

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND THE LATINO VOTE

By NALEO Educational Fund

Already the second-largest population group in the United States, the American Latino community continues to grow rapidly. Latino voting, political leadership, and influence in elections are growing as well, and still have yet to reach their full potential. This section of the report addresses increases in the Latino electorate and Latino elected officials, barriers to Latino political progress, and recommendations to ensure full Latino participation and representation in our nation's democracy.

The Latino Vote in Presidential and Congressional Mid-term Elections

The Latino vote has played a key role in determining the outcome of Presidential elections in the 21st century. Latino support in the 2000 – 2008 contests helped both George W. Bush (R) and President Barack Obama (D) win states that were critical for their respective victories. The growth and influence of the Latino vote was one of the biggest stories coming out of the 2012 Presidential election. According to an analysis by polling firm Latino Decisions, while approximately 40% of Latino voters backed President Bush in 2004, only about 27% cast ballots for Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2012, which constituted the largest partisan shift among any racial or ethnic group during that brief period.

Latino Decisions research also revealed that Governor Mitt Romney received a greater share of the non-Latino vote (which was predominantly non-Hispanic White) in the states of Colorado, Florida, Nevada and New Mexico. However, the Latino vote in those states for President Barack Obama either exceeded or significantly contributed to the President's margin of victory. In November 2012, a record number of Latinos were elected to Congress, and the Latino vote reached an unprecedented 11.2 million.

In mid-term Congressional elections, Latinos have reshaped the political landscape, both as voters and as candidates. In 2010, 6.6 million Latinos cast ballots, an 18.8% increase over 2006. The Latino vote was crucial in determining the outcome of two hotly-contested U.S. Senate races, in which U.S. Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) were victorious.

Latino Republicans also achieved several significant milestones in 2010. Nevada elected Brian Sandoval as its first Latino Governor. In New Mexico, Susana Martinez became the nation's first Latina Governor. Marco Rubio was the second Latino U.S. Senator elected in Florida's history. In the U.S. House of Representatives, the number of Latino Republicans increased from 3 to 7, including the first Latino U.S. Representatives from Idaho (Raul Labrador) and Washington (Jaime Herrera Beutler).

The NALEO Educational Fund projects continuing growth this year in the number of Latino votes cast. In 2010, the more than 6.6 million Latinos who cast votes accounted for nearly 7% of voters; in 2014, more than 7.8 million Latinos are expected to vote, making up 7.8% of the electorate.

Latino Political Leadership

In the last several decades, the number of Latino elected officials at all levels of office in the United States has also increased steadily alongside Latino population and voter participation. As of 2014, the NALEO Educational Fund’s *Directory of Latino Elected Officials* included 6,084 individuals nationwide. Figure 1ⁱ sets forth the number of Latinos in elected office at different levels of government for selected years between 1996 and 2014.

Figure 1
Latino Elected Officials in Local, State, and Federal Office for Selected Years

Year	Federal Officials	State Officials (includes statewide officials and legislators)	County and Municipal Officials	Education Officials	Others (judicial and law enforcement, and special district officials)
1996	17	162	1,653	1,240	671
2001	19	204	1,846	1,412	579
2006	25	244	2,151	1,836	876
2011	26	260	2,282	2,173	1,109
2014	31	303	2,313	2,322	1,115

In 1996, Latino elected officials served in 34 states, and by 2014, Latino officials represented constituents in 43 states.

Latinas have made significant strides in political leadership, as the Latina share of all Latino elected officials grew from 24% in 1996 to 35% in 2014. Latinas are also outpacing all women in their representation in higher offices. For example, 18.2% of all U.S. Representatives in the 113th Congress are female; however, 32.1% of Latinos presently serving in the House are women. According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, women hold 20.8% of the nation’s state senate seats and 25.5% of the state lower house seats. In comparison, women account for 27.8% of Latino state senators, and 34.7% of Latino state lower house members.

Realizing the Political Potential of Latino Growth

The Latino population grew dramatically between 2000 and 2010, reaching 50.5 million. The Latino population increase of 15.2 million exceeded half (56%) of the nation's overall growth during that period. According to the most recent figures available – the Census Bureau's Population Estimates for July 1, 2013 – there are now more than 54 million Latinos residing in the United States. The rapid growth of the Latino population is projected to continue for many years to come, as will the Latino community's political influence. By 2050, one-third of the U.S. population will be Latino.

