

The Impact of Mexican-American Voters in U.S. Politics: The Swing Voters of the Future?

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Abstract

The article examines factors affecting the trends of Latino voters in U.S. elections and analyzes their anticipated role in future presidential electoral politics. The article focuses primarily on states with large Latino populations. The research, while emphasizing the emerging importance of Latino voters, also points out that the group ought not to be viewed as a monolithic voting bloc.

Resumen

El artículo examina los factores que afectan las tendencias de los votantes latinos en las elecciones de Estados Unidos y analiza su papel previsto, en el futuro de la política electoral presidencial. El artículo se centra principalmente en los estados con grandes poblaciones latinas. La investigación, al tiempo que subraya la creciente importancia de los votantes latinos, también señala que el grupo no debe ser visto como un bloque monolítico.

Key Words/ Palabras Clave:

Latino voters; mexican-american Voters; U.S. presidential elections; swing voters. /
Votantes latinos, votantes mexicano-americanos, elecciones presidenciales de E. U.A.,
votantes indecisos

Introduction

Hispanics became the largest minority group in the United States several years ago (El Nasser, 2003). According to U.S. Census projections, by 2020, nearly 60 million Hispanics are expected to reside in the United States and comprise about 18 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). There have been debates about who "Hispanics" or "Latinos" are. The terms "Latinos" and "Hispanics," with reference to the experience of the United States, can be used interchangeably. The terms refer to those people who trace their ancestries to national origins where the Spanish language has had a major role and where people from Spain have had significant historical and cultural influences (Garcia and Sanchez, 2008). Hispanics, with 14% of the population, are now the largest minority in the United States. If current trends continue, they

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will constitute 29% of the population by 2050 (Passel and Cohn, 2008). Non-Hispanic white population is projected to increase more slowly than all other racial and ethnic groups; whites are likely to become a minority of 47% by 2050 (Passel and Cohn, 2008). Among all population groups, Hispanic growth rates are the highest (Haub, 2006). To add an additional context, the United States with an annual population growth rate of 1%, is the fastest growing developed country in the world (Haub, 2006). So, Hispanics are the fastest growing population group in the country with the largest economy in the world experiencing the most rapid population increase in the developed world. Further, among all Hispanics, people of Mexican origin, with 59% of the Hispanic population, is the single largest Hispanic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Also, the number of Mexican-Americans is increasing at a significant rate. For example, over 1994-2004, that growth rate was 55.8% (Chacon, 2005). These facts are likely to make Mexican-American voters increasingly significant players in American elections and politics.

The Significance of Regions

If Hispanic growth trends mirror U.S. Census projections, the Southwestern states are likely to feel the impact of Latino political power before the rest of the nation. Counties with the largest concentrated proportions of Hispanics were in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011) – all Southwestern states (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Map of the Southwest United States

Map Source: Adapted from: <http://www.amaps.com/mapstoprint/SOUTHWESTDOWNLOAD.htm>

Of the nine states with the largest Hispanic population, five are in the American Southwest, including California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado (Garcia and Sanchez, 2008). California is home to more than 13 million Latinos and more than 8 million Latinos live in Texas. As a result, California and Texas — the two most populous states in the nation — account for the majority of the U.S. Hispanic population. Latinos in Texas, California and other Southwestern states are already beginning to make a difference in electoral politics. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, Hispanics in these states played a significant role in the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama. Seventy-four percent of Hispanics in California and 63 percent of Hispanic Texans voted for Obama. Seventy-six percent of Hispanics in Nevada and 69 percent of Hispanics in New Mexico also voted for the Democratic nominee (Pew Center, 2008). Additionally, the Pew report finds that Hispanics voted for the Democratic nominee in 2008 in higher percentages than during the 2004 presidential election. The increase ranged from five to 18 percent and occurred in most states with a high percentage of Hispanic population, with the exception of Arizona, the Republican party nominee's home state, where the percentage of Hispanics voting for the Democratic nominee remained the same (Pew Center, 2008).

