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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: League of United Latin American Citizens

Washington, DC | July 08, 2008

Thank you, Mayor. And thank you for what you do every day as one of America's finest mayors. At heart, what Mayor Villaraigosa is doing today is the same thing he was doing as a fifteen year old when he volunteered to take part in a grape boycott led by Cesar Chavez – he's fighting to make this country more equal and just. And he is a shining example of what we can achieve when we build a government that reflects the diversity of the United States of America.

That's something I want to talk about because I'm told that today's theme is "diversity in government." So I've been thinking about why that's important and about what it means to have a government that represents all Americans. It's not just about making sure that men and women of every race, religion, and background are represented at every level of government – though that's a critical part of it. It's not just about sending a message to our children that everyone can lead and everyone can serve – although that too is important. It's about making sure that we have a government that knows that a problem facing any American is a problem facing all Americans.

It's about making sure our government knows that when there's a Hispanic girl stuck in a crumbling school who graduates without learning to read or doesn't graduate at all, that isn't just a Hispanic-American problem, that's an American problem.

When Hispanics lose their jobs faster than almost anybody else, or work jobs that pay less, and come with fewer benefits than almost anybody else, that isn't a Hispanic-American problem, that's an American problem.

When 12 million people live in hiding in this country and hundreds of thousands of people cross our borders illegally each year; when companies hire undocumented workers instead of legal citizens to avoid paying overtime or to avoid a union; and a nursing mother is torn away from her baby by an immigration raid, that is a problem that all of us – black, white, and brown – must solve as one nation.

A government that works for all Americans – that's the kind of government I'm talking about. And that's the kind of government I've been fighting to build throughout my over 20 years in public service.

It's why I reached across the aisle in the Senate to fight for comprehensive immigration reform. It's why I brought Democrats and Republicans together in Illinois to put \$100 million in tax cuts into the pockets of hardworking families, to expand health care to 150,000 children and parents, and to help end the outrage of Latinas making 57 cents for every dollar that many of their male coworkers make. It's why I worked with LULAC and MALDEF as a civil rights lawyer to register Latino voters and ensure that Hispanics had an equal voice in City Hall.

And it's why I first moved to Chicago after college. As some of you know, I turned down more lucrative jobs and went to work for a group of churches so I could help turn around neighborhoods that were devastated when the local steel plants closed. I knew that change in those communities would not come easy. But I also knew that it wouldn't come at all if we didn't bring people together. So I reached out to community leaders – black, brown, and white – and built a coalition on issues from failing schools to illegal dumping to unimmunized children. Together, we gave job training to the jobless, helped prevent students from dropping out of school, and taught people to stand up to their government when it wasn't standing up for them.

It was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life – because it showed me that what holds this country together is that fundamental belief that we all have a stake in each other; that I am my brother's



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keeper; I am my sister's keeper; and in this country, we rise and fall together.

It's an idea that's probably familiar to all of you because it's summed up by LULAC's founding creed – all for one and one for all. It's what led a group of immigrants who were tired of being sent to separate schools, and arrested for crimes they didn't commit and thrown in jail by juries they couldn't serve on, to come together and form this League nearly eighty years ago.

It's what led you to take up the cause of a fallen soldier from South Texas who'd returned from fighting fascism in a casket, but was denied burial beside the men he fought with and bled with because of the color of his skin. You've helped ensure that no one who's worn the proud uniform of the United States of America is denied the rights and respect they deserve.

It's what led a local LULAC council to forge a better future for children in Houston by launching a program that not only taught them English, and helped ensure they went on to graduate, but served as the basis for the Head Start program that's helped lift so many children out of poverty. It's what led you to make women equal partners in the battle for civil rights long before so many other organizations did the same. And it's what's driving you today in your communities to put opportunity, equality, and justice within reach for Latino families.

All for one and one for all. It's the idea that's at the heart of LULAC. It's the idea that's at the heart of America. And it's what this election is all about. It's about the future we can build together.

It's about all the people who are paying a price because of our broken immigration system; all the communities that are taking immigration enforcement into their own hands; and all the neighborhoods that are seeing rising tensions as citizens are pit against new immigrants. They need us to put an end to the petty partisanship that passes for politics in Washington and enact comprehensive immigration reform once and for all.

Now, I know Senator McCain used to buck his party on immigration by fighting for comprehensive reform, and I admired him for it. But when he was running for his party's nomination, he abandoned his courageous stance, and said that he wouldn't even support his own legislation if it came up for a vote. Well, for eight long years, we've had a President who made all kinds of promises to Latinos on the campaign trail, but failed to live up to them in the White House, and we can't afford that anymore. We need a President who isn't going to walk away from something as important as comprehensive reform when it becomes politically unpopular.

That's the commitment I'm making to you. I marched with you in the streets of Chicago to meet our immigration challenge. I fought with you in the Senate for comprehensive immigration reform. And I will make it a top priority in my first year as President – not only because we have an obligation to secure our borders and get control of who comes in and out of our country. And not only because we have to crack down on employers who are abusing undocumented immigrants instead of hiring citizens. But because we have to finally bring undocumented immigrants out of the shadows. Yes, they broke the law. And they should have to pay a fine, and learn English, and go to the back of the line. That's how we'll put them on a pathway to citizenship. That's how we'll finally fix our broken immigration system and avoid creating a servant class in our midst. It's time to reconcile our values and principles as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. That's what this election is all about.

