

Tim Wimbome/Cuartoscuro

Cruz Bustamante, one of the most important Hispanic politicians.

Hispanics Before the 2004 Elections Participation and Political Power

Graciela Orozco* Celina Bárcenas**

In early 2004 we witnessed the first skirmishes of the intense battle to occupy the Oval Office: Democratic Party primaries were determining which candidate will run against incumbent Republican George W. Bush.

* Executive director of the Mexican-American Solidarity Foundation.

** Coordinator of research and studies, Mexican-American Solidarity Foundation.

And while the contenders from both parties develop their campaign strategies and proposals to convince the greatest possible number of citizens, eyes are on the voters, their profile, their concerns and their political preferences.

In accordance with U.S. society's demographic, socio-economic and multi-ethnic diversity, the profile of the U.S. electorate presents analysts with a broad

gamut of variables that spark speculation and debate. The Hispanic sector of the electorate is no exception in this political game. Since the Latino community has become the country's largest ethnic minority, with growing influence in all spheres, the potential for the Hispanic electorate is the object of constant analysis. The 2000 presidential elections, the 2002 mid-term elections

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF ELECTORAL VOTES IN THE U.S.

STATE	ELECTORAL VOTES	STATE	ELECTORAL VOTES	STATE	ELECTORAL VOTES
Alabama	9	Kentucky	8	North Dakota	3
Alaska	3	Louisiana	9	Ohio	20
Arizona	10	Maine	4	Oklahoma	7
Arkansas	6	Maryland	10	Oregon	7
California	55	Massachusetts	12	Pennsylvania	21
Colorado	9	Michigan	17	Rhode Island	4
Connecticut	7	Minnesota	10	South Carolina	8
Delaware	3	Mississippi	6	South Dakota	3
District of Columbia	3	Missouri	11	Tennessee	11
Florida	27	Montana	3	Texas	34
Georgia	15	Nebraska	5	Utah	5
Hawaii	4	Nevada	5	Vermont	3
Idaho	4	New Hampshire	4	Virginia	13
Illinois	21	New Jersey	15	Washington	11
Indiana	11	New Mexico	5	West Virginia	5
Iowa	7	New York	31	Wisconsin	10
Kansas	6	North Carolina	15	Wyoming	3

■ States with higher number of or greater concentration of Latinos.

Source: Thomas H. Neale, *The Electoral College: How It Works in Contemporary Presidential Elections*, RS20273, Congressional Research Service (CRS), The Library of Congress, September 2003.

TABLE 2
HISPANIC CITIZENS AND VOTERS, 1996 AND 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

YEAR	HISPANICS OVER 18	CITIZENS	CITIZENS OVER 18	REGISTERED VOTERS	REGISTERED VOTERS/ CITIZENS	VOTERS	VOTERS/ REGISTERED VOTERS
1996	18,426,000	11,209,000	60.8%	6,573,000	58.6%	4,928,000	75.0%
2000	21,598,000	13,158,000	60.9%	7,546,000	57.3%	5,394,000	71.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Elections of November 2000*, February 2002, P20-542, <http://www.census.gov>.

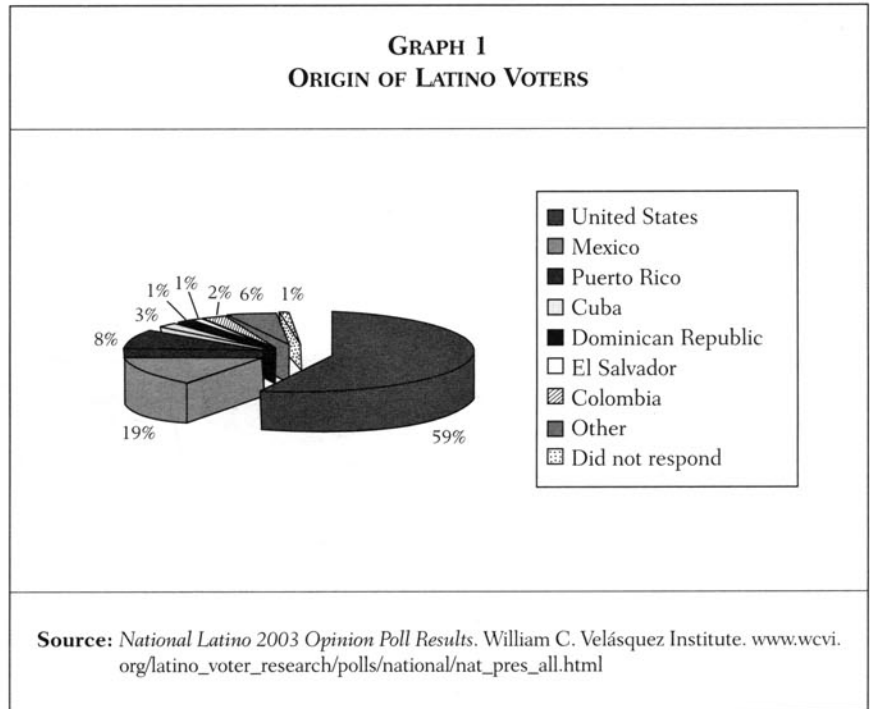
and the California state referendum in late 2003 have been valuable testing grounds providing consistent information about these voters' profile. Based on this information and specialized polls done by research centers like the Pew Hispanic Center, the Henry Kaiser Family Foundation and the William C. Velásquez Institute, in this article we will look at some issues involving Hispanics, their political participation and their potential political influence in 2004.

