

Hispanic media influence grows in election year

The logo for Associated Press, featuring the letters 'AP' in a bold, red, sans-serif font, followed by the words 'Associated Press' in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

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MIAMI – Note to candidates: What plays in Spanish no longer stays in Spanish.

Spanish-language networks and publications are taking on a more prominent role this election season, nabbing debates with major candidates and increasingly seeing their political coverage spin out into mainstream English-language media.

The attention highlights not only the growing influence of Hispanics, the nation's largest and fastest-growing minority group, but also the power of the companies that provide much of their news.

Take recent comments by U.S. Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., during a Sunday morning talk show with Spanish-language Univision Network anchor Jorge Ramos.

Sanchez told viewers her Republican opponent Van Tran, who fled Vietnam as a child, was anti-immigrant and anti-Hispanic. In previous years, those words might have gone unnoticed outside the Spanish-speaking community.

This year they were picked up by a blogger, replayed on YouTube and seized upon by Republican Party leaders, demonstrating not just the increased influence of Spanish-language media but also how ever-more-powerful social media has made the information it provides easier to disseminate.

In California, Republican gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman hoped to attract Hispanic voters and others during her debate against Democrat Jerry Brown, sponsored by Univision and held in English with translations.

Instead, the former eBay CEO was put on the defensive over accusations she should have known her longtime housekeeper was in the U.S. illegally. The exchange went viral.

Even those who toe a hard line on immigration are seeking to make their case in Spanish-language media, recognizing that they need some Hispanic votes to win and that Hispanics — who account for 9 percent of registered voters nationwide — are concerned about more than that one issue.

During Florida's primary season, for example, Republican gubernatorial candidates Rick Scott and

Bill McCollum had their first debate on Univision, even as they competed to see who could stake out the harshest stance against illegal immigrants.

"The tighter the race — and there are many this year — the more you reach out to niche constituents, and Latinos are niche constituents," said Texas State University Professor Federico Subervi and author of the "The Mass Media and Latino Politics.

Subervi believes the interest in Hispanic media is particularly high for a midterm election because the Arizona immigration law has become such a hot topic.

"People want to know what are Latinos going to do given all this rhetoric," he said.

But it's also the result of a concerted effort by companies like Univision to "plant the flag and reach out to mainstream political figures," said Jose Cancela, head of the Miami-based marketing firm Hispanic USA.

Once Latin American presidents were top among Ramos' guests, but last Sunday, his list included Delaware Governor Jack Markell, whose state is hardly known for its Hispanic population.

Univision Networks President Cesar Conde has made political coverage a top priority, beginning with the company's first presidential debate in 2008. He sees 2010 as something of a curtain raiser. The network is airing debates hosted by English-language media in New York and Illinois.

"We need to step up our efforts to ensure that the Hispanic swing vote is best equipped to make responsible and informed decisions," he said.

The company will also run a get out the vote effort across all its shows Tuesday and has declined to air Republican-backed ads urging Hispanics not to vote for any congressional representatives in response to Washington's failure to pass any immigration reform.

A symbol of just how seriously Univision takes the elections is this year's coverage line is: "Destino 2010" (Destiny 2010).

Rival Telemundo's catch phrase is "Tu Voto, Tu Futuro" (Your Vote, Your Future). Telemundo co-sponsored another California gubernatorial candidate debate last week with sister network NBC and has also beefed up political coverage, as have independent stations in cities like Miami. And Impremedia, the Los Angeles-based company that owns or partners with more than a dozen Spanish-language publications, put its political coverage into overdrive in 2008. The company has again stepped up coverage this year.

Spanish-language media, particularly TV, holds sway among so many Hispanics in part because mainstream media has often ignored them, except when it came to crime or immigration. For years, it was the only place where Hispanics, even those who prefer to communicate in English, could see themselves reflected.

Still, when it comes to Hispanic media, immigration remains a top draw both for its core audience and for those looking to take the pulse of the Hispanic electorate.

Democrats like Sanchez are using the issue to hold onto Hispanic voters, warning them that if the Democrats lose their majority in Congress, immigration reform won't even get an airing, let alone pass.

Republicans hope to blunt the idea that they are anti-Hispanic, a perception caused by some in the party who have used the border security debate as a referendum on Latinos and immigrants.

Toward that end, former Republican House Speaker and potential 2012 presidential candidate Newt Gingrich has appeared on Ramos' Sunday show and discussed support for some path to legal status for those in the country legally. He has also started a Spanish-language blog.

Former CNN newsman Lou Dobbs, whose attacks on illegal immigrants angered many in the Hispanic community, sat in with Ramos to respond to allegations that, like Whitman, he also had illegal immigrants working at his home for years.

Even Sanchez's opponent, conservative California congressional hopeful Van Tran, recently spoke with Ramos. Tran may not have helped himself much with the network's target audience. He awkwardly suggested having more in common with the local Hispanic community than his Mexican-American opponent and repeatedly danced around whether he would seek to deport the nation's roughly 11 million illegal immigrants.

But for everyone else listening — and increasingly it seems they are — it was another chance to make his pitch on national TV.