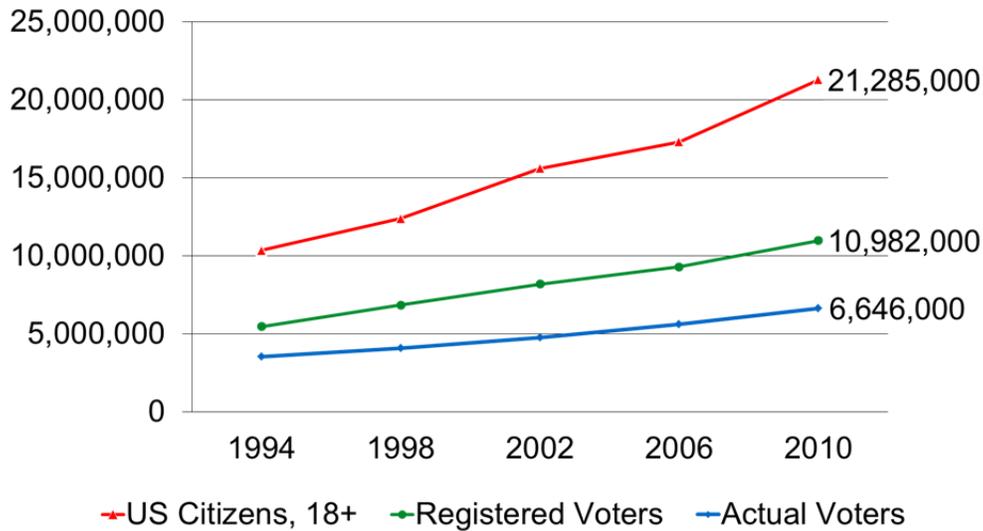
However, there are many factors that affect the extent to which Latinos will be able to realize their full political potential. First, the share of Latinos in the United States who are currently eligible to vote is disproportionately small, compared to other population groups – 44.6% in 2012, compared to 79.0% of non-Hispanic whites, 69.7% of African Americans, and 53.3% of Asian Americans. The Latino population's youthfulness is a primary reason – one-third of Latinos are under age 18 – and Latino youth represent a significant segment of the future American electorate. As of 2012, 23.1% of U.S. citizens younger than 18 were Latino. About 2,000 Latino U.S. citizens turn 18 and become eligible to vote every day.

In addition, the relatively high rate of non-citizenship among Latinos prevents many Latino adults from being able to fully participate in the political process. According to Department of Homeland Security statistics, about 4 million Latino legal permanent residents are eligible for naturalization, but have not yet become U.S. citizens, and they represent nearly half of the nation's total population eligible to naturalize. For this population, access to naturalization is key, but has been diminished in part by increases in the fee for the U.S. citizenship application, which has reached \$680.

Additionally, Latino adults who are eligible to vote are not yet registering and casting ballots commensurate with their numbers. Figure 2ⁱⁱ sets forth the number of eligible Latinos (U.S. citizens age 18 and over), Latino registered voters, and Latino actual voters in the last five mid-term Congressional elections.

Figure 2

Eligible Latinos, Registered Voters and Actual Voters



While the number of Latinos voting and registered to vote has increased steadily during past Presidential and Congressional mid-term elections, it is not yet keeping pace with the number of eligible voters. Figure 3ⁱⁱⁱ shows that the turnout rate of eligible Latinos in Congressional mid-term elections actually reversed its upward trend between 2006 and 2010; the same occurred between the Presidential elections of 2008 and 2012.

Figure 3

Voting by Latino Adult U.S. Citizens

Presidential Elections				Mid-Term Elections			
Year	Eligible Latinos	Actual Latino Voters		Year	Eligible Latinos	Actual Latino Voters	
		Number	% of Eligible			Number	% of Eligible
2000	13,159,000	5,934,000	45.1%	1998	12,395,000	4,068,000	46.2%
2004	16,088,000	7,587,000	47.2%	2002	15,601,000	4,747,000	47.5%
2008	19,537,000	9,745,000	49.9%	2006	17,315,000	5,595,000	49.3%
2012	23,329,000	11,188,000	48.0%	2010	21,285,000	6,646,000	47.1%

Barriers to Full Participation and Representation

As much as Latino political influence has grown, structural and other barriers have prevented the Latino community from becoming full participants in the nation's democracy and from achieving fair representation in elected office. In addition to the high rates of youth and non-citizenship in the Latino community, the following are influential factors affecting Latino voter turnout and Latino candidates' electoral success.

Ongoing Enactment of Discriminatory Voting and Registration Measures: Recent trends in changes to voting law and procedures at state and local levels make it more difficult for many Latinos and other underrepresented groups to vote. Strict voter ID and proof of U.S. citizenship registration requirements, citizenship checks on already-registered voters, and reductions in early voting periods and polling places threaten to disproportionately impair the Latino vote. Whereas about 11% of all Americans lack the government-issued photo identification that a number of states have begun requiring to vote in-person, 16% of eligible Latino voters do not have such documentation.

In addition, prospective Latino voters are also more likely to lack documentary proof of citizenship. When states have scrutinized the U.S. citizenship of registered voters, the result has mostly been the needless questioning of native-born and naturalized Americans wrongly identified as non-citizens in outdated official records. In Florida, for example, nearly 60% of voters whose registration was challenged in 2012 were Latino, even though Latinos accounted for well under 20% of eligible voters in the state.

