

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON

SPEAKER:

JANET MURGUIA, PRESIDENT AND CEO, THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA

SUBJECT:

THE GALVANIZING EFFECT OF THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE ON LATINO VOTERS

MODERATOR: SYLVIA SMITH, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MS. SMITH: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Sylvia Smith. I'm the Washington editor of the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette and the president of the National Press Club. I'd like to welcome club members and their guests, as well as those of you who are watching on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterward I'll ask as many questions from the audience as time permits.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called.

From your right, Rodrigo Valderrama (sp), a freelance journalist; Ivan Roman, executive director of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists; Carl Leubsdorf, the bureau chief of the Dallas Morning News; Marilou Donahue, a producer and editor of Artistically Speaking; and Jorge Plasencia, who is a member of the National Council of La Raza's board.

Skipping over the podium for a moment, Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg News and chairwoman of the Press Club's Speakers Committee. And skipping over our speaker, Barbara Reynolds, a member of the Speakers Committee and the person who organized today's luncheon -- thank you, Barbara; Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; Shawn Bullard of the Duetto group; Keith Hill, a reporter/editor for BNA and chairman of the National Press Club board of governors; and Charlie Erickson of Hispanic Link News Service. (Applause.)

MR. : (Off mike.) (Laughter.)

MS. SMITH: If we needed any evidence of the potency of immigration in the presidential election, we got it aplenty after Barack Obama's recent remarks about what makes chronically underemployed people bitter. He said people whose jobs have evaporated sometimes cling to the anti-immigration sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustration. Obama might have been taken aback by the reaction of those remarks, but our speaker no doubt saw it coming.

When Janet Murguia became president of the National Council of La Raza a little more than three years ago, she assumed the leadership of a civil rights organization that is deeply involved in immigration and, by definition in our current society, in controversy. As the country debates border fences, guest worker programs, or "send them all back home," La Raza has worked for a seat at the table. The organization supported a compromise bill that included a path to citizenship for some, but not all. illegal immigrants. As a result, some within the organization's constituency called La Raza a Trojan horse for corporate America in the Latino community.

It's the kind of political jousting that Murguia has often seen in nearly 20 years of working in Washington politics. Her first exposure was as an aide to a Kansas congressman, then as a member of the Clinton administration, and then as a member of the Gore-Lieberman campaign's inner circle. She jumped to academe -- the University of Kansas, her alma mater -- before returning to DC as the president of La Raza in 2005.

La Raza and other organizations that represent Hispanics have special attention this year because of the pivotal role Latino voters have played this far in the Democratic presidential nominating process. The Pew Hispanic Center found that of the Democratic primaries and caucuses held through March, Latinos' share of the vote

rose in 16 of those 19 states for which exit polling allows a comparison between 2004 and 2008. The same report showed a dramatic preference among Latino Democrats for Hillary Clinton. In the states where Latino voters made up at least 10 percent of the Democratic turnout, Clinton out-pollled Obama at least two to one in all but two states. In some of those states, particularly the critical California and Texas primaries, Clinton would have lost had it not been for the Latino votes she received.

We invited Murguia today to offer her insights on immigration as an issue in the presidential campaign and her thoughts on how the

Latino community will likely parse, both in the remaining Democratic primaries and in the fall races. Please help me welcome to the National Press Club podium the president and CEO of The National Council of La Raza, Janet Murguia. (Applause.)

MS. MURGUIA: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you, Sylvia, for that very kind introduction. This is a privilege and an honor for me to be here today. This is a first for NCLR and it's a first for me. I can't think of a more important time to be at the helm of NCLR, for our community and for our country.

Let me start by telling some of you in case you missed it that NCLR is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. We were founded in 1968, and so are now celebrating our 40th anniversary. We are proud to be an American institution whose mission is to create opportunities for the 45 million Hispanics in the U.S. Together with our nearly 300 local affiliates across the country, NCLR works to improve the lives of Hispanics in five key areas: asset building, civil rights, education, employment, and health. The Nonprofit Times has named us among the top 50 leaders shaping the nonprofit world, and we have been singled out in the recent new book focusing on high-impact nonprofits, called "Forces for Good." Our work has been honored by the U.S. surgeon general, and our former CEO and our current board chair have both earned the prestigious Hubert H. Humphrey Civil Rights Award by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Ordinarily I would take the honor of speaking before the National Press Club as an opportunity to talk about NCLR's work in helping 23,000 low-income Hispanic families purchase their first home. I would talk about how we are helping keeping those folks in their homes despite the unfolding housing and foreclosure crisis. Perhaps I would talk about NCLR's recent efforts to build a network of charter schools that serve some 25,000 students, or a system of health care clinics that serve another 85,000 families. Maybe I would talk about our role in public policy achievements, including the expansion of the earned income tax credit or creating the refundable child tax credit that together lift more than 2 million Hispanic families out of poverty every year.

