



**To:** Interested Parties  
**From:** Frank Sharry, Executive Director of America's Voice  
**Date:** May 2015  
**Re:** **Will Democrats Embrace the New Politics of Immigration in 2016?**

As the U.S. electorate has diversified, the path to victory for Democratic presidential candidates has changed dramatically. Consider these two facts:

- In the 1988 presidential election, Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis lost white voters by 19 percentage points, while only winning 111 electoral votes (of 538 total) in a blowout loss to Republican nominee George H.W. Bush.
- In the 2012 presidential election, Democratic incumbent Barack Obama lost white voters by an even greater margin than Dukakis, 20 percentage points, yet nonetheless won a resounding 332 electoral votes in his re-election victory over Mitt Romney.<sup>1</sup>

While Hillary Clinton and other or future Democratic presidential contenders undoubtedly hope to improve their party's competitiveness with white voters, their surest path to winning the presidency is to reassemble the coalition that President Obama relied on during his re-election – maintaining a dominant share of the African-American vote, while once again running up the margins among the Latino and Asian-American voters. As Ron Brownstein recently wrote in *National Journal*, "To win, Hillary Clinton will need some of Obama's skill at mobilizing the Next America – and her husband's knack for connecting with those who feel it is passing them by."

While immigration reform is not the number one issue for the vast majority of voters, it is a defining, gateway issue for key groups of this new American electorate. It is also a point of clear contrast and differentiation between the two major political parties. Recent election cycles showed that depending on how Democrats engage the issue, they can either motivate more voters to turn out in support for them or leave important numbers of voters under-enthusiastic and at risk of disengaging.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Thompson highlighted the Obama/Dukakis white voter and Electoral College statistic in a [post-2012 election story](#) in *The Atlantic*

For example, Democrats experienced the benefits of a “lean in” immigration strategy in 2010 and 2012. But Democrats backtracked during the 2014 midterm election cycle and paid the price with low turnout from Latino voters. After the most recent mid-terms, Democrats’ standing among Latino voters rebounded in the aftermath of President Obama’s long-awaited executive action announcement (and as Democrats stood up to Republicans, who have engaged in full-throttle attempts to overturn this progress). In 2016, maximizing voter turnout among these members of the new American electorate will be crucial to Democrats’ success up and down the ballot.

To date, the big 2016 immigration news on the Democratic side is that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, after a rocky performance on immigration questions during her book tour, is clearly opting for the “lean in” strategy. In remarks delivered on May 5<sup>th</sup> in Las Vegas, Clinton outlined a set of pro-immigrant policies that were well-received by immigrant advocates. She made a bold and smart political move in the process – no major presidential candidate has ever so forcefully championed immigrants as an essential pillar of his or her campaign before. The subsequent hiring of prominent Dreamer and immigrant advocate Lorella Praeli as the Clinton campaign’s Director of Latino Outreach is another positive sign about the campaign’s intentions in regards to immigrant issues. Viewed against the backdrop of Democrats’ checkered history on delivering on their immigration promises, however, Clinton’s words and pro-immigrant signals will have to be matched with an obvious commitment to action and a deep investment in voter contact efforts.

In the following pages, we will examine the recent history of Democrats and immigration – their evolution on immigration policy and politics – as well as the record and background of Hillary Clinton on the issue. In addition, we analyze the role an aggressive stance on the issue could play in Democratic campaigns from the presidential level all the way down to state and local elections.

*(Check out <http://AmericasVoice.org/2016> for our ongoing political analysis of the 2016 cycle and immigration, including individual candidate profiles and our assessment of the Republican 2016 field and immigration).*

### **The Old Rahm Emanuel & the Old Democratic Thinking on Immigration**

In 2007, Rahm Emanuel famously said that immigration is the third rail of American politics. His message to Democrats at the time (and, it is widely believed, to President Obama in the first two years of his presidency): touch immigration reform and you lose. The “Rahm” school of thought emphasized that immigration was an issue to avoid and if you had to discuss the issue, the conversation should mimic the rhetoric of Republicans.

