Latino Political Participation in Nebraska: The Challenge of Enhancing Voter Mobilization and Representation

University of Nebraska Omaha

OLLAS
Office of Latino/Latin American Studies

Latino Political Participation in Nebraska: The Challenge of Enhancing Voter Mobilization and Representation

Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado, Ph.D.
Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS)
Department of Political Science
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Report prepared for the
Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS)
University of Nebraska at Omaha
October 27, 2006

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) for their generous support of this study. Funding for this report and data collection for this project was provided in part by a grant to OLLAS from the U.S. Department of Education. I also acknowledge the research and administrative support of Dr. Loree Bykerk, Chair of the UNO Department of Political Science, Dr. Jerry Deichert, Director of the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, and the research assistance of Yuriko Doku of OLLAS.

Pictured on cover: Immigration march in Omaha, Nebraska, April 10, 2006. Cover photo courtesy of Larry Moffatt.

OLLAS, the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies of the Great Plains, is a center of excellence that focuses on the Latino population of the Americas, with particular emphasis on U.S. Latino and Latin American transnational communities. It is an interdisciplinary program that enhances our understanding of economic, political, and cultural issues relevant to these communities. In August 2003, OLLAS received a $1,000,000 award from the Department of Education (Award # P116Z030100).

One of the three central objectives funded by this grant is the "Development and implementation of a research agenda designed to address the most urgent and neglected aspects associated with the region's unprecedented Latino population growth and its local, regional and transhemispheric implications. These projects involve collaboration with community agencies, UNO programs and faculty and other governmental and non-governmental associations." This report is testimony of our fulfillment of that objective.

For more information on OLLAS, contact Dr. Lourdes Gouveia (402-554-3835) or go to the website:
http://www.unomaha.edu/ollas

The contents of this report were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education; however, it does not necessarily represent DOE policy. The reader should not assume endorsement of this report by the Federal Government.

This publication should be cited as:

Benjamin-Alvarado, Jonathan (2006). *Latino Political Participation in Nebraska: The Challenge of Enhancing Voter Mobilization and Representation.* OLLAS Special Report No. 3. Omaha, NE: Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS), University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Introduction

Three events occurring over the course of the past ten months provide a defining backdrop for the state of Latino politics in Nebraska in late 2006. On April 10, 2006, nearly 15,000 Latinos and their supporters turned out peacefully and without incident en masse in a march through the streets of downtown Omaha to simultaneously protest the passage of H.R. 4437[1] and to advocate comprehensive immigration policy reform. The Omaha march organizers—a loose coalition of community organizations, church leaders, educators, and labor unions—were surprised at the large turnout, as were city officials and the media. Across the nation, it was estimated that well over three million people participated in similar marches and rallies. The questions left for the organizers were whether this energy from the mobilization of Latinos in Nebraska could be transformed into effective representation in the political arena, and if the marches could be the start of a new Latino political and social movement. Interestingly, many Latinos think they can be and have viewed the marches as the beginning of a long-term Latino social movement, as well as a factor that will motivate more Latinos to vote.[2]

The second event, in response to the first, was an effort by many of the same local organizations to promote a voter registration campaign leading up to the November 7th general election. On July 27th, over forty individuals were deputized as voter registrants, and registration tables were set up in South Omaha's Plaza de la Raza. While the actual number of new voters registered was small, the effort was viewed within the Latino community as the launch of a follow-on mobilization of voters aimed at enhancing participation and civic engagement. The event was also marked by a more nefarious dimension, however. Directly across the street from the registration site a group of anti-immigrant protesters assembled who had been protesting at the offices of Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) earlier. Senator Hagel authored a comprehensive immigration policy reform package that was introduced in the Senate in the late spring. The group was comprised of "concerned citizens," nativists, erstwhile border vigilantes, and white supremacist, paramilitary groups objecting to the "registering of illegal aliens to vote." As a result of this incident and similar others, many Latinos now see the immigration policy debate as an important factor prompting the perception of greater discrimination.[3] Finally, but not surprisingly and with much fanfare, the "Secure Fences Act" was signed into law by President George W. Bush on Friday, October 13, 2006.[4] The new law

---

[1] House of Representatives Bill 4437 (The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigration Act of 2005) was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives on December 15, 2005, by a vote of 239-182 (with 92 percent of Republicans supporting and 82 percent of Democrats opposing it). This is also known as the Sensenbrenner Bill for its sponsor, Representative Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI).

