

Dennis DeLeon, president of the Latino Commission on AIDS in New York

(Unedited Transcript)

This is a very hard panel to follow.

(Laughter.)

Let me just start out by saying that I had trouble with the topic. The idea of talking about public morality was difficult for me, and I couldn't figure out why. And the reason why is that most of my involvement in what others would call public morality was involvement with social justice issues. I've always seen what is called public morality in terms of almost oppositional politics. Social justice, you know, you feel it's addressing wrongs.

And the Republicans have really come to grips with what makes the Latino community tick. My parents are Mexican. I'm Mexican-American. But the Republicans may have homed in on the Hispanic community, the largest minority now in the country, and they understand, they understand how to reach this community. Unlike the current wave of Democratic leadership.

Now, why is that so? They understand that it is a deeply -- and I'll use the word "moral" community. It is a community which has fairly rigid gender roles. It is a community where families can act as support, or you can be isolated from the family, depending upon your behavior. It is a community that is by definition oftentimes on the outside, because of language and country, different countries of origin.

And the Republicans understand that, and they understand the erosion of the unifying principles in that community, the erosion of the Catholic church as a unifying force, and the drift of tens of thousands of Latinos to Pentecostal and evangelical faith.

In short, they understand the rise of private morality, the rise of -- I do use the word "private morality," because I believe, on issues of home life, sexual behavior, et cetera, Republicans have homed in on those as the defining moral issues. And have articulated the need for maintaining those values.

Democrats have not. Democrats have not found a language for addressing the Latino community on what are really the core issues of concern to many Latinos. The one experience I had growing up I wanted to share with you is, I was in college and I was doing a study of a new type of school, which emphasized nontraditional instruction, in which children were taught to select their own work scope for a given day, and in the process become more individuals, more individuated. And this was seen by the primarily white administration as a very positive thing.

But for the Latinos in the community that I dealt with, this was seen as a very negative thing, because it was upsetting what was their sole economic unit. The son or daughter who took care of the younger children suddenly saw no more need to take care of those children; he or she now had their own private ambitions and dreams to fulfill. So in some ways, we've kind of sown the seeds of the rebellion against progressivism among the Latino community.

People cite to you Cesar Chávez. People cite to you -- there's many progressive Latino labor leaders. But it's always -- these are always leaders who are the exception. And I think that Republicans understand that, and they understand how to speak the language.

And they don't equivocate. President Bush is absolutely brilliant at talking about right and wrong. He will say something is right, and something is wrong. In the last election, John Kerry would equivocate. He would qualify. He would modify just about any moral or social position, for fear of offending some group within the Democratic Party, some segment of the party.

And it was that kind of appearance of paralysis of leadership that I think was so unattractive. And that's why Bush was so able to claim so many Latinos to his candidacy.

And why haven't Latinos been better integrated into the progressive movement? I would put forth that Latinos, the progressive movement has left Latinos, over issues that many progressives see as -- they call them divisive, because they don't agree with them. An idea is always divisive if you don't agree with it. The issue of bilingual education. Among many progressives, this isn't seen as the end of the discussion, because they view the sole role of bilingual education as a transitional process, not as the maintenance of a culture. And so the progressives lose the Latinos on that front.

Latinos have a strong power to unify and unionize around work-related, job-related issues. It's a very cohesive, it's a strong tradition of coming together in collective action, among many Latinos. My experiences with the Salvadoran community, with the Cuban community, with the Puerto Rican community, with the Mexican community, all have taught me that it is a community that really gravitates towards organized social justice issues.

But the problem is that we're now in an era where the politics of identity have kind of taken over the politics of progressivism. It's more important to have a Latino on the labor council than to embrace Latinos. The idea of identity politics has replaced progressive politics. And that's a shame because meaningful involvement is more than just having one of them. Meaningful participation is true integration at every level into decision-making.

And many people are uncomfortable. When I was human rights commissioner of the city of New York, I really strove -- I really tried hard to bring together different communities around issues. For example, there would be a hate crime against a synagogue. I would call up African-American leaders, I would call up Latino leaders, I would call leaders in the gay community, and say, "Why don't you stand with us around this hate crime? Because hate crimes, you know, eventually affect all of us."

And that worked for a while. That really did work for a while. People began to see some commonality and some benefit to them, in standing with each other. But they were a small group, and it was hard to build a movement around such incidents.

The whole idea of government is one -- the Latinos tend, according to the Pew Charitable Trust, Latinos tend to be socially conservative, but have a liberal view on the idea of what government can and should be. They believe government should resolve many of their problems. There are very few Milton Friedmans in the Latino community.

And that emphasis on the role of government is something that most politicians these days are trying to shy away from. They are trying to have less of a role in both parties, Republicans especially, but the Democrats, that was kind of the benchmark of the Clinton administration.

So I believe that over the next eight, 12 years, the progressives and the Democratic Party will lose the Latino vote. It will become a Republican vote, because of a failure to understand the characteristics of private morality that motivate so much of so many Latinos, the failure to understand the importance of cultural identity. I think everybody wishes that we were all the same, but we're not. And I think many white progressives think of a time when there was unity, and we all joined arms.

And most Latinos, and I assume other ethnic minorities, really spend most of the time trying to mobilize their own communities. And I think that progressives, white progressives, deeply resent that. They deeply resent kind of a party they can't go to, that they are not invited to.

And it's that resentment that then spills over into their views of immigration, their views of bilingual education, almost a resentment of the fact of these new communities' existence.

I do believe that this process, though, can be reversed. I believe that we can form coalitions drawing on common problems, if we begin to think intelligently. I've seen good people come up with strategies for pulling together white, black, Latino, on education. And they all have different agendas, in a sense, but they have many things in common: the quality of the education, the fact that a test is not the sole answer to educational performance. And I've seen these broader ideas bring together these diverse elements in a community.

And my hope is that progressives in this country begin to identify the issues that they have in common. The previous speaker felt that Katrina kind of opened up a mirror that we looked into, you know, and we were scared of what we saw, you know. And I believe that Latinos are always on the other side of the mirror, as a group, because they speak a different language, they come from different countries, and right now -- and they're a fractured minority. They have had different political interests. But I believe there's hope for progressives to reclaim the Latino vote, the Latino participation in progressive politics, by continually looking for a theme that can pull together common interests -- which we don't do often enough -- while at the same time accentuating and respecting differences. That latter part doesn't get done, the latter part about acknowledging differences and respecting differences, doesn't get done near enough.

I think I'm the only Latino in the room, is that right? Okay, two. And I would just put it out there as a challenge that here's a foundation which was founded during a time when all issues were cast in terms of black and white. That has not yet come into the new face of America, as multiracial, with Latinos and African-Americans and, you know, et cetera.

And I think it's a challenge for progressives, but I think this body is a progressive body, to actually begin to include those, these new populations that were not in the forefront.

Americans seem to have an obsessive relationship between white and black. And that seems to pervade all their thinking about issues of fairness and racial justice. Very few

include Latinos in that exchange. Very few see Latinos as part of that dialogue. The issues of black and white, however, I think are very old and time-honored, and are a constant source of dialogue.

The issues of Latinos and whites and blacks are something that is just now developing, and just now being formed. Thank you very much.