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Hispanics Enthusiastic about Idea of Obama

Introduction is Key to Strengthen Hispanics' Support of Democratic Nominee

Democracy Corps conducted four focus groups with Hispanic voters in Denver, CO, and Las Vegas, NV, on June 17-18, 2008. Participants in Denver were college educated Latino men and women. In Las Vegas, the first group was formed with non-college educated women who spoke mostly Spanish and the second group with non-college educated men. Participants in all groups were swing voters except for men in Las Vegas, who were holding back on Obama.

Despite the widespread assumption that Latinos won't vote for a black president, many of these participants were either ready to support Obama or eager to hear a reason to support him. Hispanic voters are desperate for change, and they like Obama's ideas. However, they are still not fully ready to embrace him. Many worry that he lacks the experience to be President and others that he won't be able to make his ideas come true. Moreover, some fear that he will put the interests of African Americans ahead of others. Because of these doubts, some Hispanics are falling back on their safe option: John McCain; they like that McCain stood up for the country, volunteered in Vietnam and his history as a POW. However, participants were not supporting him enthusiastically and many fear he will be the same as Bush.

Despite their initial doubts, Obama's biography proves to be inspiring for many of these voters and just what is needed to remove their fears. First, his struggle to get ahead despite not being born into a rich family, and his rejection of a high paying job to work for those in need as a community organizer in Chicago, show that he understands the concerns of middle class Americans. Second, the fact that he helped those in black and Hispanic neighborhoods as a community organizer shows that he cares about all minorities, not just African Americans. Finally, his early opposition to the war in Iraq and his experience in the Illinois and U.S. Senate dispel some of the concerns about his leadership and lack of experience.

Hispanics looking forward for change in November

Hispanic voters in these groups saw the difficult economic situation that the country is facing as a downward spiral that is taking the country in the wrong direction. Or, as one man in Las



Vegas put it, it is turning the United States into a “third world country.” With high gas and food prices, rising healthcare and tuition costs, and the mortgage crisis, Hispanics are struggling to stay afloat and many feel they are working twice as hard to stay in the same place. In addition to the domestic economic problems, many Latinos also mention the money spent in Iraq as another factor contributing to the economic downturn.

“I’m about the same place, but working twice as hard to stay there.” [DENVER, HISPANIC MALE]

“It’s like a cycle, one thing affects another one so everything is going down. The gas affected the production of food, it affects the lack of jobs and scarcity of jobs, the scarcity of jobs affects being able to have health insurance and all that.” [LAS VEGAS, HISPANIC FEMALE]

Latinos, near unanimously, see the 2008 election as an opportunity to turn things around. They believe stakes are high in this election and that new and fresh leadership is needed to fix this mess and lead the country to a better future.

Obama: A Fresh and New Leader with no Experience.

Latinos know very little about Senator Obama. They identify him as a fresh and charismatic leader who speaks well and has new ideas. Although Obama’s ideas are generally in track with Hispanics’ views, participants in these groups had little confidence that Obama will be able to implement these ideas. Voters mentioned Obama’s lack of experience and his failure to communicate an action plan to implement his ideas as the reasons for their doubts. Obama did not seem to have the credibility yet for these Latino swing voters to stand behind him.

“Seems like he has some good ideas that he’s talking about but I don’t know [how] they’ll work.” [LAS VEGAS, MALE]

“Somebody comes out of nowhere with new and fresh-thinking ideas, but you try to pinpoint and he won’t give a map, a plan, an outline. Give me something -- a lot of fresh talk but not a lot of answers.” [DENVER, MALE]

“You have to know all that in order to make changes, he’s just talking and talking like any politician. Just promising anything and he’s not going to be able to get to the White House.” [LAS VEGAS, FEMALE]

Most Hispanics see Obama as Jesse Jackson mostly because he is focused on African Americans. But the race card plays in two different ways with Latinos. On the one hand, Hispanics believe Obama understands the concerns of minorities because, as a black man, he had to struggle with them himself; on the other hand, many worry that he will just be concerned about the needs of blacks, and others are concerned Hispanics will not vote for him because Latinos and African Americans ‘don’t mix up.’



“I think a lot of people are going to stay away on election day. History has shown in different cities like LA and New York where Hispanics have gotten together with African American communities that they don't relate together.” [LAS VEGAS, MALE]

“Stand up for minorities.” [DENVER, FEMALE]

“He identifies, he has always been persecuted so he understands Latin people.” [LAS VEGAS, FEMALE]

“Maybe when he is president he will fight for his own people and give power to only their rights.” [LAS VEGAS, FEMALE]

“I put him more on [the] Jesse Jackson side, on the line - because I think he's more of a preacher and more for black people above all else, that's his priority.” [DENVER, FEMALE]

McCain: Experienced War Hero who Mirrors Bush

Hispanics' views on McCain are very similar to those of the broader electorate. Most see him as a war hero, recall his past as a POW and acknowledge he has vast political experience – especially on foreign affairs. However, Latinos are also concerned that he will not be able to bring the change they so desperately need. For most, McCain is too old and represents a continuation of Bush's failed policies, especially the war in Iraq.

Building Obama's Credibility with Hispanics

As mentioned above, Hispanic voters have very little information about Barack Obama. They have a vague idea of what he represents and what he stands for, but at this point he has no standing with these swing Latino voters to get his message through.