This school of thought was highly prevalent during the 1990s. In 1994, California’s voters enacted the notoriously anti-immigrant Proposition 187, making immigration a racially and culturally charged wedge issue that Republicans wielded against Democrats. With Republicans taking control of both chambers of the U.S. Congress that year, lawmakers at the national level also passed a series of

measures that made it much easier for the government to deport anyone, even long-term legal residents, and much harder for undocumented persons who had a path to legal status through a family member or other avenues to actually become legal. The backlash against immigrants responded to false anti-immigrant stereotypes—the “welfare cheat”; “the criminal”; “the terrorist”. Not surprisingly, Congress took a sledgehammer approach that went way beyond the intended “targets” and, in so doing, created the legal infrastructure of the failed immigration system we have today. Notably, while these laws were drafted and passed largely by Republicans in Congress, they were signed into law by a Democrat, President Bill Clinton, who famously triangulated on issues that put Democrats on the defensive.

But then came the backlash to the backlash. During President Clinton’s second term, Congress passed a number of pro-immigrant measures, restoring Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and food stamps to some permanent residents affected by welfare reform and making it possible for some Central American and Haitian undocumented immigrants with equities to apply for permanent residency. By 2001, newly-elected President George W. Bush opened migration negotiations with newly-elected Mexican President Vicente Fox, and it looked as if a new era of pro-immigrant progress was beginning.

Then the 9/11 attacks hit America, sparking another backlash against immigrants—starting with those from the Middle East, but quickly extending to all immigrants. In 2005, House Republicans passed the “Sensenbrenner Bill,” the harshest anti-immigrant enforcement package in a generation, which led to millions of immigrants and their supporters taking to the streets in protest. The Senate responded by taking up comprehensive immigration reform measures. A version of the McCain-Kennedy bill passed on a bipartisan basis in 2006, but it was blocked by House Republican leadership. Another more conservative version failed in the Senate in 2007.

### **2008 and 2010 Elections Show the Power of the Pro-Immigrant Voter**

Since then, immigration and its intersection with the Latino, Asian-American and immigrant vote has been a factor in every election cycle, with the pro-immigrant voter making a deeper and deeper mark. Takeaways from the 2008 election cycle provided evidence that leaning into pro-immigrant policies and politics benefited Democrats. For example, America’s Voice looked at the 22 House and Senate races ranked by the Cook Political Report as competitive one month before the 2008 election where there was a clear difference between Democratic candidates who favored comprehensive immigration reform, and Republican candidates who opposed it. Twenty of the 22 eventual winners were pro-immigration reform Democrats. At the presidential level, President Obama won five 2008 battleground states that George W. Bush had won twice (CO, FL, NM, NV, and VA), in large part because of Obama’s overwhelming support from Latino voters (67%-31% overall over John McCain, after the Republican brand image had been tarnished by the GOP’s efforts to scuttle immigration reform in Congress during the George W. Bush’s second term).

In 2010, the successful Senate Democratic campaigns of Harry Reid in Nevada and Michael Bennet in Colorado helped save the Senate for Democrats and provided a template for how Democrats could

mobilize fast-growing groups of voters by leaning into immigration reform. Both Reid and Bennet ran hard on the DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform, drew sharp contrasts between their views and those of their Republican opponents, and as a result helped to energize and turn out Latino, Asian-American and other pro-reform voters.

### **Lessons from 2012 – Democrats Win By Leaning in to Immigration**

President Obama's DACA announcement for DREAMers helped to bring a similar dynamic to the 2012 presidential contest. Obama's 2012 re-election was built on his ability to maximize advantages among non-white voters. However, prior to announcing DACA in June 2012, President Obama was in trouble with Latino voters. Having failed to keep his 2008 promise to make immigration reform a priority in his first year, and having ramped up deportations to record levels, Obama's approval ratings with Latinos had tanked. In September 2011 Gallup reported that Obama's monthly approval rating had sunk to a "new low" – 48 percent – and he was facing fierce criticism from immigrant advocates and Spanish language media. When President Obama decided to learn the lessons from 2008 and 2010 and lean into immigration issues – by announcing the DACA program for Dreamers in June 2012 – he changed the trajectory of the 2012 elections.

