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**“Righteousness and Justice”:
Latino Catholics and Protestants, Barack Obama, and the 2008 Election**

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The 2004 Election confirmed what scholars called a growing Democratic “God Gap” in the American electorate wherein Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, and other traditional people of faith were beginning to move solidly into the Republican column. Even Catholics and Latino Evangelicals, normally strong Democratic supporters switched over and voted for Bush. Obama knew this was a serious problem not only because traditional Catholics and Protestants have more children than more secular-minded Americans, but also because – in the words of Bill Clinton – even though the electorate may be theoretically and operationally progressive, it is nonetheless “moderately conservative.” He also knew from experts in the party that if they

couldn't keep the national Latino Republican vote below 40 percent, they would not win future election because of their growing share of the Democratic electorate and their location in must-win swing states.¹

Obama had good reason to worry. As a pro-life political moderate, border senator, Vietnam vet, and the most outspoken Republican supporter of Latinos on Capitol Hill, McCain was poised to match or surpass Bush's 44 percent Latino support in 2004.² The signature mark of McCain's loyalty was his 2005 McCain-Kennedy S.1033 Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act, which provided a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented Latin American immigrants. These advantages along with Latinos trending Republican over the past three election cycles from 19 to 44 percent made McCain a potentially formidable candidate.

Obama was also aware of his disadvantages. He was a black Harvard-trained liberal Protestant lawyer and novice politician from Illinois. He attended a black church led by Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright and was accused of promoting black over Latino interests in the Illinois State Senate. His political dissonance with Latinos was pounded home on Super Tuesday when Hillary Clinton took 63 percent of Latinos nationwide and 67 percent in California. Some rightly worried that Obama's sharp attacks on Clinton might prompt some of her supporters (especially women) to jump ship for McCain. Moreover, people accused Obama of being

¹ Gastón Espinosa, *Religion, Race, and the American Presidency*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 330, note 1. Hereafter, Espinosa, 2011.

² Most scholars correctly believe Bush took around 40 rather than 44-45 percent of the Latino vote. The National Election Pool (NEP, 44 percent) and *Los Angeles Times* (45 percent) stand by their findings. Others challenge them: David Leal, Matt Barreto, Jongho Lee, Rodolfo O. de la Garza, "The Latino Vote in the 2004 Election," *PSOnline* (2005), 41-49; Louis DeSipio, "Power in the Pews: Religious Diversity and Latino Political Attitudes and Behaviors," in J. Matthew Wilson, ed., *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 181; Espinosa, 2011, 262-263.

everything from a Muslim to a leftist politician with ties to terrorist and extremist organizations like the Weatherman Underground and ACORN, and therefore of being unfit to lead the nation.³ Obama quickly transformed his liabilities into assets by beating Clinton in the primaries, taking advantage of McCain's decision to play the moderate and Republican maverick, someone not beholden to religious conservatives, and by outflanking McCain on race and religion.

This article examines how Obama overcame these disadvantages to win the Latino Catholic and Protestant votes, including a plurality of those that voted pro-life and opposed same-sex marriage. He won because he ran a faith-based centrist campaign that promoted a new kind of Democratic religious and racial-ethnic pluralism that reached out to Latinos on both sides of the religious, ideological, and political divides. He and his advisors appointed Latino Catholic and Protestant Evangelical advisors, promoted faith-friendly public policies, and crafted an Evangelical-sounding conversion narrative that blended the themes of righteousness and justice. Obama not only won Catholics by a wide margin, but also—contrary to the literature—Latino Protestants, thus reversing the “God Gap” among Latino Protestants.

The findings in this article are based on the National Election Pool exit poll, the U.S. Census Bureau, The Pew Hispanic Center, The Hispanic Churches in American Public Life national survey ($n = 2,060$), the National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll ($n = 17,836$), and above all the Latino Religions and Politics (LRAP) national survey, which profiled the attitudes of 1,104

³ “Will Latinos Shun Obama because he’s Black?” *Associated Press*, February 10, 2008; Matt Barreto and Ricardo Ramirez, “The Latino vote is pro-Clinton, not anti-Obama,” *Los Angeles Times*, Opinion, February 7, 2008; Michael Dobbs, “Was Obama ever a Muslim,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2008; Aaron Klein, “Obama worked with terrorists,” *WorldNetDaily*, February 24, 2008: <http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=57231>; John Kennedy, “Preach and Reach: Despite his liberal record, Barack Obama is making a lot of evangelicals think twice,” *Christianity Today*, October 5, 2008: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/18.26.html>

Latinos (700 registered voters) across the United States from October 1 to 7, 2008. Rick Hunter and SDR Consulting fielded the 39-question bilingual LRAP survey.⁴

Growing Clout of Latinos in Presidential Politics

McCain was a seasoned politician who was well liked by Latinos. The Illinois Senator Obama could not take the Latino Democratic-leaning political affiliation for granted. Latinos were key to his new strategy because they had soared in numbers to 48 million. They made up one out of four Democratic voters. Although the number of white eligible voters had decreased by two percent from 75 to 73 percent between 2004 and 2008, the number of Latino eligible voters increased to 21 percent (16 million to 19.5 million). By November 4th, the Latino electorate was 9.5 percent – almost twice the size of the Jewish (2%), Muslim (1%), and Asian American (2%) votes combined. Latinos constituted a disproportionate share of the electorates in key states that Obama had to win such as Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada, all of which Bush had won in 2000 and/or 2004. Latinos also made up a sizable percentage of other key states such as Texas, California, Arizona, and New Jersey, places where Obama was unknown. The biggest concern was the trend in Latinos voting Republican, which had risen from 19 percent in 1996 to 40 or even 45 percent in 2004, during the same time that the Latino Democratic vote slid from 76 percent to 57/52 percent.⁵

⁴ Hunter and SDR Consulting have surveyed 200,000 people and spent 22 years directing Latino public opinion research for The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, The Pew Forum, CNN, Univision, and Telemundo. It is also based on interviews with Obama and McCain's 2008 campaign advisors.

⁵ Espinosa, 2011, 261-274. For the National Election Pool (NEP): <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#val=USP00p2>

Latino Religious Profile

One of the reasons why Bush won in 2000 and 2004 was Latinos. Realizing the National Council for La Raza and secular Latino-serving organizations were pro-Democratic, Bush sought to circumvent them by appealing directly to the grassroots faith community. Like Bush before him, his community organizing days taught him that one way to increase his Latino support was by winning over Latinos in the faith community.⁶ Obama knew that Latinos are more Christian (93 percent) than the general U.S. population (77 to 82 percent) and that Catholics and Protestants/Other Christians together make up 95 percent of the U.S. Latino electorate.⁷ He targeted not only Latino Catholics – a true blue constituency – but also the nation’s 9.2 million Latino Protestants and other Christians, most of whom are Evangelical.

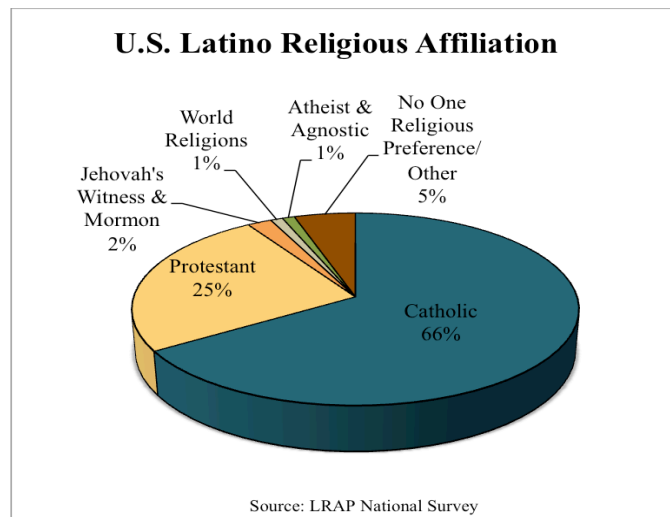


Table 1

⁶ Espinosa, 2011, 261-274. I call this the “back-door” strategy into the Latino community.

⁷ Confirmed in the 2008 LRAP survey. See Espinosa, 2011, 239-242.

He did this because all of the polling indicated that Evangelical and/or born-again Christians made up 44 percent of all Latino Christians, 37 percent of the Latino Christian electorate, and 84 percent of all Latino Protestants/ Other Christians, 43 percent of all Latino mainline Protestants, and 32 percent of all Latino Catholics.⁸ University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Greeley estimated that 600,000 Latinos may be “defecting” every year from Catholicism to Evangelical Christianity.⁹ This general finding of massive demographic shifts was confirmed by the Hispanic Churches in American Public Life and the LRAP national surveys, which found that for every one Latino that had “recently returned” to Catholicism, four had recently left it.¹⁰ The fast-growing Latino Protestant Evangelical community also made up two percent of the electorate – as large or larger than the Jewish, Asian American, or Muslim electorates. They are also very active in key swing and electoral-rich states.¹¹ In 2008, Obama hoped to use both Protestants and Catholics to offset losing the white Catholic and Protestant votes.¹²

Religious Influences, Practices, and Beliefs

Democrats canvassed Latino Catholics and Protestants because they knew that sixty-five percent said that a candidate’s personal faith and morals were relevant in their decision to vote

⁸ Espinosa, 2011, 239-242.

