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As in previous presidential elections, in 2004 Latinos were the focus of considerable early national media attention. The “Latino vote” was variously characterized as “potent” and “pivotal,” and some considered Latinos “swing voters.” As late as mid-October 2004, a CNN headline read, “Hispanics Could Hold Key to a Win” (CNN 2004). Also as in previous presidential elections, however, these early high hopes were dashed on Election Day (Leal et al. 2005). While Latinos were sometimes said to be “up for grabs,” this was certainly not the case in New York State in 2004 (“Most Hispanics Say” 2002).¹

A key feature of contemporary U.S. presidential elections—and the 2004 contest in particular—is the “battleground state” dynamic. Some states are solidly blue; that is, they are highly likely to support almost any Democratic presidential candidate. The red states are equally likely to support the Republican nominee. The remaining states are the battleground states—a relatively small number (fifteen or so) that had narrowly gone one way or the other in 2000. These were the electoral targets in 2004; the candidates and their campaigns virtually ignored all others, except for fund-raising, most notably in New York and California.²

Latinos were concentrated in several states rich in Electoral College votes, such as California (55), Texas (34), New York (31), Florida (27), and Illinois (21), as well as in Arizona (10) and New Mexico (5). Of these, only Florida and New Mexico were battleground states: California, New York, and Illinois were virtual locks for John Kerry, whereas Texas and Arizona were strongly for President George W. Bush. The claim that Latinos constituted an up-for-grabs swing vote was based in large part on their cultural conservatism and Catholic religious affiliation, which would seem to make them receptive to the GOP message on social issues such as abortion. Also, some local and state elections in both New York City and New York State saw an increasing Latino propensity to support Republican candidates. Latinos in New York City, for instance, had increasingly voted Republican in the four mayoral elections from 1989 to 2001. In 2001 Republican Michael Bloomberg received nearly half the Latino vote. In addition, there was a recognition that growing Latino numbers in New York and nationally made them an increasingly potent constituency—a dominant one in some jurisdictions, and one in New York motivated less by party identification than by ethnicity (Mollenkopf and Miranda 2002).

In 2004, as they had four years earlier, the national Republican and Democratic Parties and the presidential candidates pursued a “Latino southern strategy” that targeted Mexican and Cuban Americans in the Southwest and Southeast. As before, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Latinos in New York and the Northeast were virtually ignored (Falcon 2005)—but so were whites, blacks, and Asians in these regions. Neither party mounted anything resembling a vigorous campaign in the Empire State. It would have been masochistic for Republicans and a waste of resources for Democrats. John F. Kerry was going to win New York regardless of campaign efforts.

It was not a surprise that neither presidential candidate campaigned in New York State during the 2004 general election. President Bush did fly into New York City in early September to accept his party’s nomination in Madison Square Garden, but even this media event was meant to reach television audiences throughout the United States, not New Yorkers in particular. During the fall “campaign,” there were no television ads, no 527s,³ no ballot initiatives, and no discussion of important Latino issues. *Nada*.

What was the effect of Latino voters in New York on the presidential outcome in the state? The same—*nada*. The “Latino wave” (Ramos 2004) was merely part of the Democratic tsunami in New York State and New York City. The statewide election results, however, do not tell the entire story of the impact of Latino voters in New York in 2004. As in California, Latino voters were important contributors to the statewide electoral majority that has kept New York a safe Democratic state, thus affecting Republican and Democratic strategies and spending in more competitive states (see chap. 7, this volume). Also, Latinos expanded their coethnic representation in the state senate and state assembly (by one seat each).

THE 2004 LATINO PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

On November 3, 2004, John Kerry beat George Bush in a landslide in New York State—58 percent to 41 percent. In 2000 Al Gore had buried George W. Bush by 60 percent to 35 percent. In 1996 Bill Clinton won over Bob Dole, 61 percent to 31 percent. The last Republican to get New York’s electoral votes was Ronald Reagan in 1984.

The state was Democratic and getting more so. At election time registration rolls statewide numbered 5,535,000 Democrats and 3,209,000 Republicans. Democrats had grown by 290,000 and Republicans by fewer than 40,000 since the 2000 election (CPS 2005).

Latinos in New York State voted overwhelmingly for Democrat Kerry—75 percent versus 24 percent for Bush. Surveys by the Hispanic Federation from 1996 to 2004 found at least seven in ten New York City Latinos registered as Democrats (see table 8.1).

The proportion of the Latino voting age population that voted in New York State increased slightly in 2004 from four years earlier: 31 percent cast a ballot in 2004, up from 29.4 percent of the voting age Latino population in 2000. Latino turnout in New York City grew 4.5 points, to 32.8 percent (CPS 2005). This increased Latino voter turnout seemed to reflect a greater public interest in the Bush/Kerry campaign than the Bush/Gore 2000 contest (Warrenberg 2005). It does not reflect a greater effort by political parties and political action groups to mobilize Latino voters, as the state and the city were safely Democratic in both elections.