#### **DACA a Turning Point in President Obama's Reelection**

Latino Decisions (which happened to be conducting a poll of Latino voters in key battleground states when the President made the DACA announcement) found a huge spike in Latino enthusiasm among respondents polled after the President's announcement, compared to those polled before.

Despite the fears of the old-school "Rahm Emanuel" types, not only did Latino and immigrant voters become more enthusiastic after the June 2012 DACA announcement, but progressives were thrilled, swing voters favored the move, and Mitt Romney and Republicans were divided and defensive. The reaction was so positive that well before Election Day, one member of the President's campaign brain-trust pointed to President Obama's June 2012 DREAMer deferred action program announcement as the turning point in the overall 2012 presidential election. The days of Republicans wielding immigration as a wedge issue were gone. If anyone was using it as a wedge now, it was Obama and the Democrats.

Clearly, DACA worked as an electoral move. In Latino Decisions' 2012 Election Eve poll of Latino voters nationwide, 58% of Latino voters said DACA made them "more enthusiastic" about President Obama, while 32% of nationwide respondents said it had "no effect" on their enthusiasm for the President (only 6% said "less enthusiastic"). This enthusiasm was particularly high in key battleground states, such as Colorado and Nevada. According to a 2012 bipartisan Election Eve poll of *all* voters by Lake Research/The Tarrance Group, a majority of Americans (57%) supported DACA (46% strongly) with only 26% opposed. Supporters included 75% of Democrats, 60% of independents, 35% of Republicans, 66% of African-American voters and 52% of white voters.

## **Latino and Asian-American Voters Reward Democrats Up and Down the 2012 Ballot**

Latino voters' support for Democratic congressional candidates over GOP candidates in 2012 was even greater than President Obama's Latino margin over Mitt Romney (75%-23% according to Latino Decisions Election Eve polling; 71%-27% according to media-sponsored exit polling). Asian-American and Pacific Islander voters supported Obama and Democrats by a lopsided margin as well in 2012 – the media-sponsored national exit poll showed 74% of Asian-American voters supported Barack Obama, while an Election Eve poll of Asian-American voters conducted by Asian-American Decisions for the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) showed a 72%-26% advantage for Obama and a 73%-27% split for Democrats in House races. What makes this all the more remarkable is network exit polls found that Asian-Americans voted for George H.W. Bush over Bill Clinton in 1992 by a 2-1 margin.

## **Lessons from 2014 – Democrats Backtrack on Immigration and Suffer the Consequences**

With control of the Senate up for grabs and with many of the key races in swing or red states, Democrats backtracked on immigration in the 2014 election cycle. Despite promising to take executive action on behalf of undocumented immigrants in June 2014 Rose Garden remarks, President Obama came under pressure from Senate candidates in tough races to postpone executive action. In early September 2014, the White House announced that President Obama would delay executive action until after the 2014 elections. Immigrants and their allies were not happy. But “playing it safe” turned into a lost opportunity to turn on—and turn out—Democratic base voters. Here's what happened instead:

### **The Delay on Executive Action Did Not Save Democrats and May Have Hurt Them in Multiple Races**

President Obama's decision to delay immigration executive action did not help save any of the battleground 2014 Democratic Senate seats, as proponents of delay had argued. All of the swing and red state Senate Democrats that this strategy was designed to protect lost. Meanwhile, the delay was a missed opportunity to energize Latino voters, mobilize progressives, and provoke Republicans into an overreaction. Latino voter apathy in Colorado helped Republican Cory Gardner beat Democrat Mark Udall in this closely watched Senate race, while hurting the Democratic candidate in a range of House and gubernatorial contests that could have tilted Democratic with greater Latino turnout.

