

VOTING

The act of voting is one of the most important privileges of U.S. citizenship. Through voting, Americans are able to choose their leaders and make changes in governmental policy. The 15th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States—ratified and enacted in 1870—prohibits federal or state governments from infringing on any citizen's right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

However, the federal government also gave each state broad powers to set up its own qualifications and restrictions for voters. These restrictions vary considerably from one state to another, and within decades a plethora of insidious tactics were employed in an effort to prevent African Americans and Latino Americans from exercising their voting rights. Consequently, the voting rights of Latinos from the 19th century well into the second half of the 20th century were frequently the object of arbitrary controls inflicted by state legislatures and the will of the state majority. These restrictions were most evident in two states with fairly significant Hispanic populations. In 1894 the people of California voted to approve an English literacy requirement for California's voting booth. Because of this test, many native-born Mexican American citizens who were uneducated or whose primary language was Spanish were unable to vote. In 1901 the Texas legislature passed the poll tax, which required voters to pay \$1.75 at the voting booth, and in November 1902 Texas voters ratified the poll tax by a two-to-one margin. Such an expense was equally effective in keeping many poor Tejanos from exercising their right to vote. In effect, the poll tax was able to circumvent the rights that had been guaranteed to Tejano citizens by the 14th Amendment.

At the end of World War II, however, young Latino soldiers who had defended America on the battlefields of Europe and Asia returned home with new ideas about their rights as citizens and, in particular, about their rights as voters. The American GI Forum, founded in 1948, was organized by Mexi-

can American veterans in Texas who began to campaign vigorously to increase electoral participation of Latinos in the political arena. In an effort to get Hispanics to vote, they initiated local "pay your poll tax" drives to register Tejano voters. In California a similar phenomenon took place. When World War II veteran Edward R. Roybal ran for a seat on the Los Angeles City Council, community activists established the CSO (Community Service Organization). The CSO was effective in registering 15,000 new voters in the Latino neighborhoods of Boyle Heights, Belvedere, and East Los Angeles. With this new-found support, Roybal was able to win the 1949 election race against the incumbent Anglo councilman and become the first Mexican American since 1881 to win a seat on the Los Angeles City Council.

The Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), founded in Fresno, California, came into being in 1959 and drew up a plan for direct electoral politics. MAPA soon became the primary political voice for the Mexican American community of California. Edward Roybal, elected the first president of MAPA, would become the first Chicano representative to Congress from Los Angeles in the 20th century, in large part owing to the efforts of MAPA and the CSO.

One of the primary Latino organizations contributing to increased Latino voter registration on a nationwide level was the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), founded in San Antonio, Texas, in 1974. Reminding Latinos that the democratic process was their right and privilege, the SVREP conducted 2,200 voter registration campaigns in 14 states and initiated "Get-the-vote-out" campaigns throughout the Southwest. Because of these extraordinary efforts, Latino voter rates increased from 2 million voters in 1974 to 7.7 million in 2001.

In 1981 the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund (NALEO) was established to promote the integration of Latino immigrants into American society and encourage them to become citizens so that they might participate in the electoral process. The efforts of MAPA, SVREP, NALEO, and CSO were instrumental in the dramatic increase in the Latino electorate that took place between 1960 and 2000.

On January 23, 1964, the U.S. Congress ratified the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution,

which stated that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election . . . shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax” The 24th Amendment paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on August 6, 1965. Section 2 of this act prohibited any state or political subdivision of a state from using any “standard, practice, or procedure” that would result “in denial or abridgement of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.” This act temporarily suspended California’s literacy test, which was subsequently ruled unconstitutional in 1970 by the California Superior Court. The Voting Rights Act had not included a provision prohibiting poll taxes but had directed the attorney general to challenge its use. In *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections* (1966), the Supreme Court held Virginia’s poll tax to be unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment, thus nullifying Texas’s poll tax.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave African Americans access to the voting booth in places where access had previously been denied to them and was beneficial in increasing the African American vote in the southern states. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and other Latino activist groups took note of this fact and began to lobby intensely for an extension of the Voting Rights Act for Latinos. On hearing extensive testimony about voting discrimination that had been suffered by Hispanic citizens, Congress responded to these lobbying efforts in 1975 by amending the Voting Rights Act to include provisions that affected Latinos and “minority-language citizens.” The revised act now prohibited discriminatory election devices, including both literacy tests and poll taxes. The act also required bilingual ballots in areas where a minority group exceeded 5 percent of the vote, and it safeguarded minorities against gerrymandering schemes that would dilute the power of their vote. These legislative interventions permitted the Latino voting base to expand in the years to come.