The Significance and Consequences of Current Trends

The emergence of Latinos as a political force is likely to be inevitable, due to a constant and steady growth rate coupled with already significant populations. This emergence of power will likely first take hold in the Southwestern United States, where the Hispanic population is substantial. While the Latino population is prevalent across the United States, it is the most concentrated in the American Southwest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Additionally, the current political weight of these states is already substantial with a combination of 113 out of a total of 538 presidential electoral votes. As a result, these states have more than a third of the 270 electoral votes needed to win a presidential election. While it is clear that already these states and their populations wield significant political influence, if current population trends are correct and if the Hispanic population continues to grow at projected rates, these states, with their large Hispanic populations, are poised to become more influential over time. As Congressional districts are redrawn and new districts are based on a U.S. Census that reflects a growing Hispanic population, future Congressional districts are likely to be in heavily Hispanic areas. As states with once flourishing populations continue to lose population, states in the American Southwest that are growing significantly will benefit by gaining Congressional seats.

These trends are significant and will impact the future of Hispanic influence on American politics. The number of electoral votes awarded each state is directly related to the number of Congressional seats in that state. As the Hispanic population in the Southwestern states continues to grow, the overall po-

pulation in those states is likely to grow as well. Congressional apportionments will reflect the growth and these states will receive additional Congressional seats, obviously increasing the legislative power of these states in Congress. They will also impact the number of electoral votes each state is awarded, which in turn, directly impacts the future of U.S. presidential politics.

The clear consequences of these trends point to the political importance of the Hispanic population growth and the critical role likely to be played by California, Texas and other Southwestern states — the focus of this analysis. This analysis focuses on the future political impact of Latino voters in California, Texas, and throughout the American Southwest.

The analysis will focus on three primary indicators of voter participation: age, income and educational attainment. These factors have the greatest bearing on potential voter registration and participation. According to the Non-profit Voter Engagement Network, “American democracy is challenged by large gaps in voter turnout, by income, educational attainment, age....” (Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network, 2009, p.1). Higher income, greater levels of education attainment, and age are all positively correlated with voter participation, while lower levels of education, low income, and youth are indicators of low voter participation (Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network, 2009).

Texas

With 34 electoral votes, Texas has the potential to wield significant political power. Texas is home to more than 8.4 million Hispanics that comprise 36 percent of the state’s total population. In the state of Texas 25 percent of the adult population is made-up of Latino adult U.S. citizens (NALEO, 2008). Of the more than 12 million registered Texas voters, the Hispanic share of all registered voters is about 21 percent — 15 percent lower than the Hispanic share of the general population. U.S. Census projections indicate that nationally the U.S. Hispanic population is expected to grow by 20 percent by 2020. If these projections are applied to the Texas Hispanic population, it could likely mean greater number of voting-age Hispanic citizens, and consequently, an increase in Hispanic registered voters. As the number of voting age Hispanics increases, voter participation is likely to increase as well. When analyzing the three primary indicators of voter participation, age, income and educational attainment, Texas proves to be an interesting dynamic. The Hispanic population in Texas is significantly younger than the Anglo population, the current majority population. The Hispanic median age in Texas is 25.5; comparably, the Anglo median age is 38.1 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). That Texas Hispanics are younger than their Anglo and black counterparts could translate into a steady growth of Hispanics eligible to be registered voters. A young population means that the largest bubble of Latino voting power is still to come. Young Hispanic voters and

potential voters will likely begin to wield more political power when voter turnout numbers begin to reflect the growth of the population. The future impact of this younger generation of Hispanics, however, is closely tied to education.

Other indicators of voter participation indicate the following: Latinos trail Anglos in areas of educational achievement and earnings. Twenty-five percent of Anglos have a high school diploma, compared to 22 percent of Hispanics. Nineteen percent of Anglos in Texas have at least a bachelor's degree compared to 6 percent of Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, nationally the levels of Hispanics who are completing four years of higher education are increasing at a similar rate to Anglos. While the rate is comparable, the base population of Hispanics is growing larger. So, as the Hispanic base population grows and the rate of increase in educational attainment keeps pace with Anglo educational attainment, the potential political power of new, better educated generations of Hispanics also grows (U.S. Census Current Population Reports, 2007). If the six percent educational attainment level remains static, the number is still significant, because of the size of the population. If the percentage of Hispanics with higher levels of educational increases, the impact of these Hispanics on voting is likely to be even more influential.

Additionally, the median earning for a Latino household in Texas is about \$30,000, compared to that of Anglo households at about \$47,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

When analyzing the Texas Hispanic vote in past presidential elections, it is clear that the numbers of both registered and actual voters have increased steadily since 1996. The number of registered Hispanic voters has increased from 1.6 million in 1996 to 1.9 million in 2000 and 2.1 million in 2004 (NALEO, 2008). The number of actual Hispanic voters compared to eligible Hispanic voters in Texas has held steady at 42 percent. The largest proportional jump in actual voters to eligible voters was from 1996 to 2000, when the number increased from 37 percent to 42 percent.

As with presidential campaigns, Hispanics are also likely to impact Congressional elections because of both the sheer size of the population, which will earn heavily populated Hispanic region, such as the Rio Grande Valley, more Congressional representation. As these districts are carved into new heavily Hispanic areas reflecting population pattern shifts, they will ultimately represent a constituency that is predominantly Hispanic. Accordingly, the electorate in these districts is more likely to be majority-Hispanic. These changes will place more potential on Hispanic voters.

While voting is the most common and accessible form of political participation, Hispanic political influence in Texas is evident in more than just voter

turnout totals. According to the National Association of Latino Elected officials, Texas has more Hispanic elected officials than any other state (2008). Ninety-eight percent of Texas' Hispanic elected officials serve at the local level, serving in municipal governments and school boards.

Further, the concentration of Hispanics in regions within Texas will ensure that some areas of the state become clusters of Hispanic political clout before other parts. In Texas, if current population trends continue, this will make heavily Hispanic-populated areas potentially powerful political centers.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, several key metropolitan areas in Texas may be the first to become centers of Latino political power. The two largest metropolitan areas in Texas — Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston/Galveston/Brazoria —with 21 and 29 percent Hispanic respectively, already reflect these assertions. Regions that have traditionally been more heavily populated by Hispanics, including the Rio Grande Valley and areas along the U.S. Mexican Border, may hold the most promise as future bastions of Latino political power.

California

California, the largest state, has a booming population of more than 36 million. Also, California, significantly, is home to more than 13 million Latinos — the largest population of any state—who make up 36 percent of the largest state's total population. The state has the most Presidential Electoral College votes - 55. Furthermore, Hispanics 18 years-old and older who are U.S. citizens comprise nearly 23% of the total California population (NALEO, 2008). California's Hispanic population is significantly lower than the state's Anglo population. The Hispanic median age is 25, compared to an Anglo median age of 40.3. As noted in the discussion on Texas, this may mean a long, steady increase of Hispanic voters. A young population means a larger pool from which to draw potential voters, as opposed to the Anglo population in California, which is growing older, and will eventually lose voters.

Latinos in California have a lower level of education than Anglos. The percentage of Latinos with high school diplomas is 19, while about 5 percent have at least a bachelor's degree. Additionally, the median Latino household income is about \$37,000, compared to the \$54,000 median household income for Anglos (U.S. Census).

That the Hispanic population is young and growing, however, does not immediately translate into commensurate voter registration numbers. Hispanic registered voters in California only accounted for 18 percent of total registered voters in the state—this, despite representing 36% of the total population (NALEO, 2008). The young age of the population may account for some of this dis-

crepancy, however, when analyzing voter participation and eligibility since the 1996 presidential election, the gap between the voting-age Hispanic citizens and actual Hispanic voters is disproportionately wide (NALEO, 2008).

Voter turnouts in 1996 and 2000 show little proportional gain: in both years, the number of actual Hispanic voters, when compared to the number of Hispanic citizens of voting age, held steady at 44 percent. In 2000, the actual voter gains were slight. Of the nearly 3.6 million Hispanic voting age citizens, 2.1 million were registered voters and more than 1.5 million actually voted in the 2000 presidential election. This represented a one-percentage point increase in the number of actual Hispanic voters compared to the eligible pool of potential voters (NALEO, 2008).

California is also witnessing more elected Latinos, though not to the same extent as Latino elected officials in Texas. According to NALEO studies, 1,163 Hispanics hold public office in California. While in Texas, elected Latino officials are most visible in local office, Latinos in California have a more prominent presence in the state legislature, where they comprise 25 percent of the State Senate and 23 percent of the California State Assembly. Additionally, Latinos serve in powerful roles within the legislature, including in the office of Speaker of the State Assembly and State Senate Majority leader (NALEO, 2008).

Metropolitan population centers in California with large Hispanic populations will continue to hold the most potential for the future strength of the Latino vote.

New Mexico

Latinos in New Mexico comprise nearly 44 percent of the state's population. Forty-one percent of the New Mexico Latino population are adults and 37 percent are adult U.S. citizens (NALEO, 2008). That Latinos comprise such a significant percentage of the New Mexico population is of particular interest. The Sunbelt state is one of less than dozen "swing states" identified by 2008 presidential candidates as campaign target areas (Fineman, 2008). According to the National Association of Latino Elected officials, New Mexico has a history of close elections, typified by presidential candidate Al Gore's 2000 victory in the state by a margin of less than 350 votes (2008). New Mexico has 5 electoral votes.

Such a legacy of thin voting margins makes New Mexico, and in particular New Mexico Latinos, a potentially powerful voting block. Not only is the New Mexico Latino population significant in numbers, it is also distinct in several other ways that may impact the state's role as a swing state. New Mexico Latinos vote at a slightly higher rate than Latinos in states with larger numbers of Latinos. For example, with 288,124 registered voters in the state, Latinos account for about 32 percent of all registered voters in New Mexico.

The next highest Latino registered voter count is in Texas, where Latinos comprise 21 percent of the electorate (NALEO, 2008). Additionally, Latino voter participation in presidential elections is reflective of a considerably more politically active Latino electorate in New Mexico. During the 1996 presidential campaign, approximately 82 percent of registered New Mexico Latinos voted; the number dipped slightly during the 2000 presidential election when about 80 percent voted.

The Latino population in New Mexico, as in all other Sunbelt states, is predominantly of Mexican origin. At 29 years, the median age of New Mexico Latinos is the highest of all Southwestern states, but it remains significantly lower than the median age for non-Hispanic Anglos in New Mexico, for whom the median age is 43 years (U.S. Census, 2000).

New Mexico's Latino education is different than Latino education levels of Southwestern states. The state has a higher than typical population of high school educated and college educated Latinos. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, about 30 percent of Latinos in New Mexico had at least a high school diploma or its equivalent. Seven percent of the Latino population had earned at least a bachelor's degree. While New Mexico illustrates the predominant pattern of disparity between Latino and Anglo educational attainment found in other Southwestern states, New Mexico has higher levels of Latino high school and college completion when compared to states with larger Latino populations, including Arizona, Texas, California, Colorado, and Nevada.

If educational attainment and age do indeed have a positive correlation with voter participation, then New Mexico is likely to demonstrate a compelling potential for Latino political power. However, income, the third indicator by which the potential for political engagement is often measure, offers a more complex vision for the state's Latino population's political power. The median income for Latinos in New Mexico is significantly lower than that of the populations of other Southwestern states. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the median income for a Latino household was about \$28,000, compared to \$40,000 for Anglo households. This is also reflective of the greater pattern of substantial disparity between median incomes in Hispanic and Anglo households prevalent in other states. However, the \$28,000 is the lowest median income of the Latino populations of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada and Texas. The relatively low median Latino income combined with the lowest Latino population growth rate in the Southwest at .03 may combine to skew the future of the Latino vote in the state.

New Mexico's urban centers are reflective of the heavy concentration of Latinos and, as a result, are likely indicators of strong Latino voting power. The state's most populous metropolitan area, Albuquerque, is about 42 percent Latino.

