

COX Newspapers Washington Bureau

Univision Citizenship Drive Could Influence Election

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WASHINGTON — The Univision network, known for its romantic telenovelas and kooky variety shows, could have a major impact on the 2008 presidential election.

The Spanish-language media giant is embarked on an aggressive nationwide campaign to sign up Hispanics for citizenship and voting.

The results could change the dynamics of the national immigration debate and energize a new voting base of millions of people, political experts say.

Gabriel Escobar, associate director of the nonpartisan Pew Hispanic Center research group, said that an increase in Hispanic voters would most likely benefit Democrats because Hispanics generally favor that party 2-to-1 over Republicans.

The impact could be greater in southwestern states such as Arizona and New Mexico, he added.

But Escobar also said that Hispanics are a diverse population and difficult to forecast as voters because they lean left on some issues but are also socially conservative.

"Coming up with a clear prediction is a little difficult," he said.

Currently, more than 8 million legal permanent residents — also known as green-card holders — are eligible to become U.S. citizens but have not applied. Most are from Latin American countries.

The campaign targets them directly, with the slogan "Ya Es Hora" or "It's About Time."

Univision says the campaign is a nonpartisan public service effort to help Latinos navigate the citizenship process and become involved in civic life.

It includes billboard ads, television news segments from citizenship fairs, a 30-minute video broadcast on how to become a U.S. citizen, and partnerships with community organizations that help immigrants through the process. Morning news shows on affiliate stations often feature lawyers who answer questions about naturalization.

Univision has also put star power behind the effort, with public service announcements by one of its network anchors, Maria Elena Salinas, and promotion of the campaign by popular morning radio D.J. Eddie "El Piolin" Sotelo, who is in the process of becoming a citizen himself.

The effort started in January in Los Angeles, where it seems to have had an impact. Applications for naturalization more than doubled for the first three months of 2007 compared to the same period last year.

It is unclear, however, how much of a role the Univision campaign has played in the boost.

Rates of naturalization have been increasing nationwide for years. Analysts cite many factors, including the national debate over illegal immigration that has made many immigrants feel vulnerable.

The citizenship campaign has expanded to several cities, including Houston, Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio, Miami, New York, Boston, Chicago and Fresno, Calif.

In Houston, where it started in early April, citizenship applications increased by 90 percent in April and May compared to the same time last year.

Ivelisse Estrada, senior vice president of corporate and community relations for Univision, said that the scope of the current campaign is unprecedented.

"Univision has this very deep commitment to empower our community, to provide people with the information that they need to improve their lives," she said.

Estrada also said that the campaign "took a more urgent turn" because of the upcoming increase in fees for naturalization and fear in immigrant communities fueled by the national debate on illegal immigration.

The next step, planned to start in the fall, is an equally aggressive voter registration drive, she said. Latinos have traditionally had low rates of voting.

In 2004, about 16 million Latinos were eligible to vote, but only 7.6 million cast ballots, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

A major force behind the citizenship campaign is the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. Other partners include the Spanish-language newspaper La Opinion; the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); the National Council of La Raza, an Hispanic civil rights organization; and more than 200 community groups.

Eliseo Medina, SEIU's executive vice president, said that the goal is to empower millions of people to become involved in a political process that affects them greatly.

"We've got so many politicians beating up on immigrants" because they don't see a political downside to it, he said. That will change substantially as more immigrants become voters, he said.

Nathan Gonzales, an analyst at the nonpartisan Rothenberg Political Report, said that the Univision campaign is ambitious and could have a

long-term impact.

In addition, he said that Hispanic voters could make a difference in potential battleground states, including Florida, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and even Oregon, where only about 8 percent of residents are Hispanic.

"If it's a close margin, every voter group is going to matter," he said.

But Gonzales also said it is unclear which party will benefit the most from an increase in Latino voters and that the outcome of the immigration debate in Congress could be a factor in future Hispanic loyalty.

The Univision television network — which is seen on cable and broadcast television throughout the United States and Latin America — covers immigration heavily on its nightly newscasts and is hosting a Democratic presidential debate in September and a GOP presidential debate later in the year.

Sotelo, who hosts a syndicated morning music and entertainment show, is lobbying for a major immigration bill pending in the Senate that would give most illegal immigrants a chance at legal status and eventual citizenship.

In a highly publicized event, he delivered 1 million letters of support for the bill to Capitol Hill earlier this month.

Federico Subervi, an expert on media and politics at the University of Texas at Austin, said it is unusual for a mainstream media organization to advocate for a political cause, but that Latino-oriented outlets have historically taken on that role.

In addition, Subervi said that Sotelo is an entertainment figure in the network and not part of a newscast and, therefore, his advocacy is not a journalistic conflict.

Estrada, with Univision, said the citizenship and voting campaigns are completely nonpartisan.

"We never, ever tell people how to vote," she said.

John Keeley, a spokesman for the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that advocates stronger immigration controls, said that Univision does not represent the diversity of opinion of the Hispanic community about illegal immigration and that the network is also using "a bottom line rationale" because it would lose viewers if millions of illegal immigrants were deported or pushed to leave through other enforcement measures.

Audrey Singer, an immigration fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said that Univision's involvement in the citizenship campaign would likely have a significant impact, making information available to more people on who is eligible for citizenship, how to apply, and what the process is like.

"Such a drive will increase motivation to apply, especially if it is couched in a way that encourages people to have their voices heard," she said.

On the Web:

"Ya Es Hora" campaign: www.yaeshora.info

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