In 1960 Hispanics represented only 3.2 percent of the national population. But it was during the 1960 presidential election that the potential influence of Latinos in very close elections was first recognized and appreciated. Early in the year, “Viva Kennedy” clubs were organized by Mexican Amer-

ican activists in nine states to support the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency. When the general election was held in November, it was one of the closest in history, with Kennedy winning by a plurality of only 144,673 votes. With such a small margin of victory, many political analysts believe that the Hispanic vote helped Kennedy to win. Although Latinos made up a very small portion of the electorate, they voted in large numbers for Kennedy, who received about 85 percent of the national Hispanic vote. Even more significant was the fact that Kennedy received 91 percent of the Hispanic vote in Texas, a state with a significant Mexican American population. However, even with the Latino vote, Kennedy’s victory in Texas was by a razor-thin margin, having carried the state by only 46,000 votes. Kennedy also carried Illinois by only 9,000 votes, another state in which the Latino vote had been mobilized by the Viva Kennedy movement.

With the significant increase in the Latino population, the voting power of Latinos gradually gained in importance over a period of three decades. The table on the following page illustrates the evolution of the Latino electorate through the presidential and midterm elections from 1972 to 2002. The Latino Voting Age Population (VAP) is the number of Latinos who were qualified by age to vote in American elections. Traditionally, only a percentage of these qualified individuals actually registered to vote (second column) and the number of Latinos who actually voted was even smaller (third column).

In 1980 the SVREP drew a profile of the average Mexican American voter in the Southwest. According to this profile, the voter was an older citizen, probably foreign born, who was unable to speak English, lived in a low-income status, and lacked a formal education. These characteristics usually typify the nonvoter. The SVREP also pointed out that 85 percent of the Hispanic voters in 1980 were concentrated in nine states, which controlled 193 electoral votes. 71 percent of the 270 votes needed to win the presidency at that time.

By the time of the 1980 presidential election, Hispanic Americans had come to represent 6.4 percent of the national population, but only 56 percent of Latino residents age 18 and over were actually American citizens, and, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, only 36.3 percent of qualified Hispanic citizens were actually registered to vote. When the

**THE LATINO VOTING AGE POPULATION,
REGISTRATION AND VOTING
STATISTICS (1972–2002)**

Year	Latino Voting Age Population (VAP)	Percent of Qualified Latinos Registered to Vote	Number of Latinos Who Voted	Percentage of Latino VAP that Actually Voted
1972	5,616,000	44.4	2,103,000	37.5
1974	6,095,000	34.9	1,397,000	22.9
1976	6,594,000	37.8	2,098,000	31.8
1978	6,788,000	32.9	1,593,000	23.5
1980	8,210,000	36.3	2,453,000	29.9
1982	8,765,000	35.3	2,217,000	25.3
1984	9,471,000	40.1	3,092,000	32.6
1986	11,832,000	35.9	2,866,000	24.2
1988	12,893,000	35.5	3,710,000	28.8
1990	13,756,000	32.3	2,894,000	21.0
1992	14,688,000	35.0	4,238,000	28.9
1994	17,476,000	31.3	3,522,000	20.2
1996	18,426,000	35.7	4,928,000	26.7
1998	20,321,000	33.7	4,068,000	20.0
2000	21,598,000	34.9	5,934,000	27.5
2002	25,162,000	32.6	4,747,000	18.9

Source: Federal Election Commission Web site.
<http://www.fec.gov/pages/raceto.htm>

election took place in November, only 2,453,000 Latinos—or 29.9 percent—actually voted for president.

