

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

POLITICS | Updated November 1, 2012, 10:22 a.m. ET

Election May Hinge on Latino Turnout

By PETER NICHOLAS and COLLEEN MCCAIN NELSON

In a presidential contest still up for grabs, Barack Obama's re-election hopes hinge more than any previous presidential contender on the Latino vote.



Polls on the state and national level have been, in many cases, razor close. What happens if the candidates tie in the popular vote? In the electoral vote? WSJ's Neil King and Professor of Government Linda Fowler join the News Hub. Photo: AP Images.

Rapid population growth means that Hispanics carry more weight this election than ever before, particularly in some critical battleground states, and Hispanics have become a core element of the Obama coalition.

The great question mark in the campaign's final days is how many will show up to vote. That is why, in a small but telling incident earlier this week, a mariachi band and a few Spanish-speaking Obama volunteers set up in the parking lot of a Hispanic grocery store

far away from the neon lights of the Las Vegas casinos.



ZUMAPRESS.com

A campaign volunteer canvasses a neighborhood for Barack Obama.

Campaign workers nabbed mostly Latino shoppers at the Cardenas Market in east Las Vegas and told them the store would double as a place to cast early votes. As the band rolled through its song list, people stopped at a table festooned with placards proclaiming "Nosotros Decidimos" ("We Decide"), and signed up to attend a Thursday appearance by Mr. Obama in Las Vegas.

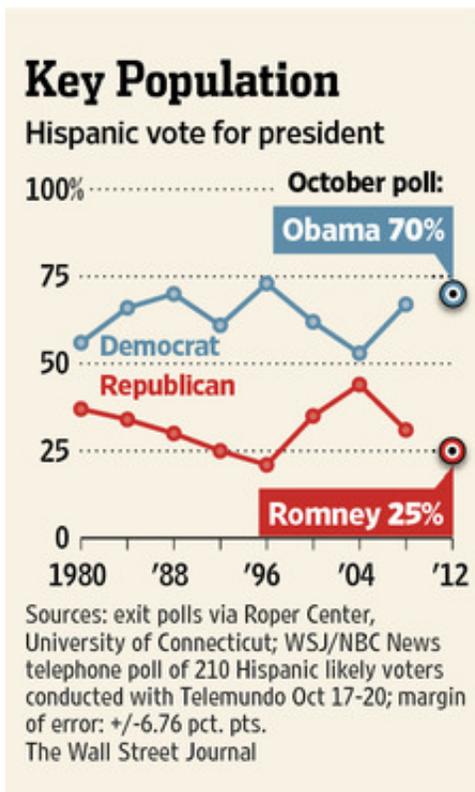
Mr. Obama has little choice but to focus on Hispanics. His support among African-Americans is 92%, while white voters are

moving away from him. A recent Wall Street Journal-NBC News poll showed his support among likely white voters at 36%, seven points less than in 2008. The same poll gave Mr. Obama a 70%-to-25% lead over Republican nominee Mitt Romney among likely Latino voters.

The campaign's challenge is getting these supporters to cast ballots. Latinos skew younger than the rest of the population, and they don't vote as reliably as other constituency groups.

Equally troubling for Mr. Obama: Latino enthusiasm about the race has consistently lagged behind that of the nation, though it has been picking up as Election Day nears.

Many Hispanics were unhappy the president didn't push harder for a path toward legal status for the 11 million people living in the U.S. illegally, as he promised during his first run for the White House. The president moved to shore up his position with Hispanics in June, when he announced a policy allowing many young undocumented immigrants to apply for a program that allows them to temporarily live and work in the U.S. without fear of deportation.



"At this stage in the game, if Barack Obama is going to win, there has to be massive turnout of Latino voters," said Democratic pollster Peter Hart, who co-directs the Journal poll. "They are central because they are central in states that are central," he added, ticking off Nevada, Colorado, Ohio and Virginia.

Even some Republicans worry that the party is alienating Latino voters in ways that could jeopardize future national elections. Steve Schmidt was a senior strategist in Republican Sen. John McCain's 2008 presidential bid. In an interview Wednesday, Mr. Schmidt voiced regret over what he described as a "collapse of support for Republican candidates by the fastest-growing demographic group in the country."

