

Trump Makes Life Harder for Colorado and Nevada Senate Candidates

Large Latino populations make flipping those seats harder for Republicans

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Two western states with large Latino populations offered Republicans the best opportunity to flip Senate seats from blue to red.

But that was before Donald Trump.

He hasn't scuttled the GOP's planned offensives in Nevada and Colorado — but the presumptive GOP presidential nominee has made two difficult campaigns even harder.

That's because each state's Republican nominee will need to court Latino voters while running alongside a candidate who, according to polls, is deeply unpopular with Hispanic voters . And some of the party's deftest strategists acknowledge that that complication might be close to impossible to overcome.

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“You don't need to win the Hispanic vote in those states, but you need to be competitive,” said Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster who worked for Sen. Marco Rubio's presidential campaign.

The Republican candidates in each state needs to focus on local issues, of course. But how does a candidate do that?

“By continuing to reiterate that you are a very different person,” Ayres said. “You can't be for throwing 11 million Hispanics out of the country and hope to get any share of the Hispanic vote.”

Standing ‘on your own two feet’

Colorado, represented by Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet, and Nevada, represented by retiring Sen. Harry Reid, are the only two Democratic-held states that Republicans have seriously targeted this year.

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The Senate GOP is otherwise on the defensive, protecting vulnerable incumbents and open-state seats in places like Illinois, Wisconsin, and Florida.

Neither Nevada nor Colorado has had its congressional primary yet. In Nevada, GOP Rep. Joe Heck is expected to defeat a group of underfunded challengers, including 2010 nominee Sharron Angle.

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The field is more muddled in Colorado, where a handful of little-known Republican candidates are competing for the nomination.

But even as Republicans in both states fight one another, they’re aware of the general election challenge that Trump poses.

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“Our positions will not be dictated by Donald Trump,” said Dick Wadhams, campaign manager for Jack Graham, who’s vying for the GOP nod in Colorado.

That’s a common theme among down-ballot Republicans.

“I’m going to stand on my message,” said Robert Blaha, a businessman who also is running for the GOP nomination in Colorado.

“You have to stand on your own two feet,” Blaha said.

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He intends to reach out to the Hispanic community: “It’s maybe not a place Republicans have traditionally spent time, but I see it as a real opportunity. We’re very aligned on faith and family and on education.”

The Gardner model

For a Republican, Colorado Sen. Cory Gardner is credited with doing well with the Latino community. That's because of the respect he showed the community, said his 2014 campaign political director Steve Gordon.

Gardner adopted a "sincere approach of listening to their interests and their concerns and talking to them as citizens," Gordon said.

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Democrats see Trump's nomination as a boon for them in both Nevada and Colorado.

"In a way you don't have to say anything because he [Trump] said it all," said Rick Ridder, a Democratic strategist in Colorado.

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Not only will Trump turn off a sector of the electorate in Colorado and Nevada, Democrats say, but he is motivating more Hispanic voters to register and turn out to vote.

Democrats in Nevada are excited about the opportunity to elect the nation's first Latina senator — former Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto.

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It's "damn hard" for Republicans to win a state like Nevada with a minuscule proportion of the Latino vote, said Democratic pollster Mark Mellman. "It's not mathematically impossible but politically extra difficult."

Six Months to Go

Still, Republicans caution that the general election is six months away, and there's plenty of time for the dynamics to shift.

"This is one of those elections where what everyone knows for sure," Gordon said, "is that they don't know what they know for sure."

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Trump may still have time to make inroads with the Hispanic community, some Republicans said.

“We have to see what Trump does between now and the general election,” said Wadhams, the former chairman of the Colorado Republican party. “I think he has the opportunity to lay out an agenda to mitigate some of the damage that he did do with the Hispanic community earlier.”

In particular, Wadhams said, Trump could lay out an agenda that addresses jobs and education reform.

But it would be far harder for Trump to change his position on immigration.

“He’s got to come up up with a plan that deals with America’s labor needs and the 11 million here illegally,” Wadhams said.

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