These days, however, only one of our issues seems to capture the attention of the media. Only one of our issues seems to resonate with elected officials. Only one of our issues seems to matter to the general public. I'm speaking, of course, about immigration.

Since the defeat of comprehensive immigration reform last year, conventional wisdom has touted immigration as the wedge issue of the 2008 election. It overwhelmed the presidential primary debates and has been the focal point for many of the subsequent off-year and special elections. And despite the repeated repudiation of candidates at the national level who espouse the harshest rhetoric, conventional wisdom continues to lead candidates to demagogue this issue down-ticket in congressional, state and local races.

I come here today out of concern. I believe that as a nation we are fast approaching a turning point. What started out as a public

policy debate last spring is on the verge of becoming one of the largest civil rights issues of our generation. The demonizing rhetoric that surrounds this issue, the hate groups and vigilantes who promote it, the politicians and the media who embrace it, and the passivity of those listening who should stop it, shame our great country. It should shame all of us.

Just last week an editorial in Investors Business Daily made the absurd claim that there's a real movement out there that feels our southwest is occupied Mexico. It went on to make the ridiculous assertion that NCLR is a key player in this alleged movement.

The night before CBS and Katie Couric -- Katie Couric! -- (laughter) -- did an expose entitled "Illegal Immigrant Births at Your Expense" and showed a member of Congress challenging the 14th amendment. Fine, but there was no opposing point of view, no second opinion.

This kind of lopsided viewpoint seeks to the level of demagoguery often seen on cable television news and talk radio. But Investors Business Daily, CBS, Katie Couric! (Laughter.) Is no one above exploiting this issue?

As a nation of immigrants, we have struggled with the demonization of others in our past. The choices we have made have not always lived up to the ideals that make this country great. We have not always listened to the better angels of our nature.

Every major civil rights abuse in our nation's history has been preceded by the vilification and scapegoating of a single group. Ask the native peoples who occupied this continent. Ask the Africans were brought here in chains. Ask the Chinese immigrants who built our railroads. Ask the Irish immigrants who "needed not apply". Ask the Japanese Americans who were put in internment camps. And ask the Germans, the Italian and the Jewish immigrants, who repeatedly suffered discrimination at the turn of the last century from people who called themselves patriots.

We struggled with immigration then and we are struggling now. Voices better left on the fringe of political discourse have moved front and center to define the debate. Their harsh rhetoric has filled the immigration debate with code words that demonize and dehumanize not just immigrants, but all Latinos as a threat to the American way of life. They depict us as an army of invaders. They call us a swarm, a massive horde. They say that we bring disease and crime to our country. But worse yet, they've had a helping hand from the media.

A cursory review of network listings shows that spokespeople from hate groups and vigilantes -- such as FAIR and the Minutemen -- have appeared at least 120 times on cable network news programming over the last three years. That doesn't count print. That doesn't count local television. That doesn't count radio. Rarely is their background explored or challenged. Rarely do they appear with an opposing point of view. And if that wasn't damning enough, many of the media's talk show hosts and commentators parrot their hate speech on air.

As an organization, NCLR has tried to draw back the curtain to expose those hate groups and extremists, pulling the levers and turning the wheels. With the launch of our campaign and website, wecanstopthehate.org, we have challenged the cable television news networks for putting hate groups and vigilantes on the air as immigration experts. It's like having David Duke on television as an expert on affirmative action.

You know, we're using this campaign to educate the public about hate groups, about hate speech and its consequences, because we know that words do have consequences and hateful words have hateful consequences. Log onto YouTube or Google or any major television -- any major newspaper or television, website -- and type in the word "immigration". The posts following any video or article are often so ugly they will turn your stomach. It's no surprise that hate crimes against Latinos are up 35 percent over the past four years. Hate groups targeting Latinos are up 48 percent since the year 2000.

Two-thirds of Latinos say that the failure of the immigration bill has made life more difficult for Latinos overall. And roughly half say that it has affected them personally. But our detractors say, "We aren't talking about immigrants. We love immigrants. We're only talking about illegal immigrants."