⁹ Andrew M. Greeley, “Defection Among Hispanics (Updated),” *America*, September 27, 1997, 12-13.

¹⁰ Espinosa, 2011, 243.

¹¹ See the NEP 2008 election results. Texas and California have the largest number of Latino Assemblies of God, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, the Latin American Council of Christian Churches, and Southern Baptist headquarters and churches. New York, Texas, Chicago, and Miami are major centers of Latino Catholic and Evangelical church growth and expansion.

¹² Espinosa, 2011, 255-267. Arian Campo-Flores and Jessica Ramirez with Jim Moscou, “Power in The Pews: Latino Evangelicals are an in-demand group this Fall,” *Newsweek*, October 7, 2008.

for him or her and that seventy-seven percent of Latino registered voters said that religion provides a great deal of guidance in their day-to-day living. The influence of religion was also evident in strong Latino Protestant and Catholic support for a pro-life position on abortion and traditional marriage. Given these facts, Obama developed a faith-based strategy to win over Latinos and outflank McCain on religion and race – which succeeded.

U.S. Latino Christian Registered Voters by Religious Guidance & Practice	Catholic	Protestant
Religion provides quite a bit of Guidance to daily Living	76	80
Relevancy of a Politician’s Faith and Morals	58	79
Pray Weekly or More	78	90
Attend Church Weekly or More	54	70
Read the Bible Weekly or More	32	62
Support Public School Prayer/Moment of Silence	77	81
Favor “under God” in Pledge of Allegiance & “In God We Trust” on Coins	81	85
Oppose Abortion	67	73
Oppose Gay Marriage	57	74
Source: LRAP National Survey		

Table 2

Party Identification by Religion: Catholic and Protestant

Despite the trend in Latinos voting Republican and despite McCain’s natural advantages, the Democratic share of the Latino party affiliation had increased by almost 10

percent from 2000 to 2008, whereas Republican growth was modest – some say due to voter mobilization for Clinton. By contrast, Latino Protestant Republican affiliation only increased by 6 percent from 2004 to 2008.

U.S. Latino Christian Party Identification and Presidential Vote, 1996-2008					
Election Year	Party			Vote	
	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Dem.	Rep.
1996	41	19	40	76	16
2000	47	15	38	62	35
2004	45	20	35	57/53	40/44
2007	57				
2008 (Pre-Election)	56	17	27	59	27
Catholic	59.5	15	26	63	24
Protestant	50	23	27	50	34
18-34	62	9	29	68	21
35-49	44	18	38	53	27
50-64	61	18	21	54	31
65+	63	22	15	60	30
2008 (Post-Election)				67	31
Catholic	63	27		73	27
Protestant				58	42

Notes: The 1996 and 2000 findings are from the HCAPL Pre-Election National Survey (n=2,060 Latinos).
 The 1996 party identification is from the 2003 Pew Charitable Trust's Values Survey.
 The NEP and LA Times exit polls reported 44 and 45 percent for Bush. However, Roberto Suro and others put the 2004 results at 40% Bush, 57% Kerry, and 3% Other.
 The 2004 and 2008 Post-Election findings are based on the NEP exit poll.
 The 2008 Pre-Election findings are from LRAP's 700 Latino Christian registered voters.
 The 2008 Post-Election two-way findings are from the ANES and LRAP statistical projections.

Table 3

However, Obama worried that the Democratic upsurge in party identification was due more to Bush's two wars, a faltering economy, and Clinton's mobilization than to Obama

himself. They were correct. With Obama at the head of the ticket, Latino party identification didn't change from 2007 to 2008.¹³ Obama had not made any major gains in the Latino vote.

Obama's poor showing among Christian Latinos was in part because they were not sure where he stood on issues like comprehensive immigration reform. This explains why a surprisingly high 46 percent of Latino voters said they would be willing to leave their party if it did not find a more positive way to address immigration issues, including almost half of all Latino Catholics (46%) and Protestants (46%). Most surprising: Latino *Democrats* (48%) were more willing than Republicans (30%) to leave their party over immigration reform. They said this despite the fact that Latinos trusted Democrats (50%) more than Republicans (18%) to pass an immigration bill that reflected their own views. Equally revealing, they also reported trusting the Democratic Party (50%) more than Obama (41%) on immigration — something that made Obama vulnerable to McCain.¹⁴

Courting the Right? Obama and Pro-Life and Traditional Marriage Latinos

In past elections, Democratic candidates assumed that Latino Evangelicals (and Blacks and Asian Americans) vote Republican.¹⁵ Obama wouldn't make the same mistake. Instead, he aggressively courted Latino Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals because of their location, numbers, swing vote potential, and growing share of the electorate. He planned to use Latino

¹³ See the LRAP survey results. Paul Taylor and Richard Fry, *Hispanics and the 2008 Election* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2007), iii, 8.

¹⁴ See LRAP survey results. Taylor and Fry, iii, 8.

¹⁵ Espinosa, 2011, 330.

and racial-ethnic Catholics and Evangelicals to offset the loss of their white co-religionist counterparts. It proved to be a shrewd move.

Yet he needed to take bolder steps if he was going to win the Latino Catholic and Protestant votes by the kind of exceptionally wide margins he was counting on to offset Euro-American losses. As a result, he took the out-of-the-box move of appointing campaign directors and advisors for the faith community that were or had been pro-life and supported traditional marriage and even voted for Bush in 2000 or 2004. His first and most important step was to appoint the twenty-six-year-old African American Joshua DuBois to direct his outreach to the faith community. On the surface, choosing DuBois was counterintuitive not only because he was a Pentecostal minister who attended National Community Church in Washington, DC, a congregation associated with the heavily Republican Assemblies of God and the Willow Creek Association, but also because he was pro-life and supported traditional marriage. Also, Pentecostals weren't members of a mainstream tradition and what most Democrats knew about them they didn't like.¹⁶ However, DuBois had proved a wise and faithful confidant and after seeing how well he advised him on faith issues during his service in the U.S. Senate, Obama gave him the herculean task in 2008 of organizing his national campaign outreach to people of all faiths, something at which he proved "superb," according to Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.¹⁷ After learning about and helping to shape Obama's New Democratic pluralism platform, DuBois wasted no time in persuading other pro-

¹⁶ Alex Altman, "Joshua DuBois: Obama's Pastor-in-Chief, *TIME*, February 6, 2009.

¹⁷ "Pick for faith-based office earns praise," *JTA: The Global News Service of the Jewish People*, February 1, 2009.

life Evangelicals to join the Obama campaign. A former Evangelical named Dr. Shaun Casey joined them. He directed Obama's outreach to the Evangelical community.¹⁸

All of this took place in the same season that Obama invited onto his team pro-life Catholics like former Ronald Reagan legal counsel Prof. Doug Kmiec. He also invited Dr. Miguel Díaz to serve as his Latino Catholic advisor and Rev. Wilfredo de Jesús as his Latino Evangelical advisor. In addition to being a pastor, de Jesús was Vice President for Social Justice of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC). Although they all shared a common pro-life background at one point in their lives, they were now part of a progressive and religiously and racially inclusive coalition that promoted racial integration, civil rights, social and economic justice, and immigrant reform.¹⁹

Obama's "Sí, se puede" ("Yes, we can") message and rhetoric in the Latino community echoed the famous rallying cry of César Chávez and his decision to mobilize the faith community. A new generation of religious leaders such as Rev. Samuel Rodríguez, President of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC) and de Jesús promoted the twin themes of "righteousness and justice," which they defined as the "reconciling message" of Billy Graham and the faith-based "activism" of Martin Luther King, Jr.²⁰

¹⁸ Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Shaun Casey, Telephone, Claremont, CA, August 17, 2010.

¹⁹ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 209-212.

²⁰ PBS, God in America: Frontline, "Interview: Samuel Rodríguez," January 13, 2010: <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/interviews/samuel-rodriguez.html>

Obama's Latino Pro-Life Campaign Advisors

The sense of urgency in the Obama camp was shaped in part by his shellacking in the primaries against Clinton and his stagnant poll numbers among Latinos in the spring. Although Obama knew he would win the Latino Catholic vote since they had voted for Clinton (83 percent), Gore (63 percent), and Kerry (69 percent), he didn't want to leave anything to chance since the Latino Catholic Democratic support had slipped 14 points over three elections.²¹

To shore up his support, he invited Dr. Miguel Díaz to serve as a Latino Catholic advisor. Díaz was a wise choice. A Cuban by birth, he immigrated to the U.S. when he was eleven years old. His father, a waiter, and his mother, a data-entry operator, settled in Miami-Dade County. Miguel took his PhD degree in theology from the University of Notre Dame, where he studied liberation theology, a theology that placed a premium on faith and social transformation. Díaz taught at various universities before being named professor at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (MN). He also served as a board member of the Catholic Theological Society of America and as president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States.²²

Díaz shared in an interview with the author that through Mark Linton, his Catholic outreach coordinator, Obama had invited Díaz to serve as a Catholic advisor to help mobilize Latino and Catholic voters. His past national offices positioned him well to bridge Catholic and racial lines and provide Obama high visibility in the Latino Catholic academic and seminary

²¹ Espinosa, 2011, 244-268.

