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Shanilinin M. Calderon
scaldero@emich.edu

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THE EXTENT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES AMONG LATINO NON-CITIZENS AND CITIZENS

Shanilinin Calderon

Dr. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Mentor

ABSTRACT

In the United States, Hispanics, or Latino Americans, are individuals with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Latin American origin. Undocumented and documented Latinos are two of the fastest growing populations in the United States. However, this demographic is still underrepresented in American politics today. The increase in this growing population is due to “push and pull” factors that attract immigrants; some of these factors include escaping from poverty in search for a better life, and better opportunities for employment. Factors contributing to lower voting turnouts include the belief that the Latino vote will not make a difference, mistrust in government, prior experiences in their native country and a lack of education. This literature review summarizes journal publications and various texts, as well as interviews with Latino elected officials, in order to identify the challenges and levels of political participation within the Latino community.

INTRODUCTION

This literature review examines the Latino population as an essential, rising demographic in the United States. According to the 2010 U.S Census, the definition of Hispanic or Latino origin refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American origins, regardless of race (U.S Census Bureau, 2010). “Origin” refers to the heritage, nationality group, country of birth, or ancestors’ origins before arriving in the United States. Out of the total U.S. population of 308.7 million individuals, 50.5 million are of Hispanic or Latino origin (i.e. 16%, which is larger than the percentage of African-Americans). The Latino popula-

tion has increased from 35.3 million in 2000 to 50.5 million in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This large and rising population is changing the U.S. demographics. Therefore, it is important to examine the extent to which Latinos will engage in politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Demographics

Demographic information is important, not only in terms of strengthening political representation of the Latino community, but it also helps identify trends that Latinos exhibit when engaging in politics. The Latino community differs from the overall United States population in several ways, including the average age, income, and education of its members. These differences influence their participation patterns. The population is significantly younger than the average U.S. population. Latinos are generally under the age of 18, and fewer are over the age of 65 (Bedolla, 2009). Latinos are also likely to earn less money, which makes poverty rates in this demographic almost twice that of the general population. Unlike the rest of the population, household incomes for Latinos are expected to support a larger number of people. This often includes remittances of money to family members in their country of origin. Average Latino educational achievement is also lower than other Americans; many more Latinos have a 9th grade education or below, and Latinos are half as likely to hold a college degree when compared to the general U.S. population (Bedolla, 2009).

Latinos and politics

When examining Latino political participation in U.S., it is important to distinguish between undocumented Latinos and citizens. It is necessary to know what type of participation Latinos are most likely to engage in, because non-citizen Latinos do not have the right to vote in U.S. elections. Yet the lack of citizenship does not stop these undocumented Latinos from participating in other forms of politics. For example, Jose Antonio Vargas, an undocumented journalist, defines an American as “A person who is hardworking, proud to be in America, contributes to society, pays taxes and is self-

sufficient” (2011). Regardless of whether a Latino is undocumented or documented, if s/he contributes to society, then s/he should have a voice in determining who runs the government (Vargas, 2011). Sarah Song (2009) defines being an American as:

A person that did not have to be any particular national, linguistic, religious, or ethnic background. All he had to do was to commit himself to the political ideology centered on the abstract ideals of liberty, equality, and republicanism. Thus the Universalist ideological character of American nationality meant that it was open to anyone who chose to become an American (31).

Latino Citizens

In the past, Latinos have not been major participants in party politics (Leal, 2008). During the reelection of President George W. Bush in 2004 and since the 2008 election of President Obama, major parties have started paying attention to the Latino population and have stopped taking them for granted. Major parties have realized that Latinos are becoming a growing political power (*DeSipio, 2006*). These Latino citizens have a greater opportunity to participate in the electoral process by having documentation of naturalization; noncitizen Latinos participate in massive mobilizations to influence public opinion. For example, in March 2006, between 500,000 and one million immigration supporters marched in the streets of Los Angeles to protest against HR 4437 (Bedolla, 2009). This bill made unlawful presence in the United States a felony, and would also have made it illegal for citizens to provide aid or assistance to undocumented immigrants. It is important to understand the relationship that Latinos have with political parties in order to see how Latino involvement may increase in the future. Latinos will participate in politics if they are able to identify a political party that will act on their behalf. Historically, Latinos have lacked a national voice (Leal, 2008). Rodney Hero, F. Chris Garcia and others (2000) state that if Latinos are to become influential

participants in American politics, “ it is probably a necessary but not sufficient condition that Latinos be involved in political party activities” (p. 530).

