

Republicans increasingly eager to get the word out — en Español

By Ed O'Keefe

Website: http://www.washingtonpost.com/posttv/video/inplay/gop-learns-to-say-votar-por-nosotros/2013/08/16/d4ae8240-06ba-11e3-a07f-49ddc7417125_video.html

Wadi Gaitan, a 24-year-old House Republican staffer who serves as a Spanish-speaking spokesman, TV booker and occasional tutor, was stumped. He was trying to teach a Republican lawmaker how to say “sequester” in Spanish, but the literal translation was proving to be problematic.

“That one was tricky at first. I couldn’t figure it out, because in Spanish, ‘secuestrar’ literally means to kidnap someone,” Gaitan said. “I said, let’s not use the literal translation, because we don’t want to say that we’re kidnapping people, or that President Obama is kidnapping people.”

Probably a good call. Now Republicans say “recortes automáticos” — literally, automatic cuts.

The proper way to say “sequester” — and “debt ceiling,” “border security” and other key phrases — has become a pressing concern for many Republicans, who worry that they are increasingly unable to make their case on the issues to the nation’s fast-growing Latino bloc, simply because they are unable to speak their language.

It’s such a critical concern that House Republican leaders at the beginning of the year ordered an overhaul of their messaging operation, urging members to talk to liberal news outlets and, as often as possible, on Spanish television.

“We’ve been absent from the conversation with Hispanic media for so long, anything can set back that progress we’ve made in the last eight months, so we are aggressive, just like we are in mainstream media,” said Nate Hodson, spokesman for the House Republican Conference, the messaging arm of House GOP lawmakers.

Hodson recalled holding a meeting recently with the conference chairman, Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.), and a longtime Spanish-language TV reporter. When it ended, “I said, thanks for coming,” Hodson said. “And [the reporter’s] statement to me was basically, ‘It’s about time.’”

GOP leaders also announced last week a “Rising Stars” program to highlight younger conservative activists and politicians. The first wave includes a black state lawmaker from Oklahoma and a Hispanic

state lawmaker from New Hampshire. The project is in response to a report issued by Republican National Committee Chairman -Reince Priebus that explored how the party could attract more Hispanic support after 71 percent of Latino voters backed Obama last year.

The efforts also come at a time when Spanish television is peaking in popularity and fast becoming a rival to the more established networks.

Univision, the nation's largest Spanish broadcaster, has been more popular than ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC several weeks this summer among viewers ages 18 to 34, a coveted demographic. Overall, 68 percent of Hispanics get at least some of their news in Spanish, less than in previous years but still high, according to a recent survey by the Pew Hispanic Center. In several of the nation's largest cities, Univision's nightly national newscast is more popular than some of its English-language rivals.

The hottest topic on Spanish TV is immigration, but Republicans are hoping that they can appear more frequently on Univision, Telemundo, CNN en Español and Spanish-language radio stations to also discuss budget cuts, health care and the economy — issues that they say can draw new Hispanic support.

In order to do so, Republicans are learning that the proper Spanish terminology for “debt ceiling” is “tope de la deuda,” or top of the debt. “Border security” translates to “seguridad fronteriza.”

Many of the Republicans willing to deliver the GOP message are newer faces such as Rep. Trey Radel (R-Fla.), a freshman lawmaker who can speak the language well enough to do live interviews.

“I want to share the message that we as Republicans are inclusive, we're not anti-immigrant, and we want to share a message that we have to do something given the current situation that we're in,” Radel said in an interview. “So any chance that I get to spread the conservative message on Spanish-speaking television, I'm happy to do it.”

A self-described “gringo who grew up in Cincinnati,” Radel learned Spanish while backpacking through Mexico after college. He picked up his “street Spanish” over beers with strangers and mastered the pronunciation and accent.

In Washington, “I've had to study a lot more to learn words like ‘border security,’ ‘debt’ and ‘deficit,’ ” he said. “Those are a little more complex, but I've had a lot of help.”

