

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



NO. 73: NOVEMBER 1, 2012



LUIS LUGO is the director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a project of the Pew Research Center. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and graduate research assistant **Nichole Flores** before participating in a panel discussion on Latinos in the 2012 elections at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: I wanted to start off by asking a broad question that isn't particularly about Latinos, namely, what happened to religion in this election? A year ago, six months ago, there were worries about Obama's so-called Muslim roots and about Romney's Mormonism, as well as the Catholic religious freedom movement. Where are we on those issues?

LUGO: Well, in a sense you answered your own question, because both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney had good reasons not to be too overt about their religion. For Obama, of course, he had to deal with the Jeremiah Wright issue back in the previous election. He obviously had no interest in bringing that up, even though a lot of his current spiritual advisers are in fact evangelicals, sort of moderate to liberal evangelicals.

And Romney, of course, coming from the Mormon faith, knew that he had a problem, particularly within the Republican ranks, the single most important bloc within the Republican party, White evangelicals, who did not support him by and large. He did win in a couple of states, actually won the evangelical vote. But by and large, they looked for other candidates, alternatives to him.

So I think the fallback option has been for Romney to talk about values, without necessarily connecting them in any

explicit way to religion. Obama acted in a similar way, although it is interesting that we keep finding a significant amount of Americans who do not believe he is a Christian, despite the fact that he identifies as a Christian. This goes beyond the people who think he's Muslim, 17 or 18% or so; people just generally don't know what his particular religion is.



So I think there has been that dimension of it, but perhaps even more importantly has been the importance of the economy and jobs. That has been such a dominant theme that, unlike, let's say in 2004, when that was less of an issue and a lot

of the social issues came to the fore, you just don't have the kind of attention to the social issues that you've had in past elections. Those are the issues people connect most closely with religion, and so I think both of those things have contributed to religion having less of a prominent role this year.

But wait until people vote, because we've found that whether religion plays a prominent role in the political discourse or not, there are very strong religion-oriented aspects to the way people vote. We know that those who attend church most regularly tend to vote heavily Republican. Those who do not attend or attend infrequently tend to vote heavily Democratic. There are exceptions to that, of course—African-Americans most specifically on the Democratic side. But as a report we did recently on the unaffiliated noted, these are folks that trend heavily Democratic, so I think you're going to see it reflected in the way people vote. We always do these fancy regression analyses, looking at all of the factors—gender, income, education—and when we hold and take all of those factors into account, next to race, it's really religion that is the most reliable predictor of the way people vote.

OWENS: So is the religion question under the surface of the political rhetoric and even perhaps the polling? If the candidates fear mutually-assured destruction

if they bring religion into this thing, we would typically see their surrogates making the negative attacks on their behalf. Maybe I'm not catching the ads or I'm not on the right mailing list, but I haven't seen much of this sort of below-the-surface negative religious activity. Have you?

LUGO: Well, there has certainly been a lot of religiously-based mobilizing. That's for sure. I happen to live in Maryland, which is not electorally competitive, but there are things on the ballot—same sex marriage more specifically—where you visibly see the religious community on both sides of that issue. They are heavily mobilized.

You know, back in 2004 there were several states where same sex marriage was on the ballot. This time around it's four, Maryland being one of them, so you definitely see those constituencies. You mentioned the question of religious liberty and the whole HHS mandate. That, within the Catholic community in particular, has resonated. We asked people in our latest poll what are they hearing about in their churches, synagogues, and mosques, and so forth, in their houses of worship. Among respondents who attend at least once or twice a month, half of them say that they've heard about this election from the pulpit. About a third said they have heard about abortion and same sex marriage and other topics. So it's clearly being talked about.

On religious liberty in particular, it's in the Catholic community where we see a significant minority who say that they have heard about that issue from the pulpit and, as we know, the Catholic vote is the quintessential swing vote in these elections. So it remains to be seen what kind of impact that's going to have.

OWENS: Are Latinos who attend religious services hearing more from the pulpit now than they used to? The Catholic religious freedom movement seems to be coming from both top and bottom.

But there is also a push among conservative evangelical Protestant ministers to take direct political positions on candidates, in contradiction to the IRS mandates about non-profit status, in order to make a point about religious freedom. Is any of that happening in a different way in churches that are predominantly Hispanic?

LUGO: To some extent, but those are not the issues that are at the forefront in the Latino community. And by the way, just

“We asked people in our latest poll what are they hearing about in their churches, synagogues, and mosques...half of them say they've heard about this election from the pulpit.”

before I go back to the Latino community, the issue that people hear about most often from the pulpit is about poverty and the poor. Three quarters of respondents across the board—this wasn't just in certain denominations—told us that poverty was most talked about from the pulpit. Whether people incline more liberally or conservatively on other issues, they are hearing about this issue quite often, which is really interesting.

Now, among the things where the Latino community might be different, one of them will not surprise you: immigration.

Latinos are hearing about that at three to four times the rate that the general population is. I think it was 15 or 16% of the general population who said that they had heard about that from the pulpit in the context of this election. In the Latino community, it's over 40%.

