

# HISPANIC AMERICANS IN THE MAINSTREAM OF U.S. POLITICS

*By Rodolfo O. de La Garza, Angelo Falcon, F. Chris Garcia, and John A. Garcia*

Americans are increasingly concerned about the role "Spanish-origin" populations will play in the nation's politics. They ask: How willing are they to learn English and to support fundamental American values? Are they liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat? What should we call them, Hispanics, Latinos, or something else?

The principal reason for these questions is demographic. From 1970 to 1980, the Hispanic population increased from 9.1 to 14.6 million, and by 1990, it had reached 21.4 million. Accompanying this growth has been increased diversity in the national origins and regional distributions. What once was a predominantly Mexican-origin group located in the Southwest is now a nationally dispersed, heterogeneous population which also includes significant numbers of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and growing clusters of Caribbeans, Central Americans and, to a lesser extent, South Americans.

This growth has had contradictory political consequences. It has, on the one hand, motivated responses such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and the Official English Movement, which although not explicitly focusing on them, are clearly targeted at Latinos. Even more troubling have been suggestions by members of the political elite, such as Senator Alan Simpson (R-Wy), former Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado<sup>1</sup> and former Official English executive director and White House appointee Linda Chavez,<sup>2</sup> that Latino cultural and political values threaten the physical and political integrity of the nation. Many Americans appear to share this negative view of Latinos. In 1990, the National Opinion Research Center reported that, compared to Jews, Blacks, Asians, southern whites

and whites in general, Americans perceive Latinos as second only to Blacks as being lazy and living off welfare rather than being self-supporting, and see Latinos as the least patriotic of all these groups.<sup>3</sup>

## Political Clout

On the other hand, the growth of the Latino population has combined with increased activism and the expanded protections of the Voting Rights Act to greatly increase Hispanic political clout. Indeed, the percentage increase in elected officials outdistanced population growth in states such as California, Florida, New York and Texas, all of which experienced dramatic Latino population increases. The Latino vote has the potential of determining the results of the 1992 presidential election, because of the role it can play in these key states.<sup>4</sup>

It is because of this potential that the Republican and Democratic party alike now court the Hispanic vote. However, since national opinion polls do not systematically include enough Latinos to report their views, it is difficult for Latinos to make themselves heard and have their concerns systematically incorporated into the nation's political debates. Indeed, so little attention is paid to Latinos that even basic questions such as party identification and electoral preferences in presidential elections may be strongly disputed.<sup>5</sup>

Data from the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS)—which interviewed nationally a representative sample of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban origin adult residents of the continental United States between August 1989 and April 1991—begin to fill this information gap.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, an individual is a member of one of these groups if he/she, one

parent, or two grandparents were of Mexican, Puerto Rican or Cuban ancestry. These three groups together account for approximately 80% of the nation's Hispanics. More significantly, they probably account for over 90% of the Hispanic voters. Here, unless otherwise stated, we report only on citizens, i.e., the real or potential electorate, with the objective of addressing issues particularly relevant to the presidential election and to key debates particularly concerning Latinos. Our book, *Speaking for Themselves*, a complete description of the values, attitudes and behaviors of LNPS respondents, is scheduled to be published early in the fall of 1992 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).

## Ethnic Labels

What do LNPS citizen respondents call themselves? This question has two types of answer, one racial and the other ethnic. Approximately 60% of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, and 93% of Cubans, identify as white. Significantly, approximately 40% of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans define themselves *racially* in terms of Latino referents such as "brown" or "Hispanic." This is a recent and potentially significant development.

When asked what if any ethnic labels they prefer, all groups overwhelmingly selected those that refer to their national origin group, e.g., Mexican-American or Cuban. Pan-ethnic terms such as Hispanic or Latino are much less popular. However, our ongoing research indicates a complex pattern of multiple ethnic identities among the total sample—i.e., citizens and non-citizens.<sup>7</sup> For example, respondents frequently combine national origin and pan-ethnic identities, and some combine these and also identify simply as "American."

## English or Spanish?

The English language plays a different role in Latino communities, depending on both nativity and citizenship. Only among the foreign-born is there a sizeable proportion of Spanish-dominant respondents. The native-born of each group are overwhelmingly either bilingual or English dominant. Citizens are much more English dominant. This is especially true of Mexican-origin respondents, 49% of whom are native-born, but is less pronounced among Cubans and Puerto Ricans, the majority of whom are immigrants or born in Puerto Rico, respectively (Table 1). All groups, and especially Mexicans, rely much more on English than on Spanish language media for their news. Nonetheless, a significant minority of Cubans (23%) and Puerto Ricans (23%), but very few Mexicans (59%), rely primarily on Spanish media.

The respondents recognize and endorse the centrality of English to U.S. society, but they oppose policies that would discriminate against non-English speakers. Thus, 90% of each Latino group agrees that citizens and residents of the United States should learn English, and more than 40% of each group agrees that English should be the official language. However, at least 90% of each group agrees that public services should be provided in Spanish, and close to three quarters disagree that business should be allowed to require employees to use only English on the job.

