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BUSINESS

OPINION

Part 2 / FEATURES

ENTERTAINMENT

CLASSIFIEDS

ARCHIVES

SEARCH

Part I: The Vote to Watch

Latinos hold potential to swing statewide and local elections

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ALBANY BUREAU CHIEF

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Inside a midtown Manhattan hotel banquet room in May, the predominantly white Republican delegates listened contentedly to the customary convention remarks from Gov. George Pataki.

Suddenly, Pataki gestured toward a line of waiters standing silently along the wall and told the delegates that he had been speaking to "the crew" beforehand.

"These are people who were born in Ecuador, in Cuba, in Albania, in Montenegro," Pataki said. "And they are here, living the American dream."

One waiter put down his tray and began clapping. The other waiters did the same. And then the delegates rose to their feet and joined the cascade of applause as Pataki declared, "We must be the party that reaches out to everyone."

As the fall elections near, the Latino vote is being contested as never before in a New York statewide race. Like Irish and Italian immigrants a century ago, Latino voters are poised to unsettle New York's traditional electoral math by their surging population and assertiveness. That has left both parties clambering for votes that until recently were assumed to be unshakably Democratic.

The full force of Latinos' potential for swinging elections was not felt until last year, when Fernando Ferrer's campaign for New York City mayor galvanized record Latino support, bringing to the polls thousands of registered Latinos who had never voted before. After Ferrer lost the Democratic primary runoff, enough discouraged Latinos either sat out the general election or supported Bloomberg to help ensure his election.

In this year's state races, several closely watched contests - including for governor, attorney general and a state Senate primary Sept. 10 in Manhattan - will test whether Latinos' past allegiance to non-Hispanic politicians can be undone by candidates of Latino descent, and whether Republicans can pry away from Democrats a chunk of the Latino vote.

"In New York there's always been black politics and there's always been Jewish politics and candidates know, 'I'm going to cultivate this population and I'm not going to offend them.' By and large the Latino population has been ignored even as it grew," said Lorraine Cortéz-Vázquez, the president of the Hispanic Federation, a Manhattan-based network of 74 Latino nonprofit organizations. "I think now it's realized that they're not going to vote as a bloc."

But even while Latino politicians and activists revel in their new sense of consequence, making inroads as far upstate as Rochester, the increasing weight is revealing cracks that threaten to weaken Latinos' ability to sway policy.

Longstanding political divergences between African-Americans and Latinos are becoming more apparent, as are the burgeoning divisions between Puerto Ricans - who account for most Latino elected officials and senior party leaders - and the growing numbers of Dominicans, Central Americans and Mexicans whose needs, unlike those of Puerto Ricans, are shaped by their immigrant status.

"Puerto Ricans for many decades have had a stranglehold on Latino politics and we were just following along," said Fernando Mateo, a prominent Dominican businessman from Westchester.

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[Gov. George Pataki is one of many politicians reaching out to Hispanic voters.](#) (Photo by Richard B. Levine)
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"As citizens, they are well protected in terms of health insurance and their rights. They don't represent the issues that we have."

In addition, there are few if any Latino leaders who can command large numbers of votes with the same authority as black ministers, rabbis, union leaders, party bosses or any of the other traditionally influential New York power brokers.

"We've never had a Jesse Jackson or a Martin Luther King Jr.," said Angelo Falcón, the senior policy executive at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund.

All this has made capturing the Latino vote an elusive quest, with this key question still unanswered: Will enough Latinos shed their Democratic allegiance to turn themselves into the most critical swing vote in New York State?

"You don't have to swing very much to be a swing constituency," said Jeffrey Plout, a pollster with the Global Strategy Group, a political consulting group.

Latinos now comprise 2.9 million of New York's 19 million residents and are increasing at a faster rate than any other ethnic or racial group, according to the 2000 Census. While Puerto Ricans remain New York's single most populous Latino group, they now are only 38 percent of the state's Latinos, having barely grown over the past decade. Instead, the state's rapid Latino growth during the 1990s - from 12 percent of the population to 15.1 percent - was driven by 1.4 million new Dominicans, Mexicans, Ecuadorans, Colombians and other Central and South Americans.

The growth spurt, through a combination of immigration and births here, helped Latinos move past blacks to become the largest minority group in New York City and on Long Island. Latinos make up a quarter of the city population and 10.3 percent of Long Island, where Salvadorans grew at the fastest rate.

But the new immigrants have been slow to gain political influence. Unlike Puerto Ricans, who are U.S. citizens at birth, these other Latinos must acquire green cards and be naturalized before they can register to vote - a process that usually takes five years.

Even then, Latinos are less likely to vote than white or black voters. Though Latinos now comprise 15 percent of the state's population, they amount to no more than 8 percent of the voting electorate, exit polls show.

For years, Democrats did not fear a Latino defection because Puerto Ricans and Dominicans - who together make up 61 percent of the Latino population in New York State - are among the most reliable Democratic voters. In New York City, 76 percent of Latinos are registered Democrats, ahead of the overall population's 68 percent, according to an analysis of Hispanic surnames in voter registration records performed this year by Jerry Skurnik, a partner in Prime New York, a Manhattan-based consulting firm.