²² Michael Sean Winters, "US Ambassador to Vatican named," *National Catholic Reporter*, May 27, 2009. Dan Gilgoff, "Obama's New Vatican Ambassador," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 28, 2009.

communities and the parishes they served. Díaz provided wise counsel on Catholic issues, promoted “just and comprehensive immigration reform, education of our children, [and] universal health care,” and canvassed for Obama via conferences and events.²³

Díaz’s pro-life background would come in handy among traditional Catholics, who in Florida are heavily Cuban and Republican. Obama’s appointment enabled him to reach out to Latinos, Cubans, pro-life Catholics, social conservatives, Latino religious leaders, and moderate Latino Republicans. Díaz also brought practical insight into how to win Florida, where Latinos made up 20 percent of the state and 14 percent of the electorate. Díaz worked at the local and state levels to “promote grassroots efforts in support of Latinos for Obama.”²⁴ He did his job exceptionally well and illustrated Obama’s new religious and Democratic pluralism.

Yet even more surprising than his choice of Díaz was Obama’s decision to ask a born-again pro-life Evangelical Puerto Rican Assemblies of God megachurch pastor Wilfredo de Jesús to serve as his Latino Protestant advisor. De Jesús campaigned hard for Obama across the nation. Obama financed his airfare, room, and board, and provided a personal driver.²⁵ Obama tapped de Jesús for a number of reasons. He served as a charismatic Obama spokesperson in meetings, interviews, and phone calls and personally spread Obama’s message through Latino megachurches and pastors. He had the attention of his pastoral colleagues because he himself was pastor of the 4,000-member New Life Covenant Church in South Chicago. Pastors looked up to him for growing his church from 100 people to 4,000 in ten years and because his congregation

²³ Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Miguel Díaz, E-mail, Claremont, CA, March 3, 2009.

²⁴ Espinosa, Interview with Díaz.

²⁵ Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Wilfredo de Jesús, Telephone, August 31, 2010.

sponsored a homeless shelter for women and children, “Gangs to Grace” programs for at-risk youth, a ministry for homeless men, and a rehabilitation farm for women struggling with drug addiction and seeking to leave prostitution.²⁶ De Jesús also – and perhaps most importantly – brought his pro-life and traditional marriage credentials to the table, which enabled him to win over Latino ministers and others who voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004. The fact that he was also Vice President of Social Justice for the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), the largest Latino Evangelical civil rights and grassroots renewal movement in the nation, gave him national visibility and influence. Samuel Rodríguez’s NHCLC worked closely with the late Sen. Ted Kennedy and Sen. John McCain to shape and write the McCain-Kennedy immigration reform bill. Having an “inside man” in the Latino Evangelical community and many of its 18,000 churches, almost all of which were pro-life and supported traditional marriage, gave Obama national visibility.²⁷

De Jesús campaigned across the nation for fifteen months, especially in the summer and fall of 2008. He promoted Obama by promising that he would pass immigration reform in his first year in office, reduce abortions, and staunchly support traditional marriage.²⁸

²⁶ Espinosa, Interview with de Jesús.

²⁷ Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Samuel Rodríguez, E-mail, Claremont, CA, June 24, 2010.

²⁸ Espinosa, Interview with de Jesús.

Converting Social Liabilities into Political Assets:

Obama's Positioning on Faith-Based Initiatives, Immigration Reform, and Gay Marriage

With his Latino Catholic and Evangelical and other faith-based advisors now in place, Obama set out to convert three potential political liabilities into assets: faith-based initiatives, comprehensive immigration reform, and gay marriage. In the primaries, some on the hard Left asked Obama to dismantle Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, claiming it violated the separation of church and state. Not only did Obama promise not to dismantle it, Obama broke ranks with the hard Left and promised to expand it. This decision was as shrewd as it was wise because it helped him win over many Latino Catholics and Evangelicals who initially worried that Obama might cut their Bush-funded social programs.²⁹

The Bush Administration provided millions of dollars in government funding to largely urban black, Latino Catholic and Evangelical, Asian, Jewish, and Muslim faith organizations to counter social problems like gang violence, teenage pregnancy, and alcohol and drug abuse. In fact, more than 80 percent of Latinos and African Americans support faith-based initiatives. While many thought Obama kept faith-based initiatives to appease white Evangelicals, they were mistaken. He sought to use his support for FBOs to win over badly needed Latinos and other racial-ethnic minorities who had voted Republican in 2004.³⁰

²⁹ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 199-202, 213- 221.

³⁰ The vast majority of blacks (85 percent), whites (65 percent), Protestants (69 percent), mainline Protestants (63 percent), Catholics (74 percent), Republicans (66 percent), Democrats (77 percent), and independents (65 percent) support faith-based initiatives. Pew Research Center, "Faith-Based Programs Still Popular: Democrats Now More Supportive Than Republicans," *Pew Research Center Publications*, November 16, 2009; Espinosa, 2011, 270-273; Catherine Wilson, *The Politics of Latino Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 34-35, passim.

Next Obama sought to win over Latino Catholics and Protestants by promising to pass comprehensive immigration reform in his first year in office. The truth is he had little choice since polls indicated that half of all Latino Democrats were willing to leave the Democratic Party if he didn't.

However, his most Machiavellian ploy was how he framed his views on gay marriage. He threaded the moral needle of American politics by stating that he supported abortion *and* traditional marriage. He knew that he could not support abortion and gay marriage and expect to win religious moderates and conservatives as Latinos opposed both by wide margins: with two-thirds of Latino Democrats (65 percent) and four-fifths of Latino Republicans (80 percent) opposing abortion. More important, Latino independents also clearly opposed abortion (by 70 percent).³¹

Unintended Results?

Although many snickered that opposing gay marriage was simply a political ruse to win over votes, Latinos and blacks genuinely believed Senator Obama. As a result, they not only strongly supported Obama but also state constitutional bans on gay marriage in Florida, Arizona, and California. Without their support, these ballots would not have passed.³²

³¹ See LRAP survey results. Gastón Espinosa, "Interview with Samuel Rodríguez," Telephone, Claremont, CA, August 12, 2010; Espinosa, Interview with Shaun Casey.

³² Joe Von Kanel and Hal Quinley, "Exit Polls: Latino Voters Tip Balance," CNNPolitics.com, November, 5, 2008: http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/11/05/exit-polls-where-latino-voters-tipped-the-balance/?eref=ib_politicalticker.

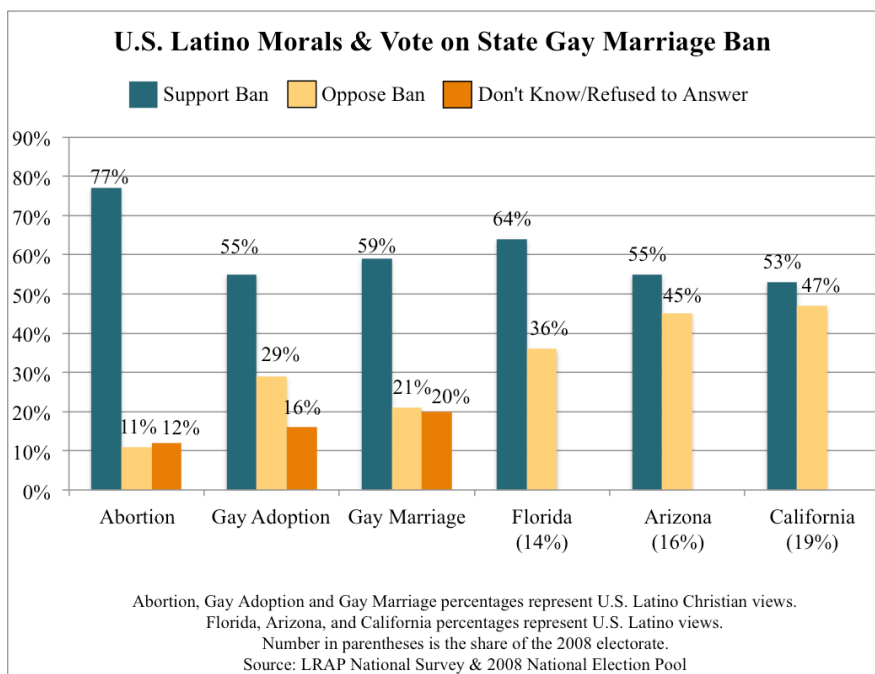


Table 4

Thus in an ironic twist of fate, Obama’s mobilization of Latinos and Blacks around his candidacy and traditional marriage helped pass three bans on gay marriage. Though the consequence may have been unintended, it is impossible to imagine that the outcome was completely unforeseen. All of this helps to explain Obama’s “evolving” pro-gay posture since 2008 and his final decision to support gay marriage in April 2012; it is not unlike Bill Clinton’s support of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 and about-face pro-gay posture since.³³ Cynical, yes, but it worked. Obama split the Latino moral vote by agreeing with them on at least one of their key moral issues. It had the same affect to varying degrees with other groups. Equally

³³ Stephen Mansfield wrote: “There’s no question Obama is a Christian, but he is definitely a postmodern, liberal, and [someone who has to a small extent a] black liberation theology perspective,” in *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2008).

important, it also enabled him to offset his pro-choice liability among Latino Catholics and Evangelicals and thwart those on the right from more vigorously opposing his candidacy.

Finding Salvation and a Few Extra Votes: Conversion and Social Justice

Obama's third and most convincing campaign strategy was to disseminate Catholic and Evangelical-sounding social justice and conversion narratives. To prove it wasn't merely a ploy, early in the campaign he publicly declared his faith in "democratic pluralism," religious freedom, and finding Jesus. He shrewdly linked his newfound faith to a liberationist God of social justice, something that resonated with a growing number of Latino Catholics and Evangelicals hungry to promote a Latino vision of righteousness and justice in a black-white world. While neither Obama or McCain claimed to be Evangelical or Catholic, Obama's carefully crafted spiritual narrative and righteous African American rhetorical expressions and flair enabled him to speak with all of the cadence, heart, and power of traditional Catholicism and Evangelicalism without having to affirm all of their traditional morality, theology, and politics.

His message was not as inauthentic as it might seem. Indeed, Obama saw and soon championed the strategic historical link between faith, justice, and progressive social change. He wrote in *La Audacia de la Esperanza (The Audacity of Hope)*, which was published in Spanish almost 18 months before Election Day:

The church ... understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge the powers and principalities... I was able to

see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world.³⁴

This powerful affirmation of the social gospel and faith-based redemption resonated with Latino Catholic encyclicals on social justice and liberation theology and with Latino Evangelicalism's growing emphasis on righteousness and justice. The results were as positive as they were predictable: De Jesús praised Obama for speaking out against the “mistreatment of illegal immigrants.” He praised Obama for understanding “the importance of justice issues such as Health Care, Education, and Immigration within the faith community.”³⁵

In a move that alienated some in his base but that exponentially attracted Catholics and Evangelicals, Obama scolded secularists and atheists for asking Christians, Evangelicals, and other people to leave their faith and morality at the doors of American public life. He stated that this was not only unwise, but also a practical absurdity because religion and faith-based morality often drove progressive social reform.³⁶ Rather than silence religion in public life, Obama argued that the U.S. government needed to partner with churches and the faith community to “feed the hungry, reform the prisoner, rehabilitate the drug addict, and keep the veteran employed.”³⁷

Churches could have a profoundly positive impact on American public life. As evidence, he offered his own life. Although some have charged that he only spoke about his faith journey to counter accusations that he was a Muslim and to distance himself from Rev.

³⁴ Obama, 207.

³⁵ Kennedy, “Preach and Reach.”

³⁶ Obama, 218.

³⁷ Kennedy, “Preach and Reach.”

Jeremiah Wright, he actually began speaking about it (perhaps anticipating future problems) long before the campaign formally began.

To lay out his spiritual journey boldly before the nation, he crafted an evangelical-sounding conversion narrative and not only published it in his book, but also in the magazine popular in the Evangelical community —*Christianity Today*. In response to a January 2008 interview question about whether he considered himself born-again, he bluntly stated to the CT reporter: “I am a Christian, and I am a devout Christian. I believe in the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”³⁸ Although hardly convincing to skeptics, it still worked with many Evangelicals – especially younger students and racial-ethnic minorities already looking for a reason to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Driving home his narrative ever further in the Latino community, several months later at the University of Texas at Brownsville he publicly declared to the 150 to 200 Latino Evangelical and Catholic leaders: “I let Jesus Christ into my life because I learned that my sins could be redeemed and if I placed my trust in Jesus, that he could set me on a path to eternal salvation.”³⁹ Then, to seal his conversion narrative once and for all among Latino Evangelicals, Obama allowed NHCLC and other Latino Evangelical leaders to lay hands on him and pray for him and his campaign—something broadcast – not incidentally – over Spanish radio.⁴⁰

³⁸ Obama, 207-208; Sarah Pullman and Ted Olson, “Q&A: Barack Obama,” *Christianity Today*, January 23, 2008: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/januaryweb-only/104-32.0.html>

³⁹ Jacques Berlinerblau, “Huckobama,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2008; Michelle Vu, “Obama Connects with Hispanic Evangelicals in Texas,” *Christian Post*, March 3, 2008.

⁴⁰ Espinosa, Interview with de Jesús.

He continued to weave his conversion narrative nationwide at a “closed door” meeting on June 10, 2008 with the nation’s top Catholic, Evangelical, and megachurch pastors. In response to Franklin Graham’s question about whether Jesus was the only way to heaven, Obama quickly stated: “Jesus is the only way for me.”⁴¹ Obama was sounding more and more Evangelical every day.

Pushing the Boundaries of Progressive Bigotry:

Obama’s New Democratic Religious Pluralism

Not all progressives – especially those on the hard left – were happy about Obama’s evangelical-sounding rhetoric and concessions. Most harbored a profound fear and even hatred of conservative Evangelicals and Catholics because of their staunch opposition to abortion and gay marriage. In the past, they had been able to check any significant attempts to give them a major voice or influence in Democratic presidential campaigns and platforms. Obama and 2008 were different. Not brought up in the D.C. Democratic establishment beltway, his loyalties were more fluid and bold. It was only their ravenous desire to beat Bush and win in 2008 and Obama’s iron-clad discipline that kept everyone in line and relatively silent about the new coalition Obama was cobbling together. In a strategic effort to win over socially progressive but morally conservative Latino, Euro-American, and black Evangelicals, Obama made it abundantly clear that Democrats in general and he in particular were not inherently anti-faith *or* anti-Evangelical. In fact, Obama vowed to correct this misperception:

⁴¹ Adelle M. Banks and Daniel Burke, “Fuller picture emerges of Obama’s evangelical meeting,” *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, June 18, 2008. Espinosa, Interview with Samuel Rodríguez.

Evangelicals have come to believe oftentimes that Democrats are anti-faith.... Part of my job in this campaign, something that I started doing well *before* this campaign, was to make sure I was showing up and reaching out and sharing my faith experience with people who share that faith. Hopefully we can build some bridges that can allow us to move the country forward.⁴²

To prove his commitment, he attended not one but two different events at Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church, including the Civic Forum on the Presidency where he spoke openly about his Christian faith; he also attended the Compassion Forum at Messiah College, an Evangelical Christian college in Pennsylvania. The strategy paid off.

Samuel Rodríguez stated in a follow-up interview in July 2008: "It's good to see a nominee engage Evangelical leaders. For too long the Democratic party seemed hostile to Evangelicals."⁴³ De Jesús praised Obama, claiming that he won Latino Catholics and Evangelicals in 2008 because he "resonated with our people, the Hispanic community and *especially the Evangelical community*" (italics in original).⁴⁴ Reflecting the growing muscle of the nation's 8.5 million Latino Evangelicals, he also told reporters that they represented "a new generation of younger Hispanic evangelical Christians... [who are] no longer content to remain on the sidelines."⁴⁵ Indeed, Latino Evangelicals were coming of age, and they liked what they

⁴² Italics in original quote. Obama, 198-224; Sarah Pullman and Ted Olsen, "Q&A: Barack Obama," *Christianity Today*, January 23, 2008:<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/januaryweb-only/104-32.0.html>

⁴³ Samuel Rodríguez, *Hispanic Christian Newswire* (Chicago, IL):<http://www.nhclc.org/news/nhclc-and-2008-presidential-candidates>

⁴⁴ "Two Chicago Latinos that Helped Obama Be President," *Extra* (Chicago) January 21, 2009.

⁴⁵ Anthony Robinson, "Articles of Faith: Evangelical group bucks tradition, supports Obama," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 25, 2008.

were hearing from Obama. Obama's Democratic pluralism strategy was a resounding success. Though some cynically argue it was just a sham for the "former" cigarette-smoking liberal Protestant (Obama's favorite brand was Marlboro Reds), this seems a tad too sharp for his seemingly genuine faith statements. In truth, Obama was both calculating and a righteous social justice crusader in a Social Gospel kind of way. Yet he was also abundantly aware of the delicious fruit his new Democratic pluralism would reap.