Approximately 90% of each group supports bilingual education. *More than 80%, however, define the objectives of bilingual education as the learning of English or the learning of English and Spanish.* Together, these findings refute those who claim Latino language atti-

tudes and behavior are resistant to English.

## Ideology and Partisanship

Ideologically, the respondents defy simply categorization.<sup>8</sup> They self-identify as moderate to conservative: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans identify 35%, 25% and 23% respectively as moderates, 36%, 47%, and 55% as conservatives. All three groups voice majority support for capital punishment. They are more divided regarding abortion and affirmative action. Cubans, the group most likely to identify as conservative, voice

**Table 1**  
Language Ability by National Origin

	<u>Mexican</u>			<u>Puerto Rican</u>			<u>Cuban</u>		
	<u>Foreign Born</u> (n=781)	<u>Native Born</u> (n=764)	<u>All Citizens</u> (n=877)	<u>Foreign Born</u> (n=387)	<u>Native Born</u> (n=202)	<u>All Citizens</u> (n=587)	<u>Foreign Born</u> (n=587)	<u>Native Born</u> (n=92)	<u>All Citizens</u> (n=312)
Much better in Spanish	19%	1%	1%	11%	0%	7%	24%	0%	5%
Better in Spanish	60	8	11	49	5	34	50	4	38
No Difference	14	24	26	24	28	25	16	29	28
Much better in English	7	59	55	16	60	31	9	63	27
Don't know Spanish	*	8	7	*	8	3	*	5	2

**Question :** Considering your abilities in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing English, which of these statements best describes your abilities in Spanish? Would you say that you don't know Spanish, are much better in English, are no different in either language, are better in Spanish, or are much better in Spanish?

the strongest objection to government quotas, yet they lend the least support to the pro-life position. Similarly, the Latino groups are in the American mainstream on role of government questions, giving major emphasis to individual responsibility (Table 2).

There are also significant partisan differences among Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans. While 60% of Mexicans and 64% of Puerto Ricans surveyed were Democrats, 64% of Cubans were Republicans (Figure 1). However, only 31 and 37%, respectively, of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans describe themselves as strong Democrats, compared to almost half of the Cubans who considered themselves strong Republicans. More significantly, those who have changed partisan affiliation have gone disproportionately from the Democratic to the Republican party.

There are differences in political participation among the groups. While two-

thirds of Cubans were registered and voted in 1988, half of Mexicans (51%) and Puerto Ricans (50%) either were not registered or did not vote that year. On the other hand, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans are more likely than Cubans to participate in political activities other than voting. Our on-going analysis suggests that these differences persist after demographic differences are controlled.<sup>9</sup>

## Still A Melting Pot

All three groups express strong attachment to the United States. The overwhelming majority of Mexicans and Cubans express very or extremely strong pro-U.S. sentiments (Figure 2). Furthermore, our analysis indicates that when demographic factors are controlled, there are no differences between Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Anglos regarding these sentiments. Relatedly, 90% of Mexicans and 77% of Cubans are primarily concerned with U.S. rather than with "homeland" politics. That Puerto Ricans score lower on these measures is probably because of the unique relationship Puerto Ricans have to the United States and the continuing debate over the Island's status.

We hope these findings stimulate political activists to review their assumptions about Latino attitudes and behavior. Moreover, we believe that the differences we have found between groups of Latinos will convince analysts that future research must be based on data which distinguish among Hispanic groups by their national origins. It is, in our judgment, very unfortunate that publicly financed research such as the National Election Study continues to refuse to oversample Latinos so as to make it possible to describe the views of the respective major Hispanic national-origin groups.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity and the Civic Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), pp. 255-256.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Chavez, *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation* (Basic Books: New York, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Tom Smith, "Ethnic Survey: GSS Topical Report Number 19," National Opinion Research Center, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Pachon and Louis DeSipio, "Latino Elected Officials in the 1990's," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Volume 25, June 1992, pp. 212-217.

<sup>5</sup> See Rodolfo de la Garza, ed., *Ignored Voices: Public Opinion Polls and the Latino Community* (Austin, Texas: Center for Mexican American

Studies, 1987); and de la Garza and Louis DeSipio, *From Rhetoric to Reality: Latinos and the 1988 Elections* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, forthcoming.)

<sup>6</sup> F. Chris Garcia, J. A. Garcia, A. Falcon, R. O. de la Garza, "Studying Latino Politics: The Development of the Latino Political Survey," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Volume 22, December 1989, pp. 848-852.

<sup>7</sup> John A. Garcia, R. O. de la Garza, A. Falcon, F. C. Garcia, "Ethnicity and National Origin Status: Patterns of Identities Among Latinos in the US," a paper presented at the 1991 meeting of the American Political Science Association.

<sup>8</sup> F. Chris Garcia, R. O. de la Garza, J. A. Garcia, A. Falcon, "Ethnicity and Ideology: Political Attitudes of Mexican, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Anglos in the United States," a paper presented at the 1991 meeting of the

American Political Science Association.

<sup>9</sup> A. Falcon, R. O. de la Garza, F. C. Garcia, J. A. Garcia. "Modes of Political Participation of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans: Preliminary Data for the Latino National Political Survey," a paper presented at the 1991 meeting of the American Political Science Association.

