

The Battle for Latino Voters

As they disperse throughout the nation, Latinos will count in far more elections. But a one-size-fits-all strategy won't woo them.

By HARRY PACHON

There is much talk about President Bush winning more hearts and votes of the fast-growing Latino population, but behind closed doors many top political operators still conclude that the key fact about Latinos is that they are significantly less likely to vote than other Americans. But settling on this fact misses the larger and more critical point: Even with a smaller proportion of Latinos going to the polls, Latinos are increasingly significant at the national level, and in selected states they constitute a substantial segment of the electorate.

It's not just that the Latino proportion of the electorate is growing rapidly, increasing by nearly 133 percent in the past 20 years compared with the 19 percent rate for the national electorate. More critically, in selected states the Hispanic electorate has the clear potential of being the much heralded swing vote. Already it takes only 3.6 percent of Latino voters in California, 2.7 percent in Texas, 1.7 percent in New Mexico, and 4.4 percent in Florida to make a 1 percent change in the statewide election. With this potential to put candidates over the top, Latino voters will be defining political reality in more and more states.

To illustrate how Latinos will shape political reality, this article provides an updated overview of their growing population, political allegiances, and policy preferences.

One of the most important Latino population shifts shaping politics is the way Latinos are rapidly dispersing throughout the nation. For example, while two out of three currently live in the six states of California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey, nine of the 10 counties with the fastest-growing Latino populations are in North Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas. Through dispersion, Latino voters will potentially swing elections in many more urban, suburban, and rural districts in states that heretofore haven't had much Latino electoral participation.

Dispersion and rapid population growth also means that Latinos are increasingly outnumbering other minorities. In 1990, they outnumbered blacks and Asian Americans combined in just 13 states, but now Latinos outnumber them in 23 states.

The rising proportion of Latinos in more and more districts matters politically because Latinos differ from non-Latinos along demographic lines highly correlated with voting behavior. Specifically, Latinos are more likely to be young, married with children, churchgoers, relatively uneducated, and poor or working class, and elections commonly split along those lines. Consider the facts:

- Close to three in five (57 percent) of Latino registered voters are under the age of 44, compared with 45 percent of white non-Hispanic, and 56 percent of black registered voters.
- Many of these young registered voters are among the one in three Latinos nationally who live in metropolitan-area households made up of two parents and their children. By comparison, only one in five white non-Hispanics is part of such a household.
- Nearly half of all Hispanic voters attend church once or more each week compared with

42 percent of white non-Hispanics.

- One-quarter of the Latino electorate has less than a high school diploma compared with 8.6 percent of the white non-Hispanic and 18 percent of the black electorate.
- Compared with the white non-Hispanic majority of the electorate, Latinos are half as likely to be part of families earning more than \$75,000. Moreover, while almost one in five (18.3 percent) married Latino parents is raising his or her children in poverty, only 4 percent of white non-Hispanic married parents and 7 percent of blacks are.
- Drawing from their economic condition, Latinos chose "working families" over an ethnic (Mexican-American, Cuban-American) or pan-ethnic (Hispanic/Latino) group identification when asked in a national poll what group they most identify with.

Although largely united as "working families," there are differences among Latinos that suggest it would be a mistake to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy toward Latino voters. For example, generational differences are seen in the way Democratic Party identification grows stronger from the first-generation foreign-born (25 percent) to Latinos of the third generation and beyond (44 percent). While there is no doubt that Hispanics of all generations overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party, President Bush's small but noteworthy success courting Latinos reflects these generational differences. Signs of an increasing split between Latinos' presidential and down-ballot preferences suggest that his aggressive courtship is changing opinions, especially among first-generation Spanish-speaking voters.

Latino voters in general also differ from their nonvoting counterparts in that they are more likely to be native-born, female, and older (by an average of 10 years). There are also significant cultural and regional differences among Latinos, illustrated by the greater conservatism among Cuban-Americans and to a much lesser degree, Texan Latinos.

Both political parties are making claims to the allegiance of the Latino voter, and have credible assertions. Altogether, however, Latino partisan attachment does not flow from a simple ideological or ethnic paradigm. Part of the reason is that Hispanics cannot easily be categorized ideologically; they range from liberal on job creation and immigrant assistance to conservative on school prayer and welfare. The most important issue for Latino voters is education, but moving down the income scale, economy and crime become more important, which underscores how economic class might play a bigger role in shaping Latinos' working-families policy preferences than does ethnicity.

Because the Democratic Party is traditionally seen as the party of working families, Democrats have an advantage in retaining Latinos' allegiance. Virtually all survey and demographic data suggest that traditional Democratic Party positions on health insurance, gun control, education, and worker retraining resonate well among Hispanics. But political approach is key: A candidate must present a working-families agenda in terms of providing the tools for upward mobility, not the platform for an aggrieved minority group.

Like the immigrants of yesteryear, Latinos believe the Horatio Alger dream. While millions struggle against poverty, the evidence suggests Latinos are upwardly mobile and more hopeful about their chances for the future than they are resentful about unfair discrimination in the past and present. A 2002 Bendixen & Associates poll found that more than four in five believe "no matter how poor you start out in this country, you can make it if you work hard." And while the *barrios* that many Latinos live in do not represent anywhere close to ideal living conditions, life

is still better in the *barrios* than in the countries many Latinos or their parents came from. Moreover there is a growing Latino middle class fueled in part by record-breaking rates of improvement in joblessness and business ownership during the 1990s.

Reaping the rewards. Given this positive outlook, Latinos will support an agenda based on the idea that government should reward hard work and personal responsibility with the tools people need to improve their lives and offer more opportunity for their children—access to health insurance, quality public education, job training, safe streets, affordable housing, and the privileges of citizenship.

Bearing in mind Latinos' hopeful outlook and desire to be in the mainstream of opportunity, it would be counterproductive to take a political approach centered on Latinos as an aggrieved minority group. While it remains vital to aggressively counter unfair discrimination, Latinos' focus on the basic tools of upward mobility shows that they believe it is lack of those tools—not discrimination—that will set them back.

Championing an agenda for upward mobility that Latinos will support also means helping legal immigrants become new Americans and access the opportunities available in the economic mainstream. Efforts to win Latino voters by facilitating the challenging naturalization process will be most effective if they are linked to voter registration and voter education campaigns, as they were in the 1990s with the Clinton/Gore Citizenship USA campaign. This upward mobility agenda should also include more support for English classes for adults and public school reform, especially for struggling schools with large numbers of immigrant students.

In addition to targeting Latinos with these specific policies, it is important to get out the vote through influential Latinos, as opposed to non-ethnic voter drives. A recent report found that Latinos were more likely to vote when encouraged through such personal contacts. And as President Bush has illustrated, it is also important to campaign in Spanish, but campaigning for Latinos only in Spanish would miss many Latinos, particularly the young, who tend to get their information from the same media non-Latinos do.

While Latinos as a group are similar to non-Latinos in many ways, there are clearly some key differences, with significant political implications. Whether these differences sharpen or recede over time is difficult to determine. The important point to remember is that the voters in this heterogeneous group seek an agenda to empower them—and very notably, their families—with the tools for upward mobility. The party that delivers this agenda will find that the electorate long dismissively stereotyped as the "sleeping giant," will be determining more and more election outcomes in its favor. With 6 million-plus voters expected in the next presidential election and the political clout to swing statewide races in major states, Latinos are shaping political reality.

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