It was a perfect storm. De Jesús, Rodríguez, Miranda, and others were promoting the twin themes of righteousness and justice and, as a result, began discussing and broadcasting Obama's faith-friendly message in conferences, conference calls, revivals, pastoral training events, rallies, voter mobilization events, online newsletters, and on Spanish-language radio. This enabled Obama to reach some of the 18,000 Latino Evangelical churches, especially in key border states. De Jesús tapped his networks to promote Obama to mega-church pastors and their congregants. He also helped facilitate Obama's outreach to Latinos through six telephone conference calls with the NHCLC. Obama directly participated in four of these calls with NHCLC President Rodríguez and other church leaders. Rodríguez stated that Obama's campaign team contacted him, the NHCLC office, or his regional leaders almost thirty times during the campaign. For the first time in history, Latino Evangelicals had what seemed like a

genuine friend in the Democratic nominee for the presidency. This newfound friendship began to chip away at Bush's hard-won gains and fledgling loyalty among Latino Evangelicals.⁴⁶

Converting Advantages into Liabilities: McCain, Latinos, and "The Machine"

At the same time Obama was making significant inroads into the Latino Catholic and Protestant Evangelical faith communities, John McCain was strangely silent – even with Latino Evangelicals with whom he had a warm and personal relationship. He was not capitalizing on his good will and natural advantages in the Spanish-speaking community. For this reason, Obama's victory in 2008 was due as much to McCain's lack of outreach as to Obama's strategic efforts.

McCain's paid advisors had decided that major outreach to Latinos was a net loss for their efforts since most Latinos voted Democrat. This led them to thwart and undermine one-on-one interaction with Latino Catholic and Evangelical clergy and congregations. As a result, McCain had only three conference calls with the NHCLC and met with Rodríguez only twice in person despite their close work on immigration reform in DC and despite giving him his personal cell phone number. McCain's advisors felt he needed to run as a moderate and not

⁴⁶ Rodríguez is an ordained Assemblies of God minister born to Puerto Rican parents who migrated to New York City. He later moved to Sacramento, California. He views comprehensive immigration reform as a civil rights issue and reportedly participated in 24 faith forums from June 2007 to November 2008, directed two conferences on Latino faith, immigration, and the election, and stated that the NHCLC has access to close to 100,000 Latinos in their database and through public venues. Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Samuel Rodríguez, E-mail, April 12, 2009. Arian Campo-Flores, "The Rev. Samuel Rodríguez: Ministering to the Needs of His People," *Newsweek*, December 31, 2007; Ben Smith, "Hispanics turn cold shoulder to McCain," *Politico*, October 9, 2008; Tim Stafford, "The Call of Samuel," *Christianity Today*, September 2006.

strongly reach out to Latinos or too strongly champion Catholic and Evangelical opposition to abortion, gay marriage, and other causes.⁴⁷

However, McCain didn't completely abandon all outreach to Latinos. He brought Dr. Juan Hernández into his group of core advisors. He served as his National Hispanic Outreach Director. Hernández was a solid choice. He had not only helped broker several meetings between Mexican President Vicente Fox and Bush, Jr., and had on Fox's presidential campaign team, but was a politically savvy pro-life Evangelical Republican from Texas who was good on camera.⁴⁸

Hernández worked hard to promote McCain to the Latino community via Spanish television, radio, and other church forums. However, he lamented in an interview with the author that he faced a brick wall of competing interests and indifference to Latino issues with some of McCain's other core advisors. Despite this, he was able to persuade McCain to shoot a number of Spanish commercials. However, they were never aired because of the "The Machine," Hernández lamented. The campaign machine made up of advisors and consultants – all pulling for their own issues – "constantly squeezed out Hispanics." "McCain would say I want Hispanics at all of the meetings." When they were not there, "McCain would throw fits. 'Where are they?' 'Why aren't they here?'" McCain scolded his senior staff. "Hispanics and their issues were simply lost in a sea of competing concerns among the 400-500 people all pulling for what they thought was important," Hernández observed.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Juan Hernández, Telephone, Claremont, August 20, 2010; Espinosa, Interview with Rodríguez, August 12, 2010.

⁴⁸ Espinosa, Interview with Hernández.

⁴⁹ Espinosa, Interview with Hernández.

McCain's Outreach

The greatest tragedy and debacle of McCain's 2008 campaign program was the decision to distance himself on comprehensive immigration reform, the signature mark of his loyalty to the Latino community. Those who worked closely with McCain and Bush's push for comprehensive immigration reform felt betrayed by McCain, not because Latinos he didn't really support immigration reform in his heart (*corazón*), but rather because he allowed his advisors to put politics ahead of friendship and millions of people living in the shadows of American society.

As a result, Latino Evangelicals reluctantly chastised McCain and especially the Republican Party for its demagoguery. Rev. Luís Cortés, an American Baptist Evangelical pastor and founder of Nueva Esperanza community development organization and co-sponsor with Rev. Jesse Miranda of the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast, stated: "McCain's problem is the problem of his party demonizing Hispanic people... You can't switch off the immigration rhetoric and think it will work."⁵⁰ Perhaps the greatest pain and sharpest arrow came in a *Washington Post* editorial by Samuel Rodríguez, who prophetically lamented, "Hispanic evangelicals won't be squeezed into a Republican barrio... Is the Republican Party the party of xenophobia, nativism and anti-Latino demagoguery, or is it the party of faith and family values,

⁵⁰ Jason DeParle, "Hispanic Group Thrives on Faith and Federal Aid," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2005; David Paul Kuhn, "The McCain-Latino Disconnect," *Politico*, July 27, 2008. Rev. Luís Cortés is Puerto Rican and a graduate of City College of New York, Union Seminary (M.Div.), New Hampshire College (MS), and is a PhD candidate in economic development at New Hampshire College. He was ordained an American Baptist missionary in 1981. He helped found Nueva Esperanza in 1988 as an economic development corporation to serve low-income families in Philadelphia. By 2008, it had received more than \$7.4 million in federal funding from the Bush Administration.

regardless of skin color or language proficiency?”⁵¹ The answer for many Latino Catholics and Evangelicals was clear.

In our interview, Rodríguez said McCain’s failure was in part due to the lack of personal attention he paid to Latinos of all backgrounds, including Catholics and Evangelicals. He simply didn’t allocate enough time, personnel, and money to Latino outreach to win over their vote. He could have increased his Latino support by more face-to-face meetings, conversations, and public policy partnerships with Latino pastors and political leaders. Thus despite the strong Republican network Bush created among Latinos, McCain’s campaign decided to invest their limited resources elsewhere. They also did not capitalize on Spanish Christian radio or television.

While Latino Evangelicals felt abandoned by McCain, others like Díaz and de Jesús were working at top speed to promote Obama to the community, who was all too happy to share his “Christian” journey. At the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) annual convention in Washington, DC, Obama clubbed McCain on stage by stating in front of him and a large audience of Latinos that McCain “abandoned his courageous stance” immigration reform, knowing full well it was due to political pressure.⁵²

⁵¹ Samuel Rodríguez, “Our Flagging Faith in the GOP,” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 2008: B04.

⁵² Russell Berman, “Obama: McCain ‘Abandoned’ Immigration Stance,” *New York Sun*, July 9, 2008.

“My Business Card is Made out of Printer Paper”: Investing in Latino Faith

Despite the fact that Bush won a majority of Latino Evangelicals in 2004 and that McCain had a number of natural advantages that might enable him to increase his support among them and traditional Catholics, McCain and especially his advisors only made a half-hearted effort to provide major funding for Latino Evangelical outreach. This stood in sharp contrast to Obama’s announced pledge to invest \$20 million into Latino outreach, including to the faith community.⁵³ This contrast of priorities and funding was painfully clear at a nationally televised Latino Evangelical conference sponsored by the NHCLC at Vanguard University, an Assemblies of God-affiliated institution in Costa Mesa, CA. At the event, Wilfredo de Jesús (who called in) and Hernández held a live debate about which of the two candidates cared most about Latinos and their issues. When de Jesús pointed out that Obama had just announced plans to invest \$20 million towards Latino outreach and asked how much McCain would invest, Hernández was uncomfortably silent. Later Rodríguez spoke with Hernández and learned that McCain had decided (off the record) not to invest any major funds into significant Latino Catholic or Evangelical outreach because his advisors told him that it would be a “net gain” for Obama. Obama’s war chest of funding was filled to overflowing while McCain’s was close to empty.⁵⁴

When Rodríguez asked Hernández how much the McCain camp had given him to win over Latino Catholics and Protestants, he quietly replied: “My business card is made out of printer paper... I don’t get paid.” Hernández was given no budget, staff, or even business cards.

⁵³ Espinosa, Interview with Rodríguez, August 12, 2010; Espinosa, Interview with Hernández.

⁵⁴ Espinosa, Interview with Rodríguez, August 12, 2010.

In fact, he and another Latino associated with the NHCLC, Rev. Mark González, ran their entire outreach efforts “out of the trunks of their cars.”⁵⁵ Despite their handicaps, they sent out thousands of Latino Evangelical voting guides and Defense of Marriage flyers across the nation. They stretched their dollars and literally loaded up their trunks with campaign materials and drove from city to city passing out flyers, posters, and other literature, spreading McCain’s otherwise faith-friendly message.