But most Latinos aren't immigrants -- but you can't tell just by looking at us. More than 80 percent of Hispanics in this country are U.S. citizens or legal residents. But the truth is, Hispanics understand that this issue is about all of us. When demonstrators in Arizona put on surgical masks whenever a Latino walks by because they think we carry tuberculosis, it's personal. When Lou Dobbs trumps up false statistics tying immigrants to a steep rise in leprosy, it's personal. When your 10-year-old nephew, who was born in Kansas and a second generation American, is told by a schoolmate -- 10-years old -- "Mexicans are stupid and I think you should go back to Mexico" it's personal. When friends and neighbors get pulled over and asked for immigration papers and sometimes are detained for hours -- even though their families have been in this country for generations -- it's personal.

And you don't have to be an immigrant to be horrified that 13,000 American children have been separated from a parent by immigration raids. You don't have to be an immigrant to know that those shouting amnesty have left mass deportation as the only solution remaining on the table.

How much will it cost to deport 12 million people? How many additional police will we need? How many federal judges, prisons and federal courts? How many U.S. citizens of color or with an accent will be picked up in such a massive sweep? How many boxcars will it take to move them to our borders?

You don't have to be an immigrant to know that such solutions are really not solutions. Perhaps some of those crying loudest about amnesty really don't want a solution at all, which brings me back to immigration as the campaign wedge issue for 2008.

Four months ago, conventional wisdom pushed Rudy Giuliani and

Mitt Romney to spar on national television over who was tougher on undocumented immigrants -- a moment so captivating that even Tom Tancredo stood back with pride and said they were trying to "out Tom Tancredo, Tom Tancredo."

Three months ago, conventional wisdom led 49 Democrats to support a deportation-only bill in fear of what Rahm Emanuel called "The third rail of American politics."

Two months ago, conventional wisdom held that immigration would be the winning issue in the special election being held in Illinois. But what do the results show? The results show that such conventional wisdom could not have been more misguided. Anti-immigration campaigns have for the most part failed. Immigration as a wedge issue does not deliver the votes. Most of those running anti-immigration campaigns lost their elections in 2006 and 2007. The presidential candidates who adopted hard-line positions on immigration have all been pushed out of the race.

Just recently, a safe Republican district in Illinois went to Democrat Bill Foster over his opponent Jim Oberweis, who mounted a largely anti-immigrant campaign. His loss prompted John McCain to caution his own party: "We just had a loss of Denny Hastert's seat," he said. "The Republican candidate had very strong anti-immigrant rhetoric. So I would hope that many of our Republican candidates would understand the political practicalities of this issue."

So clearly, when it comes to immigration, conventional wisdom has gotten it wrong. Simply put -- as we say in Kansas -- that dog won't hunt. Why is it, then, that one month ago -- after Senator McCain has secured the nomination -- conventional wisdom prompted a group of Republican senators to introduce a raft of punitive immigration bills in the Senate? Why is it that another group in the House has sought to resurrect the Schuler-Tancredo deportation-only legislation?

Why is it that 1,400 state and local initiatives have been introduced in the last year, compared to 1,300 in the last 10 years? The answer is all of these actions are clearly designed to exploit the issue for the elections this fall. All of these initiatives do not account, though, for one simple dynamic. This issue not only fails to move the general public, it galvanizes the Latino vote. It's easy to understand how this could happen. The best political teams on television have so few Latinos in front of the cameras, who could know how Latinos might react?

Make no mistake, the Latino vote matters. And after this election, it will matter more. Latinos were the deciding factor in the Florida primary for John McCain. They helped him take the lead amongst Republicans. He won 54 percent of the Latino vote in a crowded field. Hispanics were the decisive factor for Hillary Clinton in New York and California, and gave her new life in her candidacy in the Texas primary. She carried approximately two-thirds of the Hispanic vote in that state. In 1996, 4.9 million Hispanics voted. In 2008, with an energized electorate, that number could double to 10 million. More importantly, Hispanics constitute a large share of the electorate in four states that President Bush carried by margins of five percentage points or less -- New Mexico, Florida, Nevada and

Colorado. We know that the Latino vote will be the deciding factor in who is elected president this November.