### **For Latino Voters, the Immigration Debate – and Delay – Mattered**

2014 Election Eve polling conducted by Latino Decisions nationwide and in 10 states found that a plurality – 45% of Latino voters nationwide – said immigration reform was the most important issue facing the Latino community that politicians should address. Underscoring the personal relevance of the immigration debate for many respondents, 58% of Latino voters nationwide reported knowing an undocumented immigrant. Meanwhile, in an accompanying survey of registered Latino voters who

decided *not* to vote in 2014, 60% of eligible Latino non-voters said that the delay on executive action made them less enthusiastic about President Obama and Democrats.

Assessing how Latino voters were disillusioned in many 2014 races due to the delay in executive action, Dana Milbank wrote in the *Washington Post*, President Obama's "political calculation [on immigration] turned out to be too clever by half, and he wound up setting back a worthy cause without helping Democrats at the polls."

Matt Barreto of Latino Decisions recently assessed Latino voters' 2014 turnout, writing:

"Across each state for which official vote history data is available in 2014, Latino turnout among those registered was significantly lower than the statewide average ... Few Americans will rush to the polling booth if they don't think the candidates care about their community or issues important to them. Or if they don't see much differentiation between the two options. This is not to say that no 2014 candidates cared about Latinos, certainly many did; or that there were not stark differences between their issues, certainly there were. Rather, the data here suggest that candidates in 2014 did not do a good enough job convincing Latino voters that they truly cared, or that they would stand for their issues."

David Damore, Senior Analyst at Latino Decisions and a professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, recently explored how Democrats left Latino "votes on the table" in the battleground state of Colorado during the 2014 cycle by not drawing a strong contrast between the parties and candidates on immigration. As a result, Latino voters were under-mobilized in Colorado.

### **The Long-Awaited Executive Action Announcement: More Evidence for Why Democrats Should "Lean In" to Immigration**

When President Obama finally did announce the long-awaited immigration executive actions, in November 2014, his popularity rebounded among Latino voters. As Roque Planas wrote in the *Huffington Post* of Gallup tracking poll numbers, "President Barack Obama's approval rating among Hispanics shot up 10 points to 68 percent after he announced his administration would offer deportation relief to an estimated 4.4 million undocumented immigrants...His approval rating among Latinos has hovered in the fifties since May of this year, dropping to a low point of 44 percent in the first week of September," which was right after the announced delay on executive action.

As Alan Gomez assessed in *USA Today*:

"It's difficult to overestimate what Obama's executive order has done to rally Hispanic support. Nearly half of Hispanic voters know an undocumented immigrant, so for them, it's personal. I can tell you from countless conversations with Hispanic voters that even those who don't know undocumented immigrants still consider a politician's treatment of them as a driving factor in their decision-making."

Meanwhile, the American public as a whole supported the President's actions and overwhelmingly opposed Republican attempts to focus on repeal. While too late to affect the 2014 cycle, the public's reaction to immigration executive action offered more evidence for why Democrats should lean in to the issue.

## **2015/2016 – Will Democrats Embrace the New Politics of Immigration?**

There's no question that Latino voters' share of the electorate has been growing and Latinos have been trending Democratic in recent years. But for Hillary Clinton and other Democratic candidates, winning a majority of Latino voters is not enough. They have two goals – to win the largest share of Latino votes *possible* – and turn out the largest number of Latino voters *available*. And one way they can do so is by leaning in – aggressively – on immigration reform.

### **Hillary Clinton and Immigration (and the Other Democratic Contenders)**

While Hillary Clinton voted for the DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform as a U.S. Senator, and garnered widespread support from Latinos during her previous presidential run (she received 63% of the Latino vote in the sixteen Super Tuesday contests against President Obama), she has been out of the immigration policymaking business for some time. Eight years ago, during Clinton's last run for elected office, the old school Rahm Emanuel way of thinking on immigration was still predominant in Democratic circles.

