

NCLR
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA



**Tapping the Power of the
Hispanic Electorate**



Acknowledgements

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I. Introduction

The documented increase in the overall U.S. population that is Latino* has been accompanied by a notable spike upward in the number of Latino voters. In 2000, there were 7.6 million registered Hispanic voters, of which over 5.7 million cast ballots. Latino voters have demonstrated that they are engaged in the political process and scrutinize and select candidates based on substantive positions on issues, not necessarily because of political party affiliation.¹ As an example, in 1998, the majority of Latino voters supported the Republican candidate for Governor of Florida (61% voted for Jeb Bush) and the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate (65% voted for Bob Graham).

According to numerous media accounts, Latino voters as a growing share of the American electorate have drawn the attention of Republicans and Democrats who are eager to capture the perceived “emerging Latino vote.” Yet, this fresh attention suggests that political parties and candidates have only recently “discovered” the existence of the Hispanic community, which has deep roots in this nation and has made enormous contributions to its development. Furthermore, this intrigue with Latino voters has thus far come largely in the form of superficial and

symbolic gestures both small (politicians taking Spanish lessons, delivering parts of their stump speeches in Spanish, or eating at Mexican restaurants) and large (significant advertising on Spanish-language radio and television and sophisticated political programming targeted to the Latino community).² These efforts have in common a lack of commensurate focus on policy issues of concern to Latinos. Although well-intentioned, these gestures suggest that many public officials believe that Hispanic voters can be persuaded by style and are not interested in substance.

In part, these beliefs come from lack of knowledge about both the Latino community and Latino voters. Researchers, polling firms, strategists, and policy-makers have not invested significant time or resources into understanding who Latino voters are, how effective particular efforts are in targeting them and capturing their vote, or how to close the disparities in the voting patterns between Latinos and other populations.

As part of its Latino Empowerment and Advocacy Project (LEAP), the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) has undertaken initial research to draw a more complete picture of Latino voters

* The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably throughout this document to refer collectively to Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, Dominicans, and others of Spanish and Latin American descent. Hispanics may be of any race.

and to identify strategies to maximize their voting power. The following discussion provides background on the current Latino electorate, including the increase in the number of registered and active voters. It also highlights the results of recent polls to gain a better understanding of what drives Latino voters, with respect to both issues and politics. The paper also examines the untapped potential of the Latino electorate and the impact at the voting

booth of narrowing the disparities in voter registration and participation between Hispanics and other Americans. In addition, the paper analyzes the factors that impede the expansion of the Latino electorate. Finally, the paper concludes with guidance regarding what policy-makers, political parties, private philanthropy, and the Hispanic community itself must do to tap the power of the Latino voter.

II. Current Latino Voters

The Hispanic electorate can only be understood in the context of a larger profile of the overall Latino population. The 2000 Census revealed that Hispanics are now the largest ethnic minority in the United States; 35.3 million Americans – one in eight – are Hispanic.* Moreover, the Census also showed rapid Latino growth – an increase of 100% or more – in 23 states, including many that traditionally did not have a large Hispanic community.†

The majority of Latinos are native-born and speak English as their first language.

Specifically, three-fifths of Latinos overall (60.9%) and more than four in five Latinos under 18 years of age (85%) were born in the U.S. Latinos include seventh-generation Mexican Americans in Texas, third-generation Puerto Ricans in New York, second-generation Cubans in Miami, and first-generation Salvadorans in Washington, D.C. Recent Census data show that 76% of Latinos speak English well or very well.³ Additionally, Hispanics are a young population. More than one-third are under 18 years old and almost half are under 25.⁴

* Not including the 3.8 million residents of Puerto Rico.

† From west to east, these states include Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Arkansas, Mississippi, Minnesota, Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.

Socioeconomic indicators paint a mixed picture of Hispanic well-being. Hispanic buying power was measured at \$580 billion in 2002,⁵ and the most recent Census data show that there were 1.2 million Hispanic-owned businesses in the U.S., registering sales and receipts of \$186 billion.⁶ Yet, Hispanics as a group continue to have the lowest educational attainment levels, compared with Whites and African Americans.⁷ Given the requirements of the current labor market – including high literacy and numeracy skills – inadequate educational preparation and skills training affect the placement of Latinos in the U.S. workforce. Over the past decade, Hispanic women have increased their labor force participation and have made progress in specific sectors of the labor market.⁸ In contrast, Latino men are the group of Americans most likely to be working or looking for work; they remain concentrated in the jobs that pay the least, which tend not to offer benefits like health insurance and pension plans. Earnings of Latino workers are lower than those of their Black and White counterparts, as is family income. Partly as a result, poverty rates among Latinos have been persistently high, especially among children. Despite the economic expansion of the past five years and the gains made by Hispanic workers and their families, 21% of Latinos and 28% of Hispanic children live below the poverty line.

The diversity of the Hispanic population, in terms of country of origin and length of time in the U.S., economic well-being, language use, native and foreign-born status, geographic location, and other factors suggests that, with respect to advocacy and political empowerment, Latinos are not a monolithic voting bloc. This profile helps to explain the variation of the community's political affiliations, positions, and responses. While the Latino vote for president has been solidly Democratic in the past, the share of Latinos who support President George W. Bush is growing.⁹ Moreover, as the following discussion shows, Latinos are increasingly becoming active in the political process and are engaged in policy issues that are not typically associated with the Hispanic community, such as employment, Social Security, tax policy, and health care.

Latino Voter Registration and Turnout

For several decades there has been pronounced variation in the voting registration and voter turnout rates among racial and ethnic groups. The ranking of groups in terms of these two elements has not changed much – Whites register and vote at the highest percentages, followed by African Americans, and then by Latinos. Election experts and some Latino advocates previously have asserted that the Hispanic community's demographic

characteristics – low median age, high rate of immigration, low educational attainment levels, and high poverty rate – largely explained its relatively low rate of voter participation. Although these characteristics do, in fact, have a major influence on voting rates, a recent Census Bureau study suggests that other factors, including conflicting work or school schedules, duration of state residency, and same-day registration, play a much larger role than previously thought.¹⁰

In fact, recent experience suggests that, despite the community's youthfulness and relatively large share of foreign-born, Latinos are actively engaged in the political process. Their rapid rate of growth, high naturalization rate, and growing political mobilization have helped to fuel the increase in the number of Latinos registering to vote and turning out in large numbers to cast their ballots. According to the William C. Velasquez Institute, the number of Latinos who have registered to vote has grown from 2,495,000 in 1972 to 7,600,000 in 2000.¹¹

A brief review of the most recent elections shows that, in 1996, U.S.-born and naturalized citizens had together achieved a record 28% increase in new voter registrants. Of the 6.6 million registered Latino voters, 75% of them cast ballots in the November 1996 presidential election.¹² Latino voters

constituted 5% of the total national voter turnout – the highest proportion ever for the Hispanic population up until that point.¹³ Moreover, in the 1998 mid-term election, Census data reveal that 59% of Latino registered voters turned out at the polls, compared with 42% of all voters.

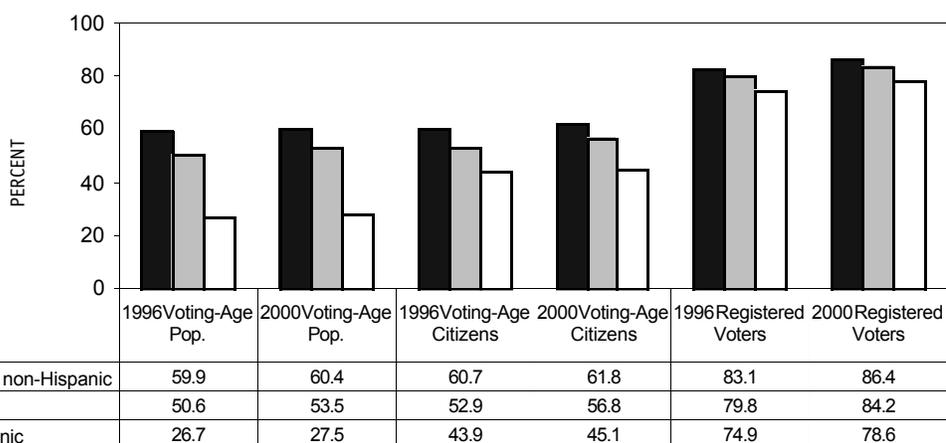
In 2000, a close election combined with unprecedented election-related spending led to the highest voter turnout in a generation. Over 5.7 million Latinos participated in the presidential election in 2000.¹⁴ Yet, compared with 62% for Whites and 57% for Blacks, only 45% of Latino voting-age citizens (VACs) voted in that election. Latino registered voters fared slightly better – close to 79% of Latino registered voters (RVs) voted in 2000, compared with 86% and 84%, respectively, of White and Black registered voters (see Figure 1).¹⁵ On the one hand, the data indicate that, once registered, Latino voting rates improve. On the other hand, the data also indicate that even after age and citizenship status are controlled for, large voting gaps remain between Hispanics and other groups.

Immigrant/Naturalized Citizen Voters

In the 1996, 1998, and 2000 election cycles, Hispanic immigrants registered record rates of naturalization, voter registration, and turnout, particularly in California.¹⁶ In New York, a major

FIGURE 1

2000 VOTING RATES BY RACE, ETHNICITY, AND CITIZENSHIP STANDING



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, Table A. Reported Voting and Registration by Citizenship, Race and Hispanic Origin: November 1996 and 2000, Issued February 2002.

immigrant voter mobilization effort turned out many new voters – the majority of whom were Latino – between the 1996 and 2000 election cycles.¹⁷ In Florida, researchers have found that the non-Cuban Latino population, which tends to vote for Democrats, is growing faster than the Cuban American population, which has historically supported Republicans, suggesting potentially significant shifts in Latino voting patterns in that state.¹⁸

Research reveals that in the last several election cycles, newly-naturalized Latinos have been more likely than their native-born counterparts to participate in the political process. According to

the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, nationally, as well as in California and New York, the percentage of Latino naturalized citizens who cast ballots in 1996, 1998 and 2000 was greater than the comparable percentage for the Latino native-born.¹⁹ However, both the California and New York experiences also suggest that the existence of a strong political empowerment infrastructure – to assist eligible newcomers to naturalize and register to vote, and to provide voter education and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) support – is an essential precondition to achieving strong Hispanic electoral participation.