Figure 1. illustrates the foreign-born population in the United States from 1850 to 2010; it also shows the growth rate for the population of immigrants with proper documentation, but who were not yet citizens. In 2010, the percentage of immigrants in the U.S. population had not reached the historical highs of the 1860s-1920s. While this chart includes all immigrants and does not spe-

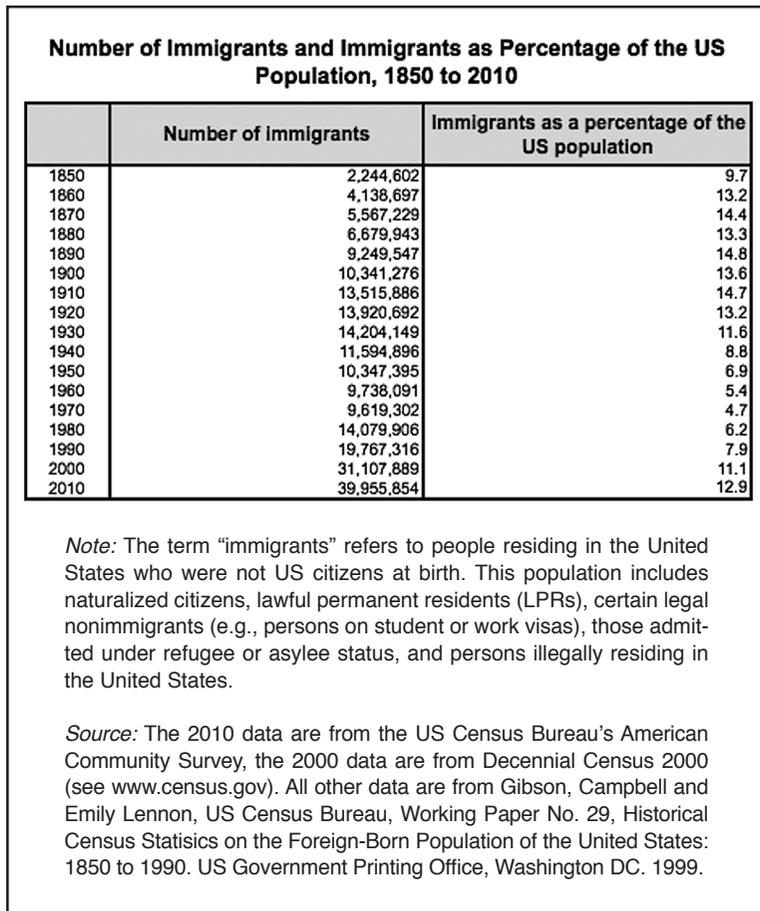


Figure 1: Number of Immigrants and Immigrants as Percentage of the US Population,

cifically show the trends in Latino immigration, it is worth noting that net immigration from Mexico to the United States has actually been negative since 2005. This is largely due to the economic crisis and lack of U.S. job opportunities (Passel et al., 2012).

Latino Immigration between 1850-2010

Harvey Santana, a state legislator of Puerto Rican origin, represents a Detroit constituency with a significant Mexican-American population. Santana reported that the older generation of Latino citizens (thirty to forty years ago) had fewer members from their country of origin in the United States. For that generation of immigrants, factors such as language barriers, similarities of culture, and being first-generation immigrants, caused Latinos to have a stronger bond and become more united as a whole (Santana, 2012). Currently, the younger generations of Latinos often feel that the struggles that their parents and grandparents faced are not the same struggles that they are facing.

Many politicians discuss immigration when running a campaign, but the younger generation of Latinos worries less about immigration because they are more likely to have been born in the United States. They are already citizens and have the right to vote; immigration is not something that they necessarily have an interest in (Santana, 2012). These voters do not feel that politicians are talking specifically to them. In order to have Latino citizens become more involved, politicians need to give them something that appeals to them (Santana, 2012).

