

Univision debate and the Hispanic vote

OUR OPINION: NOT SMART TO SNUB FASTEST-GROWING VOTER GROUP

Opinión
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This Sunday, the nation's Hispanics will have a chance to see Democratic presidential candidates face off in the first-ever national debate in Spanish. Only one thing will be missing: Republican contenders. That's too bad for Republicans and for the GOP.

Don't think that Republicans were excluded. The Univision network planned separate debates for candidates of both parties. All eight Democratic candidates have said Yes to the event at the University of Miami. Sen. John McCain was the only Republican to accept Univision's invitation.

The seven other GOP candidates all said they had scheduling problems. Right.

Vitriolic tone

By no coincidence, Sen. McCain also is the only GOP candidate who supported the sensible immigration reforms that were rejected by the Senate earlier this year. Immigration is a hot topic among Hispanics, who generally supported reforms that included a legalization path for illegal immigrants. Many Hispanics were put off by the vitriolic tone of the congressional debate led by GOP hard-liners.

Yet Mitt Romney, Rudy Giuliani, Tom Tancredo and just-declared candidate Fred Thompson seem to be vying to see who can come up with the toughest anti-immigration rhetoric. The political calculus: They must appeal to a narrow part of the GOP that opposes comprehensive immigration reforms. In a debate, the candidates would have been grilled by Univision hosts on the topic. Saying anything that could be interpreted as pro-immigration could hurt them in early-primary states like Iowa. Some critics could also object to them debating in Spanish.

The wrong message

Such calculations are short-sighted. Surveys show that most Hispanics and Americans in general -- including Republicans -- support those immigration reforms. The real problem is the inability of government or elected officials to deliver. Ignoring Hispanics sends a message that the GOP doesn't want them.

History shows the importance of the Hispanic vote. California Gov. Pete Wilson's push to deny illegal immigrants public schooling and healthcare galvanized Hispanic voters,

causing the GOP to lose the Legislature for 10 years. Presidential candidate Bob Dole, who followed the Wilson line, not only lost the 1996 race but garnered the worst percentage of Hispanic votes ever measured for a GOP presidential candidate. By contrast, an immigrant-friendly President Bush won his 2004 election with more than 40 percent of the Hispanic vote, a record high.

Univision is trying to reschedule the debate for GOP candidates. They should reconsider. Snubbing the nation's fastest growing electoral group isn't smart -- not for the candidates nor for the Republican Party.