Arizona

Like New Mexico, Arizona, with 10 Presidential electoral votes, is one of four states that make-up the "Swing-State Southwest" (Fineman, 2007). On the U.S.-Mexican border, Arizona is home to a large Latino population of more than 1.8 million, which comprises more than 29 percent of the state's total population. Latino adults count for 25 percent of the total population (NALEO, 2008). According to the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, Arizona voters have given presidential candidates victories by relatively thin margins and have been "fluid" in their partisan allegiances (2008). With a share of little more than 13 percent of the total population of registered voters in the state, Arizona has one of the lowest Latino registered voter rates in the Southwest. Despite the small percentage, Arizona Latino voters have increased turnout in the past three presidential elections with 163,000 voting in the 1996 election, 247,000 voting in the 2000 election and 296,000 voting in the 2004 election.

Arizona's Latino political profile is complex. Like other states with large Latino populations, Arizona's largest Latino group is Mexican in origin. It is a young population. With a median age of 24, the state has the youngest Latino population in the Southwest (U.S. Census, 2000).

The median Anglo age in Arizona is 42. Additionally, Arizona has one of the highest Latino population growth rates in the Southwest, 13 percent (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). While age and voter participation are positively correlated, the young Latino population of Arizona may not translate into immediate political strength, but as the young population grows older, their political participation may have the power to change the state's political landscape. Arizona continued to reflect the gap between education attainment between Latinos and Anglos with 23 of the Latino population having completed high school and five percent holding at least a bachelor's degree. The median income for a Latino household is \$31,000—fairly typical for states in the region (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000)

Heavy concentrations of Latinos are spread across the state in Arizona's five primary metropolitan areas.

Colorado

Latinos comprise about 20 percent of the total Colorado population (U. S. Census 2000). Colorado Latinos account for about 10 percent of registered voters in the state, the lowest percentage in the Southwest (NALEO 2008). Like Arizona, Colorado Latino voters have been participating increasingly in presidential elections. Colorado has 9 Presidential electoral votes.

Arguably, Colorado, more than any other Southwestern state, may hold the most promise for Latino political clout. It is there that the three indicators — age; income and education — combined with a strong population growth rate may propel Colorado Latinos into a political spotlight. The Latino population in Colorado is young, with a median age of 25. Comparatively, the median Anglo age is 38 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). As with other Sunbelt states, Colorado's young population may indicate sustained future political influence.

Significantly, Colorado has one of the most educated Latino populations in the Southwest. It has about 26 percent of Latinos completing high school and about seven percent holding at least a bachelor's degree. Education levels for Latinos are still well below that of their Anglo neighbors in Colorado, but compared to Latino populations in neighboring states, they are much higher (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). If educational attainment and voter participation are positively correlated, Colorado Latinos stand to become more active in voting. Furthermore, the median level of income for Latinos is more than \$34,000 and the third highest in the Southwest, behind California and Nevada (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

There is, however, a striking difference in Colorado's Latino population. Unlike most of its Sunbelt neighbors, Colorado's largest metropolitan area, Denver-Greeley, does not have the Latino presence that the state's smaller metropolitan area, Pueblo, has. Denver-Boulder-Greeley is 18 percent Latino, while Pueblo is 38 percent Latino (U. S. Census, Bureau 2000).

Nevada

Nevada is the fastest growing state in the United States and Latinos comprise nearly a quarter of the state's population (Kincannon, 2006). It has five Presidential electoral votes. Nevada's total population has increased by more than 108 percent from 1990 to 2006 (NALEO, 2008). A phenomenal part of this growth has been the Latino population, which has increased by about 400 percent in the 16 years following the 1990 U. S. Census (NALEO, 2008). The state has remained the fastest growing state with a growth rate of 4.1 percent for 18 consecutive years (Kincannon, 2006). Steady and significant growth, combined with Nevada's large Latino community, makes the state a key player in determining the potential for Latino political power in Southwest. Like its Sunbelt neighbors, Nevada presidential campaigns have been marked by narrow margins of victory, most notably during the 2004 presidential case when incumbent George W. Bush won by a two percent margin.

