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Look out Tea Party, here comes the Tequila Party

While you might not drink any shots at the Tequila Party, you may well walk away with a voter registration form. Behind this festive name lies a new grassroots effort to get US Latinos to vote. Though the United States' Latino population has soared 43 percent over the last decade (today, one in six Americans is Latino), they still vote in proportionally low numbers.

The Tequila Party, launched by an activist in Arizona, is an attempt to make Latinos' voting power reflect their demographic force. To do this, the Tequila Party plans to get more Latinos registered to vote and keep them up-to-speed on key legislation affecting their community - especially with respect to immigration.

It is little surprise, then, that the movement's launch party was held in Arizona, which passed the nation's toughest anti-immigration laws last year. The most controversial parts of Arizona's law, which would require police to quiz anyone they suspected to be in the U.S. illegally about their immigration status, were blocked by a federal judge; however several other states have followed suit with crackdowns on illegal immigration.

Unlike the Tea Party, the Tequila Party is non-partisan. This reflects a growing frustration among Latino activists, many of whom feel neither side is taking their community's concerns seriously. The Tequila Party's leaders say they're not planning on attacking Barack Obama or other elected officials, Tea Party-style; their aim is simply to turn Latinos into a voting force to be reckoned with, in Arizona and elsewhere.

“It's pretty hard for politicians to ignore 50 million people”

Gus Garcia is the Tequila Party's national spokesman. He served as co-chair on Hillary Clinton's National Hispanic Leadership Council during her 2008 presidential race.

The Tequila Party is really a response to unjust laws, a lack of social conscience in this country, and a lack of enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.

We're the fastest-growing segment of the US population. We're now 50 million strong.

As long as Latinos were a small minority and stayed in certain areas of country, we weren't perceived as a real force in the US population. As we grew, became stronger consumers, received educations, we became vital force in American policy.

Our party is not about drinking tequila, but the name quickly caught on because it's catchy. We're not anything like the tea party. They're based on exclusion; we believe in inclusion. We're ying and yang.

The Tequila party is non-partisan. We've got people who are known democrat activists, others who are republican. DeeDee Garcia Blase [the Tequila Party's president], was a Republican organizer for many years. Me, I'm a Democrat. This is not about an ideology, it's about a culture and a community.

The Latino community votes on issues, and will respond politically when it feels threatened.

The primary goal is to motivate Latinos to vote, make them part of the process, to get them to sign up to vote in the primaries.

It's pretty hard for politicians to ignore 50 million people. And everything is moving very fast now. The Latin media is growing; you've got CNN in Spanish. Every major corporation has a budget for Latino outreach. The United States has become a multilingual, multicultural country. We don't need a revolution; the evolution is there.

Mariachis playing at the Tequila Party's kickoff party on June 4. Photo courtesy of the Tequila Party

“When it comes to culture, party labels disintegrate”

Take the DREAM Act last year. [The DREAM Act is a bill that would have allowed undocumented college students who came to the U.S. as children to apply for citizenship. It was blocked in the Senate in 2010]. All the senators who were non native-born, whether they were Democrats or Republicans, voted in favour of the DREAM Act – so you had Republicans going against their party

line. When it comes to culture, party labels disintegrate. Culture is stronger than politics.

Latino voters tend not to vote on ordinances or referendums, when in fact most anti-immigrant measures are born through these. But we're learning. We won't be endorsing any candidates, but we'll be encouraging people to register to vote, we'll be educating them on the issues, and on how to confront social injustices and mobilize.

For too long, our community has been approached very simplistically. Political parties aren't educating voters. They're just saying "vote for us." But what we want is to give them the tools: explain 'this is how you register, this is how you vote, this is how a recall works'.

"One of our biggest challenges is getting comprehensive immigration reform"

Politicians try to ignore our specific movement. They need our votes, so they meet with Latino celebrities rather than activists to try to avoid tough political questions. [Ed. Note: In April, President Barack Obama met with several Latino celebrities, including actresses Eva Longoria and America Ferrera, to discuss immigration.] But celebrities aren't the ones who are really going to get people out to the voting booths on voting day.

One of our biggest challenges is getting comprehensive immigration reform. Right now there's not just one frontline; it's a political battle scattered all over the country.

Every state that has passed anti-immigration legislation is being challenged in federal courts. But the states that have approved in-state tuition [which is cheaper than tuition for out-of-state residents or foreigners] for undocumented students, none of them are being challenged in court. So that shows somewhere that we're gaining ground.

We're now planning rallies throughout the country. But it's more than just rallies and concerts – those are to grab public attention. We're also holding meetings, sending emails, doing a lot of social networking... It's going to be a long battle. Can the political process ignore so many voters, or will somebody try to address them?"