Given the importance of this election at all levels, we have launched several new major initiatives to improve Latino participation in this year's election, including our partnerships with Democracia USA and the Ya es hora campaign -- all designed to further engage the Latinos in this election year. Just as Latinos have had a significant role in selecting the candidates for president in both parties, we hope to elect a Senate, a House, state governors and legislators who will show courage and leadership in taking hate out of the debate. Hispanic voters have spoken loudly and clearly that we will not be demonized, we will not be scapegoated and we will not be ignored.

But we cannot and should not do it alone. Poll after poll shows that Americans favor solutions that require people to come out of the shadows, require them to pay a fine for entering this country without documents and require them to learn English and pay taxes in order to become citizens. Those American voices, however, are being drowned out by a small but extremely vocal and persistent grassroots network. In short, there is a bully in the room and all of us need to stand up to him if we are going to live up to this country's best ideals and aspirations.

Two years ago, the Latino community helped some of the largest peaceful demonstrations in U.S. history. To our community, it proved that each of us is not alone. It gave us confidence to stand up to the voices of hate. It gave us hope. But this time, there's only one march that will truly empower our community. There's only one march that will demonstrate our clout. There's only one march that will speak louder than all the voices of hate that are mobilized against us. Our next march is to the voting booth this November. I ask all Americans to join us in that march this year to oppose the voices of hate, to reject the politics of division and to support those who are serious about finding legitimate issues to this complex problem.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MS. SMITH: Thank you so much.

You had some harsh words for the media there. (Laughter.) Are you suggesting the media -- and can we just take out talk-shows hosts and commentators for a moment -- should not quote or interview organizations and people who have a diametrically opposed view to you? And as a corollary, how do you take hate out of the debate?

MS. MURGUIA: Sure. We're not saying that. We can have an honest difference on immigration policy and we welcome that debate. This is not about people who have a different view on immigration. We know this is a complex issue and it's going to require different points of views coming together and resolving that. This is, though, about representatives of hate groups as designated by -- not by us, but by organizations that have a long history of designating hate groups and hate speech. And it's questioning the judgment and the journalistic integrity of those cable news programs that suggest that somehow it's appropriate to put someone who represents a hate group on the air and tout them as an expert on immigration. That is not

journalistic integrity and it requires more context, I think, for viewers and readers to understand that.

MS. SMITH: Another point you made is that immigration is used as a wedge issue in this campaign and that the media is focusing on that perhaps in an inappropriate way. What would you suggest to those of us who wrote for markets that our own polling shows that the community itself is very interested or concerned in one way or another about immigration? Do you think we should not write about it or if we do, in what context?

MS. MURGUIA: Well, of course. We need to discuss this issue. But we need to take that hate out of the debate and what I mean by that is when we can show -- again, the ADL -- Anti-Defamation League -- has a long record of defining and designating what hate speech is. And when they talk about these code words of hate and how they can enter own mainstream -- when you start demonizing and dehumanizing a segment of our society and inculcating the mainstream with those words, it has an impact.

And let me just remind you that hate words are correlated to the increase in these hate crimes that we have seen occur. And we've seen really high rates occur in the last four years and at the same time when we've seen this rhetoric become so extreme, we've seen a correlation in the rise of hate groups targeted at Latinos and in the rise of hate crimes targeted at Latinos. So I want to be clear about making the distinction again about the difference between having an honest dialogue and differences of opinion on immigration reform. But when individuals or spokespeople represent hate groups and are touted as immigration experts, that's a different story and we need to expose that so that those words will not take center stage and enter into a mindset of our society that we know will then demonize and dehumanize that segment of that society.

So I do think that it's important for us to just be vigilant in understanding how those words can have consequences and when representatives of groups that are designated as hate groups -- I think that we need to make sure that those individuals are not touted as immigration experts. There's a real distinction there.
(Applause.)

MS. SMITH: In an ideal world, what would an immigration bill look like? And are you saying that the U.S. border should be completely open to anybody who wants to immigrate?

MS. MURGUIA: Let me be clear about that. I'm going to answer the second part first.

We support securing our borders in this country. There's no disagreement on that. We as an organization, and Latinos as represented in this society, understand that we must have secure borders, particularly in a post-9/11 world. And enforcement needs to be part of a comprehensive immigration reform approach. It absolutely needs to be part of that.

And you're talking about border enforcement, you're talking about interior enforcement. We have supported legislation that has included

enforcement measures in it, so let me be clear.

But the issues isn't whether we should secure our borders; it's how we should secure our borders. And we need to do it in a way that's workable, effective, orderly, and fair. And we have to do that as part of a comprehensive immigration reform effort.

