

Ruben Navarrette Jr.: Deny Hispanics respect at your political peril

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.

SAN DIEGO — Hispanic Heritage Month is that time of year when corporations, institutions and universities pause to show Hispanics how important they are. From Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, they hold luncheons, play music and serve chips and salsa on tables decorated in red, white and green — colors of the Mexican flag.

How sad that, this year, the celebration happens to come at a time when Hispanics have been bluntly reminded by both political parties that they're not so important after all.

At least the motives behind the celebration are clear. Corporations want a slice of the estimated \$1.4 trillion that Hispanics spend every year. Universities eager to turn out the leaders of tomorrow have to start by acknowledging what America looks like today.

What began as a look backward — an appreciation of the "heritage" of one group of Americans — quickly became a look forward, a peek at what the future has in store for America's largest minority.

How did it all start? The Hispanic experience in the United States is defined by growth. The population is constantly growing, and so is its buying power. So how fitting that what was initially proclaimed by President Lyndon Johnson as Hispanic Heritage Week would, in 1988, be expanded by President Ronald Reagan to cover a 30-day period. Those Hispanics. Give them a week, and they take a month.

For the last 25 years, the political parties played along with the charade of convincing Hispanics that — because of their numbers — they were special, and that they mattered. The White House usually has a reception. More chips and salsa.

This year is different. It turns out that Hispanics are single-issue voters, and the issue is respect. Deny us that, and we're not going to give you much of a hearing on the issues you care about.

As defensive spinners in both parties will tell you, Hispanics care about issues beyond immigration: jobs, education, the economy and health care top the list. But the immigration issue is like a volcano that erupts every so often. And when the lava starts flowing, many Hispanics move the subject up the list.

Don't look now, but the lava is flowing. House Republicans insulted Hispanics when they refused to take up the Senate immigration bill, while pretending to want to pass some kind of reform. Then President Barack Obama insulted us again when he promised to take executive action by the end of summer, and then backed off by pretending that he just discovered the political consequences.

Really? This White House eats and breathes politics. Obama and his advisers have known for months that pushing through some kind of executive reform before November that lets undocumented immigrants remain in the United States would put in jeopardy the re-election of a half dozen Senate Democrats representing red states. I suspect Obama never intended to pull the trigger before the elections. He only wanted to fool Hispanic voters into thinking he would so they would vote.

It's disgraceful. With this White House, the emphasis is always on what Hispanics can do for them, and never about keeping promises to do something for Hispanics.

It's no wonder that DREAMers — those young, undocumented immigrants who were given work permits and now want the same for their parents — are traveling the country with a new kind of guerrilla politics. They're cornering prospective 2016 presidential candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Rand Paul in states like Iowa and trying to force them to tell us their position on Obama's broken promise and what they would do to deal with immigration. The days of Hispanics blindly supporting Democrats because they despise Republicans are over.

What a great way to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month. Instead of being about marketing products to Hispanics, this should be when we pitch Hispanics on the value of independence and standing up for themselves. In politics, you've got to know your worth, or you'll always be undersold.

Chips and salsa aren't very satisfying, when what you really are hungry for is dignity and respect.

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