

The Rising Power of the Latino Political Base **By Jason Higgins**

Summary: the Latin-American community in the United States has gradually emerged as a base of political power. As of 2016 Latinos constitute upward of 15% of all adults living in the United States and more than 17% of all residents. Today they comprise 12% of the voting public in total. In the past, such assertions were made about the rise of the Latin-American as a voting power only to prove a miscalculation by ignoring internal ethnic divisions¹. However, the modern climate over identity politics and the work of groups within the Latin community could create a new dynamic within the U.S. political landscape.

Take Away: As of 2016 Latinos constitute upwards of 15% of all adults living in the United States and more than 17% of all residents. Today they comprise 12% of the voting public in total². More than 35 million living in the United States derive their ethnic origins from Mexico³. Adding to this is an aggressive campaign led by Latino groups to promote naturalizations in order to build on this base⁴. Collectively, the total number of known immigrants equates to 13.3% of the population, with Mexican immigrants alone accounting for 27.6% of that number⁵. In the past such numbers have been touted before only to prove misleading.

The term Latino was not originally a self-described title, but one assigned by the reigning political elite who used it as an all-encompassing label for any ethnic group deriving lineage from the Southern part of the Western Hemisphere. It failed to acknowledge the individual ethnic divides (Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican etc.) who continually maintained a strong loyalty to their own particular roots. In doing so they dispelled the idea of the Latino voting block as a unified base. This in turn diminished their overall political power.

However, younger generations of Latino Americans are not as closely connected to their own ethnic specific politics and even some older Latino Americans have begun to identify more as part of the general Latino community. This notion is further built upon by Latino political leaders who see greater strength in collective power.

For example, Luis Gutierrez, a leading figure in the immigration movement, is a Puerto Rican, a group that gives him citizenship by birth.

Expectations made by political strategists in the past presumed that Latinos would follow the path of previous ethnicities; that they would assimilate into the general American landscape and become a normalized part of the larger white populace. However, such calculations have not proven accurate as the overall Latino community has come to see itself as a minority apart from the U.S. American culture. This has been fostered by several factors. The recent controversy surrounding the issue of

¹ Pastor, 2016

² Pastor, 2016

³ Gonzalez, 2016

⁴ Pastor, 2016

⁵ Gonzalez, 2016

immigration has come about with the proposal of laws and initiatives that the wider Latino population has come to interpret as largely racist. In some ways this has set many Latinos on an us versus them approach to how they see their role as citizens.

This has been further exacerbated by other influences. Several community activist and political organizations push the notion of pan-Latino, seeing not individual ethnicities of Spanish origin, but as a single community with a greater unified agenda⁶. The rise of such movements as the Chicanos that emerged in the 1960s created an identity effort to retain original culture and origins.

This was further pushed by a concept of maintaining separateness from the mainstream American world⁷. On a pop-culture level entities such as the Spanish language media like Telemundo and Univision increased market share by promoting an image pan-Latino America⁸.

Another force involved is the Mexican government. With 35 million people with Mexican roots living in the United States and continuing to grow, the Mexican government has been quick to realize the political influence it could wield within U.S. borders. Mexican leaders have long worked to exert influence over this group by pushing the beauty of multiculturalism and an ethnic connection to Mexico. This is promoted through a network of consulates and political groups.

In the 1990s Mexico was instrumental in coordinating efforts against California's Proposition 187. It was also during this time that the Mexican government amended their constitution to let Mexicans who became U.S. citizens retain their Mexican nationality. In more recent years the Mexican government has been inclined to involve itself in the issues involving U.S. crackdowns of illegal immigration by engaging in propaganda campaigns in the hopes of galvanizing Mexicans and creating a unified cohesion between Mexicans in both countries.

The past several decades have seen a steady increase in Mexican consulates established in the U.S. (currently 45 at the writing of this paper). These consulates are apparently already playing roles in domestic U.S. politics. For example, with the launching of Obamacare, Mexican consulates began operating to enroll people in the program⁹.

Conservative Identifiers: Whether the Latino community is unifying into a cohesive ethnic front is realistic or not, it still does not assure that their voting block will necessarily be delivered into the liberal camp and/or the Democrat Party. The conservative movement and more specifically the Republican Party may often be viewed as the primary affront to the Latino community. Given the association the Republicans have had with past programs, such as the California's Proposition 187 that many Latinos viewed as blatantly racist, this notion is largely assumed.

However, past events should not prompt such conclusions. In the 1970s, the Republican Party through the Nixon presidency, was the first to approach the Latino community. Through that administration, they encouraged Latino-owned businesses in the hopes of building an appeal for free markets. It was Ronald Reagan's amnesty bill that granted a path to citizenship to many who were

⁶ Pastor, 2016

⁷ Gonzales, 2016

⁸ Pastor, 20106

⁹ Gonzales, 2016

previously illegal. The reelection of George Bush saw a taking of 40% of the Latino vote. The most recent presidential election saw only the Republicans field Latino candidates.

By contrast the Democrats have their own historical failings when it comes to their relations with the Latino community. During the presidency of George Bush a plan for comprehensive immigration reform which offered guest worker programs was concocted. The Republicans were viewed as the cause for the plan failing to pass. However, it was largely the efforts of Democratic sabotage (by objecting to guest worker programs) that scuttled the deal.

Too, the immigration issue has long been a problematic issue for labor unions, a pillar institution for the Democratic Party. Unions have long viewed immigrants as a threat to American jobs. As such, labor friendly Democrats often opposed any real immigration reform¹⁰. In general, Democrats have had their own complications when it comes to race relations.

In 1965, then President Lyndon Johnson was pushing legislation and enacting executive orders aimed at enforcing anti-discrimination measures. At a commencement speech, he introduced a discussion arguing that the breakdown of the family nucleus was somehow linked to minority cultures. Sociological studies done at this time concluded that minorities in general were prone to exist in habitual poverty due to cultural and psychological mentalities inherent to their race¹¹. Such attitudes and conclusions have often moved left-wing academics and minority advocates to see them as the Democrats' own racist streak showing.

Another question often raised is the true effectiveness of Latino activist groups that have been working to create this united front and increase voter numbers amongst the recently naturalized immigrant population. Groups like the National Council for La Raza (NCLR) are seen as being at the forefront of this movement¹². They insinuate the message of high discrimination against Latinos and the general American society:

NCLR (National Council of La Raza) published a profile of the nutrition landscape faced by Latinos in California. The profile found that Latinos are more likely than the state's average resident to live in low-income households, experience inadequate access to food and have fewer healthy food retailers in their neighborhoods¹³.

NCLR (National Council of La Raza), the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, today announced its opposition to the nomination of CKE Restaurants CEO Andrew Puzder as the next U.S. Secretary of Labor. *“Puzder’s past pronouncements show disregard and even contempt for workers and their welfare, and retrograde and demeaning views of women. He strongly opposes common-sense measures to improve wages for America’s workers. His company and its franchisees have been riddled*

¹⁰ Pastor, 2016

¹¹ Aja, Bustillo, Darity & Hamilton, 2014

¹² Gonzalez, 2016

¹³ <http://www.nclr.org/about-us/media/press/releases/nclr-highlights-disparities-in-hunger-in-california-113016>

with violations of labor laws covering their workers, many of whom are Latino and Latina,” noted Janet Murguía, NCLR President and CEO¹⁴.

These organizations are also perfecting strategies that encompass more innovative means of reaching both a wider and younger swath of voters.

Voto Latino is a pioneering civic media organization that seeks to transform America by recognizing Latinos’ innate leadership. Through innovative digital campaigns, pop culture, and grassroots voices, we provide culturally relevant programs that engage, educate and empower Latinos to be agents of change¹⁵.