We can talk about, again, enforcement measures, both on the border and interior enforcement measures. But it's really important that we get it right and that we exercise good judgment in how we're dealing with precious resources and how they're going into securing those borders and making sure it's very strategic. They have to be practical and workable solutions.

But a comprehensive reform bill should include enforcement. It also, though, needs to include dealing with the 12 million undocumented individuals who are in this country, and we need to deal with the future flow of workers. So we need provisions that will deal with those three areas in order for this to work.

You can't do immigration reform in a piecemeal way. And part of the problem that we're seeing occurring out there across the country is because there's been a failure of leadership at the national level, because there's been a failure to address this issue at the federal level -- and this does require federal oversight and jurisdiction -- we're seeing now local ordinances and statewide ordinances trying to do this.

They're not equipped; they're not trained. They don't have the right ability. They don't have the ability to be able to do this. But of course they're frustrated; we're all frustrated.

We want a solution to this problem, but it does require a comprehensive solution. And I think that the majority of Americans understand that you can't restore the rule of law without dealing with the 12 million undocumented who are out there. (Applause.)

MS. SMITH: Do you believe that public opinion is growing or falling for the wall? Increasingly we hear it referred to as the "height of folly."

MS. MURGUIA: As I mentioned earlier, we understand that we have to have enforcement on our borders, that there needs to be a secure border. But it's really about not whether we do it, it's how we do it. And there's -- you just need to listen to the border governors.

Listen to the border governors in Arizona and New Mexico, Governor Napolitano and Bill Richardson, who will tell you that for every 10-foot wall that's built, there's an 11-foot fence that will be built -- an 11-foot ladder that will be built for that.

Look, we need to use our resources, which are precious and limited, in a way that's most strategic. Even border enforcement personnel will tell you that they would rather see those resources used on better technology and better training where they can target in a more strategic way where there are vulnerable gaps on the border. So we need to be smart about how we use our resources, and ultimately

do what is most effective.

There's too much grandstanding around trying to be strong and tough on enforcement. That grandstanding is something I think that is wearing thin with the American public. They want reasonable, practical solutions to this problem, and they're hungry for leadership at the federal level on this issue.

MS. SMITH: So I'll jump ahead a bit. Who offers that leadership, of the three people who are running for the nomination? (Laughter.) You walked right into it. (Laughs.)

(Pause, laughter.)

MS. MURGUIA: Look -- (Laughter.) Now, it's a fair question. I want to be clear and say that NCLR, as a nonpartisan organization, does not endorse candidates. But it's fair for us to talk about the issue and see which of the candidates is responding with the most responsible approach.

And I think it's fair to say that -- and as I refer to in my speech, that we have seen a lot of the candidates who had been demagoguing this issue who have now been pushed out of this race.

I think it's not a coincidence that now the three that are in the race so far have all embraced comprehensive immigration reform. And we've got to see -- I think there is some interest in seeing Senator McCain and how he walks a very difficult tightrope. He is someone who has supported comprehensive immigration reform, offered the McCain-Kennedy bill that was a comprehensive approach.

He has made some comments since then that indicate that it's not clear exactly how he's going to deal with immigration overall. He said something about perhaps using -- doing steps to do enforcement first, or -- but I think we need to hear more from him on that.

The one thing I will say about Senator McCain is that he has consistently taken a principled position when it comes to dealing with the 12 million who are undocumented. And we appreciate that, because as I mentioned before, I don't think we can have a solution without dealing with that segment.

I think Senator Clinton and Senator Obama have also embraced a comprehensive immigration reform approach to this, and so in many respects, I think it's how we see them emerge, and making this issue a priority, to deal with it, once any of these individuals become president.

I think it's going to be really important that they make a commitment to ensuring that it is a priority early in their administration. And we're going to be asking our community to challenge all of the candidates, people on both sides of the aisle, with these questions and fleshing out further how they would deal with this issue.

But I think we can say that all three appear to have taken

comprehensive immigration reform approaches, and we would want to sort of flesh out from them further how they would do it. But I think the important thing is to get a strong commitment from each of them that they would make this issue a top priority in -- early in their administration.

MS. SMITH: An eloquent introduction to finishing the answer.
(Laughter.)

MS. MURGUIA: Sure.

MS. SMITH: No, do you -- of the three, is there one -- (laughter) -- who has indicated a top -- that it would be a top priority in his or her administration?

