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EDITORIAL

The Immigrant Vote

The Nevada caucuses today will be the first test of the mood of immigrant voters since comprehensive immigration reform was killed.

Nevada is the first state on the election calendar with a sizable Hispanic vote, and among them will be a substantial number of immigrants. We don't know who they'll choose, but we do know they are anxious. They have endured the racially tinged rhetoric used to sink immigration reform; they have witnessed Republican candidates exploiting the xenophobic nastiness. Families have been torn apart as illegal immigrants have been deported, leaving their citizen children behind.

Meanwhile, applications for citizenship have surged. About 1.4 million immigrants applied for citizenship in the fiscal year that ended in September, according to government estimates. That was double the number from the same period the year before. One motivation was a desire to beat a 66 percent increase in the application fee in July. But anxiety over the government's crackdown on illegal immigrants and anger at Republicans' efforts to make immigrants into the whipping boys of American politics, were big motivators. The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials expects at least 9.3 million Hispanics to vote in November, 1.7 million more than in 2004. We hope the emergence of new immigrant voters will help temper the immigration debate.

President Bush largely got it right on immigration. He recognized the hard-working nature of immigrants, even those who arrived illegally. He said the nation needed a path to legal status. According to exit polls, Mr. Bush drew about 40 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2004 — a record for a Republican presidential candidate.

But just one current Republican contender, John McCain, offers anything but lock-step allegiance to the enforcement-only approach now. In a poll late last year by the Pew Hispanic Center, only 23 percent of Latinos identified themselves as Republicans, down from 28 percent in 2006. Hispanics who identified themselves as Democrats surged from 49 percent to 57 percent.

The Latino voters' group expects Hispanics to account for 11 percent of the vote in Nevada, a state that Mr. Bush — with 39 percent of the Hispanic vote — won by a mere 2.6 percentage points in 2004.

It is of utmost importance that the government deal promptly with the flurry of new citizenship applicants. Mr. Bush has agreed to a proposal from Senator Charles Schumer, Democrat of New York, to do just that. Still, immigration authorities expect waits of 18 months, which would prevent many applicants from becoming citizens in time for the November election.

The citizenship and voter registration drive in immigrant communities should be celebrated by both parties.

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