

## Diss a culture at your own risk

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 14, 2009 NCR Today

Amidst all the coverage of Sonia Sotomayor's first day of confirmation hearings, one sentence jumped out at me. Lynette Oliver, who runs a women's support group in Puerto Rico, told the *Washington Post* that she brought a small Puerto Rican flag to wave at the hearing. "I want her to know people from the island are here," she said. Pride in this sense is not a deadly sin.

When John F. Kennedy ran for president, he won the Catholic vote overwhelmingly. (44 years later John Kerry lost the Catholic vote.) When Mike Dukakis ran for president in 1988, Greeks of all political persuasion not only cast their ballots for the first Greek-American nominee, they opened their wallets and kept his campaign coffers filled. African-Americans carried Barack Obama to the Democratic nomination last year. When someone from one's group is breaking through, the tribe rallies round.

Tribalism is an anti-democratic sentiment, but in this case it is proving to be an anti-Republican one. As the GOP senators stare down Judge Sotomayor, and especially when they demean her quotes about the importance of empathy, Latinos are perceiving not only that one of their own is being disrespected, but their whole culture is being dissed. Yes, Latinos put a higher premium on empathy than Anglos. You don't have to be in Puerto Rico for five minutes to recognize that. Watch the way they help a person with a physical disability in the crowded confusion of an airport: They notice and help that person, they do not avert their gaze, they do not cross to the other side of the road.

But, Republicans have to be mindful of their base, and their base has decided it does not like immigrants. Puerto Ricans, of course, are not really immigrants because they are U.S. citizens. But, by attacking Sotomayor, Republicans risk losing the Latino vote, especially the Puerto Rican vote, for at least another couple of elections. The Puerto Rican communities along the I-4 corridor in central Florida and in Lancaster County, Pa., are key swing voters in key swing states. And they are not only watching Sotomayor, they are cheering for her. In heaping criticism on her, the Republicans are really heaping coals on their own heads.

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