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# Hispanic Protestants swinging back to Democrats

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The Associated Press

Tuesday, October 21, 2008; 3:12 AM

GREELEY, Colo. -- On Sunday mornings, Rose Chavez volunteers to greet people at New Hope Christian Fellowship Church, a Hispanic congregation that worships in the renovated former headquarters of a meatpacking company on the outskirts of town, surrounded by fields of cabbage and corn.

Far afield, yes, but also far from ignored by the major party presidential campaigns.

Like most Hispanic evangelical and Pentecostal voters, Chavez backed George W. Bush four years ago. She believed his values lined up with hers.

Now, with two weeks to another election, the 33-year-old is part of a Hispanic Protestant defection to Democrat Barack Obama, a shift that could prove key in battleground states with large Hispanic populations such as Colorado, Nevada, Florida and New Mexico.

"A lot of people say Obama doesn't have much experience, but bringing the troops home is a big issue," said Chavez, who works at an employment staffing agency. "They don't need to be there anymore. We were tricked into believing in Bush and his ways."

As the economy and sour mood of the country conspire against Republican John McCain, analysts point to other factors hurting him with Hispanic Protestants, who accounted for about one-third of all Hispanic voters in 2004.

The list includes an unpopular war, an inability to connect on a personal level with Hispanics as Bush did, the marginalization of social issues like abortion and gay marriage and simmering anger about Republican rhetoric on immigration.

A report in late July from the Pew Hispanic Center found Obama leading McCain two-to-one among non-Catholic Hispanics who affiliate with a religion \_ in other words, mostly evangelicals and Pentecostals.

Other numbers suggest a closer race. Gallup daily tracking polls from Sept. 1 through Friday show Obama leading McCain 47 percent to 43 percent among non-Catholic Hispanic Christians.

In 2004, exit polls showed 63 percent of Hispanic Protestants supported Bush. In

2000, that demographic group supported Democrat Al Gore by a similar margin. Hispanic Catholics have largely remained loyal to the Democratic Party, so evangelicals and Pentecostals are swinging the Hispanic vote.

"I find it powerfully refreshing, enforcing the reality that we're not going to be the white evangelical community," said the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. "We're not the Christian right. We will not be the extension of one political party and we won't be exploited and used for victory and then ignored."

Rodriguez and others said the immigration debate that hit a fever pitch in 2006 caused the shift back to the Democrats.

"We blamed the Republican Party for the immigration reform debacle, and we blamed them for xenophobic rhetoric," said Rodriguez, who added that he will probably vote for McCain anyway because Obama is too liberal on abortion and marriage. "That pushed Hispanic evangelicals to look at ourselves."

Other factors are at work, as well. Hispanics remain conservative on abortion and gay rights but have shifted to the left since 2004 against the Iraq War and for increased government services and stricter environmental regulations, according to summer polling from John Green of the University of Akron's Bliss Institute of Applied Politics analyzed by the religion Web site Beliefnet.

The Rev. Wilfredo DeJesus, pastor of New Life Covenant church in Chicago, a Pentecostal Assemblies of God megachurch, voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004. Now an Obama endorser and surrogate, DeJesus has promoted the candidate on a call-in radio show in Orlando, Fla., and met with pastors in Goshen, Ind.

"When you hear a Democratic candidate say that Jesus Christ is my Lord and savior, I don't remember the last time a Democrat spoke like that," DeJesus said. "For the Republican party to throw out one word \_ abortion ... I'm still pro-life, I believe in the sanctity of marriage ... but I'm not going to be put in a corner."

The Rev. Mark Gonzales of Dallas, chairman of the McCain campaign's national Hispanic advisory council for Hispanic evangelicals, believes abortion and gay marriage remain the most important values issues for Hispanics. He, and others, say it's unfair to tie McCain to the GOP's harsher anti-immigration voices.

McCain defied Republican hard-liners \_ and won admiration from Hispanics \_ for co-sponsoring an immigration bill that included a path to citizenship. But he lost some of that support in speaking more forcefully about border security after the bill was twice defeated.

"The party has a major job to do in terms of repairing the damage with the Latino community," said Gonzales, who is also heading a first-of-its-kind, nonpartisan voter registration drive at Hispanic evangelical churches. "Hispanics are very loyal. It's a legacy, being Democratic in the Hispanic community. There

is still a learning curve."

Few places have felt the sting of the immigration battle like Greeley, a city of 90,000 an hour's drive north of Denver. On Dec. 12, 2006, agents with Immigration and Customs Enforcement staged a pre-dawn raid at the city's Swift & Co. meatpacking plant, resulting in 261 arrests.

At New Hope Christian Fellowship Church, staff said attendance at the Spanish-language service suffered from rumors the church would be raided next.

"Everybody knew somebody who was picked up," said Rigoberto Magnana, pastor of the Assemblies of God congregation. "All of us knew someone who was affected."

Ask Magnana's members what is guiding their vote, however, and immigration has faded behind making sure there's food on the table and a roof overhead.

Even before the recent economic tailspin, last summer's Pew survey found immigration was an important voting issue for Hispanics, but behind education, cost of living, jobs, health care and crime.

An emerging voice among Hispanic evangelical pastors, Magnana is a registered Republican who's been courted by both campaigns. While he said he won't tell people how to vote, Magnana said he'll probably vote for McCain because he agrees with him philosophically and believes McCain can lead through crisis.

"I have to be honest," Magnana said. "There's still the issue of where Obama stands as far as his belief system. Where does he really stand? You see it on the Internet, saying 'My Muslim faith,' whatever. I would like for him to come out and say, 'Look, I want to dispel this myth.'"

Obama did utter the words "my Muslim faith" in a September television interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos but corrected himself. Magnana said he was unaware that Obama has professed his Christianity repeatedly and explained how his Christian faith shapes his politics. Nevertheless, a Pew poll in September found 13 percent of all voters \_ and 19 percent of McCain backers \_ believed Obama is a Muslim.

Seated in a conference room after services, a half-dozen members of Magnana's church expressed ambivalence about the election.

"Obama doesn't have the morals, and he doesn't seem to have the love of country I think a president should have," said Esther Gomez, 65, a retired grocery store meat-wrapper.

But Gomez, a registered Democrat who voted for Bush in the last two elections, also has soured on Republicans. "It's the illegals," she said. "I don't like how they've been treated."

"I believe Obama does have morals," said Carla Ortiz, 48, the church receptionist. "But he has to be so careful of what he says because everything gets distorted. It happens with McCain, also. Everyone says he's going to be another Bush, but he's his own man.

"Ultimately, we have to vote with our hearts \_ and I'm undecided."

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