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Getting motivated

The national Democratic Party picked Nevada to increase the diversity in its presidential nominating process. Is it working?

By [Jay Jones](#)

You'd never know from a walk through the halls of power in Carson City that nearly one in four Nevadans are Latino. Only three Latinos currently serve in elected positions in state government—Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto, veteran Assemblymember Moises Denis, who grew up in Cuba, and freshman legislator Ruben Kihuen, who was born and raised in Mexico.

The imbalance is as clear as the water in a Sierra stream. Twenty-four percent of the Silver State's population can only elect a measly 4 percent of officeholders. Of course, a good chunk of the Latinos included in the census aren't eligible to vote, but of those who are eligible, a disproportionately low number are registered and even fewer bother to show up at the polling places. If all who could vote did vote, John Kerry might well be sitting in the Oval Office right now.

"You're talking about potentially switching a presidential election," says Kihuen. "Here in Nevada, President Bush in 2004 won by slightly more than 20,000 votes. Now there's close to 70,000 Latinos registered to vote. In that election, I think close to 25,000 came out and voted. Had you activated the rest of those Latinos that are eligible to go out and vote, they could have switched the presidential election."

Kihuen's words bring to mind the traditional "coulda, shoulda, woulda" mantra of Monday morning



Nevada Democrats are hoping Latinos will turn out in large numbers for their January presidential caucuses. This group was photographed during a 2006 march.

Photo By David Robert

quarterbacks, but they highlight the enormous potential of Latinos as a powerful voting bloc here in Nevada, a fact not lost on U.S. Sen. Harry Reid.

When Reid last year successfully led the charge to move Nevada's caucus up to January—thereby giving it far more national importance and media attention—he argued that the Southwest, with its booming growth, deserves an early voice. He specifically pointed to the soaring Latino community as one group that deserved to be heard.

Whether Latinos will make their voices heard in January is still iffy, at best. The Democratic candidates have been reaching out to the Spanish language media, according to Mario DelaRosa, editor of *Ahora*, Reno's largest Spanish language newspaper. But, he says, not one Republican candidate has been in touch. "They seem not to care too much about the Latino community," DelaRosa notes with frustration. He adds that there's a huge vacuum when it comes to explaining the whole process to Latinos.

It's not as though there aren't plenty of instructors—Nevada Democrats have been holding caucuses for decades (only the early date is new).

"There has to be a campaign to educate the Latino community," he explains. "About what a caucus is, what people are supposed to do, where they're supposed to meet, how this is going to work. Right now, there's no information about how the caucus works among the Latino community."

Officials from the Nevada State Democratic Party have been all over the state holding mock caucuses—they call them "mockuses"—to inform people about how the process will unfold in three months' time. However, while they have conducted five mock sessions "en Español" in Clark County, they've yet to organize a single one in Washoe County.

"I know they're working to make it happen," says Andres Ramirez, an organizer for the state party. He says the party recently hired a new employee in Reno whose assignment is to reach out to Latinos. "Frankly, I'd be surprised if it doesn't happen later this month or in early November," Ramirez said, referring to a Washoe mock caucus in Spanish.

Last month's arrests of 54 undocumented workers at McDonald's restaurants in Northern Nevada will help to motivate the community, according to Kihuen, the 27-year-old freshman legislator. "There's a lot of deportations going on right now, a lot of family separations," he said. "So immigration is an issue that they feel is important to go vote on.

"There are also other issues, not just immigration," Kiheun adds. "You have education, the lack of ELL [English Language Learners] funding for their kids. You have healthcare. We have one of the highest rates of Hispanic children who are uninsured." He speaks about such issues with passion—he learned English at an elementary school in Las Vegas, and his mother still works as a housekeeper at one of the big hotels on the Strip.

Efforts are underway to significantly increase the number of Latinos who are eligible to vote. A nationwide campaign called "Ya Es Hora" (in English, "It's Time") is being heavily promoted by Univision, a Spanish language TV network with stations in both Reno and Las Vegas. The campaign is just beginning in Nevada, but it has produced stunning results in California and other populous states. Since its launch in January, "Ya Es Hora" has generated the filing of more than 600,000 applications for naturalization.

"It's critical that Latinos continue to engage and get involved in the political process of this country," comments Walter Ulloa, Chairman and CEO of Entravision, the owner of Channel 41 in Reno. "We are

going to continue mobilizing and educating the Latino electorate."

Obtaining citizenship is a lengthy process, and Assemblyman Kihuen warns that just because someone becomes a citizen doesn't mean they're going to immediately run down to the courthouse to register to vote.

"We have to be patient," he says. "It's not something that can happen from one day to the next. These efforts to register people to vote—to educate them, to mobilize them—you need a lot of money, you need a lot of people, and you need a lot of patience, as well."

It's a similar story in Nevada's African-American community. At about 8 percent of the total population, blacks are another minority group traditionally underrepresented in political circles.

Hoping to increase African American participation in the caucuses, Nevada Democrats have created a strategy called "I Can, I Care, I Caucus." It's a message they're taking wherever people of color congregate, from neighborhood groups to churches.

"We're using that message to get out into the community and create reasons and opportunities for African-Americans to learn about the caucus," explains Kenya Pierce, a community organizer for the state party. She says the concerns of blacks mirror those of the general public, from the war in Iraq to healthcare and economic development. She realizes, though, that mobilizing her community won't be easy.

"It's a mountain [to climb], it's certainly a mountain," she says. "We have a diverse community here in Nevada, and to be a party of an early caucus is huge. This is the story that many of us, including myself, are using to get folks to feel more connected to this process."