

The Hispanic vote

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Even though the presidential primaries started two weeks ago, you could say that the "Hispanic primary" is just now getting under way.

It's about time. There are 46 million Hispanics in the United States, representing about 15 percent of the population. About 9 million Hispanics are expected to cast ballots in November, and they're considered swing voters who could help decide the election. And while there is no monolithic Hispanic bloc - Cuban-Americans often vote Republican, Puerto Ricans often vote Democratic and Mexican-Americans tend to do a little of both - America's largest minority group can't be ignored and should be heard from.

Yet, the first contests have been in states with relatively small Hispanic populations - Iowa, Wyoming, New Hampshire and Michigan.

That will change on Saturday, when Nevada will hold its caucuses. Hispanics make up 12 percent of Nevada's population. Then comes "Super Duper Tuesday" on Feb. 5 when primaries occur in 23 states, several of them with large Hispanic populations, including California.

This should be good news for Democrats. Polling by the Pew Hispanic Center and other researchers finds that Hispanic voters are likely to favor Democrats over Republicans by a margin of 2-to-1. In December, a survey by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 57 percent of Hispanic registered voters were aligned with Democrats, while only 23 percent identified with Republicans.

That's disappointing, especially given that Hispanics have, in the past, demonstrated a willingness to support moderate Republicans. President George W. Bush and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger are good examples.

This year, Republicans running for president appear to have their work cut out for them. Political strategists say that if the GOP nominee doesn't get at least 30 percent of the Hispanic vote, victory might be impossible. The Pew Hispanic survey found that, nationally, Rudy Giuliani is supported by 35 percent of Hispanic registered voters. Then comes Fred Thompson with 13 percent. John McCain has 10 percent. Mitt Romney has just 4 percent.

The Democratic tallies are a bit more lopsided. Nationally, 59 percent of Hispanic voters favor Hillary Clinton. Barack Obama is supported by 15 percent. John Edwards has just 4 percent.

To win votes, the candidates in both parties have to find ways to communicate with Hispanic voters in ways that are substantive and respectful. We wouldn't use those words to describe Clinton's recent remarks to a group of Hispanics in Las Vegas. While visiting a Mexican restaurant, Clinton tried to explain how all Americans are connected and how their problems are linked despite that "we treat them as though one is guacamole and one is chips."

That is a tad stereotypical. Hispanics care about the same issues as other Americans. There is plenty for candidates to talk to them about, no matter which party they belong to. We look forward to hearing the conversation.

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