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NATIONAL AFFAIRS

CAMPAIGN 2000

But Where's the Salsa?

Bush and Gore will spend record sums to woo the Latino vote—with very different ad campaigns

BY ARIAN CAMPO-FLORES

TO GET A FEEL FOR THE cozy rapport between George W. Bush and the Latino community, says adman Lionel Sosa, watch this. He pops in a tape of TV spots his team has produced for the Bush campaign, leans back and exults in the cheery images and melodic soundtrack. Bush lifts up a little girl in a colorful Mexican dress and gives her a peck on the lips. A young Latino kid rushes up to the governor and high-fives him. A woman built like a tank hugs Bush with such gusto that she nearly tears his head off. “See that spot there,” says Sosa. “Did it talk about issues? ... *Nada.*” In other words, personality, not policy, is the key to Latino hearts—and votes.

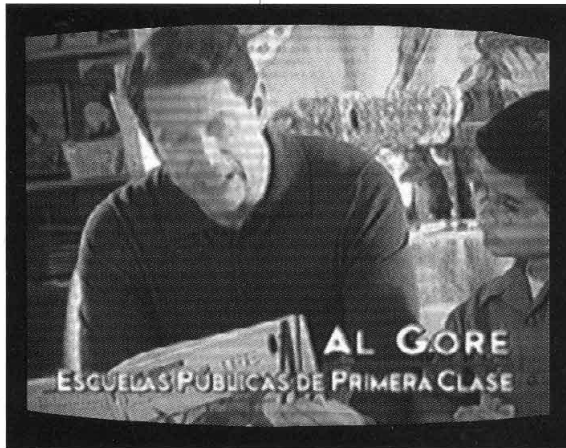
Try telling that to Al Gore. In his Latino ads, Gore puts the issues front and center. Yes, he cradles a baby, but with a voice-over promising child care. He also chats with an elderly Latina woman (Social Security), strolls beside a doctor (Medicare) and reads with a little Latino boy (first-rate schools). Pretty dry stuff. But Latinos, predicts Democratic ad maker Armando Gutiérrez, will ultimately respond to issues, not mushy images. Bush can't run on substance, Gutiérrez chides. “It's like selling Marlboro cigarettes or Firestone tires.”

Who has the better strategy? Both camps agree on one point: the winner of the Latino ad wars will take home a bigger-than-ever prize. The candidates are fighting over nearly 8 million registered voters, many of them young and up for grabs politically, concentrated in states rich with electoral votes. In key battlegrounds like Florida, Illinois and New Jersey, Latinos could prove decisive come November. So Bush and Gore are prepared to spend up to \$10 million each—far more than ever before—on Latino ads. “This is the first



LATIN LINGO: Some wonder if Gore's stress on issues—*en español*—will translate into Hispanic votes

FEEL THE LOVE: In Bush's ads, he bonds with Latinos and hopes to show that not all Republicans are scary



time, certainly at the national level, where you're going to have both sides aggressively going after this community,” says Gutiérrez, 52. Both candidates are going all out to show they're attuned to Hispanic culture and Hispanic needs. And, of course, they're brushing off their Spanish phrase books and unleashing sometimes excruciating verbal displays—Bush furrowing his brow as he tries to roll his R's and Gore

fastidiously laboring over every consonant.

Bush has reason to trust Sosa's decision to keep the ads warm and bubbly. The guru of Hispanic advertising, Sosa, 61, has been selling Latinos for decades on everything from Coca-Cola to Ronald Reagan. Two years ago he helped Bush capture roughly half of the Hispanic vote in Texas—a huge victory for a Republican. As Kathy Sosa, Lionel's wife and business partner, summarizes the gist of their ads: “If you got a chance to meet George W. Bush, this is how it might feel.” Sosa's team has also made extensive use of Bush's heartthrob nephew George P. They've cut eight ads featuring him, all dimples and hair gel, invoking his Hispanic roots in a less grating (but still imperfect) Spanish. The point of all this: to portray Bush as a different breed of Republican, one who embraces multiculturalism. Sosa “doesn't try to make Latinos Republican,” says Andy Hernández, coauthor of *The Almanac of Latino Politics 2000*. “He tries to make Latinos comfortable with Republicans.”

That's making some Latino Democrats uncomfortable. They think the Gore media effort could use some luster; in private meetings at the Democratic convention, some strategists complained that the campaign wasn't supporting a more sophisticated ad push. “It's canned footage, no creativity, the kind of spots you change the channel on,” says Antonio González of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. “If you look at the Bush side, they're gorgeous.”

The ad wars are just revving up. So far, Gutiérrez has produced three spots and Sosa 10; but only a few of these have run and only in select states, such as Florida, Illinois and New York. Future media buys will be dictated by the polls. Wherever the race is tight and Latinos color the landscape, expect to see Gore and Bush making their appeals *en español*. Gone are the days when Republicans ignored Hispanics and Democrats could take them for granted. “We want 50 percent,” says Sosa. “And by 2012 and 2016, we better be getting it, or we'll be the minority party forever.” That competitive drive—by both parties—means that Latino voters have already won. ■