



# The Battle for Latino Voters

*Harry P. Pachon, Ph.D.*

The rising importance of Latino<sup>1</sup> voters is one of the most talked about trends in American politics, and with good reason.

In California, Hispanic voters are widely credited with reversing the fortunes of Democrats during the 1990s. Nationally, nearly six million Latinos cast ballots in the 2000 presidential election—5.3 percent of the vote—as turnout increased by nearly 132 percent from 1980 to 2002. Nearly four million more Latinos could enter the electorate this decade.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Latinos surpassed African-Americans in the 2000 Census as America's dominant minority and they are the largest minority group in 23 states. Given this trend, it is little wonder that both parties are reassessing their strategies and that the Bush White House has made Hispanic voters a priority.

The 2000 presidential election delivered a wake-up call to Democrats that they should not take Latino voters for granted. Candidate George W. Bush, with a determined courtship effort, according to one national poll, narrowed the Democrats' 51-point advantage among Latino voters in the 1996 election to 27 points in 2000. And his outreach efforts continue apace. Karl Rove, the president's chief political advisor, has made no secret of the fact that cracking the Democratic hold on Hispanic voters is a central element of GOP political strategy.

But beyond the nearly universal recognition of the importance of this population juggernaut to politics, there is little understanding, and there are plenty of misconceptions, about who these voters are, their political preferences and allegiances, and the policy agendas that matter most to them.

The forthcoming report is an overview of this growing population and its implications for American politics. The report examines the demographics of this community, some of the political myths that have developed around Latino political participation, how Latinos view salient policy issues, and the implications of these factors for reaching out to the Latino vote. Its findings include:

- ▶ While two out of three Latinos live in the six states of California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey, the growing Latino electorate tends toward a broader dispersal. Of the 10 counties with the fastest growing Latino populations, nine are in North Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas.
- ▶ There are two significant factors hindering an even greater expansion of the Latino vote. First, many legal Hispanic immigrants are not citizens and thus not eligible to vote, or are young and are opting out of politics like other young people. This participation gap creates significant demographic differences in the Latino population as a whole and the Latino electorate.

- ▶ Significant cultural and political differences define Latino communities in different states. Thus, it would be a mistake to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy toward Latino voters.
- ▶ A clear majority of Latino voters have traditionally supported Democrats, but there are signs of an increasing split between their presidential and down-ballot preferences, due in part to President Bush's aggressive efforts to court Hispanic voters, especially among first generation Spanish-speaking voters.
- ▶ There are significant differences between first and later generation voters in how they identify with political parties. Party identification grows increasingly Democratic by the second or third generations.
- ▶ In survey after survey, education is the most important issue for Latino voters, but as you move down the income scale, economy and crime become more important.
- ▶ In the search for salient issues, it may be more useful to think of these voters as "working class" rather than Latino. The party that captures issues of concern to working families will do best at securing the allegiance of Latino voters.
- ▶ Candidates who make appeals to Latino voters in Spanish win points. However, to focus solely on Spanish language appeals is a mistake. Campaigns that take a bilingual approach do best.
- ▶ Increased voter registration does not translate into increased voter turnout—voter registration drives, while essential, are not sufficient. The mobilization strategy that works best includes personal contacts from influential members of the community.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably to refer to individuals tracing their ancestry to Spanish-speaking countries of the western hemisphere.

<sup>2</sup> "The Census 2000," U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 2000.