

# DESERET Morning News

## A Hispanic cleric criticizes Romney's stance on illegals

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A Hispanic Evangelical leader says Mitt Romney's hard-line stance on illegal immigration has forced other presidential candidates to take a harder line and will make it harder for Republican candidates to court Hispanic voters.

The Rev. Luis Cortes, president of the Evangelical group Esperanza USA and a member of the multi-denominational Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, said U.S. citizen Hispanics see the increasingly heated rhetoric among presidential candidates against illegal immigration as anti-Hispanic. And he says Romney is the candidate who's fueling the fire.

"He attacks other candidates as being soft," Rev. Cortes said. "I think it's going to be the key reason he's going to lose every Hispanic vote if he makes it as ... the Republican candidate."

But Alex Burgos, a campaign spokesman for the former Massachusetts governor, says Romney has repeatedly expressed his admiration for Hispanic Americans and has stressed the value of legal immigration.

"It would be a gross mischaracterization to label someone as anti-Hispanic for believing that our nation's laws should be respected and enforced," Burgos said.

Polls have shown Romney is the leading candidate among Utah voters, who know him from his leadership of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. He also shares the state's majority LDS faith.

Burgos said Romney has advocated the expansion of some visa programs, in addition to curbing illegal immigration through securing the border and creating a workable employment verification system. And two members of Romney's advisory National Hispanic Steering Committee are from Utah.

"What Gov. Romney has said time and time again is the current immigration system is broken in many respects," Burgos said. "His views are grounded in a respect for legal immigration and an interest in enforcing the laws to strengthen the legal immigration system in this country."

Rev. Cortes cited Romney's attack on another GOP candidate, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, for his support of in-state tuition and public scholarships for undocumented college students as alienating Hispanic voters from the GOP.

Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah and a Romney supporter, has in the past spoken in favor of a Utah law that provides some undocumented college students in-state tuition.

"Romney at his core is a brilliant problem solver, and I have a lot of faith in his ability to look at all sides of the issue and ultimately come up with a, perhaps, out-of-the-box solution that will deal wisely and compassionately with everyone involved," Jowers said.

But Sylvia Haro, chair of the Utah Republican Hispanic Assembly, said when it comes to immigration, Romney's views "definitely don't go along with Hispanics."

When asked if she'd vote for Romney if he were the GOP nominee next November, Haro replied: "That would put me in a really hard position. I'm very much a Republican. At the same time I look at the candidate."

Rev. Cortes' remarks to the Deseret Morning News came after a national telephone conference in which

he was among members of Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform who are concerned about what they see as a hateful tone to the immigration debate.

He pointed to a Pew Hispanic poll of 843 Hispanic registered voters taken from Oct. 3 to Nov. 9. In the poll, Romney placed last among Hispanic GOP voters, with only 4 percent of the vote. Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was first with 35 percent.

"People know that we've become the bogeymen," Rev. Cortes said. "But if you look at it, the fire is being flamed and is being stoked by Mitt Romney."

However, the Pew poll shows that while Hispanics could be a major factor in some states such as New Mexico, where 37 percent of eligible voters are Hispanic, it's unclear how much of a factor Republican immigration politics will play.

The poll found a majority of Hispanics are Democrats, and while 79 percent of Hispanic voters view immigration as "extremely" or "very important," the issue still ranks behind education, health care, the economy and crime. And not all Hispanics agree with Rev. Cortes. A separate Pew poll found that while Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanics to disapprove of specific enforcement measures, nearly 33 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics agreed with work-site enforcement.

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