In the 2000 presidential race, for example, both parties made substantive and symbolic outreach to Latinos; each built their potentially winning set of states in the electoral college on expectations for Latino turnouts in specific states. The presumption of these activities is the existence of a “Latino vote” or, more generally, a “Latino politic” that can be organized to express a Latino voice in political outcomes (DeSipio, 2006).

What is the difference between the needs of older and younger Latinos? This is one of the key questions that politicians

should be asking themselves. Politicians should not assume that all Latinos in their district or state have the same needs and desires and will be responsive to common jargon. Santana's response to these questions is that younger Latinos want a decent education at an affordable rate, and they want to make money. Some of them may not be worried about social issues; they want to be able to make a living, buy a car, house, and have money in their pockets (Santana, 2012). Officials need to speak about jobs and education for the Latino community, in order for more Latinos to become involved in politics. For example, since this new generation's elders might not have a valid social security number, it means that the family is not eligible for many benefits that would allow their children to pursue higher education. This can leave the children feeling hopeless. Furthermore, given the struggles that these families must overcome, their children end up feeling as though they are not meant to engage in higher education. With neither political party able to agree on a compromise version of the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, first introduced in the Senate in 2001), in June, 2012, the Obama administration issued a policy directive that would suspend deportation for some 800,000 undocumented youth. This policy would give students who grew up in the United States a chance to contribute to our country's interest, by serving in the U.S. armed forces, or pursuing higher education, even though they were not born in the United States.

When young people feel discouraged, this vicious cycle of low participation continues. One way that the Latino community can prosper is by obtaining higher education and learning about the obstacles that hinder their political empowerment. In this manner they can contribute to society in ways other than manual labor, like the generation before them.

Latino Non-Citizens

In Latino communities, Latino non-citizens (otherwise known as undocumented Latinos) tend to be concentrated in particular geographic areas. Currently, one half of the Hispanic pop-

ulation is located in three states: California, which accounts for twenty-eight percent (28%); Texas, accounting for nineteen percent (19%); and Florida, accounting for eight percent (8%) of the Latino population (U.S Census, 2010). In general, Latinos have an increased voice in politics as their population grows. Some laws in places like California cater to Latinos because they constitute a large percentage of the population. Research conducted in the aforementioned three states found that Latino citizens are less likely to vote when approached by a non-Latino individual, because Latinos feel as if they cannot identify or do not share commonalities (e.g. language) with non-Latinos. However, if approached by a Latino candidate or political organization, Latinos were more likely to have participated in elections (Rodriguez, Saenz, Menjivar, 2008). Those members of society who are not citizens and do not have the right to vote have an advantage when they are concentrated in geographical areas. This concentration allows them more opportunity to raise questions about democracy and representation in the United States (Song, 2009).

Lisa Garcia Bedolla stated that California has twelve municipalities in which the non-citizen populations make up more than fifty percent (50%) of the adults living there; these people work, pay taxes, and have children in school, but they do not have a say in who represents them in government. Since Latinos make up such a large portion of non-citizen populations in the United States, any changes in their involvement would have an important impact on the political process (Bedolla, 2009).

For other states where Latinos reside in smaller proportions, Latinos have a lower overall participation rate than the general public. This is because there are too few to constitute a majority vote. However, ineligibility to vote does not completely remove these non-citizens from the electoral process. Coalition politics is one of the methods used by the underrepresented population. The Latino population may have to ally with the African American community, because they share low socioeconomic status and/or other inequalities. Latinos have to create this alliance in order to have some of their political reforms play in their

favor. Non-citizens do not directly enjoy voting power, but can participate in campaigns and voice their political opinion with family and friends (Leal, 2002). They can contribute by wearing a button, attending a public meeting, writing a letter to a politician, going to rallies, donating money, and volunteering time for a campaign (Leal, 2002).

