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This is how Biden should approach the Latino vote

Some ways of talking about race and class are more effective politically. And not just with Hispanics

Joe Biden needed no reminder from the arrival of Hispanic Heritage Month this week that he should focus on Latinos. While a mere 3 per cent of American voters overall have yet to decide on a presidential candidate, according to recent polls from Quinnipiac and Monmouth, 38 per cent of registered Hispanic voters in 10 battleground states may be ambivalent about even voting.

At least so far, this large group of Latinos seemingly perceives little reason to choose Mr Biden over President Trump. That makes this group — part of the largest racial-ethnic voting bloc in the country after whites — a key component of the swing voters in this election.

Our recent research opens a window onto these voters. One of us studies racism in American law and politics; the other runs an organisation dedicated to expanding the electorate. Both of us have roots in Latino communities. This spring, we teamed up to study what was happening among Hispanic voters and to fashion a strategy for drawing our communities — Latinos and others as well — into a multiracial progressive coalition.

With the help of two liberal pollsters, Joshua Ulibarri and Celinda Lake, we conducted 15 focus groups with members of various Hispanic communities across the country and ran a national survey. We also polled large cohorts of whites and African-Americans.

The results are sobering. We began by asking eligible voters how 'convincing' they found a dog-whistle message lifted from Republican talking points. Among other elements, the message condemned 'illegal immigration from places overrun with drugs and criminal gangs' and called for 'fully funding the police, so our communities are not threatened by people who refuse to follow our laws.'

Almost three out of five white respondents judged the message convincing. More surprising, exactly the same percentage of African-Americans agreed, as did an even higher percentage of Latinos.

Latinos don't all perceive themselves as people of colour

These numbers do not translate directly into support for the Republican Party; too many other factors are at play. Nevertheless, the results tell us something important: a majority across the groups we surveyed did not repudiate Trump-style rhetoric as obviously racist and divisive, but instead agreed with it.

Hispanics, of course, are no more monolithic than any other group and internal differences influenced how individuals reacted. The single biggest factor was how respondents thought about Hispanic racial identity. More than whether the individual was Mexican-American or from Cuba, young or old, male or female, from Texas, Florida or California, how the person perceived the racial identity of Latinos as a group shaped his or her receptivity to a message stoking racial division.

Progressives commonly categorise Latinos as people of colour, no doubt partly because progressive Latinos see the group that way and encourage others to do so as well. Certainly, we both once took that perspective for granted. Yet in our survey, only one in four Hispanics saw the group as people of colour.

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In contrast, the majority rejected this designation. They preferred to see Hispanics as a group integrating into the American mainstream, one not overly bound by racial constraints but instead able to get ahead through hard work.

The minority of Latinos who saw the group as people of color were more liberal in their views regarding government and the economy, and strongly preferred Democratic messages to the dog-whistle message. For the majority of Latinos, however, the standard Democratic frames tied or lost to the racial fear message. In other words, Mr Trump's competitiveness among Latinos is real.

But our research also suggests good news. There's a winning message Mr Biden and his party can deliver that resonates with most Hispanics no matter how they conceptualise the group's racial identity.

Racism and class conflict

The key is to link racism and class conflict. The pivot we recommend was also the most convincing message we tested among whites and African-Americans.

Democrats should call for Americans to unite against the strategic racism of powerful elites who stoke division and then run the country for their own benefit. This is not to deny the reality of pervasive societal racism. But it does direct attention away from whites in general and toward the powerful elites who benefit from divide-and-conquer politics.

This is the race-class approach that one of us helped pioneer. It fuses issues of racial division and class inequality, and by doing so shifts the basic 'us versus them' story — the staple of most political messaging — away from 'whites versus people of color' to 'us all against the powerful elites pushing division.'

Here's what this looks like:

'We had come so far, but now Covid-19 threatens our families — for instance with health risks, record unemployment and losing the businesses we worked hard to build. To overcome these challenges, we need to pull together no matter our race or ethnicity. But instead of uniting us, certain politicians make divisions worse, insulting and blaming different groups. When they divide us, they can more easily rig our government and the economy for their wealthy campaign donors. When we come together by rejecting racism against anyone, we can elect new leaders who support proven solutions that help all working families.'

This message was more convincing than the dog-whistle message among Hispanics no matter how they saw the group's racial identity. It also beat the dog-whistle message among African-Americans and whites.

Democratic responses

To understand why this works, it helps to compare it to the standard Democratic responses to Mr Trump's messages stoking racial fear.

One standard reaction is to directly challenge Mr Trump as a bigot while also condemning structural racism. We tested a message like this. It said, in part,

'Certain politicians promote xenophobia, racism and division. And it's not just their words. It's their policies, too. We see it in how they rip families apart at the border. And in how the police profile, imprison and kill Black people.'

Compared with the dog-whistle fear message, this 'call out racism' message lost among whites, perhaps unsurprisingly. It also lost among those Latinos who did not perceive themselves as people of colour.

Denouncing racism against Latinos seems like an obvious strategy to those of us who see ourselves as people of color and are outraged by Mr Trump's denigrating language and his administration's violence toward Latin-American immigrants. Yet this approach ignores the fact that our racial self-conception is not shared by a majority of Hispanics, who seem to balk at understanding themselves as people of colour under racist attack.

As Mr Biden makes his own pitch, he should see Hispanics not as a monolith but as America in microcosm.

The other standard Democratic response to dog whistling is to sidestep racial issues as much as possible. Let's call this the 'colorblind' approach, which we also tested. Our version partly said,

'We live in the wealthiest country in the history of the world, but Covid-19 illnesses and deaths are worse here than almost anywhere else. We must elect new leaders who have a plan and are ready to build this country back, better.'

This approach seeks to build a coalition by emphasising shared concerns, for instance around health care or the economy, while avoiding divisive conversations about racism. But it is dog-whistle racism that cleaved the white working and middle classes from the Democratic Party in the first place and failing to counter that strategy directly leaves its potency intact. In our research, the colorblind message basically tied the racial fear message among whites as well as the majority of Hispanics.

Mr Biden's pitch

In contrast, Democrats can build common cause across economic classes and racial groups with a race-class approach.

We tested seven race-class messages woven around different issues, including immigration reform and criminal justice. Among whites — often seen as more likely to be comfortable with messages that avoid challenging racism — all seven race-class messages beat the colorblind narrative. Indeed, five beat or tied the dog-whistle message, something the colorblind message failed to accomplish.

Framing racism as a class weapon also proved effective at nurturing support for racial justice reforms. The race-class approach urges people to view the real threat in their lives as emanating from powerful elites stoking division, not from supposedly dangerous minorities.

In our test, shifting the threat in this manner worked. The race-class messages urging racial justice reforms were perceived as more convincing than the 'call out racism' and the racial fear messages by Latinos, by African-Americans and even by whites.

As late as mid-August, nearly two-thirds of Latinos reported that they had not been contacted by either presidential campaign. That's changing. Mr Trump seems to recognise that many Hispanics are potential swing voters and he is making a push for Latino support.

As Mr Biden makes his own pitch, he should see Hispanics not as a monolith but as America in microcosm. Some Latinos view themselves as whites, others as people of color, and still others minimise the importance of race in their lives. Typically, this diversity among Hispanics — and in the multiracial Democratic coalition more generally — is seen as a major challenge for Democratic strategists. But our research suggests there's a way to build common cause that speaks persuasively across the spectrum of class and race. By pointing to Mr Trump's strategic efforts to stoke division, Mr Biden can better make the case that our best future depends upon joining together.

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