MS. MURGUIA: Well, I think all three have said it's very important. I think they have used the word "priority." But for many, I think -- in our community -- there is a sense of urgency around this, not just because the system is broken and needs to be fixed.

I'll give you an example. Every piece of legislation that's coming through Congress, almost every piece of legislation, you can just wait till the amendments come through. Every one of them is being -- on every piece of major legislation, doesn't have to be on immigration -- all these amendments are coming through where they're

trying to double and triple and quadruple the ways that we're making sure that undocumented immigrants are benefiting from some part of this legislation.

It has really caused a bottleneck for so much of the thoughtful discourse that needs to occur on these issues outside of immigration. So until we deal with this issue --

You know, everybody understands we want to deal with health -- access to health and health care reform. Can you imagine if that bill were to come -- if we were able to have a historic effort to deal with health reform and immigration is still not resolved, and we're trying to figure out which of those areas are going to be pertaining to immigrants and undocumented immigrants.

Look, we have to deal with this issue, because it seems to affect so many other pieces of legislation.

And I think all of them, all of the candidates, understand that it's a priority, but I think we need to flesh out still further which would certainly make it a top priority in their administration.

MS. SMITH: Senator Clinton, as the statistics show, has really been the beneficiary of a huge outpouring of Democratic Latino votes in the primaries that we've had so far. Are those people, do you think, voting on the basis of immigration, or are they looking at her in a different context? In other words, are they -- do they evaluate her as the best of the three?

MS. MURGUIA: It's a good question, and I also want to use it as an opportunity to say immigration is an issue that cuts across the

Hispanic community. And I tried to articulate in the speech why, because it seems like in some way or another, Hispanics, even those who have been here for generations, see this as touching their lives in some way. And so they understand the importance of why this issue resonates, why it's important in galvanizing the Latino vote, mobilizing the Latino vote.

But there are other issues that are of great importance to the Latino community -- education, health, the economy and jobs and housing and the foreclosure crisis. All of those are very important to the Hispanic community. And when you poll the Hispanic community, poll after poll shows that education and health are always at the top of the list.

But we're -- I'm trying to signal, though, to politicians and elected officials that yes, those issues are important. But immigration cuts across the community in a unique way that does seem to mobilize the Latino community.

So to answer your question about Senator Clinton and why her appeal is there for the Latino community, it's a number of things. She, with her husband having been president, have great name recognition in the Latino community. They have a good record, and I think she has worked in her own right to establish a good record of working to be an advocate for children and families. And within that, she's been a part of a number of initiatives that have tried to lift many Hispanic families and Hispanic children.

So she's got a record in her own right. She's got more name recognition and has done a lot to reach out to the Hispanic community. So I give her a lot of credit for doing the outreach, but also for the fact that she does have a good record and the name recognition. And all those things combined, I think, have leant to her broad support in the Latino community.

But I do know that in Texas and in California, the margins were significant. And I know that in Texas the Clintons and Mrs. Clinton had been down there in her earlier days, in her younger days, registering voters. And when you've been down in the Valley in Texas and you're not a stranger and then you go back down there and ask for their vote, it makes a big difference. And I think that's part of what we saw happen in Texas.

MS. SMITH: Having served in the Clinton administration, how do you retroactively assess the immigration policy groundwork that that administration left? (Scattered laughter.)

MS. MURGUIA: Well, I think we saw even then challenging issues emerging. I think there was some effort to restore benefits that had -- for legal immigrants that had been taken away. But I think there were a lot of other agenda items.

I don't think -- and you've heard some of the politicians make reference to it -- I think we had a sense that the immigration system was breaking, if not broken, back then. But we didn't see it in the framing that we're seeing it here today.

Some people say it's because the economy was so much better during the Clinton administration, based on economic results. But that when you have a country in a more prosperous time, there happens to be less interest in this issue. I'm not sure if that's the case entirely or not.

I do know that it's been, I think, a culmination of factors that have led to what appears to be a worsening of the system, and I think back then there were some telltale signs. But the issue wasn't quite seen on the brink as (now ?).

We knew that, I think, there were some opportunities to address immigration reform. I think we saw even then that there were growing divisions around this and some of the voices were starting to emerge. But we've not seen the level -- back then, we certainly did not see the level of hate speech or hate crimes or the crime statistics that we're seeing here today. So I do think there has been some change, and we've seen the emergence, I think, of some of these extreme voices that have taken hold.