But the Democrats' hold has slipped in several crucial areas. Puerto Rican politicians are no longer acting as beholden to the party that gave them their start. State Sen. Olga Mendez, a Democrat who represents East Harlem, endorsed Pataki in 1998 and has been backing his re-election. Also in February, Sen. Pedro Espada Jr. of the Bronx defected to sit with the Republicans who control that chamber. Younger aspiring politicians are also showing a willingness to consider the GOP.

Latino leaders who do not hold public office also have demonstrated a new receptivity to Republicans. Health care workers union president Dennis Rivera, who had fought bitterly with Pataki when he was first elected in 1994, this year glowingly endorsed the Republican governor. Rivera's union, Local 1199 SEIU, is aggressively aiding Pataki's re-election.

A less noticed but equally striking Pataki convert is José Ithier, a Ferrer protege and longtime economic development official in the Bronx who joined the Pataki administration this year. "I think the Republicans are finally saying, 'Hey, we haven't knocked on the door,'" Ithier said.

These defections underscore a reality that Democratic leaders have long tried to ignore: Latinos do not share the common historical bond of the civil rights movement that has bound together blacks and the Democratic Party. Despite the fact that blacks and Latinos share many of the same economic characteristics, they do not consider each other automatic allies in elections.

Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion Jr., a Democrat, said: "Unfortunately, I think there are still seeds of ethnic, racial division that don't allow Latinos or blacks to cross over and vote for each other in the way that they ought to, or simply based on the record of somebody."

A number of political experts believe the strong Catholicism among Latinos makes them additionally receptive to some of the GOP's social positions. Global Strategy recently surveyed

voters on their views about whether drug dealers should be kicked out of public housing. The survey revealed that Latinos were more amenable to that idea than blacks or whites.

"That kind of idea created the notion for me that Latino voters shouldn't be a lock for the Democratic Party," Plout said.

On top of all of this, George W. Bush's ascension to the White House may help unburden New York's GOP from much of the national party's reputation for hostility to immigrants created by ventures such as Proposition 187, passed into California law in 1994 to deny basic government services to illegal immigrants, and presidential aspirant Pat Buchanan's insistence on building a wall along the Mexican border.

In New York the GOP may have an easier time recruiting converts from the newer Latino immigrants. Hispanics in the parts of Queens with larger populations from Central and South America are less Democratic than Latinos in the sections of Manhattan dominated by Hispanics of Caribbean heritage, according to Prime New York data.

John Mollenkopf, director of the Center for Urban Research at the CUNY Graduate Center, said of the Central and South American immigrants: "They tend to be more conservative. They tend to be somewhat more middle class, higher income, higher property owning."

Currently, these more recent immigrants have among the lowest registration rates of Latino groups, and they have not established political organizations of any effect, as have Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. The third most populous Latino group in the state are Mexicans, but they mostly congregate through their Catholic parishes, where priests are not politically active in the way that African-American church leaders are.

"The Mexican community, the vast majority don't vote," said Alfred Placeres, an immigration lawyer who is president of the state's Federation of Hispanic Chambers of Commerce. "A lot have become citizens not to vote but to petition their relatives" - that is, to bring them to the United States.

When it comes to fielding their own candidates, other groups are moving along in their political maturity.

William Salgado, a Colombian lawyer who made a previous unsuccessful bid for the state Assembly, is running this fall for an open State Senate seat in Corona. Last year, two Ecuadorans and a Dominican competed against a Puerto Rican, Hiram Monserrate, in the Democratic primary for the 21st City Council District representing Corona, East Elmhurst and Jackson Heights.

Although Monserrate won, he was attacked by the other candidates as a product of the "Bronx Puerto Rican machine." Angel Del Villar, a Dominican candidate, complained during the race that the Queens Democratic organization, which backed Monserrate, "still believes that everyone that speaks Spanish is Puerto Rican" and that "there are other Hispanic groups that are not being allowed to grow politically."

Among Republicans, no candidate has cultivated these new Latinos with more energy than Pataki. Though the governor showed little interest in Latino issues when he was elected in 1994, he earned points last year when he came out against the Navy bombing practice on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques.

Other Pataki efforts have been less flashy than his Vieques stance but perhaps more substantial. Last year Pataki set up a state citizenship unit to help undocumented immigrants get their green cards under a limited federal amnesty program.

He has lobbied the federal government to make it easier for Colombians to stay in the United States to avoid the violence back home, sent the state's National Guard to help Caribbean and South American countries struck by earthquakes and floods, and traveled to the Dominican Republic to offer his assistance to the families of those killed on American Airlines Flight 587, which crashed in Queens last fall on its way to Santo Domingo.

Pataki's most substantive legislative appeal to Latinos has been in the area of health care. In 1998, with his first term nearing its end, Pataki dropped his resistance to expanding Child Health Plus, the state program that uses federal money to subsidize the cost of health care for poor children with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid. The following year, Pataki and the Legislature created Family Health Plus, which subsidized health insurance for poor adults who worked in jobs that did not provide insurance yet earned too much to receive Medicaid.

