



VIVA LATINO VOTERS!

Charting the Power of an Ethnic Group in American Politics

By Adrian D. Pantoja

In the 1960 U.S. presidential election, Mexican Americans formed Viva Kennedy clubs in the hopes of electing John F. Kennedy to the presidency. Although Mexican Americans believed they helped Kennedy win the crucial state of Texas, most outside observers regarded their votes as unimportant. After all, Kennedy's running mate was Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, the powerful U.S. Senate majority leader. In one presidential election after another, Latino elites continued to hype the importance of the Latino vote. Political realities suggested that much of their hype was simply that—hype. Then came the 2008 and 2012 elections, and the hype gave way to political realities. The Latino vote was widely seen as pivotal in the election and reelection of President Barack Obama. Today, pundits no longer refer to Latinos as a sleeping giant. Instead, they use terms like the “Latino tsunami” when speaking about their demographic and electoral clout. The fact that more than a year before the general election in November 2016 the media and candidates themselves were highlighting the importance of Latino voters is a radical departure from the past. Latino voters are poised to play a pivotal role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

The 1960 Democratic National Convention was held in Los Angeles. Its location made it convenient for a handful of Mexican American political elites to attend and outline a strategy for broader Mexican American participation. These leaders decided to support John F. Kennedy and, after a quick meeting with his brother Robert, they proposed a bold strategy for Mexican American political participation through the development of Viva Kennedy clubs. The clubs were autonomous entities with no ties to funding from the national or local Democratic Party. Viva Kennedy leaders naïvely believed they were directly linked to the inner circle of Kennedy's campaign. They also naïvely believed that if they could demonstrate

◁ Latino immigration supporters launch a voter registration campaign, Boulder, Oct. 28, 2015. *Eván Semon/Reuters*

Mexican American voters were instrumental in Kennedy's election, the administration would reward them with high-level appointments. Viva Kennedy club leaders were anxious for recognition and they overplayed the importance of their initial meeting with Robert Kennedy and signals, however small, from the Kennedy campaign. They used this assumed connection to mobilize Mexican American voters by explaining to them that Kennedy was a friend and was counting on them to win the election. While there is no data showing the success of their mobilization campaigns, historians note that Mexican American voters responded enthusiastically. In the end, Kennedy prevailed over Republican Richard M. Nixon by a narrow margin. The fact that Kennedy won Texas, the epicenter of Viva Kennedy Club activities, signaled to Mexican American leaders that their efforts were successful. They eagerly awaited the fruits of their labor.

The appointments and recognition never came, nor did the Kennedy administration preoccupy itself with Mexican American issues. While the leadership felt ignored and even insulted, the fact of the matter was that these individuals and their clubs were not officially associated with the Kennedy campaign. None of them were members of Kennedy's inner circle of advisors. In all likelihood, Viva Kennedy leaders were unknown to anyone of importance working with or advising Kennedy. So it is not surprising that they did not receive the recognition they expected. Not only did the leadership fail to gain recognition for themselves, they also failed to gain recognition for the broader Mexican American electorate. Yet, Viva Kennedy leaders would remain politically active throughout their lives and many went on to hold elected offices. These men set into motion one of the most significant steps undertaken by Mexican Americans—coordinated participation in electoral politics.

Since the 1960 presidential election, there has been an ongoing quest for political recognition. One of the major obstacles confronting Hispanic leaders was the absence of reliable data and research on Latinos. It was impossible to demonstrate Latinos' voting strength or state with any confidence what their political or partisan preferences were. Essentially this made them politically invisible. Nonetheless, groups such as the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP), founded in Texas in 1974 by William C. Velásquez, continued the work of the Viva Kennedy Clubs by carrying out voter registration and mobilization efforts in Latino communities. Although the Latino population and electorate experienced significant growth as a result of changes to U.S. immigration law in the the 1980s, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which legalized millions of undocumented immigrants, they remained politically invisible because of the continued absence of data and research on this population.