Latinos in Nevada comprise 24 percent of the state's population. The large, growing Latino population in Nevada, however, belies the force of the Latino electorate. Registered Latino voters comprise only 11 percent of the total

Nevada electorate. It is the second-lowest Latino electorate percentage in the Southwest (NALEO 2008). The number of Latinos voting in presidential elections, however, has been steadily increasing. In the 1996 presidential election, 71 percent of registered Latinos voted, while in 2000 when 85 percent did; this number increased to 87 percent by 2004 (NALEO 2008). Analyses of the three primary indicators of voter participation indicate a promising political future for Nevada Latinos. First, the state is home to the second-youngest Latino population in the Southwest, with a median age of 24 (U.S. Census, 2000). Additionally, Latinos in Nevada have levels of educational attainment that are fairly comparable with other Southwest states. Twenty-four percent of Latinos in the state have a high school diploma and about four percent have at least a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, Nevada has the third highest median income for Latino households, behind California and Colorado. These factors, combined with the continued growth of the Latino population in the state, will undoubtedly make Nevada's Latinos a significantly influential force in politics at all levels.

Like several other Southwestern states, Nevada has significant percentages of Latinos living in the state's largest urban centers. In Las Vegas, the largest metropolitan area, Latinos make up 21 percent of the 1.5 million living there.

General Latino Demographics and Voting

From an overall perspective, demographic factors of the Latino population indicate that it is a young population, which, despite its large numbers, continues to participate in politics to a lesser degree than other populations. However, understanding the Latino population as a political force is fairly complex. As Latino media scholar Federico Subervi notes (2008), Latinos are not a monolithic group. This makes it difficult to accurately project the population's political ramifications.

As noted earlier, an analysis of Latino voter participation indicates a substantial gap between Latinos and Anglos. The reasons for the discrepancy in voter behavior between Hispanics and other groups is complex and includes significant gaps between Hispanics and other groups in areas of education, income and age. However, Latinos have begun to wield more political might since the 1990s, in part, because of their population numbers, the emergence of issues important to them, and the increase in co-ethnic candidates.

According to a 2006 study from the Pew Hispanic Research Center, while the total Hispanic population has grown prolifically from approximately nine million in 1970 to 44 million in 2006, the number of Hispanic voters has not grown nearly as comparably in the same amount of time. In 1974, Hispanic voters numbered approximately 1.4 million. In 2006, the number had grown to

5.6 million. According to Juan Andrade, president of the Hispanic Leadership Institute, the sheer numbers and growth of the Hispanic population could have significant implications for the future of U.S. politics, for “demography is destiny,” (Perdomo, 2004). The growth of the Hispanic population, as de la Garza notes, is the “foundation for the developing public and scholarly interest in Latino politics” (2004, p. 91).

With the growing Latino population in the states discussed here, issues traditionally important to Hispanics such family and faith, will become key points in electoral politics in Southwestern states, as politicians begin to reach out to this wakening giant of a population. Factors that traditionally influence voter turnout including age, income and education will, however, continue to affect Hispanic voter turnout, but to what extent, remains to be seen.

Though Hispanic population growth is expected to continue, the numbers alone may fail to accurately predict the population’s potential for political power. This is highlighted by scholars like Calvo and Rosenstone (1989), who emphasize the acceptance of less likelihood of Latino political participation. The standards by which political scientists typically predict voter turnout may not apply to the Latino community. This is further enhanced by scholars like Jackson (2003), who stress that, variables like education shape Latino political participation. Variables by which political scientists are frequently able to base predictions for potential voter impact are not as reliable when applied to the Latino population. Among these variables are age, income, and education, along with demographic and socio-economic factors. The positive relationships that exist between these factors in other population groups either do not exist in the Latino population or influence voter turnout differently.

Existing research on these predictors is, at best, conflicting (De la Garza 2004). For example, while some studies seemingly indicate a positive correlation between education and voter participation among Latino communities, a comparable number of studies indicate no such relationship (De la Garza 2004). In other communities, education is a fairly reliable barometer of political participation. According to De la Garza, similar conflicting studies have proven inconclusive when attempting to link age and income and Hispanic voting behavior (2004).

Age, another traditional means of predicting voter participation, is also difficult to apply to the Hispanic community. As noted, the Latino community in both Texas and California is substantially younger than the Anglo population in both states. In general, as the Pew Hispanic Center (2003) notes, median second-generation Latinos are still in their teens. As a result, predicting the behavior of Latinos based on age is inconclusive since with much of the population remains too young to vote. Furthermore, it is difficult to predict how age will

impact the future of the Hispanic vote once the youth of the population reaches voting age. The potential for greater impact is likely to increase as younger generations turn 18 (Garcia and Sanchez, 2008).

