

EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS:

The Quest for Latino Political Participation in America

“A recurring nightmare among those who hold that democracy depends upon...free, fair, frequent, and meaningful elections is that we will hold an election in this country someday soon and no one will come to cast a ballot.”

- Jack Dennis (1991, p.23)

Although an exaggeration of the repercussions of voter apathy, Mr. Dennis’s statement holds an element of prophecy. There is a well-documented history chronicling the struggle for the enfranchisement of all citizens with the right to vote. The justice and reform impulse of the civil rights movement smashed the stronghold that white male America had on the political system with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Seemingly, the country had journeyed to the gates of equality for all citizens. “It comes a real shock ... that 120 million of those eligible may not exercise the right to vote” in the upcoming presidential election (McCarthy, 1998, p.7).

Within America’s group of non-voters, there is a clear picture that certain sub - groups are represented at uneven levels (Conway, 1991). One such group, Latinos, is the most rapidly increasing population in the United States. It is estimated that by the year 2010, Latinos will move past African-Americans as the country’s largest distinctive ethnic minority group (Edmonston and Passel, 1992). Considered an “invisible population” for generations, Latinos, are priming for political success based on this population explosion (Garcia, 1997, p.8). However, as Garcia (1997) notes, “Latinos participate...in voter registration and turnout 10 - 30 percent lower than do Anglos” (p.31).

These two phenomenon, Latino population explosion and traditionally low rates of voter registration and turnout, leave Latino leaders with a dilemma. Eager to seize the potential political benefits of a larger population, leading Latinos must devise an effective plan of action to incorporate this population into the American political system. There have been efforts in the past by the Center for the Study of the American Electorate to increase voter turnout but “these

changes have had little impact” (McCarthy, 1998, p.7). Despite changes in voting registration and procedures, such as the extension of the Voting Rights Act in 1992 to provide for BI lingual election materials and the motor-voter law, Latino voter registration and turnout continues to lag behind “at levels significantly below those of the white population“ (de la Garza and DeSipio, 1997, p.72).

My research is an attempt to arrive at a better understanding of the factors that inhibit Latino voting and political participation. First, the literature and subsequent data is representative of the three largest Latino subgroups in the United States - Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans. Through examination of socioeconomic and sociodemographic factors, psychological and cultural factors, citizenship issues, and structural factors, I hope to create a picture of the barriers to political participation for Latinos. To support the data and provide a real life element to my quest, I will conduct several informal interviews with Latinos. Finally, I hope to arrive at a plan of action to aid Latinos in transcending their barriers.

Socioeconomic and Sociodemographic Factors

The socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics of Latinos in the United States are an important area to examine when investigating the political participation of the population. As Chris Garcia (1997) explains in Pursuing Power: Latinos and the Political System:

"Latinos as a whole (and each national-origin group with a few exceptions) exhibit a general pattern of socioeconomic characteristics that indicates their disadvantage...Latinos tend to have lower incomes than do non-Latino whites, higher rates of unemployment and poverty, lower level of educational attainment, live in more dilapidated housing, and are disproportionately concentrated in the service and labor sectors...the relative paucity of these resources puts Latinos at a disadvantage in employing their socioeconomic resources for political purposes." (p.8 & 9).

Several Studies have illustrated the correlation between higher socioeconomic level and increased political participation. Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) demonstrated the direct relation between higher income and educational levels and increased voter turnout in Latinos. Arvizu and Garcia (1996) examined the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) and strengthened the Calvo and Rosenstone research by asserting that higher incomes, increased education, and stable employment all contributed to increases in voting among Latinos” (pp.116

& 117). It seems quite evident that the impetus for increased Latino political participation lies, at least initially, in addressing the population's socioeconomic status.

Other scholars have chosen to focus on a combination of socioeconomic factors and sociodemographic factors, “which show that low income, low levels of education, and relative youth are significant factors explaining diminished levels of Latino political involvement” (Hritzuk and Park, 2000, p.152). Arvizu and Garcia (1996), and Hero and Campbell (1996) connected age and gender, along with socioeconomic factors, in their quest to find answers to low levels of Latino political participation. Arvizu and Garcia found that “overall, age is the most salient indicator for predicting turnout...given the relatively young age of this cohort, such lack of upward mobility does not bode well for predicting efficacious individuals, as higher socioeconomic levels are positively correlated with turnout” (p.122).