Though Hernández admitted that ad hoc funding was available for certain events, McCain’s senior campaign advisors almost always shot down their requests or made sure most advertisements were never aired. And while Hernández had to pay his own way to and from events for most of his work, Obama used his campaign funds to fly de Jesús around the nation and even provided him with a personal driver.

To appease some, McCain was forced to distance himself somewhat from Hernández because he promoted comprehensive immigration reform in his new book entitled *The New Americans*—something McCain himself had once championed. As a result of these and other frustrations and disappointments, Hernández offered his resignation not once but twice. In both cases, McCain pleaded with him to remain on his campaign team. Because of McCain’s heartfelt request and because Hernández knew that McCain really did support immigration reform and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

the faith community, Hernández stayed the course. In the end, Hernández concluded: “They paid too much attention to the [Republican] base, and not enough to Latinos.”⁵⁶

Obama’s Counter-Offensive: Creating Opportunities

In contrast to McCain’s inability to capitalize on his natural advantages among Latinos, Obama never missed an opportunity to create an opportunity. He not only sent Wilfredo de Jesús to participate in the Vanguard Conference but also Shaun Casey, his Evangelical outreach coordinator. Even Joshua DuBois participated by teleconference. Together, they stressed Obama’s desire to work with Latinos and Evangelicals on everything from faith-based initiatives to immigration reform. This contrasted sharply with McCain’s shoestring efforts and created the sense on the Latino street that Obama simply cared more about Latinos than McCain, despite his previous track record. The math was easy, according to Rodríguez: Obama won Latino Evangelicals in 2008 because he worked harder than McCain by “a margin of 10 to 1” and went out of his way to make a direct, personal connection with its leaders, not just through his surrogates or volunteer and under-resourced advisors and campaigners. He spoke with enthusiasm about how Obama walked through a bustling crowd at the Compassion Forum at Messiah College to meet and shake hands with Rodríguez and Jesse Miranda. The Obama

⁵⁶ Hernández holds a PhD from Texas Christian University and despite being pro-life, Pentecostal, and supporting traditional marriage, Republicans such as Michelle Malkin criticized him for supporting comprehensive immigration reform. Espinosa, Interview with Hernández; Jessica Ramírez and Holly Bailey, “Why Won’t Juan Come to the Phone? McCain’s Hispanic outreach chief is both loved and loathed,” *Newsweek*, July 28, 2008; Michelle Malkin, “John McCain’s open-borders outreach director: The new DHS secretary? Update: A ‘non-paid volunteer,’” *MichelleMalkin.com*, January 25, 2008; Carolyn Petri, “The Power of the Advisory Council: The Latino vote has already swung; McCain and Obama’s Latino advisory boards could explain why,” *The American Prospect*, November 4, 2008, web only.

camp's called "us monthly and [later] almost weekly to talk about their [Latino and faith-friendly] policies and ideas," Rodríguez said.⁵⁷

In addition to direct outreach, Obama, DuBois, Díaz, de Jesús, Casey, and others also reached out to their sister Euro-American and African American Catholic and Evangelical leaders, underscoring the genuineness of Obama's Democratic pluralism message. Those leaders included Jim Wallis, the founder of *Sojourners* magazine,⁵⁸ and socially progressive but theologically conservative Evangelicals such as Rich Cizik of the National Association of American Evangelicals (NAE), the sister organization of the NHCLC. Cizik lamented that although they had "been receiving weekly communication from the Obama camp" on their faith-friendly public policy positions, they received "nothing from McCain." He stated that Obama was the first Democratic presidential candidate in 28 years to request a meeting with an NAE official, something that was rather astounding given that Democrats must take about 25 percent of the Evangelical vote to win the presidency. Obama knew better. He built bridges with key NAE leaders on FBOs, the environment, social justice, and traditional marriage.⁵⁹ By contrast,

⁵⁷ Espinosa, Interview with Rodríguez, August 12, 2010.

⁵⁸ Robert Knight, "'Compassion Forum' Mostly shows Faith in Liberalism," *Eye on Culture* April 22, 2008, 1-10; Amy Sullivan, "The Dems' Delicate Dance on Faith," *TIME*, April 15, 2008.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, "Preach and Reach." Hernández stated McCain said it was wrong to use religion to win votes and wasn't comfortable talking about his personal faith on the campaign trail. Espinosa, Interview with Hernández. David Brody, "McCain Religious Advisor: Using Your Faith for Election is Wrong," *CBNnews.com*, April 15, 2008: <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/357703.aspx> Some Evangelicals called Obama's outreach to conservatives "a fraud." Sarah Pullman, "Minnery disappointed by religious outreach, not thrilled with McCain," *Christianity Today* politics blog, August 27, 2008: http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/08/minnery_disappo.html

McCain's outreach was limited in scope, vision, and creativity and was not covered well in the media.⁶⁰

McCain's seemingly meager and forced efforts prompted many to take a second look at Obama. Bishop Harry Jackson, Jr., pastor of the multi-ethnic and influential Hope Christian Church in Washington, DC, summed up the attitude of some Evangelicals and Latinos when he stated that McCain's "relative silence on conservative social issues has motivated evangelicals to take a second look at Obama." McCain's "relative silence," he lamented, created a "tremendous apathy" because Evangelicals felt "betrayed" and "left out." All of this "worked to Obama's advantage," Jackson argued.⁶¹ McCain had played the secular moderate and lost.

This both surprised and pleased Obama's advisors. Dr. Shaun Casey summed up the attitude of many when he stated in an interview, "the McCain campaign... threw the Bush playbook in the trash. They banked on [white] social [rather than religious or moral] conservatives to help them win... The Bush Evangelical outreach was at a high point. It's a mystery to me why McCain did not capitalize on it."⁶² For de Jesús, McCain needed to say, "This is what I believe in..." but instead he showed "no sense of conviction" about Latinos or faith issues.⁶³ In many ways, McCain conceded Latino Catholic and Evangelical voters without firing a shot.

⁶⁰ See this book's chapter on Evangelicals (Chapter 3).

⁶¹ Kennedy, "Preach and Reach."

⁶² Espinosa, Interview with Casey.

⁶³ Espinosa, Interview with de Jesús.

Results

The results of Obama's new Democratic pluralism approach and McCain's lack of sustained outreach enabled him to win the U.S. Latino vote 67-31-percent. Obama swept Hispanic women and men across all four age groups and took 73 percent of Latino Catholics and at least 58 percent of Latino Protestants, many of them Evangelical. While some claim McCain won the Latino Protestant vote, this article will show shortly why Obama won it by a clear margin.

Despite initially uncertainty about Obama, by October his outreach had finally arrested the trend of Latino Protestants voting Republican.⁶⁴ Not only and predictably did he lead among female Latino Catholics (63 percent), but also among female Latino Protestants (53 percent). By contrast, McCain was polling only a third of male voters (31 percent) and a fourth of female Catholic voters (24 percent).

Although impressive, Obama's victory among Latinos was not consistent across generations. The LRAP survey found that 35-49 and 50-64 year-olds gave Obama 10 percent less support than the 19-34 and 65+ groups, although the youngest cohort almost always votes Democrat. Perhaps this was due to the fact that these middle generations were mobilized into national politics during the Reagan and Bush years and because more of them were married. There tends to be a correlation between being married and holding to more conservative social views and leaning Republican. This loyalty to Reagan was due at least in part to his Immigration

⁶⁴ John C. Green and Mark Silk, "The New Religion Gap," Special Supplement to *Religion in the News* (Fall 2003):1-7. The 2004 NEP placed Bush's Latino Protestant support at 57 percent in a two-way vote whereas the Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics placed it at 63 percent. Green, *The Faith Factor*, 7, 9, 11, 60, 63, 189 n. 34.

Reform and Control Act of 1986, which led to the naturalization of an estimated 2.7 million undocumented immigrants. Loyalty to Bush may have been due to his ongoing outreach from 1998-2008. Latinos began to vote Republican during the Bush years because of his regular meetings with Mexican President Vicente Fox, speeches on Spanish radio, his Latino sister-in-law and nephew, his developed relationships with Latino faith leaders, and because he pushed for faith-based initiatives and immigration reform and opposed gay marriage and abortion.⁶⁵

Latino Christian Registered Voters Socio-Demographics & Moral Issues	Obama	McCain	Other / Undecided
All Latinos (Post-Election)	67	31	2
Women	68	30	2
Men	64	33	3
18-29 year-olds	76	19	5
30-44 year-olds	63	36	1
45-64 year-olds	58	40	2
65+ year-olds	68	30	2
Latino Swing State Vote & Percentage of Electorate (Post-Election)			
New Mexico (41%)	69	30	1
Colorado (13%)	61	38	1
Nevada (15%)	76	22	2
Florida (14%)	57	42	1
Latino Vote by Religion (Post-Election)			
Catholics	73	27	2-Way Race
Protestants	58	42	2-Way Race
Latino Vote by Religion (Pre-Election)			
Catholics	63	24	13
Protestants	50	34	16
Born Again across all Latino Traditions	50	35	15
Born Again Protestants	46	38	16

⁶⁵ Green, *The Faith Factor*, 9; Espinosa, 2011, 237, 270-273.