A Look at Recent Polls

In addition to documenting and analyzing the number of registered Latino voters, as well as those who cast ballots, more information is needed on the issues that matter to the Latino electorate. NCLR's research suggests that, like other voters, Latinos have both major ongoing public policy priorities and responses to issues of the moment that affect the political climate. For example, the increase in the rates of naturalization, voter registration, and voter turnout among Latinos in the 1994 and 1996 elections was a direct result of the use of racial "wedge" issues by Republican candidates. Specifically, California's Propositions 187 and 209,* along with federal welfare and immigration reform legislation – together seen as a direct attack against the Hispanic community – served as significant motivators for Latinos to mobilize, register to vote, and cast ballots. Latino voter turnout in 1998 and in 2000, combined with the results of several polls that have been released in the past year, suggest that Latino voters are spurred not only by Latino-

specific issues, but also by broader social and policy concerns.

Issues

Based on NCLR's analysis of these data and its own research and knowledge of the Latino community, major priorities and concerns for Latinos do not necessarily differ significantly from those of their fellow Americans. What does seem to be important to Hispanic voters, however, is that candidates address these policy issues with an understanding of their impact on Latino workers and their families. According to the polls NCLR reviewed,[†] education, the economy, health care, immigration, civil rights, and foreign policy matters top the list of Latino public policy concerns, as outlined below.

EDUCATION

- Almost half (45%) of Latinos rated education as their first or second choice as the most important public policy issue, according to a May 2002 poll on the national Hispanic electorate.²⁰

* Proposition 187 was a ballot initiative that denied education and public health services to undocumented immigrants, and required local officials, such as police officers, teachers, and doctors, to report anyone they suspected of being undocumented. Proposition 209 was a 1996 ballot initiative that eliminated the use of Affirmative Action in public education and employment.

[†] In the preparation of this report, NCLR surveyed polling data, most of which were taken during the last year, by a variety of credible sources, including Democratic and Republican polling firms, think tanks, and media sources. Most of these polls, particularly those conducted by polling firms, surveyed registered voters, though some polls sought the views of Latino adults overall, including those not registered to vote.

- Regardless of Hispanic subgroup, Latinos were likely to select education as the most important problem facing Latinos and the nation (among five issue priorities: education, economy, crime, drugs, morality), in a telephone survey of 2,011 Latino registered voters.²¹
- Four in five (80%) Latino registered voters support bilingual education because it allows children who do not speak English to keep up with their regular courses (in Spanish) while they learn to speak English.²² Similarly, 59% of Hispanics compared with 40% of other Americans say that children of immigrants should be able to take some courses in their native language.²³
- Four-fifths (79%) of Latinos surveyed believe that it is the job of the federal government to make sure that minorities have equal access to quality education.²⁴

JOBS/ECONOMY

- Two in five (41%) Latinos rated jobs and the economy as their first or second choice as the most important public policy issue facing the nation.²⁵
- Two-thirds (66%) of Latinos surveyed believe that it is the job of the federal government to make sure that minorities have equal access to quality jobs.²⁶

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of Latinos favor employers and colleges making an extra effort to find and recruit qualified minorities.²⁷

HEALTH CARE

- An overwhelming majority (82%) of Latinos believes that being able to afford the cost of health insurance or necessary medical care is a problem (55% major problem, 27% minor problem).²⁸
- One in two (51%) Latinos said that the health care system treats people unfairly based on what their race or ethnic background is, and almost three-quarters (72%) of Latinos said that the health care system treats people unfairly based on how well they speak English.²⁹
- More than half (54%) of Latinos believe that a person's race or ethnic background affects their ability to get routine medical care when they need it, either very or somewhat often. Similarly, 51% believe it affects their ability to get specialized treatments or surgery, and 55% said it affects their ability to get health insurance to pay for medical care.³⁰
- Almost four-fifths (78%) of Latinos believe that it is the job of the federal government to make sure that minorities have health care services equal to Whites.³¹

IMMIGRATION

- Seven in ten Latino parents (69%), compared with six in ten Blacks (62%) and Whites (59%) agree with the following statement, "Most of today's immigrants come to the United States to settle and become loyal Americans."³²
- Three-fourths (75%) of Latino voters support ensuring access to benefits for legal immigrants.³³
- Latinos overwhelmingly support a legalization program for immigrant workers who live, work, and pay taxes in the United States, according to two recent polls of Latino registered voters.³⁴
- Latino voters strongly agree with the statement, "We need to do MUCH more to protect the rights of illegal immigrants in the U.S."³⁵

CIVIL RIGHTS

- A majority (57%) of Latino voters do not think that police should be able to check immigration status.³⁶
- Four in five (80%) Latinos believe that their treatment by the courts and the police should be equal to that of Whites.³⁷

MILITARY/FOREIGN POLICY

- Almost three-quarters (72%) of Latinos, compared with more than half of all Americans (53%) believe

that, while President Bush is doing a good job in Afghanistan, he is getting too involved in other countries without a clearly-defined goal.³⁸

- More than three in four (76%) Latino voters surveyed think that the U.S. government should stop the bombing of the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques.³⁹

These and previous polling data show that, despite the Hispanic community's diversity, there is substantial agreement across ethnic groups and regions on certain core policy questions, at least among the registered voter population. Around two-thirds, and usually more, of the Latinos surveyed in these polls support a strong federal role in education equity and equal employment opportunity; expanded access to quality health care; more generous and fair immigration policies, including a major legalization program; and civil rights protections in the criminal justice system. Taken together, this research shows that even though there is no single, monolithic Latino voting bloc, there is remarkable convergence among two-thirds or more of Latino voters around a core, progressive public policy agenda. Furthermore, this agenda is almost uniformly reflected in the policy positions of major Hispanic advocacy organizations.