Latinos may face particular obstacles in obtaining the resources to take action. Non-citizens often have difficulty learning the English language. This makes political activities much more difficult (Merico-Stephens, 2005). Some non-citizen Latinos may already have a negative impression of government based on past experiences, so it is important that they have positive results from other community activities besides those solely based on politics. David L. Leal writes that when non-citizen Latinos think about politics, they are more aware of events occurring in their native countries (2008). According to recent cross-national survey data (Borowski, Reed, Scholl, & Webb, 2010), levels of perceived political efficacy (the extent to which people believe they can exert influence over the political system) were lower throughout Latin America than in the United States.

Many Latinos are able to maintain strong ties with their place of birth, and constant immigration has continued to make ethnic communities in the United States. These communities provide a barrier against complete assimilation into typical American culture, and encourage the preservation of Hispanic culture. Language, traditions and concerns about the new culture could cause Latinos to view their participation as inappropriate, because they do not feel connected to the American way of life (Leal, 2008). In urban areas such as Southwest Detroit, Latinos see a part of their country of origin in their neighborhood. For example, the Spanish writing on businesses tells you that you have arrived in Mexicantown. Latinos in this neighborhood use local markets called "Mercados," see schools named after César Chávez, and find others who speak Spanish.

Although the law does not allow the voice of non-citizen Latinos to be heard through voting, non-citizen Latinos can still

contribute money or time to political campaigns as a form of participation. Another factor that contributes to low voter turnout is apathy, a low sense of political efficacy, and/or a distrust of politics because of experiences in their country of origin. "When listeners view radio personalities as personal friends and spend most of their day listening to them, this creates a very dynamic and influential relationship" (Leal, 2002).

One of the ways Latinos are gaining political agency is through the media: specifically, Spanish language radio. Politicians utilize this medium to reach the non-citizen Latino population. When these radio personalities begin to discuss political matters, their listeners are even more inclined to participate and be inspired to become involved. Furthermore, these radio personalities can turn otherwise marginalized issues into issues of inspiring relevance that would affect the Latino community and make non-citizens want to take action (Leal, 2002).

The major factor in examining electoral participation is citizenship status. "It is estimated that some thirty-five to forty percent (35-40%) of voting age Latinos are non-citizen, automatically excluding them from possible participation in the franchise" (García, 2002). If this percentage of Latinos is not being heard, the Latino public opinion is not working in their favor. Research conducted by García promotes the use of public schools as a training ground to become a good American citizen. Specifically, this author advocates for a grant program to be established that will support community organizations and local government. This grant will promote the value of naturalization and will assist applicants with the administrative requirements of citizenship. Another suggestion is a modified form of the current efforts to make noncitizens eligible to vote. This proposal would first allow non-citizens to vote only for the five-year period during which they are ineligible to naturalize. After that, they would have the ability to become naturalized citizens (Garcia, 2002).

Mobilization is critical to Latino voter turnout. In the past, major political parties have excluded Latinos from "get-out-the-vote" efforts (Rodriguez, Saenz, Menjivar, 2008). However, some

choose to increase Latino political participation by the use of surveys and door-to-door methods; these methods give Latinos a feeling of being more involved. Latinos are more likely to use multiple forms of political activity to exert influences, including organizational activities such as protests, marches, demonstrations, and boycotts (Hero, Garcia, 2000). Socioeconomic status (SES) has been linked to participation in politics. If Latino citizens and non-citizens were provided with the opportunities or the proper tools to be educated, there would be more political involvement.

Political Participation

There are many factors that affect how, why, and when individuals decide they want to become politically involved. According to Lisa Garcia Bedolla, socioeconomic status is one of the variables affecting Latino political involvement. Education, income, and occupation are linked to the likelihood of whether or not Latinos will vote. Those Latinos with more education, higher incomes, and those who have professional occupations are more likely to vote than those who are less educated, poor, or do manual labor (Bedolla, 2009).

Latinos have lower voter registration rates than whites or blacks, yet because about forty percent (40%) of the Latino community consists of non-citizens, many are ineligible to vote. Mexican immigrants in particular have some of the lowest rates of naturalization of any immigrant group in the United States (Bedolla, 2009). Furthermore, the U.S. Census reports that between 1968 and 2008 the highest percentage of voters were gainfully employed. Bedolla states that, "Higher socioeconomic status individuals have more resources in terms of personal capacity, time, and flexibility; they can use to help toward paying the 'cost' of engaging in politics" (2009). It is more likely that members of society with a higher income will contribute to political campaigns, than those who are living paycheck to paycheck. It is less likely that a blue-collar worker will have the time or capacity to be involved in politics than those with leisure time and more income. Income is not, however, the only factor that influences Latino political participation.

