

The 1996 Chicago Latino Registered Voter Political Survey: Political Participation and Public Policy Positions

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SUMMARY. The Latino population in the United States has been expanding at a tremendous rate in recent decades and as the number of Latinos in the United States grows, so does their potential for influencing American politics grow. Yet, we have a very limited understanding of Latino civic engagement, political behavior, and public policy opinions. This article presents the results of a survey of 408 registered Latino voters in Chicago, Illinois. The findings advance a multidimensional understanding of Latino political behaviors and attitudes through the examination of multiple measures of political participation and opinions concerning political parties and public issues such as welfare reform, immigration, naturalization and official language policy, bilingual education, capital punishment, gun control, and affirmative action.

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Findings are discussed in the context of earlier studies of Latino electoral participation and American public policy opinions. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

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INTRODUCTION

The Latino population in the United States has been expanding at a tremendous rate over the last two decades, so much so that it is predicted that Latinos will become the largest ethnic minority group shortly after the turn of the century. In 1990, one out of every ten persons counted in the U.S. census was Latino, and the Bureau of the Census projects that by the year 2050 one of every five U.S. residents may be Latino (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993:2). As the number of Latinos in the United States grows, so does their potential for influencing American politics grow. Yet, we have a very limited understanding of Latino civic engagement, political behavior, and public policy opinions.

Despite the fact that political surveys are conducted and released on a daily basis during campaign seasons, the vast majority fail to offer useful information to political activists in at least two ways. For one, most political surveys are designed to determine only the candidate preferences of the respondents and perhaps ask for their opinions concerning a few of the most high profile issues on the campaign. Secondly, the overwhelming majority of these polls are designed to make statistical inferences to the population as a whole and therefore they sample a representative cross-section, which does not include a sufficient number of Latinos, or other minorities within the population to allow for any statistical inferences to be drawn concerning their attitudes and behavior. Arvizu and Garcia have pointed out that "[T]he omission of ethnicity by most major voting studies and data sets has created an incomplete and inaccurate depiction of the American voting public" (1996: 110).

Political surveys have historically ignored, undercounted, or oversimplified Latino political behavior. It has been in only the last two

decades that researchers have begun to give serious attention to Latino political participation. Most of the research thus far, however, is limited to comparisons of Latino with Anglo voting rates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perhaps the first attempt to understand Latino voting behavior can be found in Wolfinger and Rosenstone's, *Who Votes* (1980). Their findings indicated that while Chicanos were three percent more likely to vote than the general population, when controlling for socioeconomic status, their potential political power was compromised by high levels of noncitizenship and low naturalization rates. Similarly, Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) noted the diluted voter potential among Latinos due to lack of citizenship. Interestingly, Garcia and Arce (1988) found higher voter turnout rates among naturalized and first generation, American-born Chicanos in contrast to second generation and beyond Chicano citizens.

Nearly a decade later, Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) reported Latino voter turnout to be 51.8%, 15 percentage points lower than that of the U.S. in general, contradicting Wolfinger and Rosenstone's earlier findings. However, Calvo and Rosenstone found considerable ethnic group differences among Latinos, with Cuban turnout rates exceeding that of non-Latino voters and Puerto Ricans to be the least likely to vote among Latinos. Similarly, de la Garza and others (1992) found Latino participation to lag substantially behind that of non-Latinos.

More recently, Diaz (1996) indicated that Latino voter registration rates were approximately 20% lower than those of non-Latinos, in the 1990, 1992, and 1994 election years. Diaz also found ethnic variation in voter registration rates when analyzing data from the Latino National Political Survey. For example, he found that approximately 66% of Mexican Americans, 65% of Puerto Ricans, and 83% of Cuban Americans were registered to vote. Furthermore, he found that approximately 78% of Mexican Americans, 74% of Puerto Ricans, and 88% of Cuban Americans had ever registered to vote.

Previous studies of the general electorate have indicated that participation in electoral politics is positively associated with increases in socioeconomic status (Verba & Nie 1972). There is some evidence of a similar pattern among Latinos. Higher levels of educational attainment and occupational status were found to increase Mexican and

Puerto Rican voter turnout, while having virtually no effect on Cuban voting (Calvo & Rosenstone 1989). Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) argue that, while education was found to be the best socioeconomic predictor of increased voting for the general U.S. population, its impact on Latinos, while significant was less pronounced. Wrinkle and others (1996) observed that increases in income promoted non-electoral political activity among Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Cubans, but found that increases in education had a positive effect on Puerto Rican and Mexican Americans only. Arvizu (1994, 1996) found the interaction between education and age to be important in predicting Latino voter turnout. Older, rather than younger, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were found to be more likely to vote.