According to CBS and *New York Times* exit polls, the Democratic candidate, President Jimmy Carter, received more than 60 percent of the Hispanic vote. Although his Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan, received only 35 percent of the Hispanic vote, he received 80 percent of the vote in the predominantly Cuban American precincts of southern Florida. This was the beginning of a trend that would continue through all of the presidential elections into the 21st century.

In the presidential elections held between 1972 and 2000, the vast majority of the Latino electorate usually voted for the Democratic candidate. The primary exception to this trend was the Cuban vote, which began to show a distinct preference for the Republican Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Latino Voting Patterns in California

The evolution of California's Latino electorate from 1960 to 2000 is a significant event in the political arena. In 1961, after the redistricting of the Los Angeles, political boundaries took place based on the 1960 census, the Hispanic vote was essentially frag-

mented. Even the majority Chicano community of East Los Angeles was not able to send Hispanic representatives to Sacramento or Washington, D.C. Gerrymandering had split greater East Los Angeles into nine different Assembly districts, seven state Senate districts, and six different congressional districts. Most of these districts were combined with neighboring Anglo communities so that Hispanics rarely made up more than 20 percent of any one district's population. This district manipulation was effective in diminishing the Latino vote and, as a result, very few Chicano candidates were elected to state or federal positions during the next 20 years.

In the 1970 census, the Chicano population of California was tallied at 2,369,292. Although Latinos at that time made up 10.8 percent of the state's total population, their voting power was dramatically reduced by the presence of 490,892 foreign-born Hispanics, who represented 22.9 percent of the total Hispanic population. Many of these people were not citizens and were therefore ineligible for American voting privileges. This represented a significant stumbling block in electing Chicanos to public office.

In 1994 the controversial California ballot measure Proposition 187—also referred to as the “Illegal Immigration Act”—represented a challenge to all California Latinos. Proposition 187 was the first of several legislative initiatives that were directed against immigrant groups in California. Although the provisions of the proposition were specifically directed at undocumented residents of California, many Latinos saw the initiative as the hallmark of an anti-Hispanic vendetta directed at the entire Latino community. Proposition 187 aroused passions among Latino voters throughout California and led to a flurry of naturalizations and voter registrations. According to INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) statistics, a record 879,000 immigrant adults had been naturalized in California between 1994 and 1997. These new citizens led to a dramatic increase in the number of voters who had been naturalized. In 1992 foreign-born Latino voters made up only 19 percent of Latino voters in California; by 1996 this had increased dramatically to 32.9 percent.

The 1996 Presidential Election

At the time of the 1996 presidential election, the Latino voting-age population of the United States had reached 18,426,000, but only 11,209,000 of

these Hispanics were citizens qualified to vote, and of this group only 6,573,000 were registered to vote. Almost 60 percent of the Latinos registered to vote lived in four crucial states: California (2.1 million voters), Texas (1.6 million), Florida (570,000), and New York (540,000). During the 1990s, these four states held 133 electoral votes between them: California (47 votes), Texas (29), New York (36), and Florida (21). However, the number of Hispanics who actually voted in the election of 1996 was 4,928,000, representing 26.7 percent of the total Latino population. The Latino electorate voted overwhelmingly Democratic, with Bill Clinton winning 71 percent of the Hispanic votes. The Republican senator Bob Dole received only 21 percent, while 10 percent of the vote went to third-party candidates.

The Cuban vote in Florida turned out to be an important factor in Clinton's reelection. Clinton received 35 percent of the traditionally Republican Cuban American vote, a 15-percentage-point improvement over his 1992 showing. This vote helped Clinton to win the state, which no Democrat had won since 1976. In Arizona, Clinton also won 90 percent of the Latino vote, making him the first Democrat to win the state since 1948.

