

Article from **Policy Perspectives**

(http://www.imakenews.com/cppa/e_article000594705.cfm?x=b6Gdd3k,b30DNQvw,w)

June 28, 2006

Latino Participation

by Mark Alvarez, Administrator of Minority Affairs, Salt Lake City

"We don't need perfect political systems; we need perfect participation," Cesar Chavez once exhorted Latinos to civic action. Latino leaders and others continue the work of civic engagement through citizenship drives, voter registration, community education and advocacy.



What could energize the Latino community to greater political action? For years, the Southwest Voter Registration Project has used the slogan "Your Vote is Your Voice." Though all have voices, it is an important political principle that those who make their voices heard and vote have the most influence.

Latinos have tended to vote at low rates. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2004, over 27 million Latinos in the United States were of voting age. Only about seven and a half million voted. This is a 28% percent participation rate, well below the non-Latino-participation rate of 62.7%. Utah participation rates were 25.8% for Latinos and 65.2% for non-Latinos.

Despite the low voter turnout, which many attribute to the youth of the Latino population and the fact that 40% of voting-age Latinos are ineligible to vote, more attention now focuses on Latinos. Generally, this has to do with demographic trends of the Latino community and the potential impact on business and politics.

The Latino population has grown significantly over the last fifteen years. From 1990 to 2004, the Latino population across the U.S. grew 85%. In Utah during that same time, the Latino population grew 200%. The Latino population is young and accounting for about half of the nation's population growth.

Latino purchasing power has increased enormously. According to a Selig Center report, from 2000 to 2010, Latino purchasing power will increase from under \$490 billion to over \$1.08 trillion. In Utah during that time, Latino purchasing power will increase from \$2.5 billion to \$6.2 billion.

The demographics of the Latino population nationally are complex. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, 60.9% of the Latino population is native born. One in four foreign-born Latinos is a naturalized citizen. Many Latino are young. These facts have major implications on voting patterns, especially in the West where 44.7% of Latinos in the U.S. live.

Politically, Latinos are far from a monolithic group. In the 2004 Presidential election, about 55% of Latino voters chose Democratic nominee John Kerry and 45% chose Republican nominee George W. Bush. The most important issues for Latinos, according to a Pew Hispanic Report study done in early 2004, were education, the economy and jobs, and health care and Medicare.

The major political parties spent significant amounts of money nationally on advertising and outreach efforts in Spanish. While the outreach has not seemed as strong in Utah, Sylvia Haro, the current chair of the Hispanic Republican Assembly, suggested, "Candidates spend money on the mainstream media. They haven't spent much money on outreach to Latinos. That should change." The major political parties, nationally and in Utah, consider the Latino vote potentially theirs.

Immigration has emerged as a critical issue. In a sense, immigration and the resulting activism

has become the promising story for Latinos. The April 9 Dignity March was the biggest demonstration in Utah history and drew tens of thousands of Latinos. Many of those Latinos are young and nearing the age at which they can vote. They have gained valuable experience through their civic participation and will influence politics for coming generations.

Rosalba Dominguez, a 23-year-old Latina who helped organize the Dignity March, said that getting involved had helped her learn more about the process. She said, "A lot of friends have paid more attention and are registering to vote. Being unclear about what is occurring is motivation for getting involved." Ms. Dominguez commented on high school organizing and how some Latino students had told her they were excited about turning 18 and being able to vote.

Attention to Latino high school trends is critical. According to the University of Utah study, "The Economic Impact of the Mexico-Utah Relationship," 1 in 18 high school graduates in 2002 was Latino. In 2018, that proportion will be 1 in 4. These graduates are future voters, officeholders and leaders.

Tony Yapias, lead organizer for the April 9 Dignity March and current chair of the Hispanic Democratic Caucus, said that it was a college student who called and spurred him to begin organizing a rally for immigration reform. Mr. Yapias has worked to develop a statewide network that could be used for voter registration and education. He said, "it is important that Latinos reach out to others, make themselves heard and get involved early in campaigns."

Archie Archuleta and Frank Cordova, officials of Utah Coalition of La Raza and longtime activists in the Latino community, stressed how important it was that Latinos worked together and got involved in politics. On April 9 and April 10, at the Dignity March and Unity Rally, over one hundred people, mostly Latino, were registered as voters, in part due to the efforts of Mr. Archuleta and Mr. Cordova. Mr. Archuleta stated, "As Latinos realize we can make a difference, there is a bubbling up of hope."

The bubbling up of hope can be seen in student organizing, which has drawn significant attention recently; the numbers of people who showed up for the immigration events on April 9th and 10th; and the increased motivation of Latino students to get an education and contribute to a cause. The bubbling up of hope could lead to more perfect participation in coming elections by an ever-growing Latino population.

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