However, most of these polls have an important shortcoming. Because they tend to focus almost exclusively on registered Latino voters, they exclude large portions of the potential Hispanic electorate. Moreover, although the polling data can capture the community's policy preferences, they do not provide much information about the themes and techniques that could motivate such potential voters to actually participate in the process.

Politics

Polls suggest that Latino voters are not swayed by party affiliation as much as they are by a political candidate's positions and track record. As an example, President Bush's popularity has grown significantly among Latinos, paralleling his overall spike in approval ratings. However, polls show that Latino support for President Bush has not automatically translated into support for other Republican candidates, confirming that issues are far more important to Hispanic voters than party affiliation.

Recent polls focused on how Latino and other voters view the President and the major political parties reveal the following:

VIEWES OF THE PRESIDENT

- Two-thirds (67%) of Latino voters had a positive or very positive view of the President in August 2001, while 29% indicated that their view was negative or very negative.⁴⁰ A May

2002 poll showed a 71% approval rating for the President among Latinos.⁴¹ In addition, a similar proportion (68%) of Latino voters polled in June 2002 approved of the job President Bush was doing.⁴²

- The increase in approval for the President among Latinos reflects a similar increase among the general American electorate. In particular, in the months since September 11, the President's general approval ratings have been strong: 74% overall in the bipartisan Battleground 2002 poll and 74% in a Gallup poll cited in *Roll Call*.⁴³

PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

- A recent poll measured general views of Democrats and Republicans and asked Latino voters which party is better on general issues such as education, health care, and immigration. Unlike approval of the President, which had increased over time, Latino support for Congressional Democrats remained constant, at 53%, compared with 23% for Congressional Republicans.⁴⁴ The Battleground 2002 poll similarly found a 37 percentage point lead for Congressional Democrats among Latino voters.

Much of the press coverage of these polls has focused on Latino approval for individuals (President Bush, former Vice President Gore) or political parties, and has strongly suggested that these

approval ratings would translate into actual votes if an election were to be held today. However, the Battleground poll, which found a 78% approval rating for President Bush overall, also asked if participants would vote for him today. Less than half (43%) say definitely. Similarly, an Ipsos-Reid poll released May 7, 2002 indicated that 48% of Latinos would “definitely” vote for Bush in 2004.⁴⁵ While these results show greater support for President Bush among Latinos than the exit polls for the 2000 election, they also suggest that there is a difference between approval ratings and actual votes.

As the above discussion shows, Latino voters are serious about specific issues and have opinions and positions on a range of topics that most public officials

have not associated with the Hispanic community. As 2000 election results showed, neither party can take Latino voters for granted and assume that they will have their support, but instead must reach out and substantively engage this electorate. As a whole, Hispanic voters will follow a candidate and his/her track record on issues, regardless of party affiliation. Additionally, this short review of polls suggests that politicians and candidates must make investments to learn more about this particular group of voters, and not assume that Hispanic positions on specific issues can be predetermined without the same amount of polling and research that is invested in other segments of the American electorate.

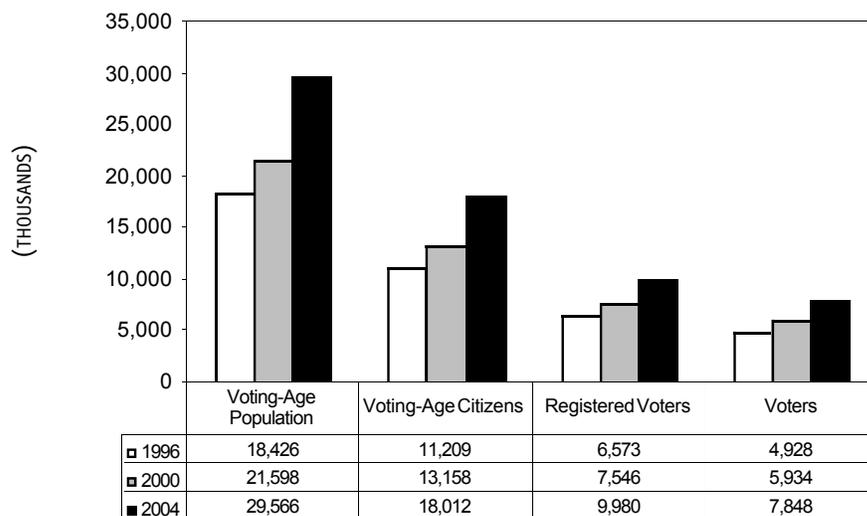
III. The Potential of the Latino Electorate

The disparities between Latinos and other Americans in voter registration and turnout represent enormous potential for increasing Hispanic voter turnout in 2002, 2004, and beyond. NCLR’s 2004 projection, based on a simple “straight line” trend analysis, suggests a likely net increase of 1.9 million Latino voters in 2004, a

growth rate of nearly one-third.⁴⁶ In other words, without major changes in registration and turnout rates, all else staying constant, the national Latino vote could increase from 5.93 million in 2000 to about 7.85 million in 2004, reflecting the community’s rapid population growth during the 1990s (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

PROJECTED 2004 HISPANIC VOTERS



Source: 2000 data from U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*; NCLR calculated 2004 potential figures based on Census data, assuming no decrease in citizenship rates.