As part of their political agenda they have as the opening page of its web site an advertisement to stop Jeff Sessions ascendency to U.S. Attorney General. They call for a massive texting campaign to congress in order to thwart this¹⁶.

In 2010, Voto Latino drew inspiration from the World War II image, United We Win—the first U.S. poster portraying African-American and white soldiers working together—and repurposed its theme to call a new generation of voters to action. Motivated by the injustice of Arizona’s racial-profiling law (SB 1070), *United We Win* registered more than 10,000 voters in four weeks¹⁷.

Mi Familia Vota works in advocacy and implementation through education of policies like the Affordable Care Act at a federal and state level. They also support women’s health rights campaigns and efforts¹⁸.

Mi Familia Vota is part of national and local coalitions, campaigns, and mobilizations advocating for workers’ rights. As a labor movement, it has championed causes from the fight for \$15 to fighting for Family and Sick Paid Days¹⁹. While some journals conclude that these groups are making serious inroads; others contend that they are more cosmetic than effective.

Some political scientists argue that outside of the public media image, groups like the NCLR have weak ties to the communities that they purport to represent. Most of their funding comes not from local contributions but from elite charities such as the Ford and Carnegie Foundations as well as government grants and donations from Fortune 500 corporations²⁰. Even if these organizations are, as some argue, effectively making inroads towards their goal, the political left does not have a guaranteed cartel.

Conservatives also are working to build their own connections to the Latino community to promote their own ideals. The Koch brothers are currently funding what is called the Libre initiative. The

¹⁴ <http://www.nclr.org/about-us/media/press/releases/labor-secretary-nominee-puzder-120916>

¹⁵ <http://votolatino.org/about-us/>

¹⁶ <http://votolatino.org/initiative/jeff-sessions/>

¹⁷ <http://votolatino.org/initiative/united-we-win-2010/>

¹⁸ <http://www.mifamiliavota.org/what-we-do/the-issues/healthcare/>

¹⁹ <http://www.mifamiliavota.org/what-we-do/the-issues/copy-copy/>

²⁰ Gonzalez, 2016

Libre initiative is aimed at establishing conservative connections²¹. Libre is publicized as a non-partisan, non-profit grassroots organization that advances the principles and values of economic freedom to empower the U.S. Hispanic community. The Libre initiative promotes small government, free-market ideas speaking against such things as state health care, big government and welfare programs²².

The future of the Latino community is still an open question in many regards. However, that it is growing as a block with great political influence is not.

Conclusion: The Latino community is growing and becoming more significant. While some groups may profess to have more influence than they really do, several others, such as the previously reported Workers Defense Project, have proven to be effective in establishing connections with the immigrant community, yielding results at a municipal level.

Conservatives, and by extension the Republican Party, need to recognize that whether they agree or not, they have been characterized in a bad light. They have been associated with several initiatives aimed at immigration that have been seen by the Latino community as blatantly racist. Although the issue of immigration is clearly very difficult to approach, this does not presume that the idea of immigration reform is impossible. It means that the strategy needs to be re-developed.

Recommendations: Any future policies and ideas put forth regarding immigration reform need to come from the Latino community itself. There are politically conservative Latino organizations and, in previous decades, even native-born Latinos that understood the need for border control. Given how much of a racist stigma has now been associated with immigration reform or border control, it is essential that the introduction of any new policies needs to come from Latinos if there is any hope for gaining the necessary momentum for success.

Conservatives made a good start with connecting with the Latino community when they fielded Latino presidential candidates. Also, as previously stated, Latinos are not necessarily in the camp of the political left. However, they do see themselves as a disassociated minority in the overall U.S. landscape. There is ground to build and promote conservative ideals within these communities. But that means embracing strategies that are derived from Latino conservative groups and not white native political elites who have often miscalculated their assessments when dealing with this issue.

²¹ Pastor, 2016

²² <http://thelibreinitiative.com/issues>

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