DEMOGRAPHICS
AND POLITICAL POWER

According to the latest Census Bureau figures, in 2002, 38,761,301 Latinos lived in the United States, a 9.78 percent increase in just two years since 2000.¹ This confirms that the community has continued to grow (from 1990 to 2000, it grew 58 percent, while the overall population increase was only 13 percent). In addition, the Latino population has spread to practically all the states of the Union, creating important enclaves in states that traditionally had no or few Hispanics. For example, North Carolina increased its Latino population by 394 percent; Arkansas by 323 percent; and Georgia by 300 percent.²

This undoubtedly has a series of political implications. Therefore, many students of the U.S. political system agree that the Latino community plays a role as an emerging electoral force worthy of consideration, with broad potential for the coming years, potential that could even be definitive in some local and state elections.

Without contradicting this, we should review some factors that condition His-



Latino organizations mobilize in different ways,
but always with the same end: translating their numerical
importance into political clout.

panics' political participation and, therefore, their political power. Given the particular characteristics of the U.S. electoral system, demographic and geographical variables are determinant in making up the Electoral College, the body which in the last analysis determines the outcome of the presidential and vice presidential election.

According to Table 1, the five states with the largest number of electoral votes are California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois; together they make for a total of 168 electoral votes. These states, in the very same order, are the ones that have the largest Hispanic populations. If we add the nine states that follow in terms of the number of Hispanic inhabitants (Arizona, New Jersey, New Mexico, Colorado, Washington,

Georgia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Nevada), the number of electoral votes would total 271, enough to decide the presidential race. This should suffice to show Hispanics' political potential and current ability to have an impact on the results in some elections. Even though the relative weight of the Latino community vis-à-vis the total population in each state is still insufficient to ensure wins by itself, it is increasingly important. Thus, in New Mexico, for example, Hispanics already make up 42.1 percent of the population and in California and Texas, 32.4 percent and 32 percent, respectively.

We also have to consider prerequisites that the U.S. system demands of its nationals in order to vote; there are three basic requirements: being 18 or

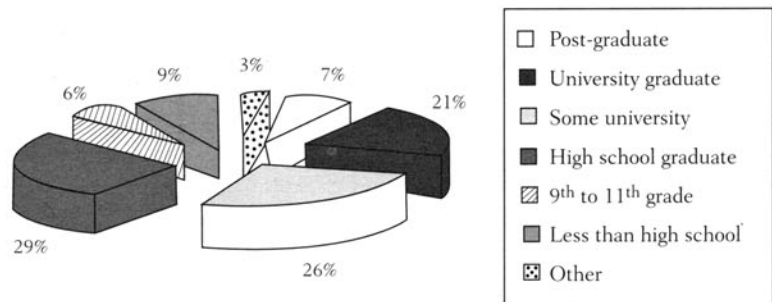
over, being a citizen of the United States (whether by birth or naturalization) and registering to vote.

Table 2 compares the figures for Latinos who complied with these voting requirements in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. It shows the variation in growth in each category. Both in 1996 and 2000, between 60 and 65 percent of Hispanics were of voting age, but only 60 percent of them were U.S. citizens. This means that in the 2000 presidential elections, only 37 percent of the 35.3 million Latinos in the U.S. fulfilled two of the three prerequisites to be able to vote. The third prerequisite, registering, limited the Hispanics even more in both elections. Lastly, as the table shows, in 2000, the Hispanic electorate came to 7.5 million, but only 5.4 million actually voted, making up only 5.3 percent of total voters in that election.

Hispanics, as an electorate, have undeniably evolved numerically. Thus, between 1972 and 2000, the number of Latinos registered to vote grew 202 percent. However, it is clear that most of the community cannot vote. About 35 percent are barred from voting because they have not yet come of age; others because they are not U.S. citizens; and many because they have not registered to vote. In addition, abstentionism is high among Hispanics, something which, if not exclusive to this community, is a matter for concern for such a numerically significant minority.