[2] Roberto Suro and Gabriel Escobar, *2006 National Survey of Latinos: The Immigration Debate*, Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, D.C., p. iii.

[3] A majority of Latinos (54 percent) say the immigration debate has made discrimination more of a problem. Native-born Latinos (48 percent) and foreign-born Latinos (66 percent) see this issue as a "major" problem. See Suro and Escobar, *2006 National Survey of Latinos*, p. 4.

[4] The Secure Fences Act was part of the FY 2007 Defense and Homeland Security appropriations bills, which added 3,736 new Border Patrol agents, 9,150 new detention beds, and 1,373 detention personnel,

authorized the construction of a 700-mile border fence between the United States and Mexico aimed at stemming the flow of illegal immigration into Arizona, California, and points north. Perhaps as a symbolic representation of the dismal state of the immigration policy, this "enforcement-only" legislation when given closer scrutiny does little, if anything, other than to satisfy the demand for perceived action on immigration, even if it is only on paper. The bill clearly authorizes 700 miles of secure real and "virtual" fencing, but this is along a border that is 2,000 miles long. In addition, the law only appropriates actual funding for 90 of the 700 miles authorized. Coming so close to the mid-term election, it served as something elected representatives could take home to demonstrate to their constituents that they are being tough on immigration.[5] But all three events clearly indicate the challenges for increasing Latino political participation and the context in which it is presently occurring.

This OLLAS policy report seeks to enhance our basic information regarding the role Latinos will play in shaping the future of Nebraska politics in the short and medium term. This will be done both in terms of the demographic dynamism of the Latino population, and also in terms of the substantive policy and social challenges facing Latinos as they embark on this quest. Because issues such as immigration policy, fair housing, labor practices, and public education have risen to the top of the political agenda nationally and statewide and because these issues directly and legitimately impact the lives of Nebraska's growing Latino constituencies, we must consider to what extent Latinos can shape the debate and articulate acceptable policy responses to these concerns.

There are widespread implications for all Nebraskans in how each of these issues is dealt with. In addition, there must be successful resolutions of these issues and an assessment of Latino participation in the process. To that end, this report establishes the basic parameters of a discussion that will require deeper analysis than is possible here but that is designed to animate a broader discourse among all political interests in the state.

This discussion includes questions directly related to the political well-being of Latinos as they continue to establish roots on the Great Plains. In particular, it corresponds to questions about the extent to which Latinos can become integrated into the body politic. Specifically, we must examine the implications if large numbers of Latinos were not included in Nebraska's political life. Because sizable concentrations of Latinos, verging on the majority, live in communities such as South Omaha, Lexington, Schuyler, and Grand Island, the possibilities

---

in addition to the 700-mile secure fence. The U.S. government has more than quadrupled spending on border and immigration enforcement, increasing funding from $4 billion prior to 9/11 to over $16 billion today. Apprehensions at the border have increased by 45%, with deportations numbering over 1 million in 2005. See http://appropriations.house.gov.

[5] See "The Fence Campaign," Editorial, *New York Times* (October 30, 2006), at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/30/opinion.

to articulate Latino political interests and perhaps elect Latino officials are very high.

Regardless of what becomes of the immigration debate on Capitol Hill and across the United States—and perhaps to the deep dissatisfaction of anti-immigrant advocates—the findings of this report reveal that the critical factors regarding the future of Latino politics in Nebraska are these:

- Conservative projections for Latinos as a percentage of the total population of Nebraska indicate that their proportion will triple in the next quarter century, regardless of any changes to the current immigration policy.
- The number of eligible Latino voters (U.S. citizens, 18 and older) will quadruple by the year 2030.
- Although eligible Latinos are registered in lower numbers than the total population of Nebraska (Latino-47 percent, total-69 percent), they turned out in high numbers for the 2004 general election (over 70 percent).
- The face of Nebraska communities such as South Omaha, Lexington, and Schuyler has changed from a concentration of Central and Eastern European immigrants and their descendants to one that is increasingly Latino in nature.
- The growth of the Latino population is not nearly enough to "overrun" the state, as some pundits and nativists claim, but it will certainly be enough to affect a close election at all levels in Nebraska.
- The change to the demographic makeup of Latino communities in Nebraska is both dynamic and permanent in nature, and it will provide opportunities for Latinos to run for local and state offices in areas like South Omaha in the not-too-distant future.