Many political analysts believe that the poor showing of the Republican Party in the 1996 elections was related to the anti-immigrant proposals that were sweeping the country during the mid-1990s. For Cuban, Mexican, and Central American immigrants, the passage of the so-called Welfare Law in 1996—which excluded noncitizen immigrants from many benefits—represented a personal attack on them.

The 2000 Presidential Election

In the controversial presidential election of 2000, the Democratic candidate, Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., ran against George W. Bush, the Republican candidate. Candidate Bush lost the popular vote by 539,897 votes but won the electoral vote by a razor-thin margin of 271 to 266, thus securing the presidency. Many analysts believed that the outcome of this election was influenced by events that took place in Florida's Cuban American community months earlier.







In 1999 a six-year-old Cuban boy named Elián González had been picked up off the Florida coast after his mother and other Cuban refugees died when their boat capsized after fleeing Castro's Cuba. Miami-based Cuban relatives of Elián had gained con-

trol of the young boy and campaigned vigorously to keep him from being returned to his father in Cuba. However, in April 2000, the Clinton administration enraged Miami's Cuban community when federal agents seized Elián in a dramatic predawn raid. In June 2000, after several court battles, Elián was returned to Cuba with his father. The anger directed toward Clinton and the Democratic Party caused many Cuban American citizens—both Democratic and Republican—to cast their votes for George W. Bush. Nationwide, 67 percent of Latinos cast their votes for Gore, but in Florida he received only 19 percent of the Cuban vote—and lost Florida by a mere 537 votes. Out of 802,000 Latinos registered to vote in Florida, 678,000 showed up at the polling booths. This impressive turnout was attributed to the reaction against the Clinton administration's handling of the Elián González case.

In California, the state with the largest number of electoral votes (54) and the largest number of Latino voters, the Latino population in 2000 reached almost 11 million or 32.4 percent of the total state population. However, since many in this population were under 18 or non-U.S. citizens, only 3 million of California's Hispanic residents were registered to vote, of which 1.6 million actually voted in the 2000 election, a significant increase from previous elections. Mexican Americans represented more than 77 percent of the Hispanic population in California and were largely Democratic in their party affiliation, outnumbering Latino Republicans by almost three to one (60 percent to 22 percent). Another 18 percent of the state's Latinos were either nonpartisan or registered with another party.

In 2000 New York contained the third-largest concentration of Hispanic voters, 8.2 percent of the state electorate. An estimated 603,000 Latinos were registered at the time of the 2000 presidential election and 502,000 cast ballots, representing 29.4 percent of the total Latino population. As a group, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans usually vote for Democratic candidates. In the 2000 presidential election, Puerto Ricans in New York gave Gore 80 percent of their vote, while Bush received only 18 percent. With 33 electoral votes, New York represents one of the most important states in the electoral process.

In all, 5,934,000 Hispanic voters went to the polls in the 2000 election, representing 27.5 percent of the Hispanic voting age population. Overall, ana-

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English-Spanish flyer directs voters to a Web-based voter guide.

lysts still considered the Latino turnout in the 2000 election disappointing when compared with registered voter turnout in other groups: while white (non-Hispanic) registered voters participated at a rate of 86.9 percent, African Americans voted at 85.3 percent, Asians at 83.8 percent, and Latinos at 79.3

percent. Similarly, whites led Latino registration by at least 15 percentage points.

Numerous factors contributed to the low representation of Latinos at the voting booth in 2000. One factor was that the Latino population was overwhelmingly young (representing 39.4 percent of the overall

2000 vote). More importantly, in 2000, 39 percent of the Latino voting-age population were still non-citizens and therefore ineligible to vote in the presidential election. Although naturalizations of Latinos increased dramatically during the 1990s, studies indicated that naturalized citizens were less likely to register to vote (35 percent) and less likely to vote (26 percent) than native-born citizens. Another obstacle to Latino participation in the nation's electoral process was the language barrier, complicated by the availability of bilingual ballots in some states. In the early years of the 21st century, many Latino-centered interest groups began to work diligently to overcome these obstacles and to prepare for the upcoming tide of Latino political influence.