On the bright side, Obama's biography proved to be a powerful message of persuasion for these suspicious Latinos. There are three aspects of Obama's bio that, if communicated effectively, could help dissipate some of Hispanics' core doubts:

- 1) Obama's *experience as a community organizer* is the most powerful aspect of his bio, especially among college educated women and non-college men. It conveys the idea that Obama has a real commitment to the people and he is someone who puts others ahead of himself due to his rejection of big money and decision to help poor neighborhoods instead. More importantly, the fact he worked in black *and* Hispanic neighborhoods shows he cares about all minorities, not the black community exclusively. Getting this point through could be crucial to dissipate some of the racial doubts Hispanic voters expressed about the priorities of a black candidate and will emphasize the good aspects of a minority candidate who can understand what Hispanics struggle with to get ahead.

“He tried to organize the blacks and whites and Latinos.” [LAS VEGAS, MALE]



*“The fact that he turned down the ability to make money and he decided to organize.”
[DENVER, FEMALE]*

*“Organizing all those group. So color is not an issue [for him], that's what this country needs.”
[DENVER, FEMALE]*

“He's a great human being. Sometimes you judge people based on what some people say. And my respects for this gentleman. His father left him, but he came out ahead. He wanted to get there and he's there because he wanted. His priorities were black, Hispanics, Latinos. When he was chosen as a senator for Illinois he stopped laws for the benefit of the people. A lot of people don't care about the rest.” [LAS VEGAS, FEMALE]

- 2) Obama's **early opposition to the war in Iraq** is something many voters value as a sign that he has the leadership and judgment necessary to make the right decisions as president of the United States. Voters value that he stood up for what he believed in, even at a time when the common political wisdom was to support the war in Iraq.

“The thing that impacted me is that he made the speech just after we went into the war and he's been against it from the beginning and if he gets into office, his primary goal is going to be getting our people out.” [DENVER, FEMALE]

*“When I look at that decision it showed great leadership, it took a lot of guts to have a surname like Obama and stand up and make that speech because at that time it was considered very unpatriotic and I remember a lot of people looking down at him and, to be honest, I was one of them.”
[DENVER, MALE]*

- 3) Reinforcing Obama's **experience in the Illinois and United States, Senate** helps some Latino voters – especially men, overcome the doubts they had about Obama because of his lack of experience.

We could not test Obama's first general election ad (“The Country I Love”), but based on the bio findings, I believe this ad can be very powerful to build Obama's credibility with Hispanics. The only thing not mentioned in the ad is that, as a community organizer, Obama worked in Hispanic, black and white neighborhoods in Chicago; the strength of that message could also be bolstered by changing the footage to show a Latino neighborhood. It may have been a campaign decision to omit this information so as not to use race to define Obama, but these focus groups suggest that this piece of information could be the difference that makes Obama's race play positively with Hispanics. It is important that the campaign invests resources early on to build Obama's credibility with Hispanics and puts a targeted media buy behind this ad that covers states with a large Latino electorate as well as Spanish media.



	Denver Women	Denver Men	Vegas Women	Vegas Men	Total
a) Family history	0	0	0	0	0
b) Father's absence	0	1	2	0	3
c) Academic achievements	1	0	9	3	13
d) Community organizer	7	2	3	4	16
e) State legislature in 1996	0	0	2	1	3
f) State Senate experience	2	4	0	4	10
g) Early opposition to Iraq war	3	3	2	7	15
h) Speech at Dem convention/ unity	1	1	0	2	4
i) U.S. Senate experience	2	4	0	1	7

Voters start off with a wider knowledge of Senator McCain. When exposed with his bio, most voters are attracted to what they already know about him – his Vietnam experience. They value a candidate that was willing to do so much for our country and admire his integrity for not leaving other POWs behind. McCain’s maverick image is also attractive to these Latino voters. They value McCain’s independence and that he does not tow a party line. Attacking McCain’s independence and emphasizing his links to Bush can be effective to erode his Latino support.

“I think the strongest statement there is his refusal to be released until his comrades were. I think it speaks to his character that he thinks about others and their needs.” [DENVER, MALE]

“Because he has tried not to follow George Bush's steps and he has his ideas and stays put on them. He shows it with what happened in the [Vietnam] war. When he was going to be liberated, he wanted to come out with everyone else. And he wants to reform political campaigns -- it's ridiculous the millions spent and it doesn't mean one is good, just means one is good at collecting money.” [LAS VEGAS, FEMALE]

“He's showing he has his own ideals, he knows what he wants, he belongs to a party but he has his own ideas.” [LAS VEGAS, FEMALE]

	Denver Women	Denver Men	Vegas Women	Vegas Men	Total
a) Military Family	0	1	3	1	5
b) Volunteered in Vietnam/ POW	2	3	5	5	15
c) Marriage, elected for Congress	1	0	0	0	1
d) Keating Five scandal	2	1	1	2	6
e) Critic of wasteful spending	2	4	2	1	9
f) Maverick	2	5	5	2	14
g) Qualified for Commander in Chief	0	0	0	4	4
h) Leading supporter of the war	4	2	2	2	10
i) Overcome campaign missteps	1	0	0	5	6