This is why the Latino organizations have carried out an intense voter registration campaign. They mobilize in different ways, but always with the same end: translating their numerical importance into political clout. Regardless of whether the elections are local or national, these organizations try to

GRAPH 2
SCHOOLING OF VOTING-AGE LATINOS



Source: *National Latino 2003 Opinion Poll Results*. William C. Velásquez Institute. www.wcvi.org/latino_voter_research/polls/national/nat_pres_all.html

Abstentionism is high among Hispanics, something which, if not exclusive to this community, is a matter for concern for such a numerically significant minority.

create awareness among Hispanic citizens about the community's political potential and the enormous opportunities that can be enjoyed if political participation makes a common front possible in the struggle to improve their quality of life in the United States.

The goal for organizations like the San Antonio-based Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) is to have 10 million Latinos registered to vote in the 2004 presidential elections.³

To achieve this goal, the SVREP not only focuses its efforts in 14 states,⁴ but has also joined together with organizations from the Midwest, the East and the Southeast to reach Latinos nationwide. This organization, founded in 1974, claims to have registered 20,000

new voters in only eight states for the 2002 mid-term elections, contributing to a record 25 Hispanic congresspersons in the 108th Congress.

We will have to wait to see if these organizations' efforts to get out the Hispanic vote in the 2004 elections meets their goal of 10 million voters and overcoming the almost 30-percent abstention rate at the polls.

PROFILE OF THE HISPANIC ELECTORATE

Recent surveys reveal the current demographic profile of Hispanic voters in the United States.⁵ Among the important characteristics are the following:

- Fifty-one percent of Latino voters are men; 49 percent are women.
- More than half the voters said they were born in the United States (Graph 1); 19 percent were of Mexican origin; and Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Salvadorans and Colombians are only a small percentage.
- Fifty-six percent have lived in the United States all their lives; 22 percent, more than 25 years; 12 percent, between 16 and 25 years; and 8 percent, less than 15 years.
- Forty-nine percent of Latino voters are between 30 and 54 years old, while one in every four (23 percent) are between 18 and 29.⁶

Many students of the U.S. political system agree that the Latino community plays a role as an emerging electoral force worthy of consideration.

- Twenty-nine percent of Latinos of voting age report having graduated from high school (see Graph 2); 26 percent said they had begun college but did not finish; 21 percent graduated from the university; this leaves 15 percent of the population with less than a high school education and 7 percent with postgraduate studies.
- Six out of every 10 Latinos of voting age are married; 24 percent are single; and 6 percent are divorced.
- Surveys show that one-fourth of Latinos registered to vote make between U.S.\$20,001 and U.S.\$40,000 a year, while 18 percent make less than U.S.\$20,000 a year.
- Sixty percent of Latino voters are registered Democrats, a historical constant, although in recent years in general people tend to vote more for

the candidate than for the party he or she represents.⁷

- Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed say they plan to vote in the next elections.
- The issues that most concern Hispanic voters are, in order of importance: education, employment and the economy, the fight against terrorism, crime and drugs, health services, discrimination, social security and taxes.⁸
- Geographically, Latino voters are concentrated in two regions, the West and the South, which include the states with the highest Hispanic populations (California, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado in the West

and Florida and Texas in the South). The Northeast, including New York and New Jersey, is also important. In the Midwest, except Illinois, where historically the Latino community has participated actively in politics, it will be necessary to wait for the new Hispanic communities that have grown dynamically in recent years to acquire more strength and begin to participate in politics and elections.

All this information shows that Hispanic voters' potential is real, as was clear in the 2002 elections and the 2003 California referendum. Undoubtedly, the Latino vote already has an impact on a local level and in close elections it can be the deciding factor. Nevertheless, we should remember that it is a new electorate. For that reason, even though increasing numbers of Latinos hold high

posts in the public and private sectors, there is still a long way to go before Hispanics mature as voters and establish electoral strategies to defend their own interests, as Afro-Americans do.

The active mobilization of the Latino vote and Hispanics' growing electoral experience bring the time closer when they will undoubtedly increase the community's political representation in elected posts. In that way, the community will have greater access to positions of power where the decisions that affect it are made. ■■■

NOTES

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Hispanic Population Reaches All-Time High of 38.8 Million, New Census Bureau Estimates Show," 18 June 2003, http://www.census.gov/Pressrelease/www/releases/archives/hispanic_origin_population/001130.html

² United States Hispanic Leadership Institute, *The Almanac of Latino Politics 2002-2004* (Chicago: United States Hispanic Leadership Institute, 2002).

³ Southwest Registration Education Project, *10-4 Campaign*, <http://www.svrep.org>.

⁴ Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and Washington.

⁵ William C. Velásquez Institute, "National Latino Voters. 2003 Opinion Poll Results," http://www.wcvi.org/latino_voter_research/polls/national/nat_pres_all.html

⁶ Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation, *National Survey of Latinos: The Latino Electorate*, 2002, <http://www.pewhispanic.org>

⁷ New Democrat Network and Bendixen & Associates, *The Hispanic Electorate*, May 2002, <http://www.bendixenandassociates.com/polls.html>

⁸ Ibid.