California's Proposition 187

In 1990, political scientists made a significant contribution to the study of Latino politics with the Latino National Political Survey. The LNPS was the first national survey analyzing Latino political behavior and attitudes. The survey had a sample of 2,817 Latinos, of which 1,546 were Mexican, 589 were Puerto Rican, and 682 were Cuban. The fact that the survey was national and that respondents were randomly selected was significant because the results could be generalized to the broader Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American community. The LNPS became an important tool for educating Americans about the political views and behaviors of the three largest Latino groups in the United States. Many of the results were eye opening and challenged conventional wisdom about Latinos. By including a number of social indicators, the survey revealed that Latino assimilationist patterns mirrored those of other immigrants. Large majorities displayed high levels of affection and patriotism toward the United States. Also, at the time, immigration issues did not factor prominently among their policy concerns. When asked if they agreed or disagreed that there are too many immigrants, 75.2 percent of Mexican American respondents agreed (agree/strongly agree) with that statement. Among Puerto Ricans the figure was 79.4 percent and among Cuban Americans, 65.5 percent agreed that there were too many immigrants. At the time, the political context was one where anti-immigrant rhetoric was not pervasive, so their views were not seen as hostile toward undocumented immigrants.

By the time the survey was carried out, the Latino population had become more diverse. Historically, Latino politics was synonymous with Mexican American politics. Yet, over time other Latino groups would experience significant increases. Given the growing diversity, it was imperative for scholars to examine whether this diverse population was seeing itself as a distinct ethnic group. Specifically, scholars were interested in whether a Latino/Hispanic pan-ethnic identity was emerging. If respondents identified as a collective, using a pan-ethnic label, then one could claim that a "Latino" community did in fact exist and may possibly act in concert when it came to matters of politics. However, if these groups rejected this identity, then the prospects for national visibility could be dampened given that "Latino" politics or the "Latino" electorate would be nonexistent. Latino politics would simply exist as Mexican American politics in the Southwest, Puerto Rican politics in the Northeast, and Cuban American politics in the Southeast.

The LNPS asked respondents to select their preferred ethnic identity. Scholars and advocates were dismayed to find that very few respondents selected the pan-ethnic identity of Hispanic or Latino. Among Mexican Americans, only 28.4 percent of U.S.-born respondents picked a pan-ethnic label. Among Puerto Ricans born in the mainland, 19.4 percent selected a pan-ethnic identity. For U.S.-born Cuban Americans,

20.1 percent chose a pan-ethnic identity. Among foreign-born respondents, the selection of a pan-ethnic label was significantly lower. For a majority of respondents, the preferred identity was tied to the ancestral homeland and the United States (for example, Mexican American). The absence of a pan-ethnic identity was consequential because it suggested that Latino politics was fragmented. An additional challenge to national visibility was the fact that many Latinos remained politically unengaged. In the LNPS, respondents were asked if they had participated in a wide range of political activities including the 1988 presidential election. Cuban Americans had the highest rate of participation with 67 percent claiming to have voted in 1988. However, turnout rates were dismal for Mexican Americans (49 percent voted in 1988) and Puerto Ricans (50 percent voted in 1988).

Although the LNPS identified some of the barriers limiting the rise of Latinos as national political players, it also helped advance their presence through the scholarship it spurred. Without the LNPS, the subfield of Latino politics would not have emerged as an important field in political science. The political scientists Harry P. Pachon and Rodolfo O. de la Garza, who worked on the LNPS, were also in the process of building a significant research center in Texas and Southern California, The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI). Together, the LNPS and the TRPI would prove to be indispensable for increasing Latino visibility in the 1990s. The former would remain the only national survey on the Latino electorate for over a decade. The latter would initiate a series of studies on the policy needs of this growing population. In essence, the dreams of the Viva Kennedy generation were being realized in the 1990s as political scientists took the lead in developing rigorous studies on the Latino electorate.

However, it was a series of strategic missteps on the part of Republicans that would alter the course of Latino history. In 1994, an anti-immigrant ballot initiative would appear on the California ballot that would fundamentally transform politics in the Golden State and beyond. The ballot initiative was Proposition 187. Supporters of the initiative designed it to address California's fiscal problems caused by "illegal" immigrants. Specifically, it prohibited undocumented immigrants from receiving any type of public service, including schooling and non-emergency medical care. It also required public service employees to report persons suspected of being undocumented to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). At the time, 80 percent of undocumented immigrants were from Latin America and the campaign images and rhetoric were largely directed at Latin Americans generally and Mexicans in particular. In his bid to win reelection, Governor Pete Wilson made his support for Proposition 187 a central issue in his campaign. Latinos saw the media campaign and rhetoric supporting the initiative as xenophobic and broadly directed against the state's Hispanic population. Although the initiative passed by a large margin (59 to 41 percent), Latinos

overwhelmingly voted against it. More significantly, the initiative led Latino immigrants to naturalize and turn out in record numbers. Historically, naturalization rates for Latin Americans were lower than that of other immigrant groups. But now naturalization was pursued in an effort to secure the right to vote. An unintended consequence of Proposition 187 was its mobilizing effect on Latinos. Over time, the sustained increases in voter turnout led pundits to declare that the sleeping giant had awakened.

“Tomorrow We Vote”

My own research, and that of other scholars, conclusively demonstrates that Proposition 187 had a dramatic impact on the Latino electorate and California politics. The initiative not only increased the share of the Latino electorate in the state, it also created a backlash against the Republican Party. This was a strategic miscalculation. The state’s Republicans had failed to consider the significant demographic shifts that were taking place in the state. For example, between 1994 and 2004 the Latino population grew by 30 percent. During this same time period, the non-Hispanic white population grew by 1 percent. Taking a longer historical view of this growth provides us with a greater appreciation for how Latinos literally changed the face of California. In 1960, Latinos constituted a mere 9 percent of California’s population. By the 2010 Census, they were 38 percent of the population. By 2010 Latinos officially transformed California into a “majority-minority” state and by 2015 they outnumbered the non-Hispanic white population.

The most significant change that occurred in California was not demographic, but political. The Latino electorate essentially transformed California into a solidly Democratic state. This is a significant accomplishment considering that throughout much of the Cold War, California was a Republican stronghold. Republicans had won every presidential contest in the state from 1952 to 1988, except Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 landslide over Barry Goldwater. Today, the Republican Party in California is in a free-fall; no Republican presidential candidate has won the state since 1992. Presently, Republicans do not hold any statewide office and they have seen their numbers fall below one-third in the state senate and assembly. In the 2010 midterm elections, when Republicans picked up sixty-three House seats nationally, they failed to pick up a single seat in California. The Democratic Party has a two-thirds majority in the state legislature for the first time since the 1880s. Finally, the share of Californians registered as Republican declined from 37 percent in 1992 to less than 30 percent in 2012.

The dramatic demise of the Republicans in California can be attributed to the rise of the Latino electorate and the anti-immigrant initiatives that were passed in the mid-1990s—besides Proposition 187, Propositions 209 and 227 cut affirmative action and bilingual education programs. Without these initiatives and the anti-immigrant rhetoric that accompanied them, Latinos would not have defected from the Republican Party and

the party's losses would not have been as dramatic. Republicans were actually making significant inroads with Latino voters prior to Proposition 187. Polling data from a California Field Poll show that Ronald Reagan increased his share of the Latino vote from 35 percent in 1980 to 45 percent in 1984. A 2013 Latino Decisions poll asked Latinos if they had ever voted for a Republican candidate in a local, state, or national election; a whopping 52 percent of respondents answered yes. Clearly, Latinos are willing to vote for Republican candidates. However, the anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric that many Republicans adopted caused Latinos to abandon the party in droves.

Anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric could not have come at a worse time for Republicans as the share of Latino voters increased dramatically. In 1980 Latino voters were only 7 percent of California's electorate. By 1990, they were about 9 percent. By 2000 that figure had grown to 14 percent, and by 2012, over a quarter of California's electorate was Latino. During this period, the size of the non-Hispanic white electorate increased by a mere 1 percent. Moreover, the size of non-Hispanic white voters registering Republican also declined, as many were also turned off by the party's stances on immigration. The increase in Latino political power devastated the Republican Party in the state.

Events in California reverberated nationally. Rather than learn from the mistakes made in California, Republicans in other states began supporting anti-immigrant policies and employed strident rhetoric similar to that used in California in the mid-1990s. Some of the most controversial measures were passed in Arizona, including Proposition 200, in 2004, and SB 1070, in 2010. Draconian anti-immigrant policies became nationalized in December 2005 when the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives passed HR 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, also known as the Sensenbrenner Bill for its sponsor Wisconsin Republican Jim Sensenbrenner. HR 4437 would have expanded fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border and increased penalties for entering the country without documentation and for hiring someone who was undocumented. However, the most controversial aspect of the bill was that it made it a crime to provide any type of assistance to undocumented immigrants. Essentially, religious workers and other social service providers who served undocumented immigrants could face felony charges. In the spring of 2006, the nation witnessed the largest civil rights demonstrations as millions, largely Latinos, took to the streets in opposition to the Sensenbrenner Bill. Many of the protestors carried signs stating, "Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote." The message was clear and it would be delivered in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.

Obama Wins!

During the 2008 primary, Latinos received unprecedented media attention. The change in coverage was due to the growth of this electorate and the fact that the Democratic

Party changed the 2008 primary schedule in a manner that allowed Latino voters to become decisive players throughout the campaign. Previously, the early primary states were less diverse and therefore minority voters had less of an opportunity to influence the early trend of the primary elections. Because so many heavily Latino states held primaries before February 5, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama intensified their Hispanic outreach strategies. Latinos strongly supported Clinton and she won the Latino vote by two-to-one margins in nearly every state. In fact, Latino voters were instrumental in keeping her candidacy viable until mid-June. It was alleged that Latino anti-black prejudice was the reason Obama did not do well among Latinos. That assertion was false, as these observers failed to cite many elections in which Latinos strongly backed African American candidates. The fact that Obama won an estimated 70 percent of the Latino vote in the 2008 general election should have put to rest the trope that this electorate is reluctant to support African American candidates.

Obama's victory over Republican John McCain was attributed, in part, to the support he gained from Latino voters. Was the Latino vote critical to Obama's victory? Before answering this question, it is important to recall that historically Latino voters are seen as politically inconsequential in national presidential politics. The noted Latino politics expert Rodolfo O. de la Garza has argued, "The Latino vote is completely irrelevant. The myth was created by Latino leaders who wanted to convince politicians nationally about how important Latinos were." True, it is difficult, if not impossible, in presidential elections for any single group of voters to claim that their vote is determinative of the outcome. Yet, Latinos were clearly relevant in 2008. According to Latino Decisions analysis, fourteen states were clearly identified as swing states that would determine the election outcome in the 2008 presidential contest. Seven of the fourteen had significant Latino populations that could influence the outcomes of those states: Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana. Using a series of sophisticated statistical measures, Latino Decisions concluded, "The Latino vote did not deliver the power punch in what became a landslide victory for Obama, but Latinos were far from irrelevant. Latino influence was greatest in Nevada and Florida, two of the most hyped battleground states; both flipped from Republican to Democrat from 2004 to 2008."

In 2012, Latinos gained even greater visibility as Obama defeated Romney despite losing ground among non-Hispanic white voters. For the first time ever, Latinos accounted for one in ten votes cast nationwide, and Obama received the highest ever Latino vote total, 75 percent, for any presidential candidate. Also, for the first time ever, the Latino vote directly accounted for Obama's margin of victory. Without the Latino vote, Obama would have lost the election to Romney, at least in the popular vote. Additional statistical analysis by Latino Decisions identifies several states where

Latinos alone and in combination with African Americans proved to be pivotal in putting that state's electoral vote in Obama's camp. One of the key factors driving Latino voters was the candidates' divergent position on immigration, a top policy issue for Latinos. Recall that data from the Latino National Political Survey (1990) revealed that immigration was not a salient issue among Latinos.

However, since the mid-1990s, the position candidates and parties take on immigration has had a direct influence on Latinos' vote choice. In 2012, Obama and the Democratic Party supported a wide array of progressive policies on immigration. In contrast, Romney took an opposing and hardline position on immigration. He supported a policy of self-deportation and opposed any efforts to regularize the status of undocumented immigrants. Rather than reaching out to Latino voters, Romney and the Republicans believed they could prevail by doubling down on conservative non-Hispanic white voters. That was once again a strategic miscalculation.