Interestingly, Latinos are also hearing more about abortion across the board than is the case among non-Latinos. About half of Latino evangelicals and Catholics alike told us that they had heard about the issue of abortion in church. Less so, again, on gay marriage—about a third. In fact, the Latino numbers there parallel very closely the general population on gay issues. So there are some differences, but also some similarities between the Latinos and the larger community.

OWENS: More broadly, what is the electoral impact of Latinos in American presidential elections?

LUGO: Well, it's still not what most people expect, given the growth of the population. Latinos now constitute well over 16% of the U.S. population, and this percentage continues to grow. We're projecting that within the next four decades, Latinos will basically double their share of the population to about 30%. But there is something else to keep in mind: this is a very young community. Latinos have the lowest median age of any group in the country. In fact, I share this with people and they sort of do a double-take: the median age for native-born Latinos (who are driving population growth in the Latino community, not immigrants) is 18 years old. That's 20 years less than the median age for the population as a whole. So, by definition, these folks cannot participate electorally. Every month, 50,000 native-born Latinos turn 18 and thus become eligible. So you can see the potential there, but in terms of actual electoral impact, it's not quite there yet.

You also have a significant percentage who are foreign-born. Many of them are either here unauthorized or they're still

in the process of becoming naturalized. So when you put those two things together, you already have less than 50% of the Latino community that's even eligible to vote. It's in the mid-40 range. Then you add to that another factor, which is not as easy to explain. Latinos just don't register to vote at near the rate, let's say, of Whites and African-Americans. They really lag behind. If you get Latinos to register, the vast majority will turn out to vote, but it's getting eligible Latinos to register. As a consequence, the Latino share of the people who actually come out to vote is about half of their overall percentage of the population. In the last election, about 7.4% of the electorate was Latinos, with again about 16% of the population. So, if you're going to use a boxing analogy, Latinos punch below their weight electorally.

But you can see with every election that it's a larger number and a larger share of the electorate. The projections for this year are that Latinos will be about 9% of the electorate. If you want to look at the national picture, you need to look at some of the microcosm states, as I call them—the nine states where the two candidates have devoted the most attention. Of those, there are three—Florida, Colorado, and Nevada—in which Latinos are 15% or so of the electorate. I mean, these are registered voters. Not eligible, but registered. Already you are seeing in some states the larger impact that you will see going forward. But I think at this point it is more limited than people would think, given all we've been hearing about the growth of the Latino population.

OWENS: Is there a measurably distinct difference between the values that Latinos bring to bear in elections and voting behavior, relative to the values that non-Latinos bring to the elections and voting behavior? I know there's a million other ways to slice this up...

LUGO: Yeah.

OWENS: ...but just focusing on the election.



LUGO: Well, Latinos are a very interesting slice of the electorate. They don't conform in the way you would think. They are relatively more conservative than the country as a whole, although that has really changed on the gay marriage issue. We put out a report on that two weeks ago. Generally, certainly on abortion and a lot of other issues, they tend to be more socially conservative. But they incline very much on the Democratic side. They have always voted for Democratic candidates, typically by significant amounts. There were two points in time when Republicans were able to close the gap to about a 20 point difference. That would be with President Reagan and the second President Bush. The second Bush run in 2004 was probably the high point of Republican inroads into the Latino community. It is an interesting dynamic. Even the group within the Latino community that's most amenable to the Republican party—evangelicals, who are about 16% of the Latino electorate—are a conflicted group. I mean, they are really cross-pressured and I say that because they are very socially conservative. They are the most socially conservative group in the Latino community not just on abortion, but on gay marriage. On the other hand, if you look at a variety of issues like from immigration to the death penalty to government-guaranteed health insurance, they

align with other Latino groups and differ markedly from non-Latino evangelicals.

There's a question we ask in our polls—you know, we always ask the ideology question, but there's one that I particularly like which I think really is a better window on this: do you prefer a larger government providing more services, or a smaller government providing fewer services. Now the plurality of Americans at this point go for the smaller government providing fewer services. Part of that is the reaction to what they perceive to be the expansion of government by the Obama administration, but the balance rests—it's not quite a majority—but the plurality is with smaller government. In the Latino community, 75% choose larger government providing more services, and there is very little daylight between Catholics, evangelicals and the unaffiliated among Latinos. They really track closely. So if you look at the Latino number there, it's precisely the reverse of the numbers that we get among non-Latino evangelicals.

So I think the best way to characterize Latino evangelicals is "big government social conservatives," and that means that they don't fit very well within the current structure, where the Republican party has become increasingly oriented toward a more libertarian approach.

OWENS: That social conservatism should make them more apt to vote for bans on abortion and bans on gay marriage, and yet you said that this is changing. Is that change due to the younger generation pushing that trend?

LUGO: I think that's it. Yeah.

OWENS: And social conservatism might marry an activist orientation to change the future of those issues.