The relative youth, coupled with lower incomes and lower levels of education have proven to be formidable barriers to the entrance into the political arena for Latinos. The Latino population is the youngest population in the United States (U.S. Census of the Bureau, 1991). The median income for Latinos, as of 1993, was 70 percent of that of non - Latino households, the unemployment rate was 12 percent compared to 7 percent for non Latinos, and the high school dropout rate was 35 percent compared to 9 percent for whites (Montgomery, 1993). The combined effect of this takes a heavy toll on Latinos, pushing them into the shadows of anonymity.

Psychological and Cultural Factors

It is my belief that there has developed a set of psychological and cultural factors that play an active role in keeping Latinos from the voting booths and other forms of political participation. According to de la Garza and DeSipio (1997), “ low levels of electoral participation have a tendency to be self perpetuating...once the perception arises that Latinos do not vote, candidates, campaigns, and parties have no reason to reach out...without outreach many new voters in these communities are not socialized into the political system and become chronic nonvoters” (pp.98 & 99). If there is a perception, by Latinos that these politicians do not come to their communities they will develop these anti political views. Garcia (1997) proposes there are

“conventional psychological reasons” for the participation gap between Latinos and Anglos (p.35). He lists them as:

1. The cultural views of Hispanics
2. Feelings of cynicism and alienation toward a hostile government.
3. Feelings of disinterest or apathy due to a history of exclusion.
4. A relatively greater lack of cognitive knowledge about public affairs.

I have conducted personal interviews that will support the impact that psychological and cultural factors have on participation. I realize that there is that fine line of “victim blaming” that I am approaching. However, my mission is to examine the many factors that contribute to low political participation of Latinos and their personal attitudes have some impact. There is a definitive connection between the formation of how Latinos view politics and the socioeconomic and sociodemographic reality in which they live.

Citizenship Issues

The citizenship of Latinos is, as Garcia (1997) puts it, “the major confounding factor in examining Latino electoral participation...between a third and 40 percent of Hispanics are non - citizens, and this greatly influences voting statistics” (pp.31 & 32). Since 1965, there have been high rates of immigration and low rates of naturalization, which has "coalesced to produce a large share of the Latino adult population that is ineligible to vote or participate in other political activities requiring United States citizenship” (DeSipio, 1996, p.194). In 1994, the rate of Latino adults that were non - citizens was 44 percent, compared to 6 percent for whites and 5 percent for blacks (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Table 4A). There has been a siphoning of the potential political power of Latinos de la Garza and DeSipio (1997) point out that in the recent past the number of Latino non - citizens actually “exceeded the numbers of Latinos who voted” (p.109).

Somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of Latino adults are foreign born, thus the impact they have on the characteristics of the population is significant (de la Garza and DeSipio, 1997) According to statistics in the LPNS, non - citizens were young, Spanish - speaking adults with low levels education (Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, 1994). These characteristics lend themselves to lower paying jobs and higher rates of unemployment, which can translate into low

political participation. If Latino immigrants are able to emancipate themselves from their socioeconomic and sociodemographic shackles, “ they are statutorily excluded from most electoral participation because of non-citizenship” (de la Garza and DeSipio, 1997, p.194).

Structural Factors

Socioeconomic and sociodemographic factors, psychological and cultural factors, and citizenship issues all play a role as barriers to political participation in Latino communities but “there are other external factors that are equally relevant and that were already present in the institutions of Anglo society” (Moore and Pachon, 1985, p.174). De la Garza, Menchaca, and DeSipio (1994) illustrate “ Seven Major Structural Changes” that have occurred in the American political system and affected the Latino community (pp. 110 & 111):

1. The decline of political parties and, at the community level, of local partisan ethnic clubs or organizations.
2. The decline of partisan competition in many races, which reduces partisan mobilization efforts, the consequences of which are felt particularly by those less familiar with the American electoral system (i.e. the naturalized immigrant and the traditionally marginalized native - born citizen).
3. The rise of candidate - centered campaigns run by consultants in dependent parties.
4. The increase in VRA - produced, safe, uncompetitive, ethnically homogenous districts. These districts usually produce intense competition only when they are initially established or when they become vacant.
5. The increasing reliance on campaign technology that allows candidates to target their message so that it reaches only those registered voters most likely to vote and reduces outreach to communities that have not voted at high rates in the past.
6. The use of direct - democracy ballot strategies such as initiatives, referenda, constitutional amendments, and bond authority, which make the vote increasingly complex, combined with the increase in the number of elective offices, particularly for ambiguously titled special districts.

7. The increasing diversification of the electorate, accompanied by extending ethnic - specific voting protections, including bilingual electoral information and districting guarantees to traditionally excluded groups such as Asians, Native Americans, and Latinos.

They point out that only the seventh change “enhances minority participation...this positive effect is surely overshadowed by the dampening effect on electoral participation of the other six” (p.111). In particular, the authors examined the VRA - produced districts and realized that instead of creating a climate that is open and friendly to new voters, it has created safe districts for incumbents. The end result is new electorates not being socialized into the political system and a “condemnation to political limbo” (de la Garza, Menchaca, and DeSipio, 1994, p.112).

Prejudice and discrimination continue to play a significant role in the barring of Latinos from the political system. Hispanic looking voters have been subjected to tougher identification requirements than the non-Hispanic registrants in past elections (Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, 1988, p.72). Many potential voters may be hesitant to march toward the polls upon hearing this type of harassment.

Interviews

All of the interviews I conducted were informal conversations with individuals. The conversations centered on voter registration, voting, and perceptions on the political system by Latinos. Again, this was not a formal research attempt but rather an informal exploratory effort. My ultimate goal was to get “to the streets” and see what real people have to say. What follows is a summary of my interviews.

Interview with Maria Segarra

She is a 20 year old, 4th semester nursing student. I explained my interest in Latino political participation and she agreed to speak with me. I asked her if she was registered to vote. She answered “no”. I asked her if there was any particular reason. “ Basically, I have no interest in politics. I see politicians on TV and it seems like they are all crooked, delivering promises they have no intention of keeping”, she responded. “ I am so busy with school and work. I just can’t see myself wasting my little bit of time on something that really doesn’t mean anything”, she explained.

I asked Maria if she knew of any of her family members that voted. “ Truthfully, I think my aunt in Pennsylvania is real big into politics but I am not sure. I know that my father and older sisters don’t vote. They’re all too busy working and raising their families”, she responded. “I don’t really know anyone, except maybe my aunt, who is into politics.” I mean just look at how things are for people in this city (Hartford). If politicians did something that helped us out, then maybe more people would get into voting and politics”, she added.

Interview with Edgardo Figueroa

Edgardo is of Mexican heritage. I met him at Southern Connecticut State University.

He is a 24 year old, 1st year MSW student. He did not know whether or not he was registered to vote, thus he has never voted. “I think I am supposed to be registered to receive financial aid. So, maybe I am registered but I have never voted. I just don’t have the time to focus on the issues right now. I know later on I will get into voting and maybe other areas of politics”, he explained. I asked him how he felt about politics in general. “Well, I know voting is a right that many people fought hard for but it’s like everyday I feel like what’s the point. Politicians seem so dirty

and never actually help those who really need it. Just from this year in school, I have learned how tough so many people have it, especially minorities, because of the system. Politicians control that”, he responded.

I asked him if anyone in his family voted and/or is politically active. “No, they don’t vote and never get involved in politics. My father is paranoid that the government is out to get him. Like with the census this year, I had to almost force him to fill it out. He says that he works hard for his money and he doesn’t want the government coming up with some reason to take more of his money”, he responded. “You know, I would like to see some color up in those offices at the capitol. Hey, maybe if we saw more Latino and Black people, we would trust enough to vote more”, he added.

Interview with James Flores

James is of Puerto Rican heritage. I have known him for several years now from the public school system. He is a 45-year-old paraprofessional for the Windham Public School System. James is very active in the politics of Windham. One could say he is a “thorn in the rear” of local politicians. He always votes and is active in Latino politics.

I asked him to explain his perception of why Latinos have low levels of voting. "They don’t have representation," he answered. I asked him to explain. “Basically, most of the politicians are Anglos, who don’t care about our issues. That’s why I feel the need to let them know that someone is paying attention. Most Puerto Ricans and other Latinos think that politics are for Anglos, they don’t really see faces like theirs making decisions. I think that those Latinos who are in politics have let their people down. The people see this and feel like there’s no hope. What can we do? I talk to Latinos all the time about taking control and using their power of voting and organizing”, he explained. “But the other thing is that people are afraid of the government. They think that by making too much noise, they will lose what little bit they do have. For Puerto Ricans, we know what the U.S. government has done in Puerto Rico in Vieques and all over the island. I can’t blame them for being scared”, he added.

I asked James what he thought would help. “You want to run for office here in Willimantic? I’ll help you. That’s one thing we need. Someone well known in the community to get things going. See for me, I don’t speak English well enough but someone like you could do it”, he added. I

explained to him that I was not Latino and couldn't speak Spanish. "Ah, but you look Spanish and have worked in this community with our kids. People trust and respect you. They look up to you. That's all they need. I can help with the Spanish", he explained. I finished by letting him know I would consider it.

Interview with Margarita Garrido

Margarita is of Peruvian heritage. I went to college with her and ran into her at the voting booths while voting on the school budget. She is a 26-year-old attendance officer in the Windham School System. This happened to be her first time voting and she was excited. So much so, that she had trouble exiting the booth.

I asked her why it took her this long to vote." You know, at first I thought it was a waste of time. That politicians did what they wanted to and my vote did not matter. But I started this job and became a member in a Latino organization for educators and seemed like it was something I needed to do", she replied. I asked if she thought her job or her organization played the largest role. "Really it was just a combination of the both of them. With my job we are always talking about funding sources and writing grants and in our organization meetings we sometimes discuss political issues like bilingual education. My parents could not vote for years because of citizenship issues and they never voted when they finally did become citizens. I knew that I wanted my kids, when I have them, to see me getting involved in things like this. It's good for them", she added. "The parents of the students I service, they don't have it like I do." It's tough to get them to make meetings concerning their child's status in school. How can we expect to get them to come here and vote? Yeah it would be good but let's be realistic, they so much more to worry about", she answered.

Interview with Reinaldo Rivera

Rey is the brother of an ex-girlfriend of mine. I have known him for seven years. I ran into him at a shopping store. He is a 24-year-old cook at the Mohegan Sun Casino. He is two classes short of an Associate's degree. I asked him if he was registered to vote. "I don't really know", he answered. I asked him what he thought about voting. "I have never voted and I see no real point to. It doesn't really matter if I vote because most politicians are slimeballs and only are into

feeding their own pockets”, he responded. I’m not gonna go out and waste my time with politics that I have no say in. With the way the government is set up it’s the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and poorer. I trying to make sure that I don’t get poorer”, he further explained.

I asked him about his family voting. “Yeah, my mother, sister, and aunt all vote. They work for the school system and are always out voting for something. I think they have to something. They don’t really say anything to me. They are just happy that I have a good job”, he replied. I asked him what he thought it would take for him to vote and pay more attention to politics. “A miracle! No, I think the biggest thing is I see so much on the news about this week's politician who screwed up. It gives people a bad taste in their mouth. Maybe some day I’ll be more into it but right now I’m busy and too scared of politicians and what they will do next.

A brief interview analysis

The one thing I got from my discussions was the sense that people are really leery of government. All of the interviewees expressed some level of fear or disappointment with politicians and/or government. There was a sense of paranoia over the government getting too much information. This fear, disappointment, and paranoia translates into an apathy or intended abstention from voting and other political forms. I also sensed that the interviewees might respond better to politics if there were more people like them in office.

It seemed that the occupation had some impact on political participation, specifically voting. Several of the interviewees spoke about the schools system and how it almost forced either themselves or family members to get involved. I particularly interested in Margarita’s involvement in her organization. Again, as with the schools, there was an environment that spawned political participation in some form. Overall, I believed I achieved what I wanted to and that was to paint a picture of Latino political perceptions and realities. As two Latent functions of the interviews, I am intrigued at the possibilities of a more formal and substantial research effort and I am even more intrigued at James Flores’s offer.

A Plan of Action

It has been established that Latinos do indeed have a low level of political participation in relation to non - Latinos. There are several causal factors that collectively impede the path way of politics for Latinos - socioeconomic and sociodemographic, psychological and cultural, citizenship issues, and structural factors. Higher levels of socioeconomic status lends itself to higher participation in the political realm. Conversely, political participation can be seen as a pathway to higher levels of socioeconomic status. This is a perplexing development. Beyond this, there needs to be a plan of action established in order to include Latinos in politics. What does the literature say?

Structural Suggestions

The first step in creating an environment conducive to higher Latino political participation, according to some scholars (Issacharoff, 1992 ; de la Garza and DeSipio, 1997), is a change in the Voting Rights Act. Since 1965, the VRA has been amended several times and has gradually moved away from the original narrow focus to eliminate obstacles to a more broad focus (Issacharoff, 1992). De la Garza and DeSipio (1997) suggest that :

“to maintain the act’s bilingual provisions...provides both a practical and symbolic need to maintain bilingual ballots...at a symbolic level, the bilingual provisions still serve as a signal that Latinos are welcome in the American political system...and the bilingual provisions continues to serve the purpose for which they were designed” (pp. 113 - 115).

As mentioned previously, de la Garza, Menchala, and DeSipiuo (1994) pointed to seven major structural changes that have damaged the Latino community. The cumulative effect of these structural barriers have placed the focus on candidates and not the voters, which simultaneously creates an environment that is not favorable to establish a social network for new electorates in the political system. So, while more Latino candidates may get elected into office, the system is such that less and less people are entering the political system.

A final area of a structural focus centers around the actual voter registration system. This debate covers the actual form, location of registration offices, the number of days a citizen must reside in a state to vote, and the closing date before a given election. Ruy A. Teixeira, in the

“Disappearing American Voter” (1992), found that reforming the registration system could potentially raise turnout levels “as high as 15 percent” (p.146). There have been changes since Teixeira’s study but there is room for continued revision.

Organizational membership and mobilization efforts

Attention to the structural barriers that impede Latino political participation is not the only area of focus. According to some scholars (Verba and Nie, 1972 ; Diaz, 1996), there is direct link to organizational membership and higher rates of political participation.

Organizational affiliation can be “another way to close the gap between Latino and non - Latino participation rates (Diaz, 1996, p.157). He argues that his research has provided the impetus for a “strong argument for support from government, foundations, and the Latino community itself for non - profit organizations that encourage Latino membership and participation” (p.170).

Involvement in community, state, and/or national organizations could facilitate the role of centralizing concerns, linking Latinos to the system, and eventual political participation. These organizations could serve as a social network. According to Hritzuk and Park (2000), “ Latinos embedded in a politically active social network...are more likely to engage in higher levels of political activity...a politically active social network acts as abridge to the American political system” (p.161). In my interviews, the theme of involvement in the school system and, in the case of Margarita Garrido, an professional Latino organization lead to more political involvement.

Another area of focus, not unrelated to organizational participation suggestions, is the practice of mobilization. “The mobilization of voters, especially ethnic voters, is one of the most important aspects of electoral success” Wrinkle et al., 1996, 145). Analyzing data from the LPNS, they were able to link mobilization to higher levels of political participation. Other scholars have supported the mobilization concept that “people participate in electoral politics because someone encourages or inspires them to take part” (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, p.161) and it has “a statistically and substantively large influence on voter turnout” (Goldstein, 1994, p.15).

de la Garza and DeSipio (1993) pose that the absence of Latino mobilization is a major cause of Latino voter turnout. They argue that as different political players and Latino leaders, including elected and non - elected community members, reach out to Latinos their efforts “will

translate into higher levels of political participation” (pp. 115 & 116). Verba and Nie (1972), found that there was long term correlation to higher rates of African - American political participation and the civil rights movement. Thus, as Latinos mobilize for today, they assure a high probability for political participation for tomorrow.

Latinos have proven to be a powerful force when they are mobilized for particular issues. One such instance occurred in California in the 1998 June 2 primary (Goodno, 1998). Latino voters helped nominate four Latino candidates for statewide office and to defeat the anti - labor proposition 226. Proposition 226 would have required unions to receive annual written permission from their members before applying a portion of dues to political activities. Labor felt that this proposition would limit the power of the unions and increase the power of big business. The important aspect to note is that labor spent \$23 million on massive media advertisement and mobilization campaigns. Many Latinos, who make up a great percentage of the labor sector and are members of unions, received the information loud and clear. The result was an overwhelming execution of their political potential as proposition 226 was denied. There is history of Latino mobilization efforts but they need to extend beyond singular events.

Citizenship Issues

As previously mentioned, some 30 - 40 percent of the Latino population is excluded from political participation on the basis of citizenship status. This exclusion of nearly half of the Latino population from the political arena should be seen as a primary area of focus for Latino leaders. The only group completely immune from citizenship issues is Puerto Ricans, thus the issue moves across most subgroups. De la Garza and DeSipio (1997) suggest a two step approach - “ naturalization and non-citizen voting.”

Naturalization of immigrants is not a new phenomenon in the United States. While the contemporary position of the federal government is that naturalization is a voluntary act, de la Garza and DeSipio (1997) note that “from the 1870’s to the 1910’s...local governments and political machines moved immigrants to citizenship with hardly a second thought” (p.117) and the federal government was able to maintain its distance (DeSipio, 1993).

DeSipio and Alegre (1992) point to a study of Latino immigrants by the NALEO Educational Fund (1989) to illustrate that most immigrants plan to remain in the United States

and desire citizenship. The problem seems to be a lack of understanding of the process of naturalization. As a remedy, de la Garza and DeSipio prescribe that community organizations, local governments, and public schools should play a stronger role in the process (p.118).

The second step of the de la Garza and DeSipio approach is a change in the effort to make non-citizens eligible to vote (p.118). They are suggesting that non-citizens be allowed to vote for the five-year period in which non-citizens are statutorily ineligible to naturalize. After the five - year period, non-citizens would no longer be allowed to vote as a non-citizen but would be able to naturalize and gain voting rights that way. De la Garza and DeSipio also propose, for non-citizens who can demonstrate consistent voting habits, an exemption from the naturalization exam on the basis that “the exam is designed to test good citizenship...voting is an equally good measure of commitment and understanding of the American system (p.118).

Their suggestions offer an interesting approach to include this population of “missing” Latinos and it warrants further investigation. Considering the magnitude of the impact that naturalization would have on the Latino population, it is quite evident that leading Latinos and candidates in Latino districts, would do themselves great service by addressing citizenship issues. It is clearly one stone to cast at the “sleeping giant” known as the Latino population.

Final Thought

A clear line has been established between the factors that act as barriers to Latino political participation. While some of the factors may exert more pressure than others, it is evident that for the majority of Latinos the factors combine to create a “weight around their ankles”. From my personal interviews, I was able to provide a “real life” perspective to the issues. Although far from substantial and scientific, the perspective can serve as motivation for more inquiry on Latino political participation.

The literature suggests that, as there are many factors at play in impeding participation, there is the need for a multiple focus approach to clearing the paths toward participation. I think the onus is on leading Latinos and those professionals that work with Latino populations, particularly social workers, help Latinos realize political participation. Understanding the distinct differences between Latino subgroups, which consequently is an area in need of study, there is a common thread that bonds them together. In order to lift the population from the shadows of the

American political system, this common thread must be woven into each subgroups thinking.
The potential collective power could truly impact the American political system monumentally.

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