

Latinos Key to Several Election Upsets in Illinois

Written by Rich Miller

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Back in 1992, Latinos made up about 8 percent of Illinois' population, yet only 1 percent of that year's total election-day voter pool was Latino. The trend continued for years. Latinos just didn't vote.

Twenty years later, things have changed in a big way. According to exit polling, 12 percent of Illinois voters last week were Latino – compared to the 16 percent of Illinois residents who are Latino.

That high participation contributed to many of last week's electoral surprises.

Twenty years ago, 85 percent of Illinois' voting-day pool was white and 12 percent was African-American, with the other 3 percent being Latino, Asian, and other races. But last week, whites made up 70 percent of voters and blacks were 14 percent, while Asian-Americans were two percent.

In 2004, 2006, and 2010, exit polls found that 8 percent of Illinois' election-day voter pool was Latino. The Latino vote was just 6 percent in 2008. A persistent, years-long push by immigration-rights groups to register Latinos to vote and then get them to the polls has most definitely had an impact here this year, as well as a decidedly hostile national Republican message.

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The Democratic Party focused hard on getting Latinos to the polls. Only about 40 percent of Illinois Latinos live in Chicago, with the remainder living in the suburbs and Downstate. So concentrating on those voters was a way of pumping up the total Democratic vote, and it appeared to work quite effectively.

According to exit polling, 81 percent of Illinois Latinos voted for President Obama this past Tuesday. That trend presumably resonated all the way down the ticket.

DuPage County is now almost 14-percent Latino, which could be why the Democratic Party did so well there this year. Lake County is now 20-percent Latino, Will County 16-percent, and Kane County 31-percent.

Representative Skip Saviano (R-Elmwood Park) went into election day hoping to win his new district's DuPage County precincts by 1,500 votes to overcome an expected 1,200-vote deficit on the Cook County side. He ended up doing slightly better than that in Cook, losing by only 1,100 votes, but then he lost DuPage by 26 votes. Despite an endorsement by Congressman Luis Gutierrez, the Latino vote appears to have done him in.

Democrat Mike Smiddy's surprise win over freshman Representative Rich Morthland (R-Cordova) is partially due to the Latino vote, Democrats say. The district's Latino voting-age population is about 7 percent, and a heavy Latino turnout in the Sterling/Rock Falls area reportedly helped him over the top. Whiteside County is 11-percent Latino. Smiddy also worked very hard for a year and raised a lot of money from labor unions (particularly AFSCME), and Morthland was injured and unable to walk precincts. Smiddy won 52-48 without any real help from the House Democrats.

The 36th Senate District is about 9-percent Latino voting-age population, and that undoubtedly helped gin up the numbers for Senator Mike Jacobs (D-East Moline). The Senate Democrats went into election day hoping beyond hope to barely squeak out a win for Jacobs. Instead, Jacobs triumphed 55-45.

One explanation for Jacobs' surprisingly large margin is that pollsters didn't accurately measure the potential Latino impact because Latinos voted in far higher numbers this year than ever before. The weighting of Latino respondents will change, as will the perception of Latinos as

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non-voters. This year marks a definite turning point in Latino power.

The 62nd House District, where Democrat Sam Yingling upset Representative Sandy Cole (R-Grayslake) has a Latino voting-age population of 22 percent. The Democrat defeated Cole by 10 points in a district drawn to elect a Republican. Yingling worked hard for months and Cole simply didn't, but the Latino vote was obviously crucial.

The Kankakee-area's 79th House District is 7-percent Latino, Democrat Kate Cloonen won the district despite being drastically outspent by the GOP and despite this being what everybody thought was a Republican district. Hard work, message discipline, and the black and Latino vote put her over the top.

If the Republican Party wants to get back into the game, they'd better stop dismissing and attacking Latinos. They simply cannot win contested races in this state if Latinos vote in large numbers and go 81-percent Democratic.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.