During her 2014 book tour, Clinton stumbled on several immigration-related questions. Asked about Central American children fleeing violence in their homelands and arriving at the U.S. border, she stated that the minors "should be sent back." In September 2014 she famously admonished to DREAMers in Iowa who were concerned about protecting executive action: "You know I think we need to elect more Democrats," a tone-deaf response at a time when President Obama, at the urging of elected Democrats, had just betrayed the promise to take executive action before the mid-terms.

But her fundamentals with Latino voters were still strong – if she adopted a "lean in" strategy. In a 2014 survey, Latino Decisions tested two versions of Clinton's immigration stance with Latino voters to see how different positions could affect her support:

"When told that Clinton would renew the executive action in 2017 if elected President, 85% of Latinos say they would support her compared to 11% who would not. This includes 73% of Latino Independents and 56% of Latino Republicans who would support Mrs. Clinton.

However, when told that Clinton might let the executive action expire and not renew it if elected, only 37% of Latinos say they would support her while 55% would not. This includes 53% of Latino Democrats who said they would be unlikely to support Mrs. Clinton if she did not commit to renewing the executive action."

Already in 2015, Clinton has been much more assertive in her embrace of pro-immigrant policies. As Elise Foley reported in *Huffington Post*, Secretary Clinton affirmatively changed her position on the question of whether undocumented immigrants should be able to obtain driver's licenses, stating: "Hillary supports state policies to provide driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants."

This announcement was important given Hillary Clinton's history on that very topic during the 2008 campaign. Additionally in 2015, Clinton again tweeted her support for President Obama's executive actions on immigration on the day of the oral argument in federal court: "As court hears immigration case today, at stake are stronger families, communities, & economy. Parents & Dreamers shouldn't live in fear."

Then, Clinton delivered a set of detailed immigration remarks as part of a roundtable discussion with Dreamers in Las Vegas on May 5<sup>th</sup>. During the proceedings, Clinton outlined and embraced a far-reaching, pro-immigrant policy vision, including pledges to fight for immigration reform with a path to "full and equal" citizenship; to defend and expand on executive actions if Republicans continue to block a permanent legislative solution; and to revisit the Obama Administration's controversial family detention practices. Later in May, the Clinton campaign announced its hire of prominent Dreamer and immigrant advocate Lorella Praeli as the campaign's Director of Latino Outreach. These developments are important indications that the Clinton campaign is intent to treat Latino outreach with serious respect and recognizes that immigrant justice issues are key to winning over a community that could prove decisive in numerous 2016 swing states. See *here for additional details of Hillary Clinton's history and record on immigration*.

Though Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is currently the only official challenger to Hillary Clinton in the Democratic 2016 presidential field, the potential candidacy of former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley presents a credible competitor for pro-immigrant votes. O'Malley is a strong supporter of immigration reform and has earned praise from immigrant advocates. During the child migrant refugee crisis of summer 2014 he criticized the Obama Administration's tough approach (United We Dream said at the time that O'Malley was "providing a model for how to responsibly handle [the issue] in accordance with our moral responsibilities and best national traditions.") As Maryland's governor, O'Malley also was a strong proponent of the Maryland Dream Act referendum – a measure that passed overwhelmingly on the 2012 ballot.

If O'Malley does enter the 2016 Democratic field, he will face long odds against Hillary Clinton – and if Clinton continues to lean in to immigration, it will be that much more difficult for O'Malley to draw contrasts and gain traction among the overwhelmingly pro-immigrant primary voters who comprise the Democratic base. Clinton's Las Vegas remarks, then, not only drew a clear contrast between the Democratic Party and the entire Republican field, but also closed down some of the running room a candidate like O'Malley may have otherwise had on this issue.

### **Demographic Trends Favor Democrats in 2016...**

A state-by-state breakdown from Patrick Oakford at the Center for American Progress demonstrates that the minority share of the eligible voter electorate has grown in every likely 2016 battleground state compared to 2012. For example, Latino voters' share of the electorate will have grown to 16% of the eligible 2016 electorate in Colorado, 20% in Florida, and 19% in Nevada. Further, the report found that, even if the Republican nominee achieves Romney's high level of white voter support, the changing demographics of the electorate will make it harder for the GOP candidate to win.