Attend Church Weekly or More	57	30	13
Pray Weekly or More	58	29	13
Read Bible Weekly or More	51	35	14
Religious Guidance in Daily Living	56	30	14
Latino Vote by Country of Origin (Pre-Election)			
Mexico	63	22	15
Puerto Rico	55	26	19
Cuba	20	75	5
Dominican Republic	75	19	6
Central America	50	29	21
South America	46	42	12
Source: LRAP National Survey			

Table 5

Sarah Palin’s Appeal Among Latino Catholics and Protestants

Struggling in the polls, McCain boldly selected Gov. Sarah Palin to be his Vice-Presidential running mate. He hoped she’d help jumpstart his campaign. Contrary to the expectations of most of the academic and media pundits, she did. In an NHCLC leadership poll, more than 80 percent had a favorable view of Palin.⁶⁶ The fact that she was both Evangelical and Pentecostal was strategic and did help McCain generate some support from his base, but it was an uphill struggle. Still, despite Democratic attempts to utterly destroy Palin, the LRAP survey found that by October she still appealed to a large percentage of both Latino Protestants *and* Catholics— precisely what made her so potentially dangerous to Obama. Even a third of Latino Democrats who loved Obama liked her (33 v. 45 percent). Even more dangerous, she appealed to a plurality of independents (47 v. 31 percent)—both men (45 to 32 percent) and women (43 v.

⁶⁶ See the LRAP survey. Espinosa, Interview with Rodríguez, August 12, 2010.

37 percent). She also won a more favorable than unfavorable rating among Latinos of Mexican (39 percent versus 37 percent), Puerto Rican (47 percent versus 34 percent), Cuban (84 percent versus 16 percent), Central American (50 percent versus 21 percent), South American (47 v. 33 percent), and Dominican (50 v. 31 percent) ancestry. All in all, she was a good pick from a Latino Evangelical point of view, though in no way decisive.

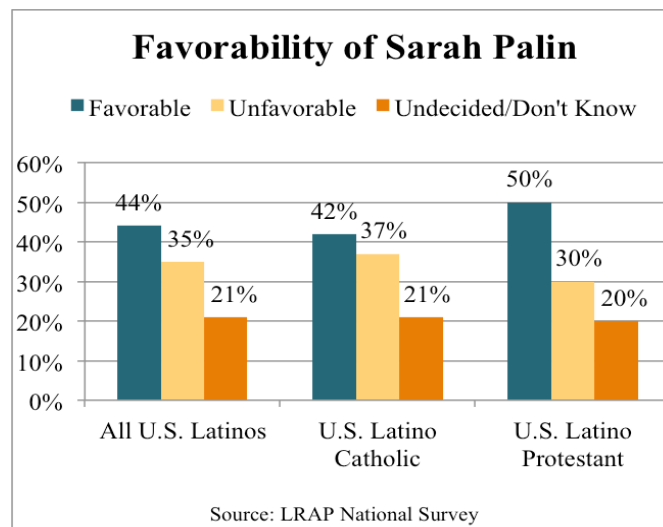


Table 6

Palin’s Latino support was due to her traditional views on abortion and gay marriage, her large family, faith, special-needs child, strong feminine outlook, working-class husband, teenage daughters, and general “hockey mom” and “pit-bull with lipstick” persona. More importantly for Latino Evangelicals, she was born-again.⁶⁷ Despite her favorability ratings among Latino

⁶⁷ Assemblies of God (AG) General Superintendent George Wood confirmed that Palin attended Juneau Christian Center (AG) and Wasilla Assemblies of God Church: <http://assemblyofgodblogs.blogspot.com/2008/08/gov-sarah-palin-assembly-of-god.html>. Eric Gorski, “Palin Says Election Rests in God’s Hands,” *Associated Press*, October 22, 2008.

Catholics and Protestants, not even she could save McCain, who seemed to be deaf to Latinos, Catholics, and Evangelicals. She was too little, too late.

Jobs, Cost of Living, and Health Care

Most scholars and analysts argue that elections are won or lost based on the economy of the sitting president. That may be true in general, but I think most use the economy and other benign factors to hide deeper and more personal reasons for voting for a particular candidate, reasons that they are too embarrassed or uncomfortable to state in public. Religion plays a critical role in shaping the quiet variables like a pro-choice or pro-life position on abortion, gay marriage, and immigration.

Religion had played a key role in Jimmy Carter's presidential politics. Winning Republicans have effectively used religion as a vehicle through which to mobilize the masses and give them something transcendent to fight for. In 2008, the roles were reversed. Now it was Obama who harnessed the headstrong power of religion to win over moderate and racial-ethnic minority conservative swing voters. He was able to do this in part because many of the Evangelical political stalwarts like Jerry Falwell, James Kennedy, James Dobson, and Pat Robertson had either passed away, were in retirement, or were simply not drawing the same level of support they had in their prime. This, along with a new generation of more conciliatory Evangelicals like Jim Wallis, Rick Warren, Samuel Rodriguez, Jesse Miranda, and others, served both as bridges – with the help of Joshua DuBois and others – and as a new generation of gate keepers that not only let Obama into the compound but gave him the first place at the table.

These generational shifts combined with the deepening economic crisis and McCain's relatively modest religious and racial-ethnic outreach, made his chances of beating Obama very difficult. The stock market crash wiped away McCain's 2.5-percent bounce in the polls the week after announcing Palin at the Republican Convention, and Obama surged ahead in the polls.

The four most important material campaign issues for Latino Catholic and Protestant voters were jobs, the cost of living, education, and health care.⁶⁸ McCain's inability to persuasively address these issues among religious and racial-ethnic minorities made it virtually impossible for him to rally his base and win over the Latino independents and Democrats that voted for Bush in 2004. Taken with his tone-deafness to religion and racial-ethnic minority group concerns, it was clear that nothing short of a miracle would save McCain.

No heavenly miracles arrived for McCain on Election Day 2008. McCain and his advisors, who seemingly turned their backs on God, moral issues, and racial-ethnic minorities, lost the election by a wide margin across the nation and Obama was able to take the House and the Senate. Obama won 73 percent of Latino Catholics and 58 percent of Latino Protestants. They proved critical to his win in swing states because they are heavily concentrated in these states, their Election Day turnout was larger than Obama's margin of victory, and because they voted for Obama at much higher rates than they did for Kerry in 2004. Obama even won the Latino vote in Florida, which Bush had carried by a wide margin in 2004 (56 versus 44 percent). Obama's Latino support offset McCain's Euro-American support in New Mexico (56 percent versus 42 percent), Colorado (50 percent versus 48 percent), and Florida (56 percent versus 42

⁶⁸ Taylor and Fry, 10-11.

percent). Latinos made up a larger share of Obama’s vote in these states than his margin of victory in Colorado (Obama 12.4 versus 9 percent margin of victory), Florida (7.9 versus 2 percent), and New Mexico (28.3 versus 15 percent).⁶⁹

Perhaps the greatest pay off of all for Obama’s new Democratic pluralism outreach efforts was his ability to win over even a plurality of Latino voters that opposed abortion and gay marriage (47 percent versus 38 percent). The LRAP survey found in October 2008 that Obama led McCain even among the most religious Latinos—those who attended church, prayed, and read the Bible once a week or more. He also led among those who said religion provided a great deal or quite a bit of guidance in their daily living—including Evangelicals and born-again Christians. These helped Obama close and reverse the Democratic God Gap among Latino Protestants that had opened up in 2004. It also defies the stereotype that Latino Evangelicals vote like their Euro-American counterparts. It was a clean sweep.

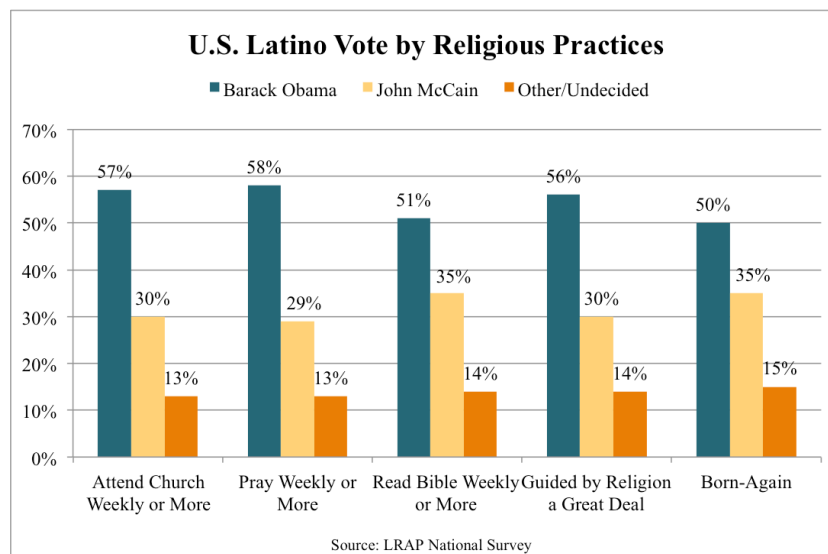


Table 7

⁶⁹ Kanel and Quinley, “Exit Polls: Latino Voters Tip Balance.”