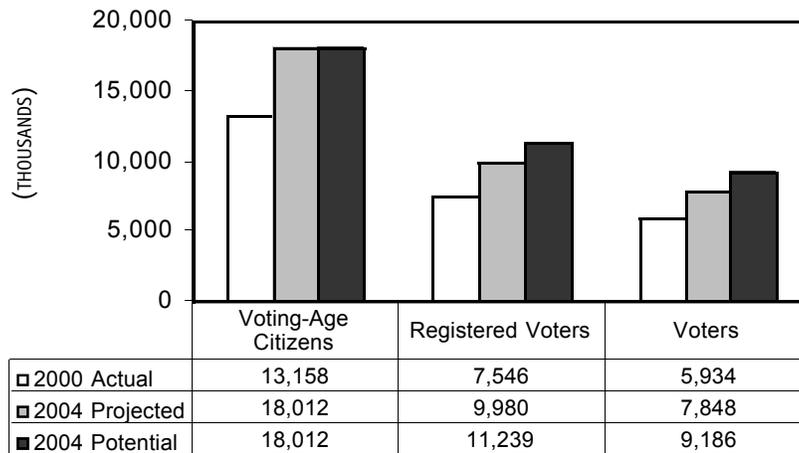
More importantly, if the registration and voter turnout gaps between Latinos and other groups could be narrowed even modestly, the potential for increases in Hispanic voter turnout is staggering. For example, Figure 3 shows the potential for enhancing the 2004 Latino vote by reducing the voter registration and voter turnout differences between Hispanics and other Americans. Specifically, if such differences between Latinos and African Americans could be cut in half – 5.1% instead of the current 10.2% voter registration gap, 2.8% instead of the current 5.6% turnout rate – although still remaining well below the levels of White

non-Hispanics, the Latino vote would grow dramatically (see Figure 3).

Thus, if the rate of Latino voting-age citizens registered to vote in 2004 rose to 62.4% (as opposed to the current 57.3% of Hispanics and 67.5% of Blacks), the number of registered Latino voters would increase from a projected 9.9 million to 11.2 million. Similarly, if just 81% of registered Latino voters actually vote in 2004 (compared with the current 78.6% of Hispanics and 84.2% of African Americans), turnout would increase from a projected 7.85 million to an estimated 9.2 million. This would represent a remarkable 3.25

FIGURE 3

POTENTIAL GROWTH IN HISPANIC ELECTORATE: EFFECTS OF CLOSING THE GAPS



Source: 2000 data from U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*; NCLR calculated 2004 projected and potential figures based on Census data, assuming no decrease in citizenship rates.

million more Latino voters in 2004 than in 2000 – a 55% increase – and 1.3 million more Hispanic voters than would otherwise be expected to occur in 2004 (a 17% increase over 2004 projections).⁴⁷

Since turnout tends to be lower in midterm elections, projected Latino

voter performance growth in 2002 would be lower, but still significant and potentially decisive in some states. Growth in Latino turnout in these states, therefore, would lend greater prominence to Latinos in those communities, and place increased attention on the issues that affect them.

IV. Analysis

Particularly over the last two election cycles, elected officials, candidates, and political parties are paying increased attention to the Latino vote. However, this increased attention is unlikely to translate into an expanded Hispanic electorate without specific efforts for several reasons, as outlined below.

- The economics of campaigns.** The economics of traditional campaigns force candidates and parties to target their resources toward likely voters. Whether mobilizing their base through GOTV activities, or attempting to influence swing voters, candidates and political parties focus almost exclusively on

likely voters. Since 55% of the potential Latino electorate did not vote in 2000 – a relatively high turnout election – by definition traditional campaigns and outreach efforts bypass the majority of potential Hispanic voters.

- **Lack of political party interest in Latinos.** Significant elements in both political parties have little or no interest in taking steps to expand the Latino electorate. On the one hand, notwithstanding widely-publicized efforts by President Bush and some of his advisors to reach out to the Hispanic vote, many in the Republican Party still perceive most Latinos as leaning Democratic. On the other hand, although many Democratic leaders perceive a need to improve their outreach to Latinos, in some key Congressional districts an expanded Hispanic electorate could threaten incumbents' positions in primary races. Thus, while both parties are stepping up "outreach" efforts, they are targeted mostly at high-propensity or already-likely Hispanic voters.
- **Limited knowledge of Latino voters.** Even if traditional institutions were motivated to expand the number of Latino voters, what is not clear is the extent to which they have the expertise and capacity to do so. Such an effort calls for a long-term investment that requires a systematic

and sustained approach, as opposed to the episodic nature of voter mobilization efforts undertaken by most political campaigns. Few campaign pollsters, strategists, and consultants, who play critical roles in modern campaign strategy, have any substantial experience with Latinos, in general, or turning out unlikely or infrequent Hispanic voters, in particular.