Yet another traditional indicator of potential voting behavior is income, but this, too, may prove inaccurate, according to De la Garza (2004). Socio-economic conditions are intricately tied to the voter participation (Garcia and Sanchez, 2008). If the typical relationship between income and voting potential is positive, this analysis indicates that Hispanics may not engage in voting in rates comparable to other citizens.

Another factor that may impact the Latino voter rate is one that is fairly unique to the Latino population. Significant numbers of Latino immigrants have contributed to the Latino population growth, and consequently, the perceived power the population should have. However, Latinos have among the lowest naturalization rates of all immigrants. Nationwide, 39 percent of Latino adults are not eligible to participate in electoral politics (De la Garza, 2004). In a 2000 study, 50 percent of white immigrants became citizens, 40 percent of Asians and 33 percent of Africans. Comparably, only 25 percent of Latino immigrants completed the naturalization process (Mollenkopf, Olson & Ross, 2001). Additionally, Latinos who do chose to become citizens usually wait between 12-14 years to become citizens (De la Garza, 2004).

According to De la Garza, naturalized Hispanics, at a national level, vote at lower rate than native-born Hispanics (2004). De la Garza's findings are in opposition to findings by the National Association of Latino Elected officials, which indicate that nationally, naturalized citizens are more likely to vote than native-born citizens (2006). Whether naturalization rates will impact the Latino vote remains to be seen. Immigration is likely to remain a key source of Latino population growth. On the other hand, citizenship rates, while they have been dismal, may become more imperative to the future of the Latino political influence.

However, as Barreto notes, despite the traditional notion that Latinos are not as politically active as other groups, certain conditions have changed since the late 1990s that have resulted in the development of a Latino population that is more likely to be politically engaged (2007). Barreto cites two such conditions — an increased sense of anti-immigration attitudes fueled by political calls for tighter immigration laws and an increase in the number of Latinos running for public office. Indeed, the data from both Texas and California, the two states with the most number of Latinos, seems to reflect the increased interest in political participation that Barreto cites.

Conclusions

The Hispanic population is complex, diverse, and large, as a result, attempting to predict voting behavior among Latinos is more difficult than making similar predictions about other more homogenous groups. As Subervi (2008) has ascribed, Latinos are not a monolithic group with a consistently definable political identity. Subervi (2008) goes on to suggest that Latinos are likely to exhibit considerable variations in political preferences differing by such factors as social class, ethnicity, and ancestry.

Appeals to the Hispanic community by mainstream presidential contenders during the 2008 presidential primary season are reflective of the importance of the Latino vote and the difficulty with which analysts struggle to understand the Latino vote. Ebenkamp notes that predicting Hispanic voter behavior is further complicated by the independent nature of the population (2004). But despite the complex nature of the Hispanic vote, Democrats and Republicans alike have continued to reach out to the community in a variety of approaches from Spanish-language media to marketing campaigns targeted at the Latino community (Subervi, 2008). The result of this outreach to Latino voters in the last few years has been ultimately beneficial to both Democrats and Republicans.

Republicans, in particular, have pushed hard to attract Latino voters. The presidency of George W. Bush has exemplified this new type of outreach. Bush, long a favorite of evangelical Christian conservatives, in particular, has sought out the Hispanic evangelical vote, capitalizing on the predominance of faith in the Hispanic community (Edsall, 2006). During the 2004 election, Bush's efforts to attract the Hispanic evangelical vote paid off and he secured about 40 percent of the Hispanic vote, with much of the new support coming from Protestant and Catholic voters (Edsall, 2006).