LUGO: Well, that's true, and I think certainly Latino evangelicals are very strong on their views there, and they very strongly mobilize. If you listen to Latino evangelical political leaders, they are very strong on the issues of abortion and gay marriage, while at the same time on immigration and education and health care and so forth. Again, they just don't sound like non-Latino evangelicals. I think that's why you see both in terms of the way they vote and in terms of their party affiliation, much more of a split within the Latino community. So a conservative ideology which, for the population as a whole argues for a strong Republican orientation, does not necessarily translate for Latino evangelicals. It's really quite interesting.

Let me just say that even for Latino Catholics who identify as political conservatives, it is still the case that a plurality of them identify with the Democratic party rather than the Republican. So they are like sort of the old Southern conservatives. I mean, it's really quite an interesting dynamic within the Latino community.

FLORES: Building on that, I read in the Pew Forum's recent study that more the Latino Catholics favor Obama than Latino evangelicals.

LUGO: Yes.

FLORES: Both groups have similar tendencies towards social conservatism, but it looks different on the ground. How do you account for that?

LUGO: That's a good point. Certainly, on the issue of gay marriage, there has been a lot of movement in the Latino community. When we polled on this six years ago, just as recently as six years ago, a clear majority (about 56%) of Latinos were opposed to gay marriage. For evangelicals it was pretty big, it was sky high in opposition. But today, the latest poll we did showed that 52% supported it, including a majority of Latino Catholics.

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So they are not as conservative on that issue as non-Latino Catholics are.

On the issue of abortion, Latino Catholics are still more conservative than the country as a whole and more conservative than other Catholics (as are, by the way, evangelical Latinos). They are more conservative on abortion than even non-evangelical Latinos by about 10 points. I have an easier time explaining the Latino evangelical vote and the way they orient politically than the Catholics. What I would say is this: if you look at political identity, you have to look at the

intensity of religion, the religiosity. At one point in our history, we could explain the politics fairly straight-forwardly by looking at affiliation, but that's no longer the case. Affiliation still matters, but the level of religiosity matters as much, if not even more. So don't tell me whether you are a Catholic—that tells me some things but not too much. Tell me how frequently you attend mass. Now that tells me a lot. For Latino Catholics who are regular mass attenders, they are much more conservative socially, as well as politically, because those issues rise in importance. For Latino Catholics who are not as connected, let's say, with the church, they may still have somewhat socially conservative views, but it's not that prominent. They are not as mobilized around those issues.

FLORES: Yes, there is no daily, weekly reinforcement.

LUGO: That's right. They are looking more at immigration reform. Remember, the three issues when we polled that Latinos always mention as the top three, for quite a few election cycles now, it's jobs and education virtually tied, and then it's health care. Those are the three issues. We work with the Pew Hispanic Center, and most of the time for our surveys we talk about how the response option was very important. So many of these issues were so very important to Latinos that we actually introduced another category, which in Spanish is *sumamente importante*. So it's like *really, really important*.

Really, that's when those three issues distinguish themselves a little bit from the others. But so is immigration. I don't mean to downplay that, because immigration has a very practical policy implication for the Latino community. A good percentage of the Latino community knows somebody, in their family or elsewhere, who is impacted by immigration reform or immigration policy. But it also goes beyond the policy to the symbolism. Latinos are very sensitive to talk about immigration, including

illegal immigration, that has a message, however implicit, that is anti-immigrant and more specifically anti-Latino. This is a very tough issue for politicians to talk about, particularly on the Republican side, without being perceived as being anti-Latino, anti-immigrant. You have to tread very carefully if you're a politician in how you talk about this issue.

OWENS: That brings me to the last question. If Obama is reelected next Tuesday, is there any hope for major immigration reform on the agenda?

LUGO: I think it was Casey Stengall who said he didn't make predictions, especially about the future. As I used to say in my old social science days, it's hard for us to make predictions, even about the past. President Obama has said that he will tackle that issue. It was one of the reasons, I think, why was Bush so successful in 2004 in garnering at least 40% of the Latino vote. Reagan also spoke about immigration reform but with Bush I think it was the compassionate conservative ap-

proach, which did not sound libertarian (because it wasn't) that brought Latinos in support. It helped him, of course, that he had been governor of Texas and had had experience in personally connecting with Latinos. Latinos picked up on that. I think it was a variety of factors, including his social conservatism. At that point in time, the Latino community was even more socially conservative than it is today, because of generational replacement. We were talking about that earlier.

By the way, if I could just give you one last thing to complicate the narrative a little bit. You're right, on the social issues, I think the reason why we're seeing a trend towards a more liberal point of view on things like gay marriage and even abortion, is that native-born Latinos are really becoming a larger and larger percentage of the Latino community as a whole. Foreign-born Latinos invariably are more conservative than native-born Latinos. As the native-born share of the Latino population has increased relative to the

foreign-born, I think we are picking up some of that more liberal orientation on social issues. Interestingly, though, remember that question I told you about bigger government, smaller government?

OWENS: Sure.

LUGO: Second and third generation Latinos tend to become a bit more conservative on that score. So it is moving more liberal on one—actually I suppose you could say they're moving towards the mean on both—because the country is relatively more liberal on the social issues, and so are younger Latinos. The country still remains a plurality conservative on smaller government, fewer services, and second and third generation Latinos move in that direction as well. So it's a very, very interesting dynamic to observe.

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