**GOP aims to peel Arizona Latinos from traditional Democratic ties**

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The Hispanic vote in Arizona belongs to Democrats — at least that’s the perception that a coalition of Republican Party leaders, candidates and activists are ready to battle.

The planks of the Grand Old Party’s platform match the values of Arizona Latinos, those Republicans say. And with some effort, as well as some image repair on controversial immigration issues, Republicans believe they can attract a portion of the growing Hispanic population in Arizona.

Arizona Republican Party Chairman Tom Morrissey admits that his party faces an uphill battle, but says he is committed to bringing more Latinos into his party’s tent.

“We have to make up ground, and this is long overdue,” Morrissey said.

He has good reason to see headwinds.

According to figures compiled by the Arizona Democratic Party, Hispanic Democrats outnumber Hispanic Republicans three-to-one in Arizona. That contrasts starkly with the breakdown for the overall population. The most current statewide partisan figures from the Secretary of State’s Office show 30 percent of registered voters identifying as Democrats, 36 percent registered as Republicans and 33 percent registered with no party affiliation.

And a practically unstoppable demographic shift in the state warrants any party’s efforts to attract more Hispanics. Census figures show that while Hispanics make up a quarter of the total voting-age population in Arizona, they account for more than 40 percent of young people who will reach voting age in the next 10 years.

Republicans looking to bring Hispanics into their fold believe the party’s stances on strong family values and pro-business credentials will help.

“I feel confident that when our message is stated, the Hispanic community will line up with us,” Morrissey said. “The message and platform of the party is our ally… The things that are of critical importance to the Latino community are the same things that the Republican Party stands for.”

Outside groups, such as the Arizona Latino Republicans Association (ALRA), a nonprofit activism group aimed at increasing awareness of Republican candidates and stances in the Latino community, have also become more vocal on issues and are getting more involved in 2012 elections.

Jose Borrajero, a spokesman for ALRA, said the group has about 200 members, and that although it has been around for about 10 years, a significant ramp up has taken place in recent months.

“We send out periodic communications so people know what’s going on… We’ve had fundraisers for various candidates that we support and we encourage people to volunteer for phone banks,” Borrajero said.

And the Arizona Republican Party helps support ALRA’s efforts by allowing them to use the party’s headquarters for meetings.

Borrajero said they recently held a fundraiser for Gabriella Saucedo Mercer, a Yuma Republican candidate in Arizona’s 3rd Congressional District. Republican U.S. Senate candidate Wil Cardon spoke at another recent ALRA meeting.

The group has also endorsed a list of Republican candidates running for office this year.

But among their endorsements are former Sen. Russell Pearce, who wrote Arizona’s controversial immigration law, SB1070, and Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who has developed a reputation for leading crime suppression sweeps in Hispanic-dense areas. Those endorsements have elicited confusion and criticism.

Mario Diaz, a political consultant who has worked with such Democrats as U.S. Rep. Ed Pastor, former U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini and former Gov. Janet Napolitano, said he applauds any effort to increase political participation among Latinos, regardless of the party allegiance. But an endorsement of Pearce sends a mixed message, he said.

“It’s a bad public relations calculation,” Diaz said. “It seems the correct political calculation would be to not endorse someone who has ostracized the Latino base.”

Diaz said that Republicans have strong Hispanic leaders at a national level, like Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and Texas Solicitor General and U.S. Senate candidate Ted Cruz. Such popular leaders can help the Republicans attract Hispanics, but the Republican brand in Arizona has been marred by the tumultuous immigration policy fights of recent years, Diaz said.

Holding up emblems of that fight will not serve Republicans well, he said.

“Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are,” Diaz said. “If you’re endorsing Pearce, it says they’re not sincere.”

Other Latino Democrats say the Republican effort is all for naught, given how close their party’s members have been to the illegal immigration debate.

“They don’t have a chance,” said John Loredo, an Arizona political consultant and former member of the Arizona House of Representatives. “They’re wasting their time. Instead of trying to sucker Latino voters into supporting their extremist politicians, maybe they should try to convince their members to stop spreading their bigoted hate speech.”

Loredo said the Republicans lost Latinos during the immigration debates in recent years and that he sees a strong movement among Latinos in Arizona against politicians like Pearce and Arpaio.

“I’ve been doing this since the late ‘80s. I’ve never seen Latinos more motivated than they are now, and they know who their enemies are and they know who’s been attacking them,” Loredo said. ‘Russell Pearce is public enemy No. 1 for Latinos.”

Borrajero, ALRA’s spokesman, and Morrissey, the Arizona Republican Party chairman, however, are undeterred by criticism such as Loredo’s and say there are plenty of reasons Hispanic voters can get behind Pearce.

“He’s a man of great accomplishment and the left uses him as a whipping post,” Morrissey said. “If you look at the economy and the budget, the governor gets a lot of credit, but Russell is one of the legislators who helped us get a balanced budget and a surplus.”

Borrajero, a Cuban immigrant himself, said he thinks Pearce’s aggressive stance on illegal immigration is particularly attractive to legal immigrants, and said he doesn’t regret the group’s endorsement.