Fulfilling the Potential

In 1960, Viva Kennedy leaders sought to raise the political visibility of Latinos through voter mobilization drives on behalf of John F. Kennedy. It was an audacious plan with a modest beginning. Over the years, Latino politics was plagued by low voter turnout and political invisibility. Regrettably, it took a series of anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric to finally awaken the sleeping giant. Latino immigrants became citizens and Latino citizens (naturalized and U.S.-born) became voters. Today, Latino voters wield significant influence in local, state, and national politics. That influence is likely to increase and remain a permanent feature of American politics.

Nonetheless, after sixty years of electoral political engagement, the full electoral potential of Latinos remains unfulfilled. For example, in the 2012 election 12.5 million Latinos went to the polls, a significant increase from previous elections, but only about half of the 24 million eligible Latino voters. Additionally, Latinos are 17 percent of the population, yet they constitute only 10 percent of the electorate. In contrast, non-Hispanic whites are 63 percent of the U.S. population, yet they constitute nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of the electorate. Much work remains to be done in order to fully capitalize on the power of the Latino vote.

Over sixty years ago, Viva Kennedy leaders recognized that Latinos would turn out and vote if they were mobilized by their organization, candidates, and political parties. Perhaps they understood that they alone would have to target Latino voters, since historically the political parties and candidates ignored Latinos. While much has changed since the 1960 presidential election, other things remain the same; Latinos are one of the most under-mobilized segments of the electorate. In a Latino Decisions 2012 election eve poll, respondents were asked, "Over the past few months, did anyone from a campaign,

political party, or community organization ask you to vote, or register to vote?” Over two-thirds of respondents answered no. Again, much work remains to be done.

Although Latinos remained under-mobilized, some significant changes have occurred since the 1960s. First, the population is considerably larger. In 1960 there were an estimated 5 million Latinos in the United States. Today, there are about 55 million persons of Hispanic ancestry. Secondly, despite its size and diversity, Latinos believe there are more commonalities than differences across the Hispanic ancestry groups; they are embracing a pan-ethnic identity. Recall that in 1990, the Latino National Political Survey found that most Latinos did not identify pan-ethnically. In 2006, a group of political scientists developed a larger national survey of Latinos, the Latino National Survey (LNS). The survey allowed respondents to select multiple identities, and the majority selected labels that included pan-ethnic identities. Specifically, Latinos were asked, “How strongly do you think of yourself as Hispanic or Latino?” Eighty-six percent of respondents identified “very to somewhat strongly” with these pan-ethnic terms. Third, Latinos are more politically cohesive than at any other time in history. In the Latino Decisions 2012 election eve poll, respondents were asked, “Which of the following three statements do you agree with the most: I’m voting in 2012 because I want to support the Democratic Party/Republican Party/Latino Community.” Support for the Democratic Party (39 percent) and Latino community (36 percent) was statistically equal. These results reveal a high degree of ethnic consciousness. The general consensus among longtime observers of Latino politics is that the ongoing attacks against immigrants are forging a sense of political commonality among Latinos. In short, Latino politics is large, visible, and cohesive.

It is ironic that the dream of the Viva Kennedy leaders to mobilize Latino voters and gain national recognition was realized in the last few decades by the shortsighted policy positions and campaign strategies of the Republican Party. The consequence of this strategy has been disastrous for the Republicans in California and presidential hopefuls. Rather than chart a new course, the current Republican presidential candidates have ramped up the attacks against immigrants and other minority groups. History has shown that Latinos will not let these attacks go unchecked and, unlike the past, they are now in a position to defeat their opponents. Will the 2016 race see the emergence of a Republican candidate along the lines of Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, who managed to win nearly 40 percent of the Latino vote? Or will it be a candidate along the lines of Bob Dole or Mitt Romney who won a mere 20 percent of the Latino vote? The former candidates provide a blueprint for political success while the latter provide a blueprint for political failure. Regardless of the choice taken by the Grand Old Party, as Republicans call themselves, the winners for the foreseeable future will be Latinos.