And that's what's concerning me. We saw opportunities to reform immigration, I think, in earlier time, but we're seeing now a much greater need for comprehensive immigration reform. And I'm concerned that we're not -- that issue is hard enough to deal with. It's a

complicated issue. It requires a lot of engagement. But when it's clouded with this sort of negative and hate sort of filled rhetoric, it makes it impossible to deal with.

So we saw opportunities, I think, to do incremental reforms in the Clinton administration. I think it's clear now we need to do comprehensive immigration reform.

MS. SMITH: Do you expect the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to continue its immigration campaign to offer amnesty to some illegal immigrants if a Democrat wins the White House?

MS. MURGUIA: I'll try to look at that question. I think the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the business community has a great interest in seeing this issue resolved, period, no matter who's in office.

We're seeing an incredible amount of stress occurring out there in the workplace. I think many businesses are confused and afraid. There's these laws being passed at the state and local level, and I think businesses aren't sure what they can and cannot do anymore. I think some see an opportunity to exploit low-wage-income workers. I think others want to get it right, but they're not sure how to comply.

So I think the U.S. Chamber of Commerce will have a vested issue in being front and center and a part of this debate, no matter who's elected in the next presidential election.

MS. SMITH: What will you do if immigration reform is not addressed in the first year of a new president?

MS. MURGUIA: Well, it's hard to say, but I do think that all we

can do is continue to advocate for this reform and for the fact that it should be a priority for the new president, whoever that person is.

I think we are working in broad coalitions, and you are seeing chamber, labor, faith-based groups, many different groups, those from the left and the right, who understand that we have to come together as a country and resolve this issue.

And I think the more we can grow that coalition and make it clear that we are trying to address in a practical way an urgent need for this country, I think we will be successful.

I know there are going to be many pressing needs, many pressing issues for the next president. But it's incumbent on us to make sure that we continue to advocate for reform in this area.

MS. SMITH: An audience member says the SAVE Act, a Democratic enforcement bill, is now within a few votes of being discharged to the House floor. Will you oppose it if it comes up for a House vote?

MS. MURGUIA: The answer is yes, absolutely. (Scattered applause.) The SAVE Act -- again, I think there are a number of members who are approaching this issue out of fear.

They're elected officials who want cover and I think are trying to grandstand on enforcement-only provisions.

I mentioned in my remarks how, despite conventional wisdom, that's a conventional mistake. We have shown that many of these elections, special elections, congressional districts, when they take this issue and demagogue this issue, they're not going to be successful.

Despite that, I think there is concern by some who want to be able to say they support something. But this is not the answer. To do piecemeal legislation and to do it in this way, what this SAVE Act proposes is what many would call deportations-only type of approach. It's nothing but enforcement-only bills. But the way it does this is really troubling.

We support interior enforcement. We understand that there need to be sound employer verification systems if we're going to get this right. But one of the components of this bill has an employer E-Verify system. And it really is a system that wouldn't just put immigrants at risk, but Americans would be at risk -- people who have two jobs, any woman who's changed her name. There are a number of problems that this would occur with the Social Security Administration.

We've not thought this through. And I just -- you know, we've had a history. We can learn from our lessons. We've had a history here of Congress acting first and thinking later. Look at the Patriot Act. Here you had this rush, understandably, to try to show that we were going to be tough on security, get that Patriot Act through, because we're going to take on, you know, every security measure to make sure our country is safe. We want to have a safe and secure country, of course. But that Patriot Act now is being challenged by

almost every state. Localities are challenging it. They're not going to enforce it.

We can go down that path and act first and think later, or we can think first and be thoughtful and not just do it because people are looking for cover or they're trying to sort of just check the box and say, "I was tough on immigration reform." This requires a much more thoughtful approach. Quite frankly, it requires leadership and courage that we're not seeing enough of in Congress. (Applause.)

MS. SMITH: Why do you think that when people talk about border security, they almost always are referring to the southern border instead of the northern border? (Scattered applause.)

MS. MURGUIA: It's a good question. You know, I think my speech hinted at why it might be that way. I mean, you know, you do sense that there does seem to be a skewed view about how we're dealing with our borders. And, you know, I don't know all the statistics, but I think some people will tell you that of the various individuals who have crossed the border who have been subject to terrorism, most of them have come through the Canadian border, not through the southern border.

So it's a good question. I'm not able to answer other than to say that we should have immigration reform that deals with both our borders, with all of the points of entry, and that gives us the best tool and technology to do it in a strategic way.