Republican pollster Whit Ayres has consistently made similar points, writing in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed that "Whites accounted for 72% of the national electorate in 2012, down from 83% in 1992 and 88% in 1976. If this pattern continues – with an average decline since 1996 of 2.75 percentage points each presidential election – the 2016 electorate will be about 69% white and 31% nonwhite."

### **... But Will Democrats Take Advantage of Demographics? They Need to Lean In on Immigration and Invest in Latino Voter Mobilization**

Immigration plays a central role in energizing and turning out these eligible Latino voters. As Latino Decisions has consistently noted, immigration is a "gateway" issue for Latino voters. When 58% of Latino voters know someone who is undocumented, and 85% of undocumented immigrants report having a U.S. citizen relative, immigration isn't an abstract policy debate, it's personal; it's about families. And Democrats who lean in to the issue, hard, are able to motivate this base of support.

As noted, Hillary Clinton's May 5<sup>th</sup> immigration remarks in Las Vegas were bold and new. By laying out an unequivocally assertive set of pro-immigrant policies, Clinton drew a sharp contrast with the Republican presidential contenders (who must continue to appeal to enough Republican primary voters, who lean in the opposite direction of the American mainstream on immigration, to capture the GOP nomination).

But Clinton's remarks, against the backdrop of Democrats' checkered recent history on following through on immigration promises, also highlighted the fact that big promises are not enough. In order to take advantage of the favorable demographic trends, Democrats must fund the infrastructure to mobilize and turn out the eligible voters who comprise the new American electorate. Despite their recent role in blocking immigration reform, Republicans and conservative allies are making significant and unprecedented outreach to Latino voters ahead of the 2016 cycle. A recent *Washington Post* story highlighted the role and work of the LIBRE Initiative, an organization funded in large part by the Koch Brothers and seeking to provide grassroots support, services, and voter engagement to Latinos from a right-of-center perspective. A follow-up article from Adrian Carrasquillo at BuzzFeed highlighted that the DNC and Democrats were sufficiently scared by the prospect of LIBRE that they had developed a presentation on the organization, presumably designed to generate additional funding on the Democratic side to bolster their Latino voter outreach and mobilization efforts.

Meanwhile, an earlier BuzzFeed piece noted that no Latino groups were among the thirty-five organizations funded by the liberal donor collective the Democracy Alliance in a new round of funding recently announced. The story quoted Hector Sanchez of National Hispanic Leadership Agenda saying, “Everyone talks about the possibility of the Latino vote but there is no correlation in how parties and national infrastructures invest in Latino civic participation and promotion of basic elements of democracy like voter registration, voter education, GOTV and voter protection.”

If the Clinton campaign continues to lean in and embrace the new politics of immigration reform, and if the Democratic Party apparatus sufficiently invests in reaching and mobilizing newly eligible voters, it will help mobilize the largest eligible Latino and Asian-American electorate in history and make the Republican likelihood of retaking the White House that much more difficult.

It also will benefit Democrats up and down the 2016 ballot. As election forecaster Charlie Cook assessed regarding the 2016 Senate map, Republicans will “have 24 Senate seats up, to only 10 for the Democrats. Seven of those 24 GOP seats are in states that President Obama won in 2012, and five are in states that he won by 5 points or more.” Republicans will need to defend Senate seats in such Latino-heavy states such as Arizona (Sen. McCain), Florida (Sen. Rubio), and Illinois (Sen. Kirk). Meanwhile, in the House, 75 Republicans will occupy districts where eligible Latino voters make up 10 percent or more of the electorate.

The bottom line? Democrats have the inside track on holding onto the White House, and have a shot at retaking the Senate. But how they handle immigration – and how seriously the party invests in energizing the new American electorate – will go a long way to determining whether they take full advantage of the opportunity at hand.

***Throughout the 2016 election cycle, America’s Voice will track candidates’ immigration positioning and offer ongoing analysis at: <http://AmericasVoice.org/2016> (individual candidate profiles already available).***

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