Gender has also been identified in previous research as a significant factor in Latino political participation and opinion formation. Welch and Sigelman (1992) uncovered a gender gap among Latinos on measures of political ideology, party identification, and presidential voting. Wrinkle and others (1996) also identified gender as a significant predictor of nonelectoral political activity among Mexican Americans. They found Chicanas were more likely to write letters, attend public meetings, and engage in other nonelectoral political activities than their male counterparts.

Hero and Campbell (1996) found that, while Latinos may be less likely to vote than non-Latinos, Latino participation in a number of other nonelectoral political forums was not distinct when socioeconomic differences were considered. More specifically, when socioeconomic variation is accounted for, there is not a significant difference between Latino and non-Latino nonvoting political participation, such as attending public meetings, writing to public officials, attending rallies, and contributing money. Significant differences between the two groups were found only in the rates of volunteering for a candidate or party and signing petitions.

Wrinkle and others (1996) found that participation in nonelectoral political activities increases for all Latino groups with higher incomes, similar to patterns observed in voting behavior in the general population. They also found that nonelectoral political participation was boosted by increased levels of education among Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. And, they found age to be significant in predicting Mexican American and Puerto Rican nonelectoral political participation.

In summary, we can see that numerous factors have been found to affect Latino political participation. Both education and income seem to be positively related to political participation, with education clearly the stronger predictor. Numerous studies have also found age to influence political activity, with older individuals participating at higher levels than younger individuals. Finally, there have been varied findings concerning the effects of gender and ethnicity on voter participation. Some studies have indicated that while women voted with less frequency than men prior to the 1970s, the gap has been closed in recent decades. Other research has shown that Latinas participate at higher rates than Latino men in nonelectoral political activities.

While voting is an important measure of political participation, it does not capture other forms of civic engagement, such as participation in political organizations or other private voluntary associations (e.g., charities, community groups, religious organizations). A multidimensional conceptualization of political participation incorporates a broad spectrum of citizen mobilization like voting, campaigning, participation in community activities, involvement in collective action to solve a problem, public discourse, and many other forms of nonelectoral political activity. Furthermore, some analysts have argued elsewhere that taking part in private voluntary associations is strongly associated with voting and other political activity (Verba & Nie 1972, Putnam 1994, Diaz 1996). Thus a view that incorporates both electoral and nonelectoral political behaviors provides a more accurate picture of civic engagement and political participation.

In this study, we attempt to gain a multidimensional understanding of Latino political behaviors and attitudes by examining multiple measures of political participation and opinions concerning political parties and public issues.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Methodology

In order to collect data on Latino political participation and public policy preferences, we developed a 54-question telephone survey, which was administered during a two-week period in late-October 1996, just prior to the national elections. We collected data on demo-

graphic characteristics, nonelectoral and electoral political participation, public policy opinions, and candidate choices. The instrument contained both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was piloted on a small number of individuals and modified according to the feedback received. The survey instrument was administered principally by nearly 40 volunteers in both Spanish and English, and required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Sample

The Cook County Board of Elections provided two electronic files for the purpose of drawing a sample. One file contained a complete list of all registered voters in Chicago, with phone numbers when available. The second file contained a list of Latino surnames developed by the U.S. Census Bureau. The total list of registered voters ($N = 1,374,644$) was matched with the Latino surname file, yielding 141,659 estimated Latino registered voters for the city of Chicago. While only a sample size of 400 was needed to achieve a 5% confidence interval, a 5% random sample of voters with phone numbers was drawn from this file to generate a list for conducting the survey. This larger sample was drawn to insure that a sufficient number of cases would be available for the study in the event of: (1) our inability to locate persons appearing on the list due to wrong numbers, disconnected phones, not at home when called, or move in residence, (2) persons appearing on the list who did not meet study criterion (e.g., persons with Spanish surnames who were not Latino), and (3) individuals declining participation in the study. This master list was run in random order to produce sub-lists for individual volunteers conducting the phone interviews. A total of 408 surveys were completed during the two-week period, yielding a sample size sufficient for a 5% confidence interval.

