

A clear impact

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

In some respects, Super Tuesday was viewed as the coming-out party for Hispanic voters. And what a grand fiesta it was, especially if you were pulling for Hillary Clinton or John McCain.

According to exit polls, those were the candidates whom Hispanic voters found most appealing - a trend evident in states with sizable Hispanic populations. In New York, New Jersey, California and Arizona, Hispanics helped carry Clinton to victory. Among California Democrats, Clinton got a whopping 69 percent of the Hispanic vote, with 29 percent for Barack Obama.

And among Hispanics who were registered Republicans, McCain was the favored one. Many Hispanic voters seem to have been turned off by Mitt Romney, perhaps because of his pandering on the immigration issue. Even Romney's Spanish-language ad offensive aimed at Hispanics didn't help him mend fences.

In California, among Republicans McCain received 35 percent of the Hispanic vote. Mike Huckabee got 20 percent. Romney received 19 percent.

Remember the McCain figure: 35 percent. That's the same percentage of the Hispanic vote that George W. Bush received nationally in 2000, and experts consider that share enough to give a Republican the presidency.

That sets up quite a competitive matchup if Clinton and McCain wind up being the nominees. Each would give the other a run for the money with Hispanic voters. And so it's a safe bet that McCain would prefer to run against Obama, and Clinton would prefer to run against Romney. Neither outcome seems likely at this point. McCain appears close to having the Republican nomination locked up, and Clinton did well enough on Super Tuesday to allow her to hold onto the mantle of Democratic front-runner, at least for now.

We might see that McCain-Clinton matchup, after all. And if so, Hispanic voters might be even more important in November than they were in February. That serves the interests of Hispanic voters, but it's also good for the national fabric. These are patriotic and productive members of society who bring a tremendous amount to the electorate. They care about the same issues as other voters, such as the economy, education and the Iraq war.

Hispanics have an special stake in the immigration debate, because many of the immigrants coming into the United States, both legally and illegally, are from Latin America. And to the degree the rhetoric fueling the debate has at times become anti-Hispanic, many Hispanics have taken offense. That doesn't mean they support open borders, only that they don't seem to have much appetite for simple solutions and overheated sound bites.

Hispanic voters aren't going anywhere. They will continue to have an impact on this election - and on many elections to come. Candidates ignore that fact at their peril.

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