Conversely, one could surmise that the following scenarios might develop if Latino political interests were marginalized or ignored:

- Latinos denied opportunities for active political participation would have little if any influence in setting the policy agenda, meaning little or no input about what issues are advanced and debated across all levels of government and political action.
- This in turn would deny Latinos effective representation in making laws and policies that directly impact themselves and other minorities, especially if naturalization processes remain as cumbersome and lengthy as they are at present, despite the current immigration debate.[6]
- Similarly, Latinos without adequate access to participation and representation in the political system would be denied access to a

[6] Immigration policy analysts state that it takes between 4 and 22 years for an immigrant to successfully navigate the naturalization process. Backlogs for renewing visas are as long as 15 years for certain categories. Material from "Comprehensive Immigration Reform: A National Policy Perspective," a panel presentation by Darcy Tromanhauser, Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law and the Public Interest, October 16, 2006, at Lincoln, Nebraska.

system that holds them accountable through local, state, and federal laws and regulations.
- Ultimately, this might result in Latinos being denied a legitimate political voice—meaning that whether by design (e.g., poorly designed laws and policies) or by default (the result of political neglect or oversight), Latinos could be relegated to second-class citizenship status and inadequate protection under the law.

One could also make a strong argument that since more than half the adult Latinos presently residing in Nebraska are here "illegally," they are de facto "second-class citizens." This is an important consideration because of the following factors:

- Latino citizens and noncitizens pay taxes and contribute to the material well-being of American society.
- All immigrant children are required to attend school.
- All immigrants are subject to laws and rely on government bureaucracy for fair and effective disposition of matters directly related to these individuals' conformity with U.S. laws and regulations.
- Ultimately, immigrants can be denied their freedom when they run afoul of the law, with the additional possibility of deportation.

Rather than focus on the argument that these Latinos have broken the law and are here illegally, we might consider that poor laws and policy sometimes produce unwitting and unwilling offenders. Legal status remains a problem for many immigrants, and the process of legalization and naturalization for the law-abiding immigrant can still take as long twelve years. Today more than 53 percent of Latino adults in Nebraska are not citizens.[7] And for many Latinos who are legal residents and full citizens, there are significant barriers to integration into the state's civic life, including but not limited to:

- Socioeconomic status: Poverty and the nature of low-wage employment limit immigrants' access to participation opportunities and to information regarding the voting process;
- Cultural and language barriers: Overwhelmingly, most public institutions in Nebraska are monolingual and hence inaccessible to many immigrants in the state, including but not limited to Latinos.

