

Latino Impact on the California Recall Election

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The storyline was familiar, appearing frequently in papers around the country during the recall election: Will the Latino vote affect the fate of Governor Davis? Does Lt. Governor Bustamante's presence in the race ensure an energized Latino electorate? Can Arnold Schwarzenegger's popularity among Latino youth translate to votes?

For all the column inches dedicated to the subject, did the papers get their stories and polls right?

To help answer this question, researchers at the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute have examined the 2003 California recall election results by city in Los Angeles County, as reported by the Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters office. Because two-thirds of California's Latino voters reside in Southern California, this data reveals much about the Latino electorate.

TRPI has arrived at four basic observations about Latino majority cities in Los Angeles County:

- Precincts in these cities had lower voter turnout rates (45% vs. 51% LA County general electorate turnout)
- Voters in these cities were more likely to vote "No" on the Recall (65% voting no)
- Voters in these cities were more likely to vote for Bustamante (65% support)
- Voters in these cities were less likely to vote for Schwarzenegger (20% support)

For example, in the city of Maywood, in which 86% of the registered voters are Latino, Bustamante received 66% of the vote for replacement candidate compared to 13% for Schwarzenegger. Similarly, Huntington Park, where 85% of registered voters are Latino, voted overwhelmingly for Bustamante (63%) over Schwarzenegger (15%). Both cities also voted no on the Recall by a 70% to 30% margin. In contrast, Glendale, which has just 15% Latino voters, favored Schwarzenegger by a 2 to 1 margin over Bustamante, 50% to 25%, and a majority voted yes on the Recall.

Why Wasn't Turnout Higher?

The torrent of news stories across the nation correctly predicted the impact a wave of Latino voters could make in the California recall election. Because Latinos are 18.5% of the California electorate, every 3% of the Latino vote amounts to a one percentage point gain in a campaign. However, harnessing the power of the Latino electorate is possible

only through its effective mobilization , as was seen in the 1990s in increasing Latino state legislative representation.

In the recall election, there wasn't a comprehensive campaign that effectively mobilized Latino voters. Latinos received mixed campaign messages that made it difficult to form their opinion – and to predict their voting intentions. Between Davis' "No on Recall" message and Bustamante's replacement candidate strategy, there was no unified "get out the vote" message by Democrats – traditionally the party of preference for California's Latino voters.

Latino mobilization is dependent on direct contact with constituents, such as door-to-door canvassing, rallies and community appearances. In the recall's compressed election schedule, these types of events were not as orchestrated and could explain the six percentage point difference between Los Angeles county Latino voters and the general electorate in the county. In a short campaign, candidates were simply less inclined to use their most precious resource – time – to go after what can sometimes be a volatile electorate.

The Volatility of the Latino vote

One example of the Latino electorate's ability to swing dramatically from one position to another is Proposition 209, the "California Civil Rights Initiative." A TRPI poll conducted in the run up to the 1996 election showed that 70% were undecided on how they would vote. In the final three weeks of the campaign, Latino political and civic leadership mobilized to inform the community about the proposition. While the proposition passed (and ultimately ended affirmative action in the state), Latinos opposed the measure by three to one. Much the same phenomenon occurred in this election in regards to Proposition 54, the "Racial Privacy Initiative."

The polls: did they get the story right?

The most primary measure of a poll's efficacy is its margin of error. It is quite common for polls to purportedly report Latino sentiment on an issue with a margin of error range from seven to ten percentage points. To strengthen the snapshot of Latino voter sentiment, pollsters merely need to increase their Latino sample size.

The polls on the recall election got half the story right. For the most part, support for the recall was accurate, with the exception of the Field Poll's late September poll. Candidate preference, however, was more varied and, in the end, not as accurate. The Field Poll had a low prediction of Latino support for Bustamante at 40% and TRPI had a high prediction of support for the Lt. Governor, at 57%.

Exit polls by *The Los Angeles Times* and *MSNBC* put support for Bustamante at 55% and Schwarzenegger at 34%. Because the *LA Times* did not poll extensively in Latino majority cities, TRPI believes they are underestimating the support for Bustamante and

overestimating support for Schwarzenegger; a better statewide Latino estimate is probably 65% for Bustamante and 25% for Schwarzenegger and 7% support for McClintock.

The *Los Angeles Times* exit poll estimated Latinos to be 11% of the state electorate and *MSNBC* estimated Latinos to be 18% of all voters in California. Analysis of voter turnout in heavily Latino precincts by TRPI leads us to believe that the real estimate is somewhere between the two, at around 14% of the state electorate, resulting in roughly 1.3 million Latino voters on October 7, 2003.

Summary of Pre-election polls ¹						
					Replacement Candidate	
	Latino Sample	Margin of Error	Recall Yes	Recall No	Bustamante	Schwarzenegger
LA Times	137	8.4%	49%	48%	54%	24%
Field Poll	134	8.5%	57%	38%	40%	34%
PPIC	134	8.5%	48%	46%	49%	15%
Knight Ridder	150	8.0%	45%	49%	50%	25%
TRPI ²	600	4.0%	45%	47%	57%	13%

The political news focus has shifted to the 2004 Presidential election. No doubt countless stories will spotlight the impact Latino voters will potentially make on the race.

It will be important to remember the lessons learned from this recall election, concerning the Latino vote. Briefly stated three lessons are:

- Without comprehensive voter mobilization efforts, the Latino vote will not turn out at the rate of non-Hispanic voters.
- Latino voter volatility will continue to confound the pundits and pollsters.
- Polls purporting to show Latino voter preferences are sometimes based on Latino samples with large margins of error.

Will the lessons be learned? We'll know in less than a year from now.

¹ LA Times = September 25 - 29, 2003 815 likely voters; Field Poll = September 25 - October 1, 2003 894 likely voters; PPIC = September 9 - 17, 2003, 1033 likely voters; TRPI = September 6-16, 1604 likely voters; Knight Ridder = October 1 -4, 2003, 1000 likely voters

² This poll was jointly conducted by The Institute for Justice and Journalism, Pew Hispanic Center, New California Media and the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute