



Too Many to Ignore

The Latino Vote in 2010 and Beyond

Angela M. Kelley and Gebe Martinez | October 2010

Introduction

Two years after playing a decisive role in the election of President Barack Obama, Latino voters are poised to play a critical role in the November 2010 contests and in years to come as their population and voting numbers increase.

The key question for Latinos, as with all voters, is whether the general malaise with government will deflate turnout at the polls, or whether frustration with a stale-mated Congress will actually fuel election participation to let their voices be heard.

Midterm elections usually draw fewer voters than in presidential election years, but this year of the cranky voter threatens to upset political norms, and the Latino electorate will be a major factor in the post-election analyses.

Whatever the outcomes, there is one dynamic that will not change this November and beyond: Candidates who draw Hispanics to the polls by addressing their top issues such as immigration and the economy will be rewarded with the votes of this ever-expanding segment of the electorate. Those who do not may rue the day they ignored Latinos' concerns.

Whipping up immigration

Heated gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races are in play in eight states where Latinos make up at least 10 percent of voters: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, and Texas, plus Connecticut and Illinois, which also have growing Latino electorates.¹

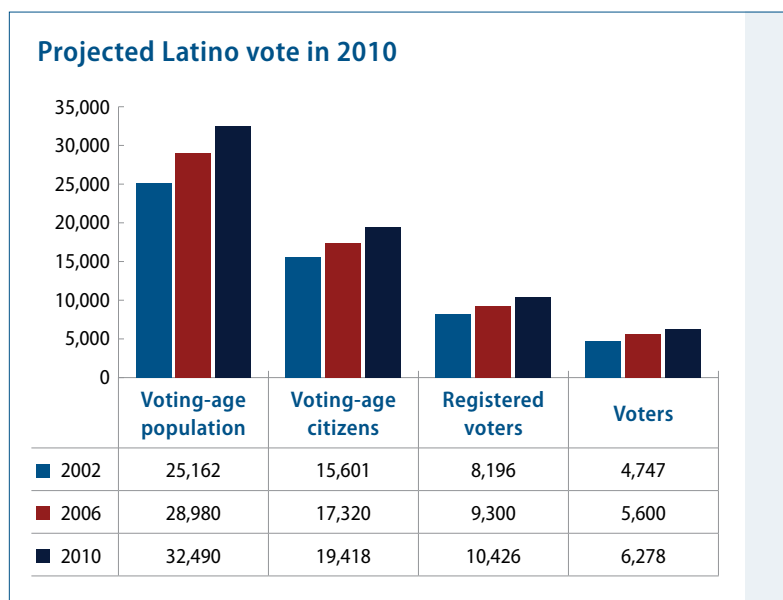
The strength of the Latino voter turnout is also primed to determine the outcome in 17 of the toughest races for seats in the House of Representatives. These are districts where Hispanic voter registration is high enough to sway the outcomes if Latinos maintain past voting trends.² The National Council of La Raza has calculated that an additional 700,000 Latino voters will participate in 2010 over the last midterm election in 2006, if previous trends in electoral growth hold.³

A recent NALEO Educational Fund poll found that approximately 65 percent of registered Latinos say they support Democratic candidates for Congress in November, compared to 22 percent who say they support Republicans.⁴ Still, party loyalty is not a sure bet this year.

Latinos are unhappy over Democrats' failure to enact comprehensive immigration reform, especially in the midst of the Arizona state legislature's unduly harsh immigration control measures now being copied in other states. Immigration emerged this election season as Latino voters' top concern for the first time in recent years of polling, ranking higher or equal to their worries about the sluggish economic recovery.⁵

Yet the Republican Party's performance has been exceedingly worse than Democrats, according to Latino voter surveys.⁶

The Republican brand has been seriously damaged in Latino households by a questionable strategy to make immigrants this year's political scapegoats, even though a strong majority of all voters favor enactment of comprehensive immigration reform that is tough and fair. Some conservatives have disregarded the tinge of discrimination Latinos feel when inflammatory rhetoric is directed at immigrants who are their friends, relatives, or similar in skin color. To counter that, faith and business coalitions have formed to promote comprehensive immigration reform, including one headed by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in partnership with top executives such as News Corp. Chairman Rupert Murdoch.⁷



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2002 and 2006," *Current Population Survey*. Calculations for 2010 by National Council of La Raza.

Still, in this election season, we are seeing some of the strongest anti-immigrant rhetoric and campaign ads in recent years, and even a cynical attempt by a conservative activist in Nevada to reduce Latino voter turnout through a new ad urging Latinos not to vote because Congress failed to enact comprehensive immigration reform.⁸

Political analysts agree that immigration restrictionists have taken most of the air out of any short-term hope the GOP had to win back President George W. Bush's previously loyal Latino supporters when conservatives allowed them to turn immigrants into a political football. As Bush proved, a Republican cannot win the White House without at least 40 percent of the Latino vote.

Political grandstanding on ethnically divisive issues such as immigration, mixed with economic uncertainties that began during the previous presidential administration promise powerful election results.

Too many voters with too much at stake

The competition for Latino support is fierce this year in the major gubernatorial races in states where Latinos make up at least 10 percent of voter registrations: California, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, New York, and Texas, and also in Illinois where Latinos make up 7.5 percent of registered voters.

The Republican Party has tried to downplay its draconian immigration policies by highlighting the ethnic backgrounds of its Latino candidates in order to attract Latino voters. The Republican gubernatorial candidates in Nevada and New Mexico are Hispanic, as is their senatorial nominee in Florida.

Much is at stake this year. Following in Arizona's footsteps, some conservative-controlled state legislatures are primed to wrest control of immigration law enforcement away from the federal government—even as federal courts block that avenue. And comprehensive immigration reform awaits congressional action in Washington, where party control of the House of Representatives hangs in the balance. At least 79 of the House's 435 districts have a Hispanic population that is at least 25 percent. And 17 of the approximately 60 most competitive congressional races this year have strong Latino influences. (see "Elections to Watch" section below)

There are six tight Senate contests in states where Latino voters can influence the outcome: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois and Nevada. The most high-profile Senate battle this year is in Nevada, where Majority Leader Harry

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Reid is seeking reelection against Republican challenger Sharron Angle. Latinos make up more than 12 percent of the electorate in Nevada and a high Latino voter turnout will tilt the race in Reid's favor.

Rising Latino voters across the United States

The power of the Latino vote rises with each election cycle.

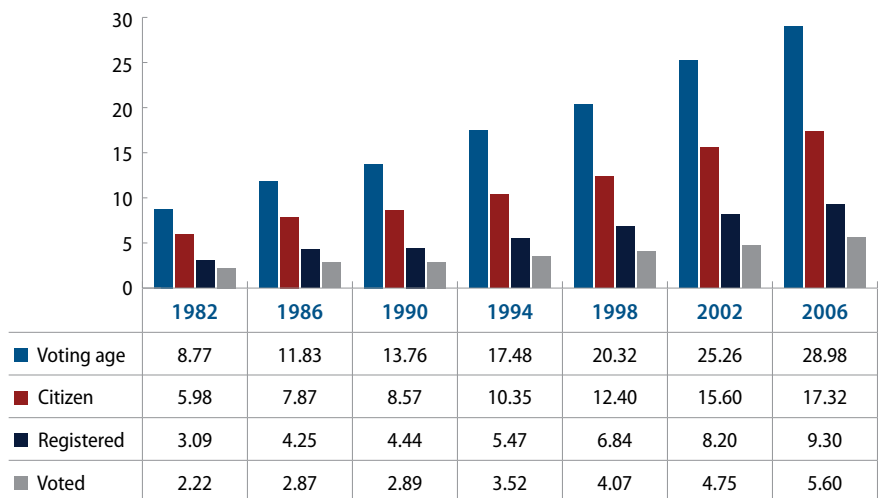
Latino voters in the 2008 election of President Obama showed the promise and the threat of their growing numbers and political strength. Huge increases in the number of Hispanic voters that year were crucial to President Obama's wins in numerous states, especially Colorado, Florida, Nevada, and New Mexico. The total Latino turnout was 9.7 million, a significant jump from the 7.5 million who cast ballots in the previous presidential election in 2004.⁹

The Hispanic voter turnout has also increased steadily in midterm and presidential elections going back decades, according to a recent compilation of U.S. Census Bureau data by the National Council of La Raza. In 2008, 85 percent of Latino voters were concentrated in 10 states. In order of the number of Latino voters in each, these are: California, Texas, Florida, New York, Arizona, New Jersey, Illinois, New Mexico, Colorado and Pennsylvania.

Besides net voter increases in these traditional gateway states, migration to other parts of the country is causing Latino political influence to be seen and heard in states such as Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina.

Immigrants to the United States are assimilating at high rates, most notably by becoming citizens and homeowners in the first 18 years of residency, according to a report

Reported Latino registration and voting in midterm elections, in millions, 1982-2006



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2006," *Current Population Survey*, Table 4a. Available online at: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>. Accessed October 1, 2010. Report utilized "Spanish origin" persons as the category used for Latino here.

recently released by the Center for American Progress. The findings, based on U.S. Census Bureau data, show that 14 states now have foreign-born populations above the national average of 12.5 percent.¹⁰

And much of the Latino population is young, suggesting that there will be an exponential growth in the Hispanic electorate in years to come.

The electorate's fastest-growing voting bloc is "New Americans"—naturalized immigrants, mostly Hispanics and the U.S.-born children of immigrants since 1965. The registration rate for "New Americans" skyrocketed by almost 101.5 percent from 1996 to 2008 while the number of voter registrations nationwide rose only 9.2 percent, according to the Immigration Policy Center.¹¹ With that increase, "New Americans" accounted for 1 in 10 registered voters in the United States in 2008.

This segment also shows signs of being more independent of either major political party as the number of Latino voters expands across generational, social and political interests.

Independent Latino voters

Naturalized citizens of Latino descent make up more than 40 percent of the Latino voter population and are a "swing" constituency, especially among Spanish-dominant voters—that is, voters who are more proficient in Spanish than in English.¹²

Spanish-language outreach with an emphasis on Republicans' social values was critical in President George W. Bush's wins in the 2000 and 2004 elections. As NDN reported, "In Florida, during the 2000 presidential election, then-Gov. Bush dramatically outspent then-Vice President Al Gore on Spanish-language media, a move that was critical to Bush winning the presidency. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's son, George, himself of Mexican descent, was a prominent figure in the ads."¹³

The Bush strategy paid dividends, and Spanish-dominant voters supported John Kerry in 2004 by only a narrow margin—52 percent to 48 percent, according to an analysis by America's Voice.¹⁴

Republicans purposely turned away from the Bush strategy in 2006 when they adopted a strong anti-immigration stance in Congress and in political campaigns.

The party's outreach to Hispanics is now minimal and even embarrassing, as noticed last fall when the Republican National Committee issued an error-filled Spanish translation of a press release honoring Hispanic Heritage Month.¹⁵

The 2008 presidential contest for the Democratic nomination saw a similar trend, with Hillary Clinton's solid support from Latinos prolonging the battle between her and Barack Obama. As Obama captured the nomination, he worked hard to win the confidence of Latino voters. And he won the White House with their support, which included a significant increase in the total number of ballots cast by Latinos.

President Obama defeated Republican nominee John McCain in 2008 by garnering 67 percent of the Latino vote, compared to 31 percent for McCain—far below the 40 percent needed for a Republican to capture the White House.¹⁶ President Obama won a much larger share of the Spanish-dominant electorate—those who are more proficient in Spanish than in English and are typically “swing” voters—in that election, by a huge margin of 75 percent to 25 percent.¹⁷

2010 and beyond

President Obama has not fulfilled his commitment to win comprehensive immigration reform, causing his support among Latino voters to slip at times in the polls.¹⁸ But this segment of the electorate appears to give Democrats credit for at least trying to resolve an issue that helps Latinos decide who is on their side. The challenge for Democrats is that their candidates in swing states or House districts are playing defense on immigration against Republicans' hard-charging rhetoric. The big question for Democrats in 2012 will be whether just trying on immigration will be enough, or whether their fear to act on the issue will hurt them with Latino voters until that task is done.

Majority Leader Reid's work for legal immigration reform has come under vicious attacks by Angle, his GOP opponent, who released an “us-vs.-them” ad that falsely claims Reid works on behalf of illegal immigrants while showing images of dark-skinned people sneaking past a chain-link fence. A similar mailer followed the ad, which also was used by Republican Sen. David Vitter of Louisiana. The tactic was criticized by the head of the Nevada Republican Hispanic Caucus, and the Reid campaign said it was typical of Angle's divisive campaign.¹⁹

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Even Republicans who are spending millions to court the Latino vote, such as gubernatorial nominee Meg Whitman in California and Senate nominee Marco Rubio in Florida, have faced criticism—especially in the Spanish-language media—for broadcasting different messages to voters, depending on the language being spoken.

The outreach continues growing. This year, major candidates in both parties are spending millions on Spanish-language advertising, not just in the traditional states, but in growing Latino voter markets like Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The upcoming election will speak volumes about messaging that works and fails with Latino voters. One thing is clear: Their voices will be increasingly louder in years to come as their voting strength rises.

There are nine states where Latinos' growing population numbers have resulted in higher Latino voter turnout in recent elections. In 2010, the Hispanic voter performance will be closely watched in 10 states featuring nine gubernatorial races, six elections for U.S. Senate seats, and 17 for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. All of these will be decided in part by the strength of the Latino vote.

Elections to watch

Arizona: 14.8 percent Latino voters

Governor

Jan Brewer (R-incumbent) vs. Terry Goddard (D)

U.S. House

District 1: Anne Kirkpatrick (D-incumbent) vs. Paul Gosar (R)

District 5: Harry Mitchell (D-incumbent) vs. David Schweikert (R)

District 7: Raul Grijalva, (D-incumbent) vs. Ruth McClung (R)

District 8: Gabrielle Giffords (D-incumbent) vs. Jesse Kelley (R)

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California: 21 percent Latino voters

Governor

Jerry Brown (D) vs. Meg Whitman (R) (open seat)

U.S. Senate

Barbara Boxer (D-incumbent) vs. Carly Fiorina (R)

U.S. House

District 11: Jerry McNerney (D-incumbent) vs. David Harmer (R)

District 20: Jim Costa (D-incumbent) vs. Andy Vidak (R)

District 47: Loretta Sanchez (D-incumbent) vs. Van Tran (R)

Colorado: 10 percent Latino voters

Governor

John Hickenlooper (D) vs. Dan Maes (R) vs. Tom Tancredo
(American Constitution) (open seat)

U.S. Senate

Michael Bennet (D-incumbent) vs. Ken Buck (R)

U.S. House

District 3: John Salazar (D-incumbent) vs. Scott Tipton (R)

Connecticut: 8 percent Latino voters

U.S. Senate

Richard Blumenthal (D) vs. Linda McMahon (R) (open seat)

U.S. House

District 4: Jim Himes (D-incumbent) vs. Dan DeBicella (R)

Florida: 12.8 percent Latino voters

Governor

Alex Sink (D) vs. Rick Scott (R) (open seat)

U.S. Senate

Kendrick Meek (D) vs. Marco Rubio (R) vs. Charlie Crist (Independent)

Illinois: 7.5 percent Latino voters

Governor

Patrick J. Quinn (D-incumbent) vs. Bill Brady (R)

U.S. Senate

Alexi Giannoulias (D) vs. Mark Steven Kirk (R)

U.S. House

District 11: Debbie Halvorson (D) vs. Adam Kinzinger

District 14: Bill Foster (D) vs. Randy Hultgren (R)

Nevada: 12.4 percent Latino voters

Governor

Rory Reid (D) vs. Brian Sandoval (R) (Gov. Jim Gibbons defeated in GOP primary)

U.S. Senate

Harry Reid (D-incumbent) vs. Sharron Angle (R)

U.S. House

District 3: Dina Titus (D-incumbent) vs. Joe Heck (R)

New Mexico: 32.6 percent Latino voters

Governor

Diane Denish (D) vs. Susana Martinez (R)

U.S. House

District 1: Martin Heinrich (D-incumbent) vs. Jonathan Barela (R)

District 2: Harry Teague (D-incumbent) vs. Steve Pearce (R)

New York: 10.9 percent Latino voters

Governor

Andrew Cuomo (D) vs. Carl Paladino (R)

U.S. House

District 13: Mike McMahon (D-incumbent) vs. Michael Grimm (R)

Texas: 21.7 percent Latino voters

Governor

Rick Perry (R-incumbent) vs. Bill White (D)

U.S. House

District 23: Ciro Rodriguez (D-incumbent) vs. Francisco Canseco (R)

District 27: Solomon Ortiz (D-incumbent) vs. Black Farenthold (R)

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