

AL DÍA, Feb. 27 2012

MESA, Arizona — If there's anything to take away from the Republican Presidential primary debate staged here Feb. 22, it is that Arizona is on the precipice of shifting from a traditionally red — conservative Republican — state to a battleground one, with the Latino vote as the crucial ingredient.

While the results of the Feb. 28 GOP primaries here in Arizona and in Michigan have yet to play out, Francisco Heredia, director of Mi Familia Vota Arizona, vouches, "This year is shaping up to be one where Latinos can show our political strength."

In Arizona?

Yes, in Arizona

Hispanic political involvement in here is increasing as dramatically, maybe even more, than its population is surging.

Three years ago, GOP presidential candidate John McCain, Arizona's senior senator, outpolled Barack Obama here by eight points, 53 percent-45 percent. A Public Policy Polling survey released Feb. 22 showed Obama's reelection prospects to be improving in recent months. He runs virtually even when pitted against any of his potential Republican opponents.

The pro-Obama turnout of Latino voters, which could run as high as 2-1 in this swing state, could well decide the White House winner.

Latinos now comprise as many as 17 percent of the state's 3 million registered voters.

Heredia pinpointed for *Al DÍA* the catalyst cause of the spiraling Latino political engagement as Gov. Jan Brewer's signature nearly two years ago on anti-

immigrant law SB1070.

His message to both parties is to be prepared to discuss, without equivocation, their support for immigration reform and the DREAM-Act.

Heredia added the caveat that if Latinos want to have lasting influence that will not just tip one election but change the state's political pyramid, they need to mobilize and become at least 20 percent of the state's registered and active political machinery.

Dreamers

Prior to the debate, DREAM Act-eligible youth joined a few hundreds others outside the Mesa Art Center from both sides of the political spectrum. Some carried signs supporting one of the four in favor of the candidates while others in opposition. But like tailgating before a big sporting event, all were filled with high expectations.

Dreamers chanted and carried a large banner that read: "Dream Act Now" along with posters calling to "Veto Romney not the Dream Act."

Advocating for the Arizona Dreamers was longtime civil and labor rights activist Dolores Huerta.

"I wanted to support the Dreamers, especially here in Arizona where Romney's message is very anti-immigrant," Huerta commented.

The Debate

The Republican debate here came and went offering spasms of nativist noise but nothing in the way of resolution.

Once the debate began, it focused on topics such as what to do with the growing nuclear threat in Iran, the economy and immigration.

But while Republican candidates Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum and Ron Paul spoke about most of these topics at great length, immigration and the DREAM-Act were both snubbed says Arizona DREAM-Act Coalition's president, Dulce Matuz.

"Unfortunately the candidates did not give good solutions for immigration and the DREAM-Act," she said in Spanish.

Matuz, who came to the United States at 15 from Sonora, Mexico, said they were expecting more from the candidates, but they failed to deliver and instead played it safe.

Candidates Vs. Obama

But playing it safe may not be a winning formula in Arizona. The Public Policy Polling survey shows President Obama breaking even with Romney, both projected to get 47 percent of the state's votes.

Obama is projected to have a lead over Gingrich and Paul of 48 percent over 44 percent and 46 percent over 42 percent respectively.

The only candidate in Public Policy Polling survey projected to beat Obama is Santorum. The polling shows the former Pennsylvania Senator squeezing out a 47 percent to 46 percent victory over the incumbent president.

Arizona State Sen. Rubén Gallego (D-Phoenix) said that the rift between Republicans on immigration and the DREAM-Act ultimately favors Obama.

Gallego argues that with Romney, the candidate he says he expects to win the

GOP's nomination, favoring a "self-deportation" policy and Gingrich being the only one out of the four candidates showing favorable support toward immigration reform and the DREAM-Act, the gap for a GOP consensus is too big to bridge, leaving Obama as the ultimate beneficiary.

"The harsher the rhetoric becomes [on immigration], the more Latinos depart," said Gallego.

The democratic senator also said that the failure to reach a general consensus on what to do with immigration and how to capture the Latino vote is due in part, because Republicans are trying to "get the best of both worlds."

Gallego asserts that to appease the woes of the middle class due to an ailing economy, GOP candidates tend to shift the blame on undocumented immigrants.

However, Gallego added that while the economy continues to struggle, it has seen some improvement in recent months under the current administration.

This, Gallego says, plays to Obama's advantage in a general election. And if the GOP plans to win states such as Arizona where the Latino population has grown by 46 percent since the 2000 Census, Republicans need to drop the rhetoric.

"The Latino population could be a determining factor," Gallego said. "If we can mobilize the Latino registered voters we can shift a win to the President's column."