

# Hispanics in the U.S. Congress

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Larry Downing/Reuters

Hispanic or Latino federal legislators have won an important place in the last 30 years among the ethnic identities with political representation in the United States.<sup>1</sup> While it is important to take into consideration political scientist Robert Dahl's statement that the idea that the U.S. is a racial melting-pot is more myth than reality,<sup>2</sup> it cannot be denied that the politically strongest and most distinctive sub-cultures among the country's numerous ethnic groups

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have been able to integrate into the general culture and political life thanks to the voluntary and necessary rapid integration of immigrants and their children into the society they live in.

This legislative group now exercises national leadership partly because

of the continual participation and organization, above all in elections, of different Latino groups with a local, regional and national presence. This political participation reflects the joint work of legislators and interest groups; it also signifies an advance in the forg-

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ing of agreements about common ideas and goals, as well as the acceptance of both actors of the suppositions upon which the play of power in the U.S. polyarchy is based, according to which participating means accepting certain beliefs about the role of authorities and the effectiveness of government and the regimen in dealing with social problems.

Thus, these legislators do their jobs and react to these suppositions and to the pressure that interest groups constantly bring to bear during the legislative process. Although the legislators defend concrete interests, the very dynamic of inequality prevailing in this model of social and political pluralism only allows them a certain degree of autonomy. Nevertheless, it is also true that some groups, above all large corporations, have more power and influence than others. For some, this inequality in the acquisition and exercise of power among groups is an old concern. James Madison said, "Freedom is to the factious spirit what air is to fire."<sup>3</sup> With this metaphor, he expressed just how inevitable organizations and the proliferation of interests were in a "free society." And his vision continues to be true: when interests compete with each other, they automatically regulate their participation in an atmosphere free of rules, open and very prone to participation. Limiting them would be like limiting freedom. In his romanticism, Madison thought that if there were an automatic balance of power among them, none would be able to dominate the political process.<sup>4</sup>

However, history has taken it upon itself to show the partiality of the political play in a pressure system where groups of all kinds are the important

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actors in organized life. Thus, the supposed equal right to actively participate in politics does not prevent the difference in power among them from being noticeable, making their ability to participate and their influence in the legislative process unequal. The Latino groups are part of a game dominated by the rich, and therefore powerful, groups, and not by the poor and weak. The former have a greater capacity to constantly intervene in the government both legally and illegally. In this way, while current trends have been able to regulate institutionally, that is, achieve a formal balance, the political participation of both powerful and weak interest groups favors the political status quo. The powerful groups—considered such because of their economic prowess—do not prevent the others from participating, but do take advantage of their privileged position to constantly intervene in government.

Latino legislators are not separate from this political reality and it is in this situation where they have to work with the groups with which they share a cultural heritage and common political ideas in search of the social betterment of their constituents. In an ideal political world, the Latino groups would be able to join together in a single organization, a plural Latino grouping that would not necessarily be barred from coexisting or making alliances with other blocs to live up to the culture

of U.S. political pluralism's maxim of "politics is exercising pressure."

The existence for over 30 years of a group of Hispanic federal legislators shows their integration into the dominant political culture, where the degree of trust that the public has in its representatives allows them to believe in the solution of social demands through institutional means. Thus, these legislators are not only the personification of that Latino power, but are part of the authority of that small group of people who make up the federal Congress.

At the same time, unequal access to power is still manifested inside Congress since Latino legislators are forced to share political strategies with other groups (for example, other minorities), or make coalitions around concrete questions that will bring them certain results. To a great extent, they dedicate their political lives to achieving personal and group political goals in a dynamic dominated by conflict and cooperation.

In the same fashion, not only ethnically but also politically, the Latino legislative group is plural. They represent a broad gamut of political, economic, social and cultural interests. Understanding this heterogeneity explains the reason they take specific positions with regard to the national agenda. In the last three decades Democratic Latino legislators have been the most integrated and identified with low-income Latino sectors of society. The

PLACE OF BIRTH AND ANCESTRY OF HISPANIC LEGISLATORS, 102ND TO 108TH CONGRESS						
	NAME	PARTY	STATE	DISTRICT	PLACE OF BIRTH	ANCESTRY
1	Joe Baca	D	California	42	Belen, NM	Mexican
2	Xavier Becerra	D	California	30	Sacramento, CA	Mexican
3	Henry Bonilla	R	Texas	23	San Antonio, TX	Mexican
4	“Kika” de la Garza	D	Texas	15	Mercedes, TX	Mexican
5	Mario Díaz-Balart	R	Florida	25	La Habana, Cuba	Cuban
6	Lincoln Díaz-Balart	R	Florida	21	La Habana, Cuba	Cuban
7	Dennis Cardoza	D	California	18	Merced, CA	Portuguese
8	Henry González B.	D	Texas	20	San Antonio, TX	Mexican
9	Charles González	D	Texas	20	San Antonio, TX	Mexican
10	Raúl M. Grijalva	D	Arizona	7	Tucson, AZ	Mexican
11	Luis V. Gutiérrez	D	Illinois	4	Chicago, IL	Puerto Rican
12	Rubén Hinojosa	D	Texas	15	Mercedes, TX	Mexican
13	Ed López Pastor	D	Arizona	2	Claypool, AZ	Mexican
14	Grace Napolitano	D	California	34	Brownsville, TX	Mexican
15	Matthew Martínez	D	California	31	Walsenburg, CO	Mexican
16	Robert Menendez	D	N. J.	13	Nueva York, NY	Cuban
17	Solomon Ortiz P.	D	Texas	27	Robstown, TX	Mexican
18	Silvestre Reyes	D	Texas	16	Canutillo, TX	Mexican
19	Bill Richardson	D	N.M.	3	Pasadena, CA	Mexican
20	Ciro Rodríguez	D	Texas	28	Piedras Negras, Coahuila	Mexican
21	Lucille Roybal-Allard	D	California	34	Los Angeles, CA	Mexican
22	Edward Roybal R.	D	California	25	Albuquerque, NM	Mexican
23	Ileana Ros-Lehtinen	R	Florida	18	La Habana, Cuba	Cuban
24	José Serrano	D	N. Y.	16	Mayagüez, P.R.	Puerto Rican
25	Linda Sánchez	D	California	39	Lynwood, CA	Mexican
26	Loretta Sánchez	D	California	47	Lynwood, CA	Mexican
27	Hilda L. Solis	D	California	32	Los Angeles, CA	Mexican
28	Frank Tejeda	D	Texas	28	San Antonio, TX	Mexican
29	Esteban E. Torres	D	California	34	Miami, AZ	Mexican
30	Nydia Velázquez	D	N.Y.	12	Yabucoa, P.R.	Puerto Rican

