

## **Politicians must mind their language in wooing Hispanic vote**

By John Authers

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Don Francisco, Hispanic America's most popular broadcaster, landed a blow for Spanish-language TV this month when his programme won the ratings battle for young adult viewers.

*Don Francisco Presenta* was more popular among 18-to 49-year-olds than any English-language offering in its time slot, even its biggest rival, the crime drama *Law & Order*. It was the first time Spanish programming had achieved this feat in the nation's largest media market.

The milestone, much celebrated at Don Francisco's network, Univision, the biggest US Spanish-language network, came during the quietest period of the year. But Univision has more viewers than any English-language networks in Los Angeles, Miami and San Antonio, and already had plenty to crow about. In the 12 months to July this year, its primetime viewership among those between 18 and 49 rose by 18 per cent.

Others are competing. Azteca America, backed by the Mexican broadcaster TV Azteca, and NBC's Telemundo both offer a similar diet of news, variety shows, Mexican soap operas and Latino sports (particularly Mexican soccer).

The rise of television in Spanish is the most obvious symptom of a growing "Hispanic market" in the US, to which both marketers and politicians are desperate to appeal. But the "Hispanic" community is diverse. Does it really make sense to talk about a single "Hispanic market," or one "Hispanic vote"? And is Spanish the best language to

reach them?

Sergio Bendixen, a Peruvian and an influential pollster and consultant to several Democrat politicians, can trace an emerging "Hispanic" identity. "Hispanics come from many different countries, and they have very different legal status in this country. ... What holds us together is a culture that works to live rather than one that lives to work."

This is seen as in contrast to an "Anglo" culture where self-image is linked to how much money people make and to how much they work. Mr Bendixen cites Univision as an example. "There's a message throughout their programming, and that is that they emphasise the cultural differences, and the importance of holding on to them."

In focus groups, young Hispanics who speak English and have never been to their parents' home country still proudly call themselves Latino. "They say: 'We enjoy life more. We have stronger relationships. We give friendships more importance. We stay closer to our families.' They are much more able to show their emotions and are very passionate about things." This, Mr Bendixen says, is "what joins the second-generation Hispanic in Texas and a recent migrant who just arrived in Orlando or New York".

Others disagree. Andre Pineda, a Californian pollster, the son of immigrants from Costa Rica and Nicaragua whose wife was born in Mexico, says: "It's not Hispanic surnames that matter most here. What matters more is country of origin, or how long they've been in the US, or which generation, or which language they choose to use."

Cubans, for example, are notoriously more conservative than other Hispanics. But, he says, Cubans in "Generation 1.5" - those born abroad, who arrived in the US before their 10th birthday - approach politics differently from their parents. "Their obsession with Fidel Castro is not there. They're trying to get through college and go to professional school and so on. What does Castro have to do with any

of that?"

Si! TV, which started broadcasting last year as the latest entrant to vie for Hispanic viewers, was founded upon exactly this demographic insight. All its programming is in English.

Even Spanish-language stations now carry English advertising. According to Carlos de la Garza, who heads advertising sales for Azteca America: "Latinos like to go to a film's opening weekend. It's a status symbol. And they don't want to see a movie like Brad Pitt's *Troy* dubbed into Spanish."

The makers of *Troy* understood this - they ran English commercials during the advertising breaks for Mexican soccer games and soap operas.

This truly bilingual community creates difficulties for marketers and politicians alike.

Azteca is now launching its soap operas simultaneously on both sides of the border, and Femsa, the Mexican brewery that makes Sol and Tecate, tailors its marketing of lager to different consumers. Anglos and established Hispanics are targeted with bottled beers at a premium price, advertised in English, while Tecate is aimed at immigrants. As drinking beer from a can is expensive in Mexico, where most beer is drunk from returnable glass bottles, Tecate in California is marketed in Spanish, and sold in cans to aspirational migrant workers who want to show that they have arrived as rich Mexicans, and can afford canned beer.

Political appeals to Hispanic voters have yet to show such subtleties. Democrat strategists say President George W. Bush's success in gaining 42 per cent of the Hispanic vote last year was in part because most Latinos lived in non-competitive states, without big "get out the vote" campaigns.

But New Mexico was harder to explain. The state is more than 40 per cent Hispanic, but swung to Mr Bush last year despite the presence of Bill Richardson, the state's Democratic governor, who is himself Hispanic.

According to Mr Pineda, the Democrats made a basic mistake in approaching Hispanic New Mexicans, many of whom are of Mexican origin but whose ancestors have lived in the state for more than a century. "We have to get [beyond] the idea that Spanish is the path to the Latino vote. Only 18 per cent of US Latinos are voters."

He added: "Unlike Hispanics as a whole, 72 per cent of Latino voters were born in the US, and only 9 per cent come from Spanish-speaking households. Two-thirds per cent say they watch more English than Spanish." The Democrats might have done better speaking in English.

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