It's about the couple I met in North Las Vegas who saved up for decades, only to be tricked into buying a home they couldn't afford, and are now struggling to raise their four daughters; it's about all the Latino families who are the first ones hurt by an economic downturn and the last ones helped by an economic upturn. They can't afford another four years of the Bush economic policies that Senator McCain is offering – policies that give tax breaks to big corporations and the wealthiest Americans, while doing little for the struggling families who need help most.

They need us to restore fairness to our economy by putting a tax cut into the pockets of workers and small business owners; by ending tax breaks for companies that ship jobs overseas and giving them to companies that create good jobs here at home; by solving the housing crisis, and giving relief to struggling homeowners, and investing in infrastructure to create new jobs in the construction industry that's been so hard hit. That's what this election is about.

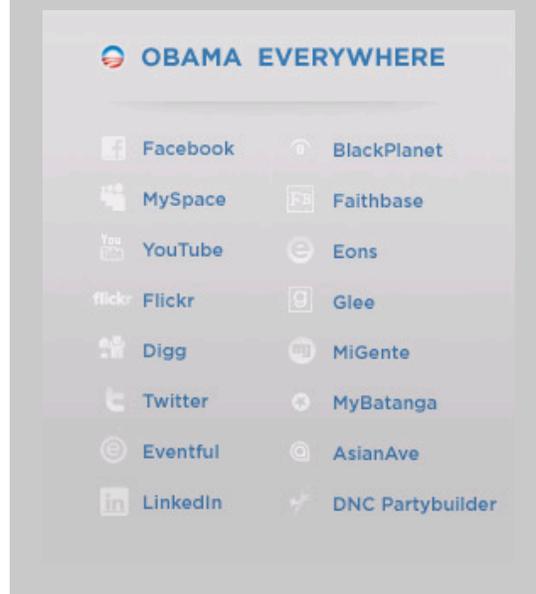
It's about the one in three Latinas who don't have health care; and the small business owners who are doing everything they can to succeed but are struggling to stay afloat because of the rising cost of health care. They cannot afford another four years of the Bush health care policies that Senator McCain is offering – policies that won't solve our health care crisis, but will make you pay taxes on your health care for the first time ever.

They need us to stand up to the big drug and insurance companies, guarantee health insurance for anyone who needs it, make it affordable for anyone who wants it, and cut costs for business and their workers by picking up the tab for some of the most expensive illnesses and conditions. That's what this election is about.

It's about the Latino students who are dropping out of school faster than nearly anybody else; the mother in L.A. who said she felt like the education system wasn't designed for people like her; and the children from West Chicago to the South Bronx who go to overflowing classes in underfunded schools taught by



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teachers who aren't getting the support they need. They cannot afford another four years of false promises and neglect.

They need us to invest in early childhood education, stop leaving the money behind for No Child Left Behind, recruit an army of new teachers to your communities and make college affordable for anyone who wants to go – because that's how we'll give every American the skills to compete in our global economy. And that's what this election is all about.

It's about giving all Americans a fair shot at the American dream. That's what most Americans are looking for. It's not a lot. Americans don't need government to solve all their problems, and they don't want it to. They just want to know that if they put in the work that's required, they'll be able to build a better life not just for themselves, but for their children and grandchildren. It's the idea that in this country, the only limit to success is how big you're willing to dream and how hard you're willing to work. And as my friend Henry Cisneros said to me the other day, nobody embodies this spirit more than the Latino community.

I was reminded of this a few years ago when I attended a naturalization workshop at St. Pius Church in Pilsen. As I was walking down the aisle, I saw people clutching small American flags, waiting for their turn to be called up so they could begin the long process to become U.S. citizens.

And at one point, a young girl, seven or eight, came up to me with her parents, and asked for my autograph. She said her name was Cristina, and that she was studying government in school. I told her parents that they should be very proud of her.

And as I listened to Cristina translate my words into Spanish for them, it struck me that for all the noise and anger that so often clouds the discussion about immigration in this country, America has nothing to fear from our newcomers. They have come here for the same reason that families have always come here, for the same reason that my own father came here from Kenya so many years ago – in the hope that here, in America, you can make it if you try.

Ultimately, then, the danger to the American way of life is not that we will be overrun by those who do not look like us or do not yet speak our language. It will come if we fail to recognize the humanity of Cristina and her family – if we withhold from them the same opportunities we take for granted; or more broadly, if we stand idly by as our problems grow, as more and more Americans go without quality jobs, affordable health care, or the skills they need to get ahead in the 21st century. Because America can only prosper if all Americans prosper.

It goes back to the idea that's at the heart of LULAC – that it's all for one and one for all. That's the idea we need to reclaim in this country. And that's the idea that we can reclaim in this election.

But I can't do this on my own. I need your help. This election could well be decided by Latino voters. Every four years some of the closest contests take place in Florida, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico – states with large Latino communities. In 2004, 40,000 Latinos who were registered to vote in New Mexico didn't turn out on Election Day, and Senator Kerry lost that state by less than 6,000 votes. 6,000 votes. That's a small fraction of the number of Latinos who aren't even registered to vote in New Mexico today. So while I know how powerful a community you are, I also know how powerful you could be on November 4th if you translate your numbers into votes.

During the immigration marches back in 2006, we had a saying: "Today, we march. Tomorrow, we vote." Well, that was the time to march. And now comes the time to vote. And I truly believe that if we can register more Latinos, young and old, rich and poor, and turn them out to vote in the fall – then not only will we change the political map, and not only will I win the presidency, but you will finally have a government that represents all Americans. And then you and I – together – will bring about the kind of change we've been marching for and fighting for, and lift up all your communities and every corner of the United States of America.

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