Democrats complained that Pataki had taken credit for their ideas by starring in tens of millions of dollars worth of public service advertisements urging people to enroll in Child and Family Health Plus. They also noted that for five years, Pataki refused to extend Medicaid coverage to recent immigrants, until the state's highest court ruled last year that New York's resistance

violated the state and federal constitutions.

Pataki received only a quarter of the Latino vote in 1998. Still, Latino voters' favorable rating of Pataki, which was only 20 percent when he was first elected, has skyrocketed to 73 percent in this summer's annual Hispanic Federation survey.

"We hadn't really expected very much from Pataki," said Falcón, the executive at the Puerto Rican legal defense fund. "Mario Cuomo, we battled with because we had high expectations."

Falcón recalled that a year or two ago, he was surprised to be invited to a brainstorming session attended by the governor, and even more amazed by other prominent and outspoken Latinos who were present. "That's when I realized Pataki was so flexible," Falcón said.

Earlier this year, Falcón's group issued a report complaining that Pataki had appointed only two Latino judges, one to the Appellate Division and the other to the lower Court of Claims. The report stated those appointments were "widely viewed within the Hispanic community as simply an election-year move in light of his previous failure to appoint a Hispanic in his last seven years in office to any of the 28 vacancies he had to fill in the Appellate Division."

"We released that report on a Monday," Falcón said. "On Friday, he met with a group of Latinos and announced he was appointing two Latino judges to the Appellate Division. I had never had that kind of response to anything I'd done before." Today, Pataki has appointed a total of five Latino judges.

As he seeks a third term, Pataki established his own group of Latino campaign supporters, named "Amigos de Pataki." The ultimate success of Pataki's effort could go a long way to clarifying Latinos' willingness to abandon the Democratic Party for a white candidate who aggressively courts them. This election will be a good test, for both of Pataki's Democratic rivals have strong appeal among Latinos.

Andrew Cuomo is relying on the lingering popularity of the gubernatorial administration of his father, Mario, as well as his life's work on housing issues, which rank as among the most important to Latinos, along with education and the economy.

"He's not going to fool anyone," Cuomo said on a televised debate last week. "You go to the Latino community and ask, 'Do you have more affordable housing? Are the schools better? Do you have a minimum wage increase? Are the Rockefeller drug laws reformed?' No."

The other Democratic candidate, State Comptroller H. Carl McCall, has already started running television advertisements in which Ferrer praises him.

"The sophisticated people out there are making a distinction between their new friend and their true friend. Gov. Pataki has become a new friend of the Latino community because he realizes, boy, this community really comes out and votes," McCall said during the debate. "Those people are going to stay with us."

Such confidence aside, state election board records show that McCall is not relying on good will alone to snag the Latino vote. This year, McCall and his unofficial running mate, Dennis Meheil, have paid \$124,755 to two consultants for their advice and coveted Latino voter lists. The duo - Roberto Ramirez, the former Bronx Democratic leader, and Luis Miranda Jr., the founder of the Hispanic Federation - have parlayed their stints in public service into the most influential Latino consulting partnership in the state.

Aside from Pataki's efforts, the GOP's other main push to win Latino votes is taking place in the attorney general's race. There, the Republicans have put up their first Hispanic statewide candidate, former city Circuit Judge Dora Irizarry, against incumbent Eliot Spitzer, whose office has worked to dissuade Korean grocers and supermarkets who pay well below minimum wage to their mostly Latino workers, deliverymen and day laborers.

While most political experts do not expect Irizarry to come close to beating Spitzer, they are eager to see how much of the Latino vote she can pull away from the Democratic Party solely on the basis of her Latino heritage.

"I think these elections are going to be crucial because they will give the politicians an indication of where Latinos are going to go," said Dolores Fernandez, the president of Eugenio María de Hostos Community College of The City University of New York. "Years ago the Democratic Party could really count on the Latinos. I don't think that is true any more."

Next: A State Senate primary exposes divisions.

Rising Force

The percentage of Hispanics among the state population has been on the rise for the past decade, fueled primarily by a surge of Central and South Americans.

1990

Non-Hispanic White 69%

Non-Hispanic Black 14%

Hispanic 12%

Asian 4%

Other 1%

2000

Non-Hispanic White 62%

Non-Hispanic Black 16%

Hispanic 15%

Asian 6%

Other 1%

While Hispanics' numbers have increased, they remain clustered in the metro area.

Several Hispanic groups saw their numbers soar, while Puerto Ricans remained steady:

Total Hispanic

1990 2.2 million

2000 2.9 million

32% increase

Puerto Rican

1990 1.1 million

2000 1.1 million

0% increase

Dominican

1990 336,625

2000 652,347

78% increase

Colombian

1990 111,419

2000 152,715

37% increase

Ecuadoran

1990 92,569

2000 177,957

92% increase

Mexican

1990 86,131

2000 274,480

219% increase

Salvadoran

1990 48,956

2000 105,639

116% increase

SOURCE: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research

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