

Latino vote may have swung election

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In just the few days since Tuesday's historic election, a new consensus has quickly emerged among leaders across the political spectrum: The Latino vote was absolutely critical to Obama's victory, and immigration reform is suddenly at the top of the national policy agenda.

President Obama captured between 71 percent and 75 percent of the Latino vote, delivering narrow victories in swing states like Colorado and Florida. And exit polls clearly indicate that these New American voters see immigration as a litmus test. They support candidates who demonstrate real leadership on the issue and reject those who demonize their communities and encourage the needless separation of families. Gov. Romney swerved sharply to the right on immigration during the primary by

proclaiming his support for "self-deportation," a mean-spirited tactic to make everyday life so difficult for immigrants that some simply cannot bear to stay. He tried desperately to backpedal from this extreme position during the final debates, but it was too late. And it may well have cost him the presidency.

Tennessee has the third-fastest-growing foreign-born population in the United States, with over 20,000 immigrants in Davidson and Shelby counties alone who could become eligible to vote before the next election. These new Americans are more politically engaged than ever, and have already begun to make their electoral presence felt. In one of Tuesday's state House races, Metro Nashville Councilman Darren Jernigan defeated incumbent Representative Jim Gotto by only 160 votes. Like President Obama in Colorado, Jernigan won by a margin much smaller than the number of new Americans casting votes, and the losing candidate had a well-known history of supporting anti-immigrant measures.

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As our foreign-born population continues to grow, we can expect to see this scenario play out again and again in districts across the state.

Sensible immigration reform isn't just the smart thing to do ; it's vital to our economic recovery. Immigrants join our communities as investors, entrepreneurs, and highly motivated workers. In 2011, immigrants started 28 percent of all new businesses, despite accounting for only 13 percent of the nation's population. These numbers are impossible to ignore, and they reinforce what we already know about America — people come here from around the world to work hard, build a better life for their families, and relentlessly pursue the American Dream. Immigrants are the very job creators and small business owners we heard so much about during the presidential campaign, and any credible economic plan must necessarily include immigration reform as an essential component.

Several cities have begun to capitalize on the valuable contributions of immigrants, choosing to actively attract and welcome newcomers in an effort to re-energize their economies. The mayor of Chicago has set out to create “the most immigrant-friendly city in the country.” As a measure of early success, immigrants now account for about half of all business license applications in Chicago. Baltimore, St. Louis and Detroit have all passed measures that welcome new Americans, recognizing that immigrants fill important gaps in the labor market, create jobs for U.S.-born workers and make the economic pie bigger for everyone.

Now is the time for party leaders to learn the real lessons of Election Day and to boldly lead the nation toward common-sense immigration reform. Latinos and immigrants are the fastest-growing segment of the electorate, and they steadfastly support candidates and policies that reflect their values and keep families together. We must urge President Obama and Congress to turn immediately to the task of updating our immigration laws, and insist that state lawmakers advance policies that build a strong, vibrant, and welcoming Tennessee.

Stephen Fotopulos is executive director of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

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