Latino Protestants—McCain or Obama?

However, some writers contend that McCain rather than Obama won the Latino Protestant vote. While the NEP exit poll found that 67 percent of Latinos in general and at least 73 percent of Latino Catholics (ANES) in particular voted for Obama, the percentage of Latino Protestants that voted for Obama is contested. The 2008 National Survey on Religion and Public Life (NSRPL) post-election survey reported that 57 percent of Latino Protestants voted for McCain and only 43 percent for Obama.⁷⁰

However, this is incorrect. Obama won approximately 58 percent of Latino Protestants for at least five reasons—in addition to the ones already cited.⁷¹ First, the 57 percent NSRPL post-election survey seems inconsistent with the earlier NSRPL pre-election survey findings in April-May 2008, which reported that only 34 percent of Latino Protestants planned to vote for John McCain, 46 percent planned to vote for Obama, with 20 percent were still undecided. To reach this figure, McCain would have had to increase his vote by 23 points in less than six months (34% to 57%), winning 100 percent of all of the independents and 3 percent of those planning to vote for Obama. This would have been virtually impossible given that Obama took 67 percent of the Latino vote. The math and probability simply do not add up. Almost all surveys show the momentum going in Obama's direction in the fall of 2008.

⁷⁰ Corwin E. Smidt, Kevin R. Den Dulk, Bryan T. Froehle, James M. Penning, Stephen V. Monsma, Douglas L. Koopman, *The Disappearing God Gap? Religion in the 2008 Presidential Election* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 198.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Second, the LRAP survey was completed on October 7, which was less than four weeks before Election Day. It reveals that Obama had increased his lead among Latino Protestants from 46 (pre-election NSRPL) to 50 percent (LRAP), thus trending upward. The LRAP findings are based on 500 Latino registered voters. The NSRPL post-election survey, by contrast, is based on 151 likely voters, with an 8-percent margin of error – more than twice the margin of the LRAP survey. Moreover, the real margin of error for Latino Protestant NSRPL post-election survey sample is much higher because it included only 21 Latino Protestants out of the 151 Latino respondents (89 Catholic, 21 Protestant, the remainder other/something else, etc.). The margin of error on 21 Latino Protestant respondents (not registered voters) is very large and thus less reliable than the 500 Latino Protestant LRAP registered voters.

Third, the LRAP survey found that Obama was winning even a majority of highly religious Latinos by October 2008, including Latino Protestants who said they were born-again and went to church, read their Bible, and prayed once a week or more. It is unlikely that this same group of people would have switched their vote by such a wide margin in less than four weeks, especially in light of McCain's lack of evangelical outreach and back-pedaling on immigration and Obama's aggressive outreach on both of these issues.

Fourth, the LRAP survey indicated that 50 percent of Latino Protestants planned to vote for Obama. Even if the Latino Protestant independent voters (16 percent) split their vote on Election Day, rather than giving two-thirds of their vote to Democrats as they normally do, Obama still would have won 58 percent of the Latino Protestant vote. Even if Obama won only half of these independent voters (16 percent), which is highly unlikely given that he won 67

percent of the aggregate, he still would have won 58 percent of the Latino Protestant vote. It is unlikely that Obama would have witnessed a sudden seven-point drop from 50 percent in October to 43 percent on Election Day and that McCain simultaneously would have increased his Latino Protestant support by 26 points in less than four weeks in light of their Evangelical and Latino outreach or lack thereof.

Finally, even if Obama had not won *any* of the 16 percent of independent Protestant voters, he still would at least have tied McCain at 50 to 50 percent. For all of these reasons, I believe that Obama rather than McCain won the Latino Protestant vote and probably—in a two-way race—by a margin of 58 percent to 42 percent.

Conclusion

Given his shaky start against Hillary Clinton in the primaries, it was not a foregone conclusion that Obama would beat McCain as decisively as he did among Latino Catholics and especially Protestants on Election Day 2012. He had to work harder, smarter, and make some risky moves. His success was due to his faith-based centrist campaign, which promoted a new kind of Democratic religious and racial-ethnic pluralism that enabled him to reach out to Latinos on both sides of the religious, ideological, and political divides. He increased his support over Kerry's 2004 rates by appointing Latino Catholic and Protestant Evangelical advisors, promoting faith-friendly public policies, crafting Catholic and Evangelical-sounding social justice and conversion narratives, and because McCain failed to capitalize on his good will, natural advantages, and Bush's significant inroads.

Latinos proved important because they helped Obama offset his losses among Euro-American Catholics and Evangelicals to win. Obama ran a brilliant campaign and one that not only kept McCain's Latino Republican vote well below the 40 percent threshold laid out by Democratic advisors, but also one that enabled him to recover the ground Democrats had lost to Bush in 2000 and 2004. All of this helped Obama narrow the God Gap among Latino Protestant Evangelicals and increase his Catholic shares over Kerry's 2004 margins.

A wise and strategic politician, right after the election Obama began capitalizing on his new relationships and began laying a solid foundation for the 2012 Election. His drop in Latino support in the 2010 mid-term election reinforced that he was not bullet proof from recession and slippage in his support. To reward and solidify his Latino Catholic and Evangelical support, Obama has made a number of concrete Latino Catholic and Protestant Evangelical appointments. He appointed Dr. Miguel Díaz U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, a position that some thought he would give to pro-life Catholic Doug Kmiec for his strong and outspoken support for Obama. However, Obama took the rather courageous path of appointing the first Latino Catholic to the Holy See, which, in light of the nation's massive Latino demographic shifts, will also serve him well in 2012. To undergird this signaling of affirmation to the Latino Catholic community, Obama also appointed Dr. Arturo Chávez of the Catholic Mexican American Cultural Center to the Advisory Board of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

To reward and firm up his Protestant Evangelical support, Obama invited Rev. Rodríguez of the NHCLC to be one of just a few select ministers to offer a prayer at the historic 2009 Presidential Inauguration. However, Latino Evangelical leaders made it clear that they also

wanted to be appointed to White House offices. Since that time, he has asked Rev. Rodríguez to serve on the Obama White House Fatherhood and Healthy Families task force. He has also sought his advice in face-to-face meetings about public policy issues on immigration reform, homeland security, and Latino deportations and civil rights, some of which advice Obama has used in his public policy legislation and speeches on immigration reform, Rodríguez stated. Rodríguez has also had breakfast with just a handful of people and the President. Obama appointed the Evangelical Rev. Noel Castellanos of the Christian Community Development Association to the Advisory Board of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Around 2010, as his numbers among Latinos began to sag, he recommended Dr. Jesse Miranda, Chief Executive Director of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), to the same Faith-Based advisory board. This recommendation was made in part because Wilfredo de Jesús and Samuel Rodríguez made it clear that they were unhappy that a Latino Evangelical leader from the NHCLC was not appointed to the Faith-Based board. However, to this date and for reasons that are still unclear, Miranda's appointment has yet to be confirmed, a source of ongoing frustration with Latino Evangelicals who believe they helped deliver 58 percent of the Latino Evangelical vote for Obama in 2008 and now think he's breaking another one of his promises to Latinos, the first being passing immigration reform in the first year in office and the second supporting traditional marriage, according to Rodríguez.⁷²

In light of Obama's resounding victory among Latino Catholics and Evangelicals in 2008, one could easily argue that he will not only match but even increase his Latino support in

⁷² Gastón Espinosa, Interview with Samuel Rodríguez, E-mail Interview, July 4, 2011.

2012. However, as we have just seen Obama's relationship with Latino Catholics and Evangelicals (not to mention Euro-American Catholics and Evangelicals) has become more complicated by a number of decisions he's made since becoming president. The fact that Obama failed to keep his pledges to fix the economy, pass comprehensive immigration reform in his first year in office when he controlled the House and Senate, stop deportations (deportation numbers have risen since he took office), and support traditional marriage all undermine and dampen some of the Latino Catholic and Protestant Evangelical enthusiasm he enjoyed in 2008. This, combined with his the religious freedom issues involved with Obama's decision to require Catholic insurance providers to pay for contraceptive coverage (e.g., the morning-after pill) along with his April 2012 reversal on gay marriage, not only undermine his 2008 campaign platform but make it seem like a crass series of political ploys with the Latino community.

Although Obama will win the Latino vote by a very wide margin in 2012, Romney and Ryan only need to target and increase their Latino support in the key states of Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada to increase their overall margins high enough to win the Election. In short, they can lose the Latino vote by a wide margin, but still win these swing states on Election Day if they can increase their present meager Latino support to the threshold needed to win. Despite these concerns, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which Obama doesn't anticipate these factors and work hard to offset them by reinvigorating his Latino outreach with bold promises to advocate for righteousness and justice and to pass comprehensive immigration reform in his first year in office in 2013.