

Forget Boulder—Republicans' Real Shot at the White House Is All About Pueblo

All eyes in the political world may be on Wednesday's debate, but the GOP's hopes for better Latino support are centered 150 miles to the south.



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PUEBLO, Colorado—When Republicans describe how they will rescue their standing with Latino voters in the 2016 presidential race, this is the place they point to.

This gritty old steel town never really recovered from the industry's crash in the early 1980s. It is older, less-educated, and significantly less well-off than the rest of Colorado. In a state where unemployment is near 4 percent, Pueblo is closer to 6 percent.

The town and its surrounding county is also a longtime Democratic stronghold, thanks largely to a big Hispanic population—43 percent, twice the average of Colorado as a whole. Yet in 2014's Senate race, it

gave Republican challenger Cory Gardner nearly as many votes as

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Democratic incumbent Mark Udall, contributing to Gardner's 2.5-point win statewide. Just two years earlier, Pueblo County had supported President Obama's reelection by a 13-point margin. Obama won all of Colorado by less than 5 percentage points.

Clarice Navarro, while thrilled with the outcome of that Senate race, is even more excited by what happened to the Republican National Committee's Hispanic outreach effort after the election was over: Nothing stopped, and—unlike in elections past—the outreach continued.

"I think we're going to see huge impacts because of this," she said. "They stayed engaged, they stayed strong."

If Pueblo is the sort of town that the RNC would like to showcase, Navarro is exactly the sort of Hispanic Republican that the party wants the country to know about. The daughter of a single mother, Navarro put herself through college, became a teacher, and in 2012 won a key seat in the Colorado House of Representatives, one that could easily have gone to Democrats following redistricting.

As a high school student two decades earlier, she tried out for and made the cheerleading squad—only to face the question from her mom about how she was going to pay for the uniform. "And I thought, 'Well, I guess I better find a job.'"

Her work at a nearby pickle factory paid for the cheerleading outfit, the senior portrait, and all the other things that wealthier students didn't have to worry about. "That job was really eye-opening for me," said Navarro, a mother herself now who lives with her family in an upscale Pueblo subdivision. "I learned about independence that year."

It's Navarro's story that the RNC hopes it can sell to other Latinos as it tries to improve its standing with them nationally. In 2012, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney won only 27 percent of the Latino vote. That showing was highlighted in the party's "autopsy" of the election, the Growth and Opportunity Project report, which recommended that the party actively engage with Latinos and other minorities, and not wait until just a few months before the 2016 election to do it.

And what's been happening in Pueblo since 2013 shows that the party is taking that recommendation seriously, said Jose Alanis, the RNC's on-the-ground staffer here who is ramping up the 2014 effort to elect Gardner into an even bigger 2016 push.

"We're building the long-lasting relationships with people in the community," he said.

Just this past weekend, Alanis said, 14 students from the Pueblo campus of Colorado State University walked neighborhoods, each matched up with an experienced volunteer from previous elections. It's a way to train a cadre of community activists to spread the party's message—with more than a year to go before the 2016 election. In all, they knocked on 400 doors in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods. "This is the proof that what we're doing is actually working," he said.

George Rivera, for one, is impressed. The chairman of the Pueblo County Republican Party was born and raised here, working 34 years for the Pueblo Police Department before retiring as deputy chief. He said the national party's sustained presence is going to be necessary for Republicans to have a chance at winning Colorado and its nine electoral votes a year from now. "There are no shortcuts to this. It's going to take a lot of effort," he said.

From a corner table at the Steel City Tavern, the club he once owned and where he still occasionally plays with his blues band, Rivera points to a flyer on the bulletin board advertising a watch party for the Republican debate in Boulder on Wednesday night—a social event that he hopes will get some non-Republicans interested.

"I was the first Republican in my family," he said, conceding that persuading Latinos seems particularly challenging. "To get someone to change their party? That's like getting someone to change their religion."

Still, Rivera said progress is coming—a view that Navarro shares. She described her own election to the Colorado House, seeing so many Latino Democrats in her own district. "Many times, when I was campaigning, I'd see people with signs saying 'Latinos for Obama,'" Navarro said. "I'd go up to them and say, 'I'm a Latina—will you help me?'"

To her surprise, she said, the answer was often yes, suggesting to her that Hispanic voters are open to supporting Republicans, after all. "We're on the verge," she said.

There is, though, one gloomy cloud that hangs over the sunny outlook that local Republicans like to project. And that cloud's name is Donald Trump.

When the months-long Republican presidential front-runner's name comes up, the smile on Navarro's face evaporates. She said she will not comment on Trump, and that, frankly, the presidential race is not at the top of her constituents' concerns. "Donald Trump is not on their radar at this point," he said.

Rivera similarly is not eager to discuss the developer-turned-reality-TV-star whose strident language about illegal immigrants and Mexico generally has earned him dismal poll numbers among Latinos nationally. Rivera points out that not a single caucus or primary has been held, and a lot could change in the coming three months. “We have a wait-and-see attitude,” he said of Trump. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

But even if Trump fades before long and Republicans never get to that bridge, there remains the broader question of whether Rivera and Navarro present a realistic model for large-scale GOP inroads into the Hispanic community.

Rivera’s family left Mexico three generations ago, and Navarro’s family has been in this country for five generations. The importance of overhauling the immigration system is not necessarily as pressing for such long-ago migrants as it for those who arrived one or two generations ago.

Pablo Manriquez of the Democratic National Committee said that no matter how good the Republican Party’s salesmanship becomes, no matter how much quality time and how much money they spend in Hispanic-heavy areas, they will have a hard time overcoming their party’s history in recent years.

“All that money is just not going to be enough to make Latinos forget that the Republican Party has been the principal antagonist of Latinos in this country for over a generation,” he said.

What’s more, while Republicans might hope that Trump will be a distant memory a year from now, Hispanic voters were not likely to forget how much noise he made and how popular he was with Republican primary voters. “Hispanics aren’t seeing on the Republican side the willingness to stand up to a bully. How can we expect them to advance our interests?” Manriquez said.

RNC officials, for their part, say they are building bridges for election cycles to come, not just in 2016, and not just in Colorado. Pockets of what they consider “persuadable” Latino voters in New Mexico, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Florida are also seeing intensive outreach efforts.

Alanis said that while the news media and Democrats are fixated on Trump, the typical voter he talks to is not. “People are just excited that we have such a huge and diverse field of candidates,” he said. “That’s really what their focus is.”

Pueblo County GOP chairman Rivera said the problem he faces in his day-to-day work to persuade others to join the Republican fold is not Trump, but the much longer-lived presumption that the party is run by and and works for white people

and works for rich white people.

"Do I look rich? Do I look white?" Rivera asked with a shrug. "We're still battling that image. I know that. It's not going to change overnight. But we're in this for the long haul."



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