

U.S. hopefuls turn attention to Latin America

Demographic changes driving vote-seekers to Hispanic arena

By **BENNETT ROTH** Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle Washington Bureau

May 31, 2008, 9:43PM

WASHINGTON — Courting the burgeoning Hispanic vote in the United States, the presidential candidates are looking southward, vowing to take Latin America off the political backburner but differing sharply on how to do it.

In recent days, Democratic front-runner Barack Obama and John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, have given major policy speeches on Latin America. They have promised to pay more heed to the oft-neglected region that has been largely ignored over the past seven years as President Bush focused on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the candidates have clashed over how to improve relations with the United States' southern neighbors, differing over such thorny issues as whether to normalize relations with Cuba and how aggressively to pursue trade liberalization.

The domestic incentives

This year, both parties are aggressively wooing

Hispanic voters, many of whom retain strong ties to Latin America. Of the 45 million Latinos living in the U.S., 71 percent have their family roots in Mexico or Central America.

The large Cuban-American population in South Florida is a key to that swing state's electoral votes, ensuring a lively debate over U.S. policy toward Castro-controlled Cuba.

Candidates have paid additional attention to Latino issues in recent weeks as Obama and Hillary Clinton battle for the 63 delegates at stake in today's Puerto Rico primary. Flavio Cumpiano, the executive director of the Puerto Rican Federal Affairs Administration, said the candidates are aiming not only at the commonwealth's residents who cannot vote in November, but also the 4 million Puerto Ricans who live on the mainland.

"Normally, the United States' presidents look either to the east or to the west. Very rarely do they look to the south," said Henry Flores, a professor of political science at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. "Hispanics have become a very intense demographic voting group. You are going to have to speak to their issues."

All pushing change

Although President Bush came to office declaring his interest in Latin America, he has become unpopular in much of the region, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Project.

Advertisement

☆ mobile.chron.com

**Full-time forecasts
ANYTIME, ANYWHERE!**



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

The candidates vying to replace Bush agree that the next president needs to take a different approach to Latin America.

"For decades, in Republican and Democratic administrations alike, the United States has treated Latin America as a junior partner rather than as a neighbor, like a little brother rather than as an equal," McCain said in Miami.

Obama, also speaking in Miami, charged that Bush administration policies in the Americas have been "negligent toward our friends, ineffective with our adversaries, disinterested in the challenges that matter in people's lives."

Clinton criticized Bush for pushing a policy in Latin America of "neglect and broken promises."

The winner of the '08 election will face an array of challenges in Latin America. The next president will have to decide how aggressively to push domestically unpopular free trade deals and how to deal with leftist leaders Hugo Chavez in oil-rich Venezuela, Fidel and Raul Castro in Cuba and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

The starkest contrast among the candidates has been on the issue of leftist leaders.

McCain has advocated a hard-line stance against Chavez and has vowed to keep the trade embargo against Cuba until it allows major changes, including free elections.

He has criticized Obama for expressing a willingness to meet with Raul Castro, saying it would "send worst possible signal to Cuba's

dictators that there is no need to undertake fundamental reforms."

Familiar promises

Obama's approach is far more conciliatory. He has declared that snubbing Cuban leaders and isolating the island's economy has failed, and that, "it is time to pursue direct diplomacy with friend and foe alike."

He has said he would move to ease travel and other restrictions with Cuba. He has not ruled out direct talks with Chavez.

Clinton, whose husband expanded the trade embargo when he was president, has expressed sentiments similar to McCain's on Cuba, mentioning that Havana must release political prisoners and hold free elections.

Though Clinton and McCain share a contempt for the Castros, they part ways on attempts to expand free-trade pacts.

McCain has embraced trade liberalization as economically beneficial to the U.S. and Latin America and has criticized Obama and Clinton for opposing an accord with Colombia.

The Democrats have been ambivalent about free trade. Both contenders have voted for a free trade deal with Peru but opposed an accord with Colombia, citing the government's inability to halt the killings of union leaders. Both have threatened to cancel the North American Free Trade Agreement if Mexico does not agree to

Advertisement

☆ mobile.chron.com

**Full-time forecasts
ANYTIME, ANYWHERE!**

Print Powered By **FormatDynamics™**

modify the pact to benefit American workers.


McCain and both Democrats are in general agreement on one issue: immigration. They favor a comprehensive approach that includes beefed-up border security coupled with a guest worker program.

Geoff Thale, the program director of the liberal-leaning Washington Office on Latin America, welcomed the increased attention on the region but said that campaign promises do not always become reality.

Thale recalled that Bush, before he was first elected in 2000, made similar vows, but was diverted after Sept. 11, 2001.

bennett.roth@chron.com

Advertisement

 **mobile.chron.com**

Full-time forecasts
ANYTIME, ANYWHERE!

The advertisement features a smartphone on the right side, displaying the mobile.chron.com website. The phone screen shows the Chron.com logo, the date 'Sat, 12/20/08', the location 'Houston, TX', and a weather map. The background of the advertisement is split into an orange top half and a white bottom half.

Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics™**