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Andres Oppenheimer: Obama's Latin policies in play

By Andres Oppenheimer

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The Obama campaign is just starting to build its Florida organization. Unlike the situation in most other states, it had not done so previously because — under a rule from the Democratic National Committee that punished the state for trying to anticipate the vote — there had not been a primary election in the state.

"We just opened our office in Tampa three days ago," Sanchez said Friday. "In terms of staff, we are still putting that together, but we hope to have that in place within the next two weeks. Admittedly, we are playing catch-up, but you are going to see a Latino outreach the likes of which no presidential campaign has ever seen." Over the next two weeks, the Obama campaign will hire 300 paid staffers in Florida and enlist hundreds of volunteers, campaign officials say. Among the newly enlisted, well-known South Florida Democrats are pollster Sergio Bendixen, who will be a senior Hispanic strategist for Obama's national Hispanic campaign, and former U.S.

Ambassador to the Organization of American States Luis Lauredo, who will join the group of campaign spokesmen on Latin American issues.

Comparatively, Republicans for several months have had a national network of informal Latin American advisors, most of them Floridians.

Asked in a recent interview about his top Latin American adviser, likely Republican candidate Sen. John McCain cited his top foreign-policy aide, Randy Scheunemann.

Asked in an interview last week whom he relies on for advice on Latin American issues, Scheunemann mentioned Florida legislators Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Sen. Mel Martinez, former State Department Latin American chief Otto Reich and former congressional staffer Stephen Vermillion.

"My fear was that, as in previous Democratic campaigns, we would have a pan-Hispanic message that would be essentially aimed at Mexican-Americans," said Freddy Balsera, an Obama campaign spokesman in Miami. "But the Florida Hispanic message will be specific to Florida Hispanics, based on issues, experience and motivations that move Hispanics in this state." Told about the Obama campaign plans for Florida, Ferre said he is not ruling out a quick correction: "They are very intelligent people."

They may have realized that they don't have a handle of the Latin community, and that the only way to do it is at the local level." My opinion: Don't be surprised if, in coming weeks, you see a shift to the center in the Obama campaign's Latin American rhetoric, including a less strident opposition to the Mexico and Colombia free trade agreements, and a more persistent criticism of Cuba and Venezuela's authoritarian regimes. Suddenly, Florida is at the center of the Obama campaign's strategy to win the White House, and will play a key role in it.

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