In the past few elections Latino organizations have become actively involved in efforts to mobilize Latinos to vote by urging eligible persons to register, to vote, and to become naturalized. For many elections, such as the California gubernatorial recall election of October 2003, these efforts produced a strong Latino turnout at the polls. A similar effect was felt in 2004, when a number of organizations pushed to increase Latino voter representation in states as diverse as Illinois, Wisconsin, Florida, and New York.

The 2004 presidential election posed important issues for both political parties. Senator John Kerry, the Democratic candidate, and the Democratic Party were hopeful that Latinos would vote Democratic in as high percentages as they did in the 2000 presidential election. But Republicans also courted the Latino vote, hoping to raise the percentage of Latinos voting for Republicans toward the 50 percent mark. Both candidates, President George W. Bush and Senator Kerry, spent unprecedented sums on Spanish-language advertisements in an effort to lure Spanish-speaking voters. By the time the voting booths had closed on November 2, 2004, more than 7.6 million Latinos had voted, an increase of 1.6 million from 2000. According to one exit poll by the William C. Velásquez Institute, in 11 states, 67.7 percent of Latino voters supported Kerry. Other national polls suggested that 44 percent of Latinos had voted for Bush. In addition, two Latinos were elected to the U.S. Senate, Democrat Ken Salazar of Colorado and Republican Mel Martinez of Florida, the first Latinos to serve in the U.S. Senate since 1977.

What are the party loyalties nurtured by the Latino minority? In spite of the traditional support of Hispanics for the Democratic Party, the Latino commu-

nity as a whole cannot be characterized as a monolithic group. Across the nation, the Latino population differs with regard to their views on economic, social, cultural, and political issues; and their views cannot be allocated into convenient political compartments. Some studies reveal that a large proportion of Latinos tend to favor the Democratic Party—on economic and social issues, for example—while others favor more conservative values that are more consistent with the Republican Party on issues such as abortion, divorce, religion, and gay rights.

Latino Democrats tend to be more socially conservative than other Democrats, and Latino Republicans often take a more liberal stand on taxes and the size of government than non-Latino members of that party. Therefore, even within circumscribed political groups, Latinos are not easily represented. And although one could identify areas of consensus on issues that concern the majority of Latinos, such as education, health policies, bilingual education, and economic policies, the consensus breaks down considerably when one looks at age, national origin, and length of time in the United States. On cultural and social issues, Latinos' voting patterns cannot nicely be plotted on a statistical scale that would offer either party comfort. If there is one thing that can be predicted with accuracy in this context, it is that the "Latino voter" model is a myth. The potential for capitalizing on Latinos' voting power clearly exists; however, the impetus is likely to come from the voters and organizations representing Latinos rather than from the parties.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the Latino voter comes from a multitude of communities, with diverse cultural, economic, social, and educational experiences. The three major Latino groups are Mexicans—representing almost 60 percent of all Latinos—Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. The rest of the Latino population is dispersed among different nationalities, mostly from Central and South America. Experts point out that political candidates will have to learn the various regional, cultural, and political differences among Hispanics rather than treat them as a monolithic group.

Although Latinos live in all 50 states, the largest concentration is found in California and Texas. Latinos also make up significant minorities in New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, New Mexico, and New Jersey. The presence of a large number of eligible Latino voters in these states has tremendous poten-

tial for affecting national politics, primarily because these states control almost 70 percent of the important Electoral College votes. Politicians and analysts realize that the Latino electorate cannot be ignored and, in fact, may play a pivotal role in all future elections. Latinos are expected to number 53 million by 2020 and 97 million—roughly one-quarter of the population—by 2050. With such incredible growth rates anticipated, it is widely expected that in some areas of the country, Latinos will actually become the primary policymakers.

RELATED ARTICLES

Civil Rights; Democracy; Democratic Party; Discrimination; Mexican American Political Association; Politics, Latino; Republican Party; United States Congress; United States Presidents and Latinos.

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http://www.svrep.org/aboutsvrep/fact_sheet.html

U.S. Census Bureau.

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>

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