The sample represented the following general characteristics. Women comprised 61 percent of all respondents. With regard to national origin, 46.7% were of Mexican heritage, 37.7% were Puerto Rican, and 15.6% were of other Latino heritage. Sample frequencies and means indicated that the typical Latino registered voter was 40 years old, had some college education (30.9%), was foreign born (54.2%), had immigrated to the U.S. at 18 years of age, was married (54.3%), and was overwhelmingly of the Catholic faith (77.1%). Furthermore, the average Latino registered voter lived in a four-member household

(3.74), in which Spanish is more likely to be spoken (43%), and was a full-time employee (52.5%), with a total annual family income of \$20,000 to \$29,000.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Political Participation

In this study, political participation was measured broadly, consisting of electoral and non-electoral political mobilization. Participants were asked about their voting behavior, involvement in political organizations, and community or religious organizations. In our analysis of the political participation data, which is detailed elsewhere (Sanchez & Vidal de Haymes 1997), we constructed a simple four-point index of political participation based on a combination of variables that measured voting, activity in political organizations, and activity in community organizations, to identify predictors of political participation.

Our results indicated that voting was best explained by two variables: how long the respondent had been registered to vote and the age of the respondent. Voting was found to increase with age and length of time registered to vote. We found that male gender, level of education, and the length of time the respondent had resided in the U.S. were positively related, and the strongest determinants of whether an individual will participate in a political organization. Education was the only factor that significantly predicted whether a respondent was involved in a community or religious organization.

Our data tend to corroborate the findings of previous studies in a limited manner. As in other studies, our data support the notion that education is positively related to political participation. Those Latinos with higher levels of education tend to be more active politically than those with lower education levels. Additionally, we found that maturity, or simply time, has a positive effect on participation. Those who are older or have been in the United States longer tend to participate more than those who are younger or have been in the United States only for a short time.

Our study, on the other hand, yielded some new and interesting findings. For example, our data suggest that women tend to participate at lower levels than men. We could not reach any conclusions about

why women seem to be less active politically than men without collecting and analyzing more data. Our findings were surprising because our sample was composed of 60% women. Since there are more men than women in the Chicago Latino population, we were convinced that Latinas were much more likely to register to vote than Latino men since our random sample of registered voters yielded a 6 to 4 ratio of female to male registered voters, and consequently we expected to find that women would be more active politically.

Our study uncovered a predictor of political participation—how long a respondent has been registered to vote—that has not been explored in the past. Those Latinos who have been registered to vote for more than four years tend to participate at higher rates than those who have recently registered. This finding suggests that in a period of large-scale Latino voter registration, such as the Latino Vote 96 campaign that was underway during the time of the study, the Latino vote may not be immediately perceptible. However, in the long run, registration efforts will yield large dividends.

What we did not find is also very interesting. For example, it appears that Latinos who were born in the United States are no more likely to participate politically than Latinos who are immigrants. Likewise, Latinos who speak Spanish predominantly in their homes are not less likely to participate politically than those who speak English principally. Being more “American,” as defined by speaking English or being born in the United States, does not seem to increase political participation, at least among those who are citizens and registered to vote.

Another important observation is that we did not find a very strong relationship between education and age and political participation. This could be due to the fact that Latinos may be motivated to participate politically by other factors than the population at large, or more specifically than the Anglo population. One of the questions in our survey asked the respondents whether they thought their political participation would increase if there were more Latinos running for public office. The results were quite startling: 61% said that their participation would increase or dramatically increase. Latino political participation, like the participation of other minorities, may be greatly affected by the fact that candidates do not usually come from their ethnic group. If Latinos knew that they were going to be represented by a Latino it is much more likely that their political participation

would follow the general patterns of Anglo voters. Thus, when Latinos can vote for Latinos to represent them we may see increased levels of participation, and participation patterns that resemble more closely the patterns of Anglo voters.

Party Affiliation and Public Policy Opinions

Party Affiliation. The party preferences of Latino voters in Chicago were decidedly Democratic in 1996, with 79.9% identifying themselves as either a Democrat or Strong Democrat. This is somewhat puzzling when one considers the fact that only 29.5% of the respondents say that they consider themselves to be to the left of center ideologically (socialist 5.1%, very liberal 4.5%, and liberal 19.9%), yet it is possible that this apparent paradox is due to cultural preferences for being conservative socially as well as the perception that the Democratic Party has moved to the center of the ideological spectrum. Furthermore, 72.3% of Latinos stated their intent to vote for President Clinton in the 1996 election, 4.3% for Dole, and 20% were either undecided or unfamiliar with the candidates.