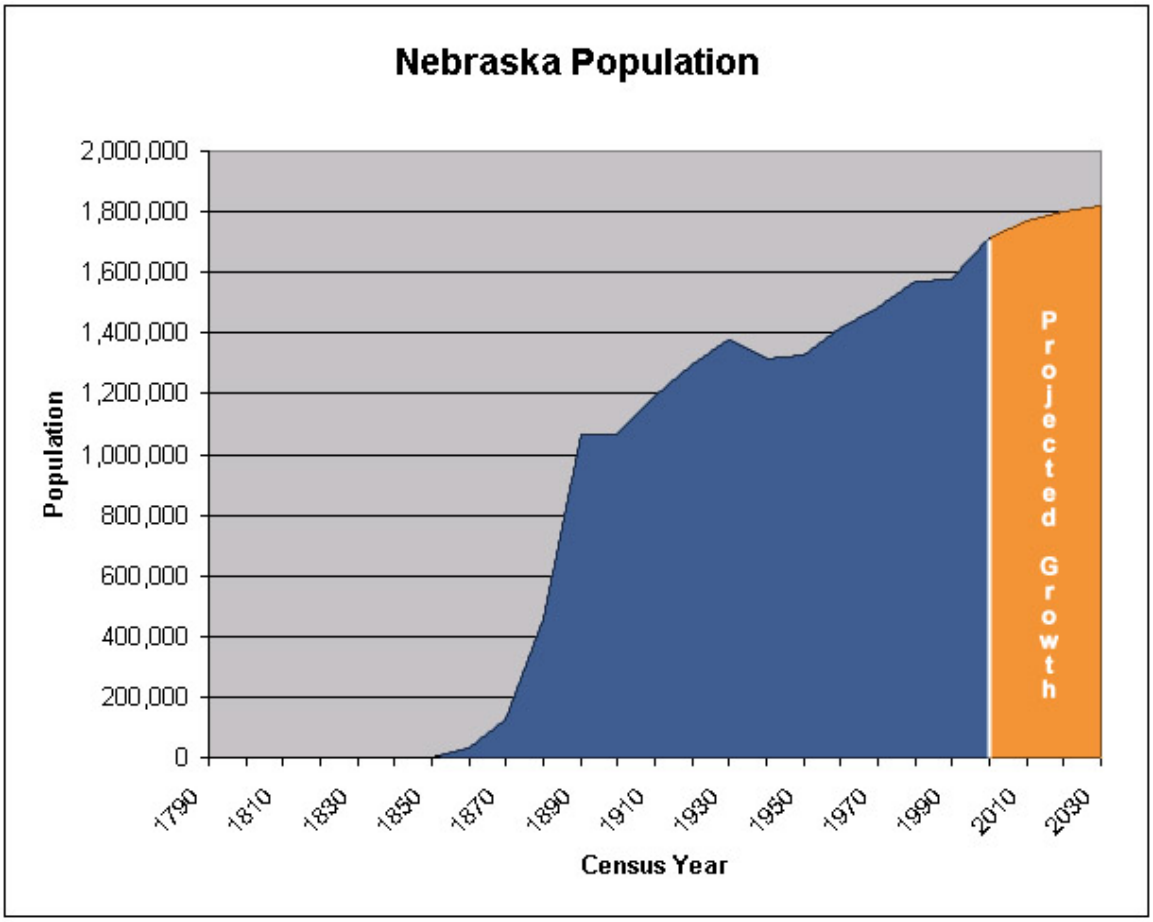
We begin this report with an overview of the present context of Latino political life in Nebraska, then discuss the political interests of Latinos. I then look at specific modalities that can enhance Latino participation and representation in civic life.

[7] 2004 U.S. Census data prepared by Jerry Deichert, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research (2006). Source: Table 4a, "Reported Voting and Registration in the Total Voting Age Population, by Sex, Race and National Origin, for States (November 2004)."

The Context of Latino Political Participation

The 2000 Census revealed what many Nebraskans already knew: that the state's Latino population had grown astronomically in the previous decade. In the five years since, that growth has continued unabated. The reasons for this are numerous and include an availability of attractive jobs, a reasonable cost of living, and established and burgeoning Latino communities across the state. Politically, the increase in the Latino population has simultaneously drawn the attention and ire of mainstream, predominately white, English-speaking Nebraskans concerned with the impact Latinos will have on the "good life."