Moreover, it is unlikely that such expertise will be developed in the near term. Although no definitive studies have been conducted, Latino nonvoters and infrequent voters are likely composed of four groups: those with the lowest levels of income and educational attainment, young people just becoming of age to vote, immigrants who have attained citizenship, and immigrants who are not yet naturalized citizens. Conventional wisdom suggests that low-income people are too disaffected and alienated, and that young people are insufficiently interested in politics, to vote. However, findings from recent focus groups conducted by the NAACP National Voter Fund (NVF) suggest that having a family may be a motivator to vote for parents of non-voting age children. Given Hispanic demographics, this suggests significant Latino upside voter potential. These propositions may or may not be true in general, and may

or may not apply to Latinos, but little or no research has been conducted to find out. The absence of such research, combined with the conventional bias against electorate expansion in favor of mobilization of likely voters as the preferred GOTV strategy, means that many potentially rich sources of new Latino voters are ignored.

For example, there is some evidence to suggest that new Latino citizens have a higher registration and turnout rate than comparable native-born Hispanics,* but little or no effort has gone into rigorous analysis of what messages and techniques that have worked for these new citizens can be applied effectively to the extremely large group of those immigrants eligible for citizenship who have not yet naturalized, and the recently-naturalized who have yet to register.

Since the two largest groups of voting-age Hispanics consist of those who are not yet citizens, and those who are citizens but have not registered to vote, this information is crucial. Naturalization backlogs are, on average, 12 to 24 months from the time an eligible immigrant completes

an application to the day of the swearing-in ceremony conferring citizenship. As a rule, campaigns and political institutions focus on the short term, and few have the capacity to invest heavily in research, or to focus attention on groups like naturalization applicants, who are two years from becoming eligible to vote. Another group that requires similar consideration is Latino youth. As with previously-cited statistics, and even when controlling for citizenship status, Latino U.S. citizens 18-24 years old have the lowest rates of voter registration, 38.5%, when compared with their African American and White counterparts, 51.6% and 53.0%, respectively.⁴⁸ The same holds true for turnout rates: only 25.6% of Latino citizens in this age bracket voted, compared with 36.2% of African Americans, and 38.1% of Whites.⁴⁹ Given the youthfulness of the Latino population – 35.7% are below 18 – maintaining those voting patterns signals a growing population on the margins of the electoral process, and therefore unable to influence elected officials who shape the issues affecting that community.

* For example, on June 23, 2001, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that "Between 1995 and the end of 2000, 120,000 immigrants were naturalized in the Houston district, and another 2,100 have joined the citizenship ranks every month since. Nearly 60 percent, or 92,959, of Houston's 165,850 Hispanic registered voters signed up after 1995."

■ **Lack of investment in increasing Latino electorate.** Part of the reason for the gap in electoral participation between African Americans and Latinos can be attributed to significant financial investments in the African American electorate by private organizations, foundations, and individuals, which have not been matched for Latinos. Indeed, the voter gaps between Black and Hispanic voting-age citizens and registered voters – which are about twice as wide as the gaps between Blacks and Whites – confirm that factors other than education and poverty negatively affect Latino registration and turnout, since the economic status of Latinos and African Americans is similar.

■ **Mismatch between areas of the most rapid Latino population growth and the existence of Hispanic organizational voter registration/GOTV capacity.** According to the 2000 Census, the Hispanic population more than doubled (100%+ growth rate) in at least 23 states over the 1990s, mainly in “nontraditional” areas. While it is true that the majority of Latinos still live in five key states – California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois – even within these states the population is increasingly dispersed away from inner-city

neighborhoods with some, albeit often still very limited, voter registration/GOTV capacity.

Notwithstanding these formidable barriers, there is increasing evidence that focused, nonpartisan efforts can make a significant difference in expanding the Latino electorate. For example:

- From 1996 to 2000, the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) conducted its “200,000 in 2000” campaign, designed to increase the newly-naturalized immigrant voter pool in New York City by 200,000 new voters. With very limited resources, and using a model largely focused on voter registration linked to naturalization programs and community-based voter education, the campaign succeeded in registering at least 168,000 new immigrant voters. Furthermore, election-day exit polls documented a statistically significant increase in newly-naturalized voters.
- In 2001, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Education Fund (NALEO-EF) carried out GOTV efforts in key mayoral races with Latino candidates – Los Angeles, Houston, and New York. Relying almost exclusively on direct mail and phone banking targeted at

infrequent voters based on voter file analysis, independent evaluations confirmed press reports of heavy Latino voter turnout.

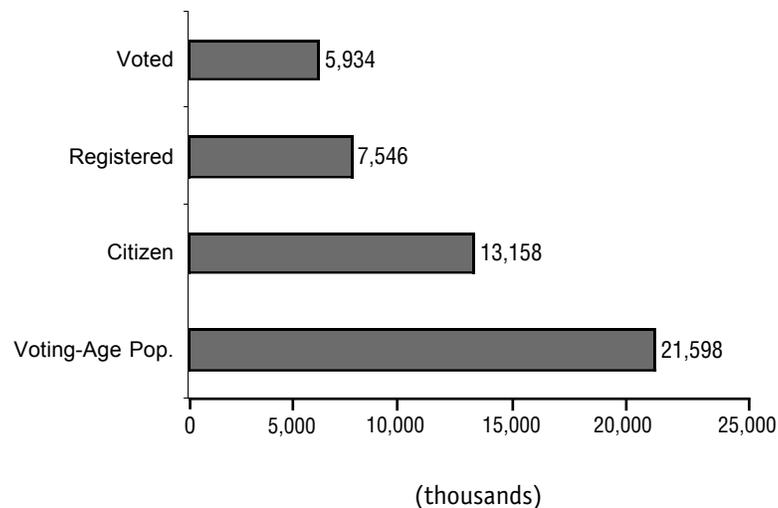
Perhaps the best-known and most successful recent independent GOTV effort was carried out by the NAACP National Voter Fund (NVF) in 2000. Using a combination of voter education, voter registration, GOTV, and media components, NVF is credited by many with the startling increases in African American registration and turnout in 2000. For example, 67.5% of Black voting-age citizens were registered in 2000, an increase of 2.1 percentage points over 1996. More importantly, 56.8% of Black citizens voted in 2000, a 3.8 percentage point increase over 1996. By comparison, Hispanic registration

dropped by 1.3 percentage points, and the voting rate increased by only 1.1 percentage points, over the same period.⁵⁰

Even if politicians start making serious efforts to reach likely Latino voters, they will only be tapping the tip of the iceberg, and a sustained, long-term investment is needed to achieve the empowerment of this population at the voting booth. In particular, as Figure 4 shows, there are three segments of the total voting age population of 21.6 million Latinos that current outreach efforts have failed to reach: (1) currently registered, low-propensity voters, (2) Latino citizens of voting age not yet registered to vote, and (3) citizenship-eligible immigrants.

FIGURE 4

HISPANIC ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, Issued February 2002.

V. Conclusions

The Hispanic electorate has come of age as a significant, potentially decisive voting population. At a time when the current occupant of the White House prevailed by a razor-thin margin of electoral votes, and when a shift of 100,000 votes in a few states could determine control of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, it is possible that the Latino vote could grow from less than six million in 2000 to as much as nine million in 2004. However, the discussion above also shows that there is not a specific Latino voting “bloc.” Similar to their overall diverse composition, while current research suggests strong views among Latinos on a range of issues, more research is needed to understand what appeals and matters to Latino voters.

Based on research and analysis of the Latino electorate, NCLR believes that two sets of issues are relevant. First, with respect to the current Latino electorate:

- **Candidates and elected officials should address the issues that matter to Latinos.** As this discussion has shown, Latinos are very concerned about issues that affect their community and the nation as a whole. These include education, the economy, and health

care. More than delivering speeches in Spanish, candidates and public officials need to communicate substantive agendas that will benefit and not harm the Hispanic community, or the nation, to appeal to Latino voters.

- **Reaching specific segments of the Latino electorate will require additional investments in research and polling.** Researchers and pollsters segment much of the mainstream electorate – “Soccer Moms” or “GenXers” – in order to gain a more precise and sophisticated understanding of various groups. As the Latino electorate grows, it will become increasingly less susceptible to broad or simplistic generalizations. In addition, deeper analysis is needed about the various components of the Latino electorate, including the perspectives of native-born and naturalized voters, those whose first language is English or Spanish, those who are young, new voters, and those who are long-time voters.

Second, with respect to ensuring that the Latino electorate reaches its full potential:

- **The nation’s ability to expand the Hispanic electorate commensurate with the community’s growth should be seen as an important indicator of the health of the American democracy.** A fundamental tenet of “government by the people” is electoral participation. If any significant portion of the population does not participate, democracy itself is weakened, to the detriment of the larger population.
- **The Latino voting-age population that currently does not vote (15.6 million) is nearly three times the size of the number of Hispanics who voted in 2000.** As this population becomes more active and engaged over time, it has the potential to transform American politics. Therefore, it is not just politicians and political parties, but all Americans, who should be paying attention.
- **Latino organizations have a special responsibility to work on expanding Hispanic participation in the electoral process.** As this analysis shows, the Latino community and its organizations cannot rely on political professionals and campaigns to support this work. In order to maximize this potential, Hispanic organizations, including NCLR, need to:
 - Make significant, purposeful investments in expanding the electorate, in conjunction with labor, business, and private philanthropy.
 - Include targeted efforts to better understand the issues and voter participation models that will successfully motivate the multiple components of the infrequent voter population to engage in the political process.

Polls Reviewed

The Battleground 2002 Poll. The Tarrance Group/Lake Snell Perry and Associates, a bipartisan poll of 1,000 registered likely-voters nationwide, released June 25, 2002.

A Glimpse into Latino Policy and Voting Preferences. Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, telephone survey of 2,011 Latino registered voters, March 2002.

"Immigration: A Nation Divided?" www.publicagenda.org. Included telephone interviews conducted September 3-16, 1998 with a sample of 801 parents with children in public schools in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Latino Voters. Hart/Lake/Bendixen, Survey of 1,148 Latino registered voters conducted July/August 2001 for the AFL-CIO.

National Hispanic Electorate. Bendixen and Associates for the New Democrat Network (NDN). Included 800 interviews with Latinos, of whom 53% were U.S.-born and 47% were foreign-born. Among foreign-born voters, 65% had become citizens after 1995. More than half (52%) indicated that English was their preferred language. May 2002.

National Survey on Latinos in America. *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, nationally representative sample of 4,614 adults, 18 years and older, including 2,417 Latinos, conducted by telephone between June 30 and August 30, 1999.