Despite these inroads into the traditionally strongly Democratic Latino voting bloc, the Republican Party's Hispanic growth has begun to ebb. According to a study from the Pew Hispanic Center titled, "Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote," 57 percent of registered Hispanic voters are Democrats, while 23 percent align themselves with the Republican Party. This represents a 34 percent gap between party affiliations among Hispanics. In 2006 the gap had been 21 percentage points and 33 percentage points in 1999 (Taylor & Fry, 2007). Arguably, the emergence of the immigration debate as a key political issue has hurt the Republican Party in the Latino community. Forty-one percent of Latino registered voters believe that Democrats are better suited to handle immigration than republicans, who have traditionally been tough on illegal immigration (Taylor & Fry, 2007; Edsall, 2006).

Latinos who shifted their support from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party earlier this decade are now switching their support back to the Democratic Party and the party's hold on Latino voters remains strong.

"Across all Latin nationality groups except Cubans, the Democratic advantage in part identification among Hispanics is more than 20 percent [...] More alarming for Republicans is that, unlike a lot of European minority groups in the past, Latinos appear to identify just as much with Democrats the more educated they are or if they're immigrants, the longer they've lived in the United States," (Dettmer, 2001, p. 1).

More Latinos now identify with the Democratic Party than in the past 10 years (Taylor & Fry, 2007). As a result, the implications of such a shift in such a large and growing population could be significant for the Republican Party. "The math is simple: More Hispanic voters equal fewer Republican victories," (Miller, 2002). Furthermore, if the issue of immigration remains a divisive one among both parties, Latino voters in Southwest states, most of which share a border with Mexico, are even more likely to impact partisan politics in their respective states.

While immigration is clearly a hot-button issue for Latinos, the Latino voter is also preoccupied by a number of other issues, according to the Pew Hispanic Center study. Though the study focused on issues in the 2008 Presidential Campaign, politicians looking to court the Hispanic voter would be wise to remember these issues, as just as the population itself is not a "monolith voting bloc," neither are the issues important to Latinos all the same (Subervi, 2008). Most important to Latino voters is education, followed by healthcare, the economy and jobs, crime, immigration, and the Iraq War (Taylor and Fry, 2007).

The population is expected to continue to grow at faster rate than other populations and with the constant influx of immigrants, Latinos are poised to experience a unique integration into the U.S. political process and the Sunbelt states are likely to be at the forefront of the integration. As the number of Latino registered voters continues to grow, politicians will continue to court the Latino vote, which has already proved a political golden ticket of sorts. At the same time, the Latino voter is complex; understanding party allegiance and the issues important to the Hispanic electorate is key for unlocking the power potential of the Latino vote.

While Hispanics have traditionally not participated in electoral politics in comparable rates to the other populations, demographic patterns clearly indicate the increasingly important political role they play. Was this importance reflected in the most recent of 2008 and 2010? Data from those years clearly validate the significance of this rising tide.

In 2008, a year when voter participation generally increased, the Latino share of the national vote rose to 9% from 8% in 2004 (Pew Research Center, 2008). Increases in Latino voters in the 2008 election were especially large in New Mexico (9% higher), Colorado (5% higher), and Nevada (5% higher) (Pew Research Center, 2008). Latino voters, by large margins, voted for Barack Obama in 2008 (Pew Research, 2008), a key voting factor in helping him win the presidency.

The elections of 2010 continued the trend of increasing Latino importance in elections. The charts below (Figure 2) show general increases in Latino share of voters, among total voters, between 2006 and 2010 (Latina Vista, 2010).

Figure 2 Latino Share of Voters 2006-2010 (Selected States)

Senate		2010	2006
State	Latino Share	Latino Share	Latino Share
AZ	13	11	
CA	22	19	
FL	12	11	
NV	15	12	
NY	9	7	

Governor		2010	2006
State	Latino Share	Latino Share	Latino Share
AZ	13	12	
CA	22	19	
FL	12	11	
IL	8	10	
NV	15	13	
NY	9	7	
TX	17	15	

Source: http://www.latinalista.net/palabrafinal/2010/11/analyses_of_latino_midterm_voter_turnout.html

Data reported by the Pew Research Center (2010) substantiate the data cited above as reported by *Latina Vista* (2010). The Pew Center states that in 2010, more Latinos were eligible to vote than ever.

A historically significant point in the electoral landscape of the United States has clearly arrived. Latino voters, dominated by Mexican-American voters, are now a crucial group of swing voters.

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