

Can Obama, like Harold, get Latino lift?; Both 'element of racism' and lack of outreach blamed for Calif. loss

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The biggest shocker of Super Tuesday was not that New York Sen. Hillary Clinton won Massachusetts.

That loss by Sen. Barack Obama just proves celebrity endorsements are overrated. Despite having the support of Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Caroline Kennedy -- not to mention Kennedy cousin Maria Shriver -- Massachusetts voters still chose Clinton.

No, the upset was that Obama lost 2-1 among Latinos on the West Coast. Because California has a large Mexican-American population, as does Illinois, you would have expected Obama, a phenomenal field organizer, to have done a lot better than that.

That brings me to a sensitive topic: What role, if any, did racism play in the outcome of the Latino vote?

We may not talk publicly about the existing tensions, but it wasn't that long ago that then-Mexican President Vicente Fox outraged black Americans by saying: "Mexicans are doing the jobs that not even blacks want to do."

And in 2003, a survey conducted in Durham, N.C., examined the attitudes of Mexican immigrants toward African Americans. It wasn't pretty.

A third of those surveyed said they believed African Americans were troublesome, and a majority of Mexican immigrants said they believed black Americans were "lazy liars."

'DIDN'T COMMIT' ENOUGH RESOURCES

Juan Rangel, the outspoken executive director of **United Neighborhood Organization**, called the race element of the campaign a "hard one."

"Nobody wants to talk about that. It is a very uncomfortable topic for anybody to talk about, but I think there is an element of racism," he said.

"I would bring it down to the level that Hispanics don't understand blacks and blacks don't understand Hispanics. People don't want to be lumped in, especially when there is a negative perception of what it means to be a minority in this country."

In Chicago, Clinton carried just about every heavily Hispanic ward except the 1st, 26th, 31st and 35th wards, where U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez's influence apparently made the difference.

"I don't think you should use Latinos and African Americans not getting along as a barometer for what happened with the Latino vote,"

Gutierrez told me. "I consider [California] not only a failure of the Obama campaign, but also the fact that Hillary Clinton is a national figure, and the coattails that [former President] Bill Clinton brings is astronomical."

Gutierrez, an early Obama supporter, said the Obama campaign "didn't commit" the level of resources to capture the Latino vote that it should have.

"That is a failure of running a national campaign. The person that we came to know that is on the cover of Newsweek and national magazines many times does not get to the household table where people are dealing with how you pay the mortgage," he said.

"At least 4 out of 10 Latinos do not get their opinion of public officials from English-speaking media," he pointed out.

"I do not go out there and hear Latinos using any kind of racism against Barack Obama," Gutierrez said. "That just didn't happen. Why don't we just assume that it was a failure of the campaign to see the need to communicate."

FORCED TO EXAMINE OUR VIEWS

To prove his point, Gutierrez pointed to New Mexico, where 43 percent of the registered voters are Latino. Late Wednesday, Obama was still in a dead heat with Clinton as votes were tallied.

In pondering how difficult it has been for Obama to attract the Hispanic vote, both Rangel and Gutierrez brought up Mayor Harold Washington's primary race against Jane Byrne and Richard Daley in 1983.

"Latinos did not come out in big numbers and vote for Harold Washington in the primary," Rangel noted. "But when the general election came around, Latinos backed the Democratic nominee. I would venture if Obama wins the nomination, Latinos will come out in big numbers for Barack."

Gutierrez also noted that when Washington ran in the general election, white voters moved to vote for Republican Bernie Epton, blacks rallied for Washington, and Latinos stayed with the Democratic Party, boosting Washington's Latino tally from 10 percent to 60 percent.

"They rejected the bigotry," Gutierrez said. "Those leaders who inspire hope allow us to overcome our innate bigotry and prejudices."

Obama's quest for the White House continues to force all of us to think more deeply about our views on race.

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