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Election Time: NV-Senate

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): This race has seen mountains of spending, a single debate, and much national attention since I first looked at it. All of the prognosticators rate it as a toss-up and it will be very instructive to see if Nate Silver's model at fivethirtyeight.com is correct: He gives Tea Party favorite Sharron Angle a 68% chance of winning. What baffles me is that every poll in the past two months is within the margin of error, so I do not know how statistically Silver reaches his conclusion.

I stick by my prediction that Latino turnout will put Reid over the top.

Also check out this commentary on the race from Catholic University Politics Professor Matthew Green.

ORIGINAL POST: When Sen. Harry Reid wins re-election in November, he will have two women to thank for his victory, Sharron Angle and Lucy Flores. Angle, his GOP opponent, is running perhaps the #1 race-baiting television ad of the year, with images of Latinos climbing through a fence and then walking menacingly down a dark alley. Flores, who is Latina, is not climbing over any fence from Mexico, but she is breaking down a different barrier: She is one of nine Latino candidates for the Nevada state legislature. If Reid wins, it will be the turnout generated by these aspiring Latino legislators that will put Reid over the top.

There are currently two Latinos in the Nevada state legislature but Flores told NCR that eight of the nine current Latino candidates appear to be headed for victory. Flores is proud to point out that four of the nine are not running in majority-Latino districts, but it is the increased turnout in the districts that are heavily Latino that Reid needs to hold on to his job for six more years. Many commentators have focused on the effect Obama's victory in 2008 had in bringing along down-ballot Democrats in marginal districts, but in Nevada, the reverse phenomenon is at play: The down-ballot races may serve to motivate higher Latino turnout that can help Reid.

All polls show the Nevada Senate race to be a toss-up, but a poll is only as good as its model of voter

turnout. Latino voters are disproportionately young as well as members of a minority, two groups that traditionally suffer from low voter turnout. But, this year, Latinos have a reason to go to the polls that the rest of us lack. "Latinos are frustrated with the President and the Democrats," Flores acknowledges, "but they're still voting for the Democrats. The Republicans have branded all Latinos as illegals who are stealing jobs. We are being made scapegoats for everything that's wrong with the country."

Flores told me that earlier in the year, Latinos were focused, like the rest of the country, almost solely on the economy. Immigration did not even rate very high on the list of other issues. Unemployment was near 15 percent in Nevada and it led the nation in foreclosures. The economy remains the number one issue but, according to Flores, "in the last few months, because of anti-immigrant fervor, the rejection of the DREAM Act, and the mess in Arizona, immigration is now the second highest concern among Latino voters." Ads like the one Angle is running will hardly warm the hearts of Latinos. Here is the ad:

Curiously, one Republican might benefit from the increased Latino turnout: GOP candidate for Governor, Brian Sandoval, who is also Latino. Flores thinks some Latinos will vote for Sandoval out of ethnic pride, but they will back Reid overwhelmingly. "Sen. Reid? Absolutely, Latinos will vote up-ballot for him. He has been a friend to the Latino community. He has been active in the Latino community," Flores told me. "There is a lot of energy in our local Get-Out-the-Vote effort to support him."

Latinos, like previous immigrant groups, have networks of social relationships that can be opaque to those outside. One hundred years ago, Irish or Italian immigrants enjoyed a social life defined by the local Catholic parish, the union hall and the pub. German Catholics and Lutherans had their own German-language newspapers, often sponsored by their churches. Today, churches, largely Latino unions such as SEIU in Las Vegas, and Univision serve the same functions for Latinos, providing a network of support and communication that outsiders tend to ignore even when they know it exists. You may not need to hire a hot shot field director sent from D.C. to win a state legislative race in Las Vegas, but my guess is it helps to know the pastor, the lady who runs the corner store, some of the local Spanish-language radio hosts, and the union organizers.

This past weekend, Congresswoman Linda Sanchez from California traveled to Las Vegas to meet with the Latino candidates, as well as with party and union activists and volunteers for several campaigns. "It was pretty amazing being out there and seeing the big change about to take place," Sanchez said of the meetings. The Congresswoman is becoming one of the non-Latino world's go-to surrogates: In 2008, she trudged through the snowy streets of Hartford and Bridgeport, knocking on doors and visiting Mom-and-Pop shops in the Latino neighborhoods in a successful effort to turn out Latinos for Barack Obama in the Connecticut primary. Connecticut was the only Northeast state in which Obama beat Clinton. I do not put much value on surrogacy, unless it leads to money (as a Sarah Palin endorsement can), or if it happens within a community that is still cohesive, the way Latinos are today and the Irish and Italians were a century ago.

It is a measure of how unsuccessful Harry Reid is as a homestate hero that his race is still tied in the polls even after Angle won the GOP primary. The "Second Amendment remedies" candidate who runs from the press is perhaps the scariest candidate running for federal office in America today, with the possible exception of Democrat Alvin Green in South Carolina. Yet, Reid, who has never been Mr. Charisma, keeps winning. This year, he not only got lucky in drawing a bad challenger, but in finding a wave of Latino voter engagement focused on down-ballot races that will nonetheless carry him across the finish line. And, if that does not earn immigration reform top place on the new Senate's agenda, I do not know what does!

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