Welfare Reform. There was a series of six questions that addressed the welfare reforms that had been recently debated in Congress. Our results indicated that a significant number of Latinos in Chicago favor some reforms in the welfare system. For example, 49.8% felt that welfare benefits should be cut off after a period of two years and 81.1% thought that people should receive welfare only if they perform some sort of work for those benefits. These findings suggest a reasonably strong reform sentiment among Latinos. However, when asked if parents on welfare should receive some sort of government funded day care in order to work or study, 88% of the respondents agreed, and 90.5% thought that legal residents of the U.S. should be eligible for welfare benefits, education, and health care. In addition, an overwhelming 92.1% of registered Latinos in Chicago believe that the government should establish a national health care system. In sum, Latinos in Chicago favor some of the major welfare reforms recently adopted by Congress and the President, particularly the work requirements. However, there is overall support for the social welfare state

and a rejection of many of the more stringent provisions included in the compromise welfare reform package (see Table 1).

These views on welfare reform are similar to those found in a 1993 national study of public opinions of the general registered voter population (Garin, Molyneux, & DiVall 1994:47). The study concluded that while voters accepted a conservative diagnosis of the problem, they did not accept a conservative agenda for reform. More specifically, they found that 93% of voters were in favor of requiring welfare recipients to work for their welfare checks and 65% favored a general two-year limit on benefits. Yet, 95% supported the provision of child

TABLE 1. Chicago Latino Registered Voter Public Policy (Opinion)

Issue	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Welfare benefits should be cut after a period of 2 years.	201	49.8	40	9.9	162	40.2
People should perform work for welfare benefits, unless they have a disability.	331	81.1	22	5.4	55	13.5
Parents on welfare should receive subsidized day care, to allow them to work or study.	358	88.0	19	4.7	30	7.3
Children of legal residents should be eligible for welfare, education, and health care benefits.	368	90.5	17	4.2	22	5.4
The government should establish a national health care system that covers all citizens.	375	92.1	20	4.9	12	2.9
The minimum wage should be increased.	372	91.4	17	4.2	18	4.4
The government should take stronger steps to limit immigration to the U.S.	204	50.5	84	20.8	116	28.7
It should be easier to become a citizen of the U.S.	237	58.5	78	19.3	90	22.2
It should be easier to become a registered voter.	283	69.9	62	15.3	60	14.8
English should be the official language of the U.S.	136	33.4	31	7.6	240	59.0
The government should increase spending for bilingual education.	320	79.0	36	8.9	49	12.1
The government should eliminate affirmative action.	128	31.8	58	14.4	217	53.9
The federal government should strengthen gun control.	353	86.7	16	3.9	38	9.4
The death penalty should be used in the criminal justice system.	232	58.6	57	14.4	107	27.0
Money has too much influence in American politics and elections.	381	93.8	12	3.0	13	3.2
The government should reimburse parents if they choose to send their children to private school.	219	54.3	55	13.6	129	32.1

care subsidies and 89% supported the provision of health care benefits to parents on welfare who go to work.

Immigration and Citizenship. In addition to welfare issues, we included several questions that are of special interest to Latinos, such as immigration and citizenship. Half (50.5%) believe that the U.S. government should take stronger steps to limit immigration into the U.S., while 58.5% agree that it should be easier to become a U.S. citizen (see Table 1). These results are somewhat contradictory and suggest that despite the fact that the survey item did not specify "legal or illegal" immigration, many respondents were probably thinking in those terms. Nonetheless, it is evident that Latinos who have established citizenship in the U.S. support some restrictions on additional immigration and are much more likely to support the maintenance of benefits to current immigrants rather than efforts to ease entry into the United States. Perhaps this position can be attributed to the issue that Latinos are more likely than Anglos to be adversely affected by the economic impact of additional immigration (Miller, Polinard, & Wrinkle 1985). Whatever the reason, the current wave of restrictionist attitudes among immigrants has a long history in the U.S. Espenshade and Hempstead (1996) indicate that this "drawbridge" mentality has existed in this nation since the time of the pilgrims.

While half of the Latino respondents in our survey supported some steps to limit immigration, a CBS News/*New York Times* general public opinion poll conducted in June of 1993 indicated that nearly two-thirds of survey respondents thought the level of U.S. immigration should be lowered, roughly one-third felt that immigrants take jobs away from native workers, and half felt that immigrants cause problems for the U.S. (Espenshade & Hempstead 1996:44-45). A national poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News in 1996, revealed that 52% of respondents wanted to halt all immigration, illegal or legal, for five years (Reimers 1998:30).