Ongoing Use of Discriminatory Redistricting Plans: In addition to making it harder to vote, some jurisdictions continue to create barriers to Latino political influence when they design new electoral districts that fail to reflect the degree of Latino-driven population growth, and fail to provide Latinos with a fair opportunity to elect the candidates of their choice. Under these circumstances, even when Latinos participate in the political process, they will not be able to effectively elect their preferred leaders. For example, in Texas, where Latinos accounted for about two-thirds of population growth from 2000 to 2010, a federal court found that the legislature's 2011 Congressional and state legislative maps intentionally discriminated against Latinos and violated the Voting Rights Act (VRA). These maps were designed so that Latinos would likely be outvoted by non-Latino in every new Congressional district gained because of the growth of the Latino community.

Diminished Legal Protections Against Discrimination in Voting: Unfortunately, more voting changes that disproportionately prevent and deter Latino voters and candidates from taking part in the political process are going unchallenged because of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2013 invalidation of part of the VRA. The Court's decision in the case of *Shelby Co. v. Holder* rendered mostly inoperable procedures which had required certain states and localities to obtain federal review of changes in voting laws and procedures before they could take effect (the "preclearance" process).

Since 2013, a number of states and localities have implemented policies that had previously been adjudged to limit, or were suspected of impairing, Latinos' political opportunities. These include the state of Texas, which put into operation a strict voter ID

law that the NALEO Educational Fund projected would make voting more difficult for an estimated 699,000 Latino Texans eligible to vote who lack state-issued identification.

In addition, both prior to and after the *Shelby* decision, many jurisdictions attempted to dilute the impact vote of Latinos and other under-represented groups by increasing their use of discriminatory at-large electoral systems. For example, in 2010, the Arizona legislature passed a law which would have added two at-large seats to the Community College Board in Maricopa County, but initially abandoned its implementation after the Department of Justice expressed concerns during the preclearance process. After *Shelby*, the state moved forward to enforce the law.

Language Accessibility of Voting and Registration: A significant number of Latino U.S. citizen adults – about 4.8 million or just over 20% – are not yet fully proficient in English, and may encounter difficulties with navigating voting and registration procedures and understanding election materials in English, which often contain complicated and confusing language about candidates and ballot measures. The VRA requires certain jurisdictions to provide language assistance to Latino voters throughout the election process, including translated materials and bilingual poll workers.

However, some jurisdictions fail to comply, and the Department of Justice has brought successful litigation against many localities. In addition, based on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), several new jurisdictions were covered by these requirements starting in October 2011, including areas that are not traditional centers of the Latino population, such as Fairfax County in Virginia, Salt Lake County in Milwaukee, and additional counties or townships in Connecticut and Massachusetts. These types of jurisdictions may need technical assistance to implement effective language assistance programs.

Lack of Outreach and Voter Engagement Targeted at Latino Community: In American political campaigns, parties and candidates tend to concentrate their voter outreach efforts on those citizens who are already actively participating in the political process. Thus, they do not make investment in the Latino community a high priority for their efforts. As a result, some Latinos become even less engaged, and do not receive the "invitation to participate" or the information needed to cast ballots. Without robust voter outreach and education to Latinos who are not yet fully engaged – "low propensity voters" – the Latino participation gap will likely persist.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A strong and enduring American democracy requires the robust participation of Latinos. Policymakers, advocates and public and private institutions should take steps to cultivate Latino voter turnout and political leadership by:

- Focusing more outreach, engagement efforts and funding on low-propensity voters, including young people and new registrants

- Investing in recruiting and developing Latino candidates, and building Latino political infrastructures that provide these candidates with access to resources to mount viable campaigns
- Modernizing and strengthening landmark federal voting rights protections, and filling in gaps in federal law with enhanced state and local measures to stop discriminatory voting policies
- Investing in civic education in elementary and secondary schools that prepares young people for active adult citizenship
- Expanding the availability of automated online registration and other innovations to increase voter registration rates
- Supporting policies that facilitate voting, such as expansion of early voting periods, and opposing legislative barriers, including strict voter ID requirements
- Ensuring that the growth of the Latino population is accurately measured and accounted for in redistricting and language assistance requirements by preserving a fully funded and mandatory ACS, as well as adequate funding for decennial Census planning and implementation
- Increasing public and private efforts to promote naturalization and assist legal permanent residents with the naturalization process, including the creation of more opportunities for Latino immigrants to study civics and English
- Implementing fundamental changes in the system of financing immigration services in order to stabilize the naturalization application fee, and exploring other options to make the naturalization more affordable for all legal permanent residents
- Expanding exemptions from English language testing for prospective new Americans who are elderly or disabled

END NOTES

ⁱ NALEO Educational Fund, *National Directory of Latino Elected Officials 2014, 2011, 2006, 2001, 1996*.

ⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the November Elections: 1994-2010*.

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the November Elections: 1998'-2012*.