

WALL STREET JOURNAL

RULING SETS OFF LATINO VOTE DRIVE IN ARIZONA

By Tamara Audi
June 26, 2012

PHOENIX – A day after the Supreme Court upheld a key provision of Arizona's tough immigration law, Democrats and immigrant advocates in the state seized the decision as an opportunity to encourage Latinos to register to vote and become politically involved.

On Monday, the Supreme Court struck down most provisions of SB1070, as the law is known. But it upheld a hotly contested part, which allows police to question people about their immigration status when they are stopped for other reasons.

Hours after the ruling, civic organizations were registering Latino voters at community forums and demonstrations against the law. Those efforts continued Tuesday with door-to-door registration. Activists said they plan a push to register Latino voters this week at community meetings focused on SB1070.

"Our community feels under attack," said Abigail Duarte, an organizer with the Phoenix office of Mi Familia Vota, an advocacy group. The organization has registered 1,300 new voters in the city since late April and sent volunteers door-to-door Tuesday. "It's an encouragement for our community to participate and change our representation," she said of the law.

Civic and Democratic groups have been registering Latino voters in Arizona for months, but say the high court's decision Monday is a boost to those efforts. Other analysts say because some consider the decision favorable to the Obama administration and immigrants, activists now face an uphill battle in motivating Latinos to participate.

Phoenix city council member Daniel Valenzuela, a Democrat, said the fact that the ruling is perceived as an overall victory for immigrants doesn't hurt political momentum among Latino voters. The ruling "lets people know we're being heard, and we just have to continue," he said.

Democrats say they hope their voter mobilization will tilt the conservative state before the presidential election in November. Key to that hope is registering many Latinos, who largely support President Barack Obama, polls show.

There are 1.1 million Latino citizens eligible to vote in Arizona, but only a little over 600,000 are registered, according to Matt Barreto, a pollster and co-founder of Latino Decisions, an independent political-research firm that focuses on Latinos.

The number of Democrats lags behind Republicans and independents among the state's 3.1 million registered voters. Moreover, the state's independents tend to favor GOP candidates.

Democratic groups and activist organizations have sent young Latino volunteers across the state to register Latino voters. The enthusiasm among young Latinos is a relatively new phenomenon, community leaders say. In addition, different Latino groups that worked on separate tracks are starting to coordinate. "We've learned to work together," said Petra

Falcon, executive director of Promise Arizona, an immigrant advocacy group. "That gives me great hope."

Mr. Valenzuela, who was elected last year after a surge of Latino voter registration in his district, said, "We're seeing a shift here in Arizona. It will make a difference, and it will make a difference for President Obama."

State Republicans dismissed the notion as farfetched. They said Latinos are socially conservative and often share Republican values, such as opposition to gay marriage.

"The political ramifications [of the Supreme Court ruling] remain to be seen" in Arizona, said Jennifer Sevilla Korn, executive director for Hispanic Leadership Network, a conservative political advocacy group, based in Washington, D.C. "I think it's cynical to say that Hispanics only care about immigration. I think it's an overreach to say that SB1070 is going to turn the state from red to blue."

Arizona has elected Republican presidents since 1952—except for 1996, when the state voted for President Bill Clinton.

"There are many citizens of Hispanic background that are in the conservative movement," said Maricopa County Republican Committee Chairman Rob Haney. If anything, Mr. Haney said, Monday's Supreme Court ruling has fired up Republicans. "This just cements in our minds that if [Mr. Obama] is not defeated then truly our Republic will end," Mr. Haney said.

Democrats have said in the past that "they're recruiting more Hispanics, but that vote has never materialized," Mr. Haney said.

Political analysts say the main challenge will be motivating the Latino community, which typically has low turnout, to vote. That could prove difficult if fears about SB1070 fade. Latino voters might choose not to go to the polls if the provision is overturned by legal challenges already under way.

Civic groups say engaging Latino voters on issues other than immigration is key to getting them involved. They also are encouraging Latinos to sign up for early voting by mail-in ballots.

At a Phoenix high school Monday night after the Supreme Court decision, dozens of young volunteers carrying clipboards walked up to immigrant families who gathered to meet for a community forum about the enforcement of SB1070.

"Are you registered to vote?" they asked, in English and in Spanish.