

A Family Weighs Democrats' Latino Credibility

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LAS VEGAS -- Olivia Diaz's political commentary began soon after her family settled in their cozy living room on Sunday night to watch the first presidential forum in the nation's history targeting Hispanics.

"He speaks Spanish," she whispered during the introduction of [Sen. Christopher J. Dodd](#) (D-Conn.). Her two sisters and their parents, who immigrated from [Mexico](#), were enjoying being courted and uncommitted, and nodded.

But Diaz, a 28-year-old teacher, pursed her lips in disapproval when [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) (D-N.Y.) defended her vote to construct a barrier at the border with Mexico. "A wall won't solve the problem," Diaz said later.

On details such as the fence, Diaz and her family agreed that the seven Democrats at the forum don't quite get it. They skimmed on specifics about changing immigration law and dodged a question about why it is okay to construct a barrier at the U.S.-Mexico border but unnecessary to build one at the border with [Canada](#).

As far as Diaz was concerned, the forum, which [Nielsen Media Research](#) said was watched by 4.6 million people, most of them Hispanics, produced no clear winner. She and her family want a candidate who can beat the Republicans, whom they don't think understand their problems, but Sunday night did not settle it. And Diaz knows their opinions matter more than ever, because while the forum was in [Miami](#), a major new front in the battle for Latino voters is in [Nevada](#).

The combination of a change to the primary calendar that moved up the state's Democratic caucus to Jan. 19 and the fast growth of the state's Hispanic community -- it has increased by 209,000 since 2000 -- has made families such as the Diazes highly sought after.

Latinos make up one-quarter of Nevada's population and about 13 percent of its voters, according to a study by [Brookings Institution](#) demographer William H. Frey, and could help push the state, which [President Bush](#) carried by only 21,000 votes in 2004, into the Democratic column in 2008.

Although [New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson](#) is the only Latino in the race -- and he loudly protested Sunday that he was not allowed to answer questions in Spanish -- he has not won over the Diaz family.

Over the weekend, Diaz was in the small crowd when [Richardson](#) opened a campaign office a few blocks from her home in the Hispanic heart of the city. She clapped politely

but didn't put a campaign sticker on her shirt. Richardson is at least the fourth candidate to come to her neighborhood this summer.

Her decision will probably influence her family. Her mother, Alejandra Diaz, is 52 and a housewife. She immigrated to [Las Vegas](#) 34 years ago from a small farming village called La Candela in Durango, Mexico, following her husband, Gilberto. Alejandra speaks little English, but both she and Gilberto, 60, became citizens in the late 1990s. He works nights, cleaning the casino at [Caesars Palace](#), and is a member of the 60,000-member Culinary Workers Union, which is heavily courted by Democrats.

Neither of Olivia's parents have high school diplomas, but they have voted in every presidential election since they became citizens.

"It was silly to wait so many years," said Gilberto Diaz, who legally immigrated to Lincoln, [Calif.](#), with his parents in 1965. "The doors are open when you are a citizen, and we wanted to be involved in the system, to be able to vote. It's the only way for Latinos to show that we have force."

All of their children were born U.S. citizens. Three Diaz siblings, 24-year-old Marisa and 20-year-old Nydia, who are attending the [University of Nevada at Las Vegas](#) on scholarships, and 13-year-old brother Alejandro still live at home. Olivia Diaz and two of her sisters are married but haven't strayed far from the family or their parents' political leanings. All but Marisa are registered Democrats. She's an independent but has never voted for a Republican candidate in a contested race.

The campaign issues that matter to them are ones that touch their lives. After the family of eight spent years in government-subsidized housing, Gilberto's job helped provide a small home with four bedrooms, including the garage, which the family converted into sleep space. His grinding work at the casino earns him basic health benefits, and he will collect a small pension to combine with a Social Security check two years from now, when he can retire. He is looking for a president who will provide universal health coverage because he worries about rising costs, but not enough differences have emerged between the Democratic candidates on the issue to sway him.



[Play Audio](#)

AUDIO | The Diaz family responds to the Univision presidential debate.



VIDEO

[First Presidential Debate Broadcast in Spanish](#)

For the first time in a U.S. presidential campaign, 7 candidates vying for the Democratic nomination participated in a debate Sunday that was broadcast across the nation in Spanish. One of the hot topics discussed was immigration reform.

'08 Presidential Race

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Olivia Diaz teaches at an elementary school that is 80 percent Latino and provides free or subsidized lunch for every child. It is common for some of the children, even those of legal residents, to start school speaking no English. She wants the government to make more provisions for students learning English to keep up with the ever-increasing number of federal testing standards, but she hasn't heard that topic addressed in the campaign.

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Last year, a second-grader and a third-grader disappeared, and word of their father's deportation followed. "They were really bright kids, some of our top performers," Olivia said. "They had to leave."

She felt the loss personally and wants to see the next president dramatically change the nation's immigration law, which all of the Democratic candidates committed to do at the Univision forum.

After the forum, the Diaz family continued to parse the candidates' responses. Gilberto Diaz was stuck on the question about a border barrier.

"They never said, 'Why Mexico and not Canada?' " he said, sounding disappointed.

"Why don't they just say they don't want Mexicans to come in?' " asked his daughter, Marisa. "They don't want us."

"They want our votes," Olivia Diaz said.