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Ethnic Influence, by the Numbers

Politics: O.C.-based Hispanic 100, a heavily GOP executive group, starts fast on shaping a pro-business agenda.

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It started two months ago, with just seven members: five CEOs, an attorney and a retired vice president from State Farm.

Eighty-seven members later, the organization, optimistically billing itself Hispanic 100, demonstrated its first bit of political pull: It lured all three Republican candidates for governor to an invitation-only luncheon in Orange County.

The group tilts heavily Republican, with only a few Democratic members. Its mission to advance a Latino-friendly, pro-business agenda, without ignoring such traditional activist rallying points as immigration and education.

The group hopes to conduct other forums and will soon consider whether to become a political action committee, which could donate money to campaigns. Members are looking to Republicans' Lincoln Club as a model for their own development.

"This is an effort to create a structure that local, state and federal candidates can approach," said Carlos Olamendi, a founding member who runs a Capistrano Beach restaurant and an international financing company, Cor International. "This is a group of [Latinos], most of whom have come from rags to riches... There are people who not only know what taxes are, they know what payroll is."

The group's formation comes as Democrats and Republicans jockey to capture a growing Latino vote.

Last month in Ontario, President Bush conducted a town meeting sponsored by the Latino Coalition Foundation, the Ontario Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Orange County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Latin Business Assn.



Founders of the new but rapidly growing Hispanic 100 include, from left in front row, David Padilla, Manuel Ramirez CPA, Manny Padilla; back row, Carlos Olamendi, Francisco Valle MBA, Mario Rodriguez, John Cruz Esq., George Jaramillo Esq.

"Latinos are the most important battleground in American politics today. The Republicans, led by the president, are trying to attract Latino voters to their party. Democrats are now trying to do everything they can to hold on to them," said Sergio Bendixen, a long-time pollster for Latino clients. "What you are seeing in Orange County has a lot to do with that."

Zeke Hernandez, a Democrat and president of the League of United Latin American Citizens in Santa Ana, agreed.

"Latinos who are Democrats will see [Hispanic 100] as a ploy to build [Republican] numbers. It's pressure on the Democrats to do their own work. They can't sit on their duffs and say, 'We have done outreach in the past' and say they are satisfied," Hernandez said.

Advantages Also Called Bipartisan

Still both parties could get a boost from Hispanics' 100's efforts, said Jess Araujo, another Orange County Democrat and founder of Latin American Voters of America, which registers Latino voters.

"It promotes democracy. It forces the political parties to compete more aggressively for our interest and our dollars," Araujo said.

Drawing Latinos into the political process is a major challenge. In California, which is one-third Latino, only 16% of registered voters are Latino. Of those, 68% are Democrats and 20% are Republicans. Orange County has even fewer Latino voters—12%—but more are Republicans, 28% compared with 54% Democrats.

That makes Orange County fertile ground for Hispanic 100.

Most of the 87 members are owners of businesses with annual sales of more than \$1 million, or Latino executives with corporations such as the Walt Disney Co., Pacific Bell and Gigante USA who are active in the community.

Sometimes they disagree. Most members, however, believe a healthy economy, not government aid, will help society. Yet there is also a general sense that a more liberal immigration policy would benefit business and unify families. The group has taken no formal position on that, however.

Hispanic 100's principal founder,

Manuel J. Ramirez, who also heads Orange County's Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said the group has already attracted a surprising amount of attention. After last week's gubernatorial event, which drew former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, Secretary of State Bill Jones and L.A. businessman Bill Simon, the candidates called members of Hispanic 100 individually to hear their concerns about issues such as independent contracting, worker's compensation reform, taxes and energy costs.

But Ramirez, a 36-year-old father and president of an Irvine accounting firm, insists that Hispanic 100 will not exist just to support Republicans. Instead, he says, candidates on the side of issues important to Latino businesses could gain support regardless of party. And the issues may be statewide, but could also be local, he said.

"When you bring 100 top Hispanics into the room, things happen," Ramirez said. "Money gets raised. People get elected. Issues get tackled."