English Only. Another area of particular interest to Latinos concerns efforts to make English the official language. These movements have garnered some momentum in states with large Latino populations within the last few years and the Republican Party has attempted to use this issue as a potential "wedge." In fact, studies of public opinion in this area have indicated that majorities (64.5%) of the general public support these efforts (Tatalovich 1995:179). We found that 59% of Chicago Latinos oppose the adoption of English as the official

language, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., de la Garza, Falcon, Garcia, & Garcia 1992). We also found strong support (79%) for increased government funding for bilingual education (see Table 1). In short, efforts to make English the official language will continue to be a divisive issue within the electorate, with Latinos being the main opposition group to the English-only movement.

Affirmative Action. As evidenced by the mobilization of Latinos and other groups in California, the elimination of affirmative action programs is an issue which has the potential to activate grassroots movements and inspire individual citizens to participate. Our results indicate that 53.9% of Latinos in Chicago favor affirmative action programs (see Table 1). These figures place Latino support for affirmative action between that of White and Black Americans. Kinder and Sanders (1996:17) indicate that 15.4% of Whites and 67.7% of African Americans support affirmative action programs in the work place and 29.7% and 79.7%, respectively, support such programs in college admissions.

Capital Punishment and Gun Control. A review of public opinion and capital punishment research indicates that approximately 75% of the American public support the death penalty when they are not presented with the alternative of a life sentence without parole (McGarrell & Sandys 1996:501). A recent Gallup poll found that 7 out of 10 Americans support the death penalty for individuals convicted of murder, even though many of those same people believe American minorities and the poor are most likely to receive a death sentence. While our study did not find such overwhelming support for capital punishment, we did find considerable support among Latinos (58.6%). (See Table 1.)

There was overwhelming support among the survey respondents for strengthening gun control laws. Eighty-seven percent of respondents favored increased federal government restrictions on gun ownership (see Table 1). This strong support for more stringent gun control laws is also shared by the general American public. A June 1999 Gallup poll found that 89% of Americans surveyed supported mandatory prison sentences for felons who commit crimes with guns; 87% supported mandatory background checks for gun purchasers; 82% agreed with raising the minimum age for handgun possession to 21 years of age; and 79% supported mandatory registration of all firearms (Gallup 1999).

Government Spending. Study participants were asked to identify which of four areas of government spending should be cut the most if needed to balance the national budget: corporate subsidies and tax breaks, education, defense, and social welfare programs. More than half (53%) of respondents indicated that corporate subsidies and tax breaks should be cut and nearly a third (29.3%) supported defense cuts. There was considerably less support for cuts in social welfare program (14.3%) and education (2.9%) spending.

Major Problems in the U.S. Facing Latinos. Respondents were also asked to reflect on what they believed to be the most important contemporary problems facing Latinos in the U.S. This survey item was open-ended. The most frequent responses in rank order were: discrimination/racism (26.8%), the economy and employment prospects (15.7%), crime/gangs/drugs (15.2%), education (13.9%), immigration (9%), lack of political representation (6.2%), welfare (6.2%), anti-immigrant/Latino legislation (3.6%).

CONCLUSION

The results of our analysis indicate that the length of time an immigrant has lived in the U.S., age, education, and how long the respondent has been registered to vote, are all positively related to levels of political participation. Latinas tend to participate at lower levels than their male counterparts. Young citizens have the lowest rates of registration and voting and our results indicate that the length of time one has been registered is an important determinant of other forms of political participation. Lastly, a majority of respondents indicated that their levels of political participation would increase if more Latino candidates ran for public office.

Although it is evident that more research on the political attitudes and party affiliation of Latinos in Chicago needs to be conducted, our study was able to identify several important characteristics of Latino public opinion. For example, identification with the Democratic Party by Latinos in Chicago is extremely high. This level of support might be explained by the Democratic positions on such issues as moderate welfare reform, increases in the minimum-wage, and health care reform, which Latinos strongly favor. Although the issues of English only, immigration, and affirmative action do not enjoy the widespread support that one might think among registered Latino voters in Chicago,

go, our results indicate that slim to moderate majorities reject English-only legislation and support affirmative action and restrictions on immigration. Furthermore, Latinos would rather see cuts in federal spending for corporate tax incentives and defense, than cuts in educational and social welfare programming to balance the budget.

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