Race and Ethnicity in 2001: Attitudes, Perceptions and Experiences. *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, nationally representative sample of 1,709 randomly selected respondents ages 18 and older, including an oversample of 696 respondents (230 African Americans, 237 Latinos, and 229 Asians), conducted by telephone March 8 through April 22, 2001.

Race, Ethnicity and Medical Care: A Survey of Public Perceptions and Experiences. Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, national random sample of 3884 telephone interviews with adults age 18 or over, including 1479 Whites, 1189 African Americans and 983 Latinos, conducted between July and September of 1999. Released October 1999.

Victory 2001, Survey of New Jersey Hispanic Registered Voters. Bendixen and Associates, survey of 800 New Jersey Hispanic voters, September 2001.

Endnotes

1. For more on this point, see *The Latino Agenda: Issues at Stake in the 2000 Presidential Election*, Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, October 2000.
2. See for example, Lee, Jessica, "GOP, Democrats court Latino vote," *USA Today*, May 12, 2002; "Both parties courting Latinos vigorously," *Washington Post*, October 26, 1998.
3. NCLR calculation based on U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey Summary Tables. Calculation includes Hispanics over 5 years of age who speak only English, as well as Hispanics who speak Spanish at home, but speak English well or very well.
4. U.S. Census Bureau, *The Hispanic Population in the United States*, Census Brief 2002, Washington, DC: Department of Commerce, May 2001.
5. "Annual Report From UGA Selig Center Shows Minority Buying Power Made Dramatic Gains Over Past 12 Years," July 11, 2002, www.uga.edu/news/specialreport/buyingpower.
6. 1997 Economic Census, Minority and Women-Owned Businesses, United States, <http://www.census.gov/epcd/mwb97/us/us.html>.
7. The latest Census Bureau data show that 57% of Latinos 25 years old and over have at least a high school diploma, compared with 79% of African Americans, and 88% of Whites.
8. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost one in five (18%) Latinas worked in professional and managerial positions, compared with 12% of Latino men in 2000.
9. "National Hispanic Electorate," Bendixen and Associates for the New Democrat Network (NDN), May 2002.
10. U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, Current Population Reports, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, February 2002.
11. Growth in National Latino Voter Registration: Presidential and Mid-Term Elections, 1972-2000, http://www.wcvi.org/latino_voter_research/latino_voter_reg/uslvr.html.
12. *The Latino Vote in the '90s*, Issue Brief No. 4, Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, October 2000.
13. "Poll Shows Democratic Gains with Key Voters," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1998.

14. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, op. cit., and U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996*, Current Population Reports, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, July 1998.
15. Ibid.
16. *NALEO's 2002 Latino Election Handbook*, Washington, DC: National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, 2002.
17. Sponsored by the New York Immigration Coalition, the "200,000 in 2000" campaign coordinated citizenship, voter registration, voter education, and get-out-the-vote activities among some 50 different community-based Coalition members.
18. *Current Issues: Immigrants and the 2000 Election*, Washington, DC: National Immigration Forum, January 2002, www.immigrationforum.org/currentissues/articles/111700_election.htm - 11k - 15 Jan 2002.
19. *NALEO's 2002 Latino Election Handbook*, op. cit.
20. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit.
21. Barreto, Matt, Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Ph.D., Jongho Lee, Ph.D., Jaesung Lee, Jaesung Ryu, and Harry P. Pachón, Ph.D, *A Glimpse Into Latino Policy and Voting Preferences*, Policy Brief, Claremont, CA: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, March 2002.
22. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit.
23. "Race and Ethnicity in 2001: Attitudes, Perceptions and Experiences," *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, 2001.
24. "National Survey on Latinos in America," *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, 2000.
25. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit.
26. "National Survey on Latinos in America," op. cit.
27. Ibid.
28. "Race, Ethnicity and Medical Care: A Survey of Public Perceptions and Experiences," Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, October 1999.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. "National Survey on Latinos in America," op. cit.
32. www.publicagenda.com, "Immigration: A Nation Divided?"

33. The Tarrance Group/Lake Snell Perry and Associates, "The Battleground 2002 Poll," June 25, 2002.
34. In "The Battleground 2002 Poll," 90% of Latino voters supported such a program, while in the Hart/Lake/Bendixen poll of Latino Voters, conducted in July/August 2001 for AFL-CIO, 86% of Latino voters expressed their support.
35. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit., 85%; Hart/Lake/Bendixen poll for the AFL-CIO, 86%.
36. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit.
37. "National Survey on Latinos in America," op. cit.
38. "The Battleground 2002 Poll," op. cit.
39. "Victory 2001," Bendixen and Associates, September 2001.
40. Hart/Lake/Bendixen for the AFL-CIO, August 2001.
41. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit.
42. "The Battleground 2002 Poll," op. cit.
43. Kondracke, Mort, "Democrats Have Plan To 'Unmask' GOP To Win Latino Votes," *Roll Call*, May 16, 2002.
44. "National Hispanic Electorate," op. cit.
45. "Democrats Have Plan To 'Unmask' GOP To Win Latino Votes," op. cit.
46. NCLR projections based on information from *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*.
47. Ibid.
48. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, Detailed Tables, Table 2. Reported Voting and Registration, by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age.
49. Ibid.
50. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, op. cit. and *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996*, op. cit.