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**Table 2**  
**Social-Political Outlook, By National Origin**

		<u>U.S. Citizens</u>		
		<u>Mexican</u>	<u>Puerto Rican</u>	<u>Cuban</u>
<b>(1) Attitude Toward Capital Punishment</b>				
Supports		65%	53%	70%
Depends on the case		17	21	17
Opposes		17	26	14
<b>(2) Attitude Toward Abortion</b>				
Should never be permitted		20%	23%	12%
Only if rape; incest		33	36	33
Only if needed		11	13	18
Always permitted		36	28	36
<b>(3) Views of Job and College Admission Quotas (Scale)</b>				
Government quotas	(1-2)	31%	34%	19%
Both equally	(3)	30	35	18
Strictly Merit	(4-5)	39	31	64
<b>(4) Government's vs. Individual's Role in Providing Jobs* (Scale)</b>				
Government should provide a job for everyone who needs one	(1-2)	30%	40%	21%
Both equally	(3)	29	28	29
Individuals should get their own	(4-5)	41	32	49

### Questions :

(1) For persons convicted of murder, do you favor or oppose the death penalty?

(2) There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which...best agrees with your view? By law, an abortion should never be permitted; an abortion should be permitted only in case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger; an abortion should be permitted but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established; a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice?

(3) We would like your opinion on some issues that have been talked about in recent months. On each card, the number 1 represents a position held by some people (The government should establish quotas in college admissions and job hiring to insure representation.), the number 5 represents an opposing position (College admission and job hiring should be based strictly on merit.), and the numbers 2 through 4 stand for positions between these two. Please indicate the number that best represents your opinion on each issue.

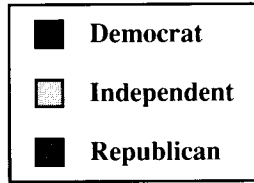
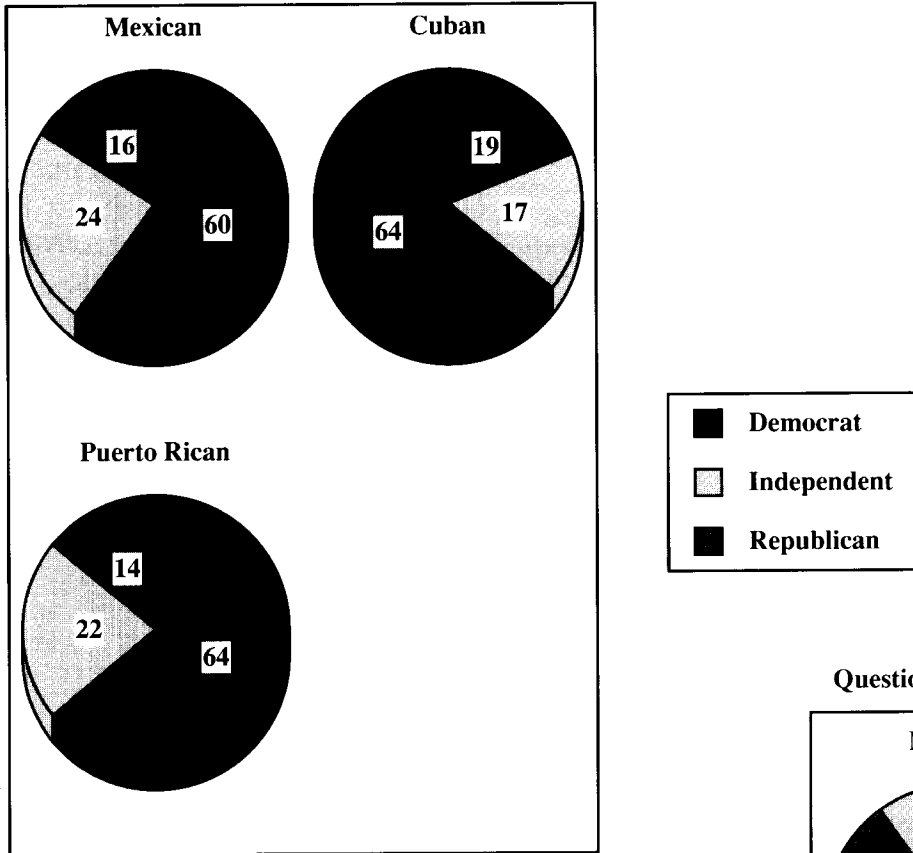
(4) Same structure as the previous question: "The government should provide jobs to everyone who wants a job"; and "It's up to each person to get his own job."

\*A comparable question asked by the National Opinion Research Center in the General Social Survey, 1990 of the U.S. adult population was as follows: "On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to...provide a job for everyone who wants one?" The responses were: 15% definitely should be; 27% probably should be; 32% probably should not be; 22% definitely should not be; and 5% can't choose.

## RESPONSES OF LATINOS, BY NATIONAL ORIGIN (U.S. Citizens)

**Figure 1**

**Question:** Do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?



**Figure 2**

**Question:** How proud are you to be an American?