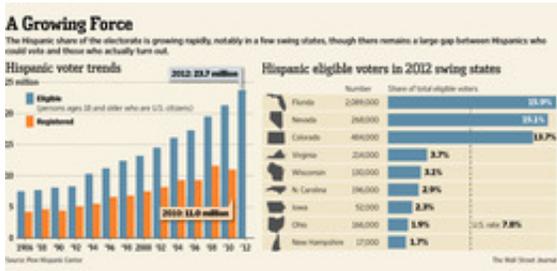
"It's deeply worrying," Mr. Schmidt added. "Eight years ago we were having conversations about getting 50% of the Hispanic vote. Eight years later

we're worried about whether we're going to get 30% nationally."

The Obama and Romney campaigns are wooing Latino voters in different ways and toward different ends. Nowhere are their contrasting strategies more evident than Nevada and Colorado, two swing states with sizable Latino populations.

This year, Latinos account for 15.1% of eligible voters in Nevada and 13.7% of voters in Colorado, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Obama campaign manager Jim Messina told



reporters in a conference call this week: "This could be the biggest miscalculation that the Romney campaign is making. They believe the electorate looks like what it used to, in 2004 or 2008. Well, it doesn't."

Romney campaign officials said they are aggressively pursuing the Hispanic vote.

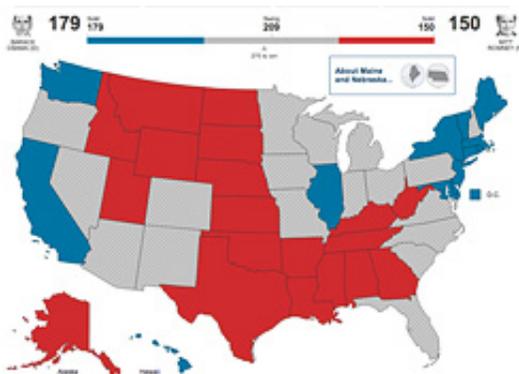
They have worked with the Republican National Committee to hire a team of outreach coordinators who have been dispatched to key states with larger Hispanic populations.

"The most important thing is to make sure that Hispanics know they have a choice and that Republicans want their vote and want their support," said Bettina Inclan, the national Hispanic outreach director for the Romney campaign.

ELECTION 2012

Build Your Own Election Map

Think you know how the presidential vote will go? Select states to set their outcome, then save and share your projections.



Live: Election 2012 Stream

Races and Candidates: By state, district

Turning Points: Top Debate Moments

State of the Race: Map of latest projections

Poll Tracker: Latest national, state polls

Moneyball: A portrait of money in politics

Super PACs: How much are they spending?

Issues: Romney vs. Obama on key topics

Campaign Ads: Watch and rate

Poll Tool: Compare Current, Past Candidates

Many Hispanic voters say their views on Mr. Romney were shaped during the Republican primaries, when he took a hard line on immigration issues, vowing to veto the Dream Act and offering support for "self-deportation." More recently, Mr. Romney has softened his rhetoric, as he has emphasized bipartisan solutions and has pledged to deliver a long-term fix for immigration policy. But the Republican nominee's earlier statements were a cause for concern, many Hispanic leaders have said, and the Obama campaign has been quick to remind voters of Mr. Romney's tough talk.

Mr. Hart said the promises Mr. Romney made during the primaries could prove consequential.

"If Romney loses, he'll look back on two or three major decisions that he made in the campaign, and one of them will clearly be the decision to go to the right of [Texas Gov.] Rick Perry on the immigration issue," he said. "That was as central as they come."

Colorado is tightly balanced, making Latino turnout crucial to both Mr. Romney and Mr.

Obama as they look to secure its nine electoral college votes.

The president won the state by a comfortable margin—nine percentage points—in

2008. Both campaigns say this contest will be closer.

Early polls had Mr. Obama leading in Colorado, but the race has tightened. The latest Wall Street Journal/NBC News/Marist poll showed a tie, with each candidate garnering 48% support among likely voters.



ZUMAPRESS.com

U.S. Sen. Harry Reid speaks to a group of Hispanic voters in East Las Vegas early Friday morning.

For the president, extending his lead among Hispanic voters could make the difference. With that in mind, the Obama campaign has recruited a small army of Latino volunteers.

At an Obama campaign office in West Denver, Latino volunteers assembled Tuesday afternoon to canvass the nearby neighborhoods. Before they dispersed, Denver City Council member Paul Lopez offered a pep talk in Spanish. "You're not just volunteers," he told them. "You're organizers. And there's a difference."

Antonio Esquibel, a retired university professor and administrator, has been walking these heavily Hispanic Denver neighborhoods for the past few months. He said he encounters nearly all Obama supporters as he knocks on doors.