Chart 1: Nebraska's Projected Population Growth

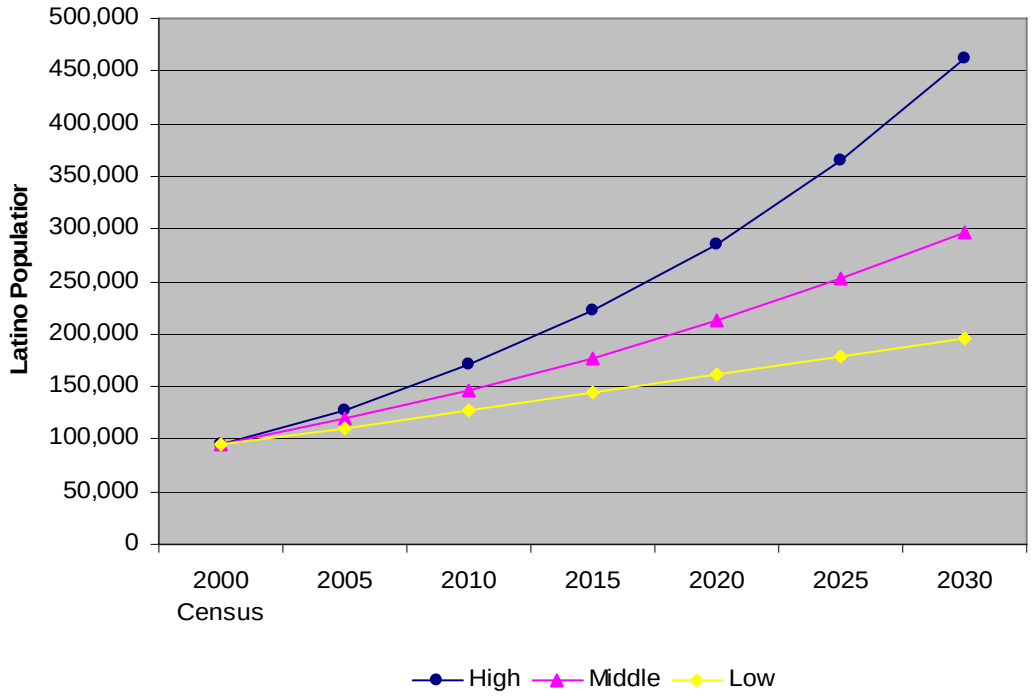


Source: U.S. Census, 2005, prepared by the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006).

But an increase in the number of Latinos (citizens and noncitizens) residing in Nebraska is no guarantee there will be a commensurate increase in opportunities for Latino civic participation. There have been notable developments in civic organizations aimed at expanding Latino awareness and representation in terms of the labor market and business interests. In addition, there is growing awareness of the transnational dimension of politics for Mexican immigrants seeking to retain political as well as economic and social

ties with their sending communities through what are termed "hometown associations." But this is occurring only at the margins, and as of yet, little has been done formally by organized political entities in Nebraska to increase voter registration and facilitate actual voting by Latino citizens.

Chart 2: Projections of the Latino population for Nebraska: 2005 to 2030[8]



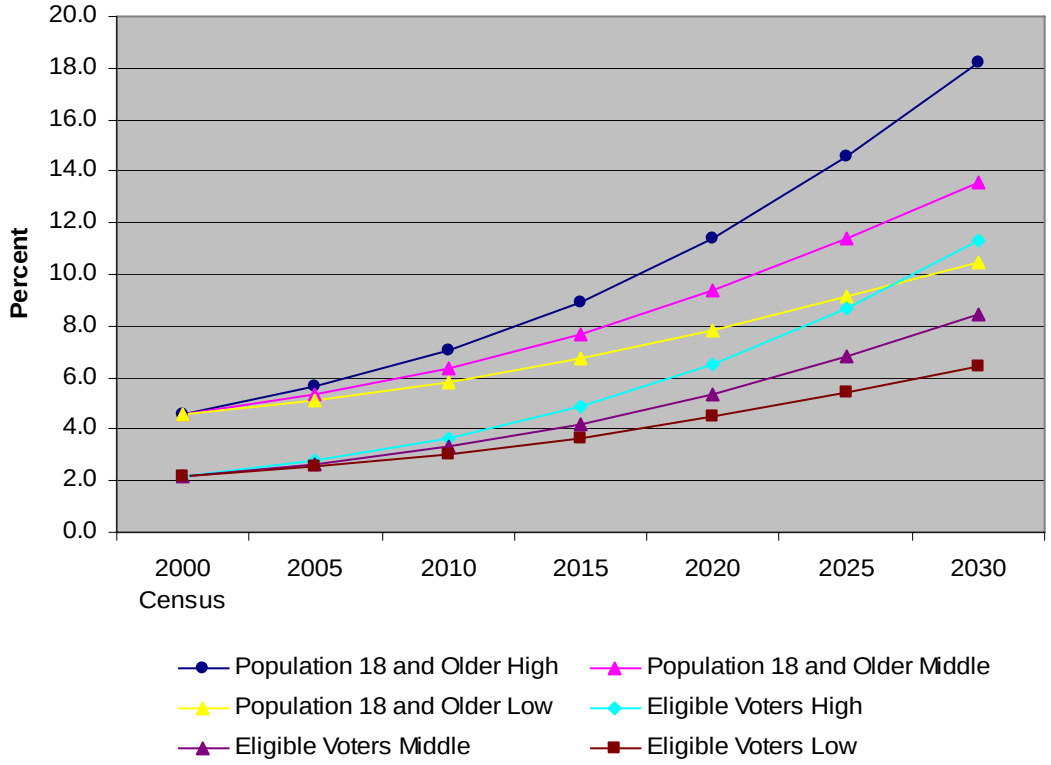
Source: U.S. Census, 2005, prepared by the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006).

On the other hand, we should not be so quick to attach Latino political interests to such a monolithic and potentially divisive issue. This is especially so because although Latinos are presently only an estimated 7 percent of the state's population, nearly 50 percent (47.2) of all Latinos in the state are already U.S. citizens, and of those Latinos registered to vote, over 70 percent turned out for the 2004 presidential election. Demographic trends indicate that

[8] Estimates provided from U.S. Census data developed by Jerry Deichert, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006). Assumptions: Birth rates: Birth rates by single-year age of mother were calculated for 2000 and used for 2001 to 2005. Beginning in 2006, the total Latina birth rate was decreased annually until it reached the total Nebraska birth rate in 2030. Net migration rates: There were three series of net migration assumptions: high, middle, and low. The same net migration rate was used for men and women. The high series assumed the single-year migration rates for 1990 to 2000 would continue from 2000 to 2030 at 2/3 the 1990 to 2000 rates. The low series assumed the single-year migration rates for 1980 to 1990 would continue from 2000 to 2030. The middle series averaged the single-year migration rates for 1990 to 2000 with the single-year rates for 1980 to 1990 and assumed they would continue from 2000 to 2030 at 2/3 the average rates. Data figures for the table drawn from the middle series. Survival rates: Survival rates by single-year age for men and women were developed for total Nebraska projections and were used for the Latino population projections.

by the year 2025, Latinos may comprise nearly 20 percent of the state population, with perhaps over two-thirds of them U.S. citizens.[9]

Chart 3: Projections of the Latino Population 18 and Older and the Number of Eligible Voters as a Percentage of the Total Population 18 and Older for Nebraska: 2005 to 2030



Source: U.S. Census, 2005, prepared by the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006).

And while immigration policy will remain a key political issue for the immediate future, Latino interests in education policy, the economy and jobs, and health care will increase demonstrably because of the bubble of Latinos between the ages of 5 and 18.[10] For Nebraska, therein lies the rub. While some municipalities in the state have made great strides in integrating or, at a minimum, welcoming expansion of citizenship, civic engagement, and participation prospects, others have been overwhelmed by the scope and volume of change in their communities and are therefore reluctant, unable, or unwilling to address these changes. For both types of responses the

[9] See Lourdes Gouveia and Mary Ann Powell, with Esperanza Camargo (2005). *Educational Attainment and the Successful Integration of Latinos in Nebraska: A Statistical Profile to Inform Policies and Programs.* OLLAS Special Report No.1. Report prepared for the Mexican American Commission, Omaha, NE, Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS), University of Nebraska at Omaha.

[10] In 2002 the Omaha Public Schools became a minority-majority school district. Latinos comprised the second largest racial/ethnic population group (16.6 percent), behind African Americans (31.2 percent). In the elementary schools, Latinos comprised 19.4 percent of the student population compared to 30.9 percent for African-American students. See *Statistical and Financial Facts, 2002-2003* (2003), School District of Omaha, Nebraska.

implications are the same. The health and vitality of political participation, representation, and ultimately of American democracy are directly linked to the extent that the larger community integrates Latinos—whether citizens or new arrivals—into the political mainstream.

Many conclusions drawn from previous analysis of Latino political participation are relevant to Nebraska and therefore must be taken into consideration. First, the context of reception matters. How new arrivals are welcomed into the political mainstream is important, and the extent to which legitimate political participation occurs depends on the quality and degree of outreach by the government, political institutions, and parties to new (and potential) voters in minority communities.[11] Second, it should be noted that immigrants who become citizens in a politically charged environment are individuals who feel strongly about political issues at hand, and who seek enfranchisement (the act of voting) as an act of political expression.[12] Third, contrary to advocates of theories of culture clash and divided loyalties, research consistently shows that Latinos (and especially Mexicans) become loyal U.S. citizens whose interests diverge from those of the mother country. [13]

This is particularly important to first-time participants in the democratic process because the initial experience potentially can serve as a catalyst for deeper participation, especially if it is positive. Moreover, the implications of such factors in political participation raise questions regarding growing inequality and the health of American democracy. Specifically, the growth of distortions in participation is at stake, which is important because political participation, whether through voting, campaign contributions, or organizational activities, directly reflects the distribution of economic resources, and as resources become more unequal, so is participation skewed toward the better off. This can offset the potential benefits of social capital for Latinos and other minorities because access to politicians is directly proportional to affluence: the issues and positions of the affluent are heard by politicians, and louder voices give the affluent greater influence. Consequently, even with the continuing growth of the Latino population in America's heartland, there is no direct correlation between its increase in size and its political influence, largely because of persistent poverty and growing economic inequality. Even though pro-immigrant rallies and marches are occurring across the nation, skepticism is still warranted because Latino leaders have a formidable task in translating the energy of these events into meaningful political action—that is, cultivating and electing

---

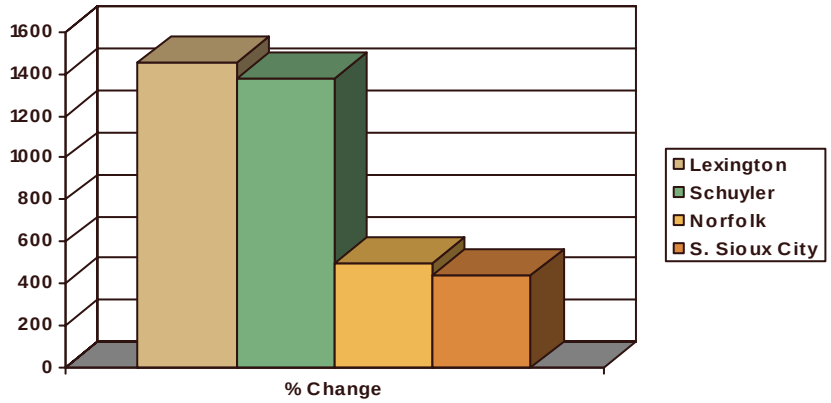
[11] For evidence of applied research specific to these ideas see Melissa R. Michelson, "Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization," and Ricardo Ramirez, "Giving Voice to Latino Voters: A Field Experiment on the Effectiveness of a National Nonpartisan Mobilization Effort," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 601 (September 2005), pp. 85-101, and 66-84.

[12] Adrian D. Pantoja, Ricardo Ramirez, and Gary M. Segura. "Citizens By Choice, Voters by Necessity: Patterns of Political Mobilization by Naturalized Latinos," *Political Research Quarterly*, Volume 54, Number 4 (December 2001), pp. 729-750.

[13] Rodolfo de al Garza, "Interests Not Passions: Mexicans-American Attitudes Toward Mexico, Immigration from Mexico, and Other Issues Shaping U.S.-Mexico Relations," *International Migration Review*, Volume 32, Number 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 401-422.

Latino candidates, influencing legislative agendas, and passing laws that address specific issues. If this task can be accomplished, then we can say that a sleeping giant has been awakened.[14]

Chart 4: Latino Population Change in Selected Nebraska Cities, 1990-2000



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, Calculations by: Nebraska State Data, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The Latino Political Future in Nebraska

The failure and misinterpretation of exit polls in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections call into question the validity of such instruments in measuring Latino electoral participation. The extent to which there are meaningful changes to the role of exit polls in future elections will be predicated on how immediate these instruments really need to be. Exit polls have no direct impact on elections and are in reality questionable media tools that perhaps dampen the general public's desire to be engaged politically. Clearly, methods other than polling are more effective modes of measuring and engaging Nebraska's Latino voters. These include but should not be limited to grassroots engagement through community-based and social service agencies, as well as traditional methods of political engagement such as voter registration, candidate forums, and "get-out-the-vote" (GOTV) efforts.[15]