We want to make sure that we have comprehensive immigration reform that's practical, that's workable, that's enforceable. To do things just because we're trying to be tough makes no sense at all. We don't have enough resources in this country to be able to have that luxury, and we need to be more thoughtful and more strategic.

MS. SMITH: Would the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative be part of that thoughtful plan?

MS. MURGUIA: I'm not sure I'm familiar --

MS. SMITH: That's the one that would require over-the-land entry between the U.S. and Canada and U.S. and Mexico to have a certain identification.

MS. MURGUIA: Yeah. (Inaudible.)

MS. SMITH: Do you believe that the Latino vote will provide the winning presidential candidate with long enough coattails to elect reasonable candidates at the congressional, state and local levels regarding immigration?

MS. MURGUIA: Well, I think, again, as I mentioned in my remarks, you know, we're very interested in the presidential election. Obviously who becomes the next president is critical. But our focus is not just on the presidential election, and I believe, as a community, we ought to hold elected officials at every level accountable for how they're going to deal with this issue, but most importantly, ensure that they make a commitment to take hate out of

this issue.

Again, we have a very difficult, complex issue in dealing with immigration reform. But we can take the hate out of this. And there's no room for demagoguing on this issue. And I hope that our community would hold all elected officials accountable for their

positions and how they're dealing with hate in this debate.
(Scattered applause.)

MS. SMITH: Is the Latino vote more of a bloc than, say, the women's vote?

MS. MURGUIA: You know, I don't think, you know, it makes sense to start comparing certain blocs to other blocs. I'll just tell you, I mean, the demographics are important. We have seen an emergence of Hispanic vote, and that's consistent with a lot of the demographics that you've seen, and the statistics are there.

But, you know, we do know that, for instance, the Hispanic population in California is 35 percent. In Colorado it's 20 percent; in Florida, 20 percent; in Nevada, 25 percent; New Mexico, 44 percent; in Texas, 35 percent. Those are going to be key states that are going to make the difference in this election. And I would just suggest that we have the ability to create real clout in those states and show that the Latino vote can make the critical difference.

MS. SMITH: How much trouble would Barack Obama have, if he's the nominee, in getting a decisive majority of Latino votes against John McCain?

MS. MURGUIA: Well, I think that there would be a competitive effort there underway. I think that Senator McCain and Senator Obama would both have some considerable appeal with the Latino community. And I don't think it's a given that any candidate will lock up the Latino vote unless they demonstrate that they're willing to do the outreach, take the positions that are responding to the community.

And I think both have the potential, as would seem Senator Clinton has demonstrated, but both Senator Obama and Senator McCain -- we know Arizona is a state with a significant population of Hispanics, but as is Illinois. And I think both have received strong support of Hispanics in their states, in their respective states. I think both would be every able to make an appeal.

But I think the key issue would be what do they do to do the outreach. And we will be looking closely at their positions, not just on this issue but across the board, and see how they're being responsive. But I do think that Senator McCain will be very competitive.

MS. SMITH: If you had to call it right now. (Laughter.) I mean, if Obama were the nominee and the election were tomorrow, what do you think would be the outcome right now, based on what we know of the two candidates, within your community?

MS. MURGUIA: Yeah. Well, I refuse to answer that question on

the grounds that it will incriminate me. (Laughter.) I don't know. I can't predict right now.

MS. SMITH: We're almost out of time. But before I ask the very last question, a couple of important matters to take care of. First, let me remind our members of upcoming speakers. On April 24th, Charles Overby, who's the chairman, CEO and president of the Freedom Forum and CEO of the Newseum, will discuss "The Newseum and the Free Press: A Sign of the Times."

And on April 28th, in the morning, at a National Press Club speakers breakfast event, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, will be with us. And later that day, at lunchtime, Dan Glickman, chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association, will be our guest.

And again, before I ask the last question, I'd like to present our speaker with our special 100th anniversary mug that has Eric Sevareid's postage stamp on one side.

MS. MURGUIA: Oh, great. (Applause.) Thank you very much.

MS. SMITH: And for the final question: IF the tables were turned and you were the talk show host asking Lou Dobbs one question -- (laughter) -- what would you ask?

MS. MURGUIA: Hmm. I'd say, "Lou, why don't you lighten up?" Anyhow, thank you all. This has been an honor and a privilege. I really appreciate it. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MS. SMITH: I'd like to thank our speaker very much for coming today and all of you.

I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's luncheon, and also thanks to the NPC library for its research.

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Thank you for coming. We are adjourned.

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