Whenever Radel is asked to appear on a Spanish-language television program, he calls Gaitan, who grew up in Maryland and is the son of Honduran immigrants. He's part of a seven-person press office with the GOP conference that works out of a suite of offices in the Cannon House Office Building, recently redesigned to resemble a West Coast tech start-up. Gaitan sends out Spanish-language news releases, keeps in touch with Spanish-language TV producers to pitch potential guests and topics, and meets regularly with lawmakers who want to practice their Spanish.

Radel and other Republicans, including Reps. Mick Mulvaney (S.C.) and Jeff Denham (Calif.), are working on their Spanish to complement the party's few Spanish-speaking Hispanic lawmakers, such as Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart (Fla.) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Fla.) and Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.).

Democrats have long dominated the Spanish-language airwaves thanks to a long bench of Hispanic politicians, including Rep. Xavier Becerra (Calif.), the fourth-ranking House Democrat; Reps. Loretta Sanchez (Calif.) and Luis V. Guterrez (Ill.); Sen. Robert Menendez (N.J.); and former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson.

Democratic political operatives suggest that the GOP will have to do much more than offer new faces to make their case on Spanish television.

“On paper it’s the right approach for communicating better with this group, but it doesn’t eliminate the central dynamic of the party,” said Fernand Amandi, managing partner of Bendixen & Amandi International, a Democratic political and polling firm that has worked with several Hispanic Democrats. “Three-quarters of Hispanics say that the [Republican party] doesn’t represent their perspective and in many ways they feel ignored and antagonized. Until they can address that problem . . . it’s going to be difficult for them to seduce Hispanics on other subjects.”

But members of Washington’s Spanish-language press corps said they appreciate the renewed attention.

“It’s been refreshing for them to reach out,” said Fernando Pizarro, a Washington correspondent for about 60 Univision affiliates across the country. “Republicans have tried to do this in the past, but we were getting pretty much our old, regular Republican Latino regulars. They’re going beyond the usual suspects . . . and they’re being persistent.”

Pizarro said the change was evident in January when he began meeting incoming freshman lawmakers. Several of them eagerly offered business cards and said they wanted to speak with him often.

That’s a welcome change for Pizarro and the other Spanish-speaking TV reporters who traverse Capitol Hill daily for new angles on stories, especially regarding immigration. English-language newscasts might go days without discussing the topic, but Latino audiences are eager to absorb every morsel of the months-long debate.

“Every time we have an editorial meeting for our Sunday show or daily newscast, we always discuss a possible immigration story. Always, always, always,” said Jorge Ramos, co-anchor of Univision’s nightly newscast, “Noticiero Univision,” and the host of the network’s Sunday political show “Al Punto” (“To the Point”).

The increased attention is especially notable on Sunday mornings. Ramos hosts “Al Punto” from Miami, while Jose Diaz-Balart hosts the Telemundo program “Enfoque” (“Focus”). Diaz-Balart is the brother of the Florida congressman and also co-anchors Telemundo’s nightly newscast “Noticiero Telemundo.”

Both shows trail English-

language leaders “Face the Nation” on CBS and “Meet the Press” on NBC, but the English-language shows have dipped in recent weeks, and “Al Punto” occasionally tops “Fox News Sunday” among 25-to-54-year-olds, the demographic most coveted by news advertisers.

Those ratings gains are leading to better guest bookings. On one recent weekend, Ramos conducted interviews with Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.), Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Rubio — a lineup that any English-language show would covet. Ramos and Diaz-Balart also quizzed House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), who is considered a critical voice among Latinos tracking the immigration debate.

Radel recently appeared on Diaz-Balart's Sunday show, saying he was concerned with the Senate immigration bill and favored the step-by-step approach adopted by House leaders. As the interview concluded, Diaz-Balart told Radel that he appreciated his flawless Spanish, especially since the congressman is "mas gringo que apple pie."

The congressman is a former TV news reporter, so television comes naturally no matter the language. But he knew that the Spanish-language exposure was paying off during a recent visit to a supermarket in his southwest Florida district, where a woman approached him and told him in Spanish how happy she was to see him discussing immigration on Univision.

"If we don't go out there and talk — I don't care if it's in English or Spanish — we'll lose," Radel said. "We as Republicans need to expand our portfolio; we cannot simply talk to conservative news outlets or AM radio. We need to expand beyond that and when we do, I think it resonates."