**SOURCE:** Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa, *The Almanac of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002).

poverty of most Latinos makes them demand better education for their children as a way to access better living standards. This kind of social demand is a point of unity for Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Central Americans.

We should remember that the term “Hispanic” is the name Congress has given to all U.S. inhabitants with Latino roots to create the idea of homogene-

ity, which facilitates political manipulation when justifying government actions vis-à-vis this minority. We should remember that the United States has immigrants from almost all of Latin America, the Caribbean and the Iberian Peninsula. The largest groups are the millions of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Cubans and Cuban Americans, among other minorities who live

there and, generation after generation, change their culture, although not necessarily radically changing their social needs. The social spectrum also includes all those who live and work there, temporarily or permanently, whether they be Latin Americans or from the Iberian Peninsula. The governmental view of the concept “Hispanic” and its homogeneity are unfor-

tunate, since the diversity among the groups is notable both in terms of political ability and social demands; this is why it is precisely that diversity that best defines both these demands and the make-up of the legislators.

Table 1 allows a first look at the Latino legislators who have been elected to the U.S. Congress. They were selected based on their affiliation to the Hispanic Caucus. They all belong to one of the two hegemonic parties, the Democrats or the Republicans.

As the table shows, the legislators' place of origin and ancestry is diverse, although the majority are of Mexican origin. Some were born in homes where little English was spoken, such as the case of Rubén Hinojosa; others are second generation Mexican Americans, like Javier Becerra and Lucille Royball Allard. In other cases, we have legislators whose parents were low-income Mexican migrants and who have done post-graduate college work, such as Loretta Sánchez.

The border states with Mexico are the ones that have sent the greatest number of Latino legislators. This political advance is not by chance, since, historically, it is in this region where the greatest number of Mexican or Mexican-origin migrants are located. A great number of Mexican migrants, above all in the state of Texas, have taken out U.S. citizenship, and this is currently the group with the greatest interest in participating with Hispanic-origin legislators, particularly in matters regarding trade.

In the northern United States, in New York, Illinois and New Jersey, the Latino legislators are of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent. Cuban-origin legislator Robert Menendez has had a rapid and efficient political career in

side the Democratic Party and is the Latino who has occupied the most important post inside the party. As a young legislator with broad support in the Latino community, he is expected to play an important political leadership role in the House of Representatives.

In the south, Florida has three Republican representatives of Cuban descent: two are the Díaz-Balart brothers and the third is the only Republican woman, Representative Ros-Lehtinen. Together they dominate the political scene of conservative, Republican Latinos.

The ratio of men to women in the Hispanic caucus is no different from the overall norm in Congress: there is a marked minority of women. However, in the last eight years, women's participation in Hispanic politics in the United States has increased notably: of the last six House seats that Latinos have won, four have gone to Democratic women. The majority of all these men and women are Catholics and represent urban constituencies.

It is important to point out that the presence of the representatives from Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands is almost symbolic, since they do not have the right to vote in Congress. This sub-group of Latino legislators is an example of the under-representation that their constituencies have, and shows the limited political rights in the so-called "protectorates."

Finally, the representation of Hispanics in the House does not correspond to the number of Latinos in the country, a situation similar to that of Afro-Americans, who are currently fewer than 50.<sup>5</sup> The total number of Hispanics comes to 30, counting all the representatives from the 102nd to

the 108th Congresses. No generation has come even close to being 10 percent of the House of Representatives. The Democratic Party has contributed the most Hispanics during the period analyzed as well as for all the generations who have come to Congress.

The number of Hispanic legislators is far from desirable. However, their presence in Congress can mean the consolidation of a group with national leadership on important issues for the Latino community, as long as they increase their political participation through the vote and seek to win greater political space. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The U.S. government has made the use of the term "Hispanic" official for referring to the different Latino identities that live within its borders. In this article, the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" will be used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dahl, *La democracia y sus críticos* (Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós Ibérica, 1992), p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *El federalista* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast with this pluralist optimism, the reality of organized life allows one group—which could be called the plurality of the elites—to dominate the rest, up to and including through tyranny. See Giovanni Busino, "Elite," José Luis Orozco Alcántar and Consuelo Dávila, comps., *Breviario político de la globalización* (Mexico City: Fontamara/UNAM, 1997), pp. 89-100.

<sup>5</sup> The 107th Congress had 38 Afro-American representatives. For more information on the under-representation of the Latino and Afro-American minorities, see David Lublin, *The Paradox of Representation: Racial Gerrymandering and Minority Interest in Congress* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 61-66.