Voting age also plays a role in Latino political participation. Figure 2., below, provides U.S. Census data (2009) indicating that only forty-two percent (42%) of Latinos are eligible to vote by age and citizenship; thirty four percent (34%) are unable to vote because they do not meet the minimum age requirement, and the remaining twenty-four percent (24%) are adult immigrants who are not eligible to vote because they do not have citizenship. This data confirms the fact that the Latino population is younger and a larger share are unable to vote than the general population.

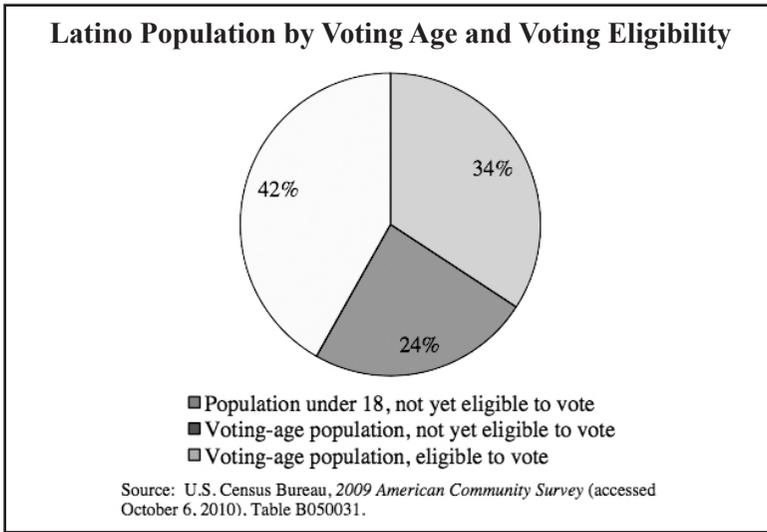


Figure 2: Latino Population by Voting Age and Voting Eligibility (2009)

CONCLUSION

Today, there should be greater public awareness of Latino political participation, because this community makes up a large and growing percentage of the U.S. population. The research reviewed suggests that Latinos lack political engagement because of age, income, education and citizenship status, which prevents many from voting. Other related factors stemming from their cultural and historical background may include a lack of English language skills, greater interest in the politics of their country of

origin and a general mistrust of government. Little research has focused on ways to improve voter turnouts in the Latino community, however, there are several organizations that are aware of this issue and are trying to address the problem. The Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) is committed to empowering Latinos and other minorities by increasing their participation in the American democratic process. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) is the nation's leading Latino legal civil rights organization, promoting social change by educating the community about employment, immigrant rights, and political access. The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEAO) is a non-profit organization that facilitates the full participation of Latinos in the American political process, from citizenship to public services. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) has a mission to improve the economic conditions, education, political influence, housing, health, and civil rights of the Hispanic population of the United States. More qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted in this area, because Latinos are projected to become the majority population of several states within the next decade.

I plan to expand my review of literature and conduct interviews in Southwest Detroit, which has a population of 47,902, or about fifty-seven percent (57%) of the total population. According to Data Driven Detroit, that percentage is predicted to continue to grow in the coming years (2010.) As the United States' ethnic diversity continues to surge, it is important to recognize the potential contributions of the Latino-American population.

The low rate of political involvement is a problem that I believe can be addressed by 1) improving the Latino community's English skills, and 2) creating inclusive programs that teach the importance of voting. This will help Latinos feel more involved in politics and would encourage them to fight for policies oriented toward their specific needs. More research needs to be conducted in the area of Latino participation, in order to spread the awareness that Latinos can have an influence on public policy. I plan to interview Latino residents, non-Latino residents, and public of-

ficials in Southwest Detroit regarding their own political engagement. The danger exists that non-participation will be mistaken for consent in politics. Everyone has a right to participate in the political decisions that affect them; Latinos just need to know how to exercise this right effectively.

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