"They're for Obama. They don't even want to hear about Romney," Mr. Esquibel said. "They see my [Obama] button, and they want to hug me." His challenge, however, is translating that sentiment into action. With so many choices—early voting, mail-in ballots, or voting at the polls—Mr. Esquibel said his task is to make sure the people he contacts aren't intimidated by the deadlines and options.

With bilingual phone banks and events aimed at reaching small-business owners, Republicans are counting on their economic argument to win over a constituency that traditionally has leaned Democratic.

"You're talking about a community that's been hit particularly hard in this economy," said James Garcia, the Romney campaign's state manager in Colorado. "Hispanics are concerned about the economy. Hispanics are concerned about the same things that all Americans are concerned about."

The Republican's campaign in Colorado has gotten a hand from "Democrats for Romney," a largely Latino grass roots group that has sought out one-time Obama supporters who have been disappointed by the president.

"I talk to a lot of Latinos, and they're just not as excited as they were four years ago," said



ZUMAPRESS.com

MGM Mirage employees enter a polling place for early voting near the Las Vegas Strip.

Dave Martinez, founder of the group, which numbers a few dozen members. He describes himself as a lifelong Democrat. "Some bring up the immigration issue, but a lot of them bring up jobs."

In Nevada, Romney campaign officials say they will consider it a success if they can damp Mr. Obama's Latino support and hold his total to no more than 65% to 70%. The campaign opened an office in east Las Vegas, where the Obama campaign has five.

Craig Romney, one of the candidate's sons, starred in a campaign ad that aired on Spanish-language TV. Looking straight at the camera, the younger Romney talked about his father in Spanish.

"We've had a presence and I do believe you get points for showing up to the game," said Mason Harrison, a campaign spokesman for Mr. Romney's Nevada office. "Our focus is making sure that we have a presence—making sure that we are not ceding this community and allowing it to be completely dominated by the Obama message."

Pockets of Nevada Latinos are more receptive to the Romney message. The campaign has reached out to small-business men who like the candidate's economic program, and also to evangelical Christians who are upset with the president for endorsing same sex marriage.



Peter Nicholas/The Wall Street Journal

Vice President Joe Biden visits students and staff at Matt Kelly Elementary School in Las Vegas.

Juan Sclafani, senior pastor at the First Spanish Baptist Church, whose congregation is Hispanic, said in an interview: "When he (the president) is trying to encourage gay marriage, he's destroying the foundation for our society: the family. It goes against Scripture and the Bible."

There are signs Mr. Romney isn't performing as well as he might among the state's Latinos. Nevada's junior senator, Republican Dean Heller, is running ahead of Mr. Romney among Latino voters, said David Damore, an associate professor of political science at

UNLV who analyzes Latino polling data. In a blog post over the summer, Mr. Damore wrote that Mr. Romney was picking up only 20% of Latinos, compared with 30% for Sen. Heller, who is running against Democrat Shelley Berkley.

Mr. Damore attributed the gap partly to a heavier presence by Mr. Heller on Spanish-language media. A Romney campaign aide said Mr. Heller's showing is due, rather, to

the natural advantage that comes with being an incumbent senator.

In wooing Latinos, Mr. Obama is getting outside help. He has gotten an endorsement from a longtime Cuban-American TV personality, Cristina Saralegui, whom a campaign official calls the "Spanish-language Oprah." Along with first lady Michelle Obama, she appeared in a campaign ad that is airing in Nevada.

Mr. Romney, for his part, has been endorsed by comedian Paul Rodriguez, who appeared at an October rally in Las Vegas. Sen. Marco Rubio and New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez also have appeared on the trail for Mr. Romney.

Nevada's powerful culinary workers union is going door-to-door on the president's behalf. More than 100 union workers have taken leaves of absence from their jobs and are canvassing neighborhoods. About half are Latino, and one of the neighborhoods they are hitting is east Las Vegas.

A special target of their efforts is first-time Latino voters. Union members are scouring blocks for young people voting for the first time and for newly naturalized citizens who have never voted before, in hopes of getting them to the polls.

In conversations, the culinary workers are telling them about Mr. Obama's support for the Dream Act, which would provide a path to legal status for certain young people who pursue higher education or military service. Congress in recent years has rebuffed efforts to pass the measure.

Write to Peter Nicholas at peter.nicholas@wsj.com and Colleen McCain Nelson at colleen.nelson@wsj.com

A version of this article appeared November 1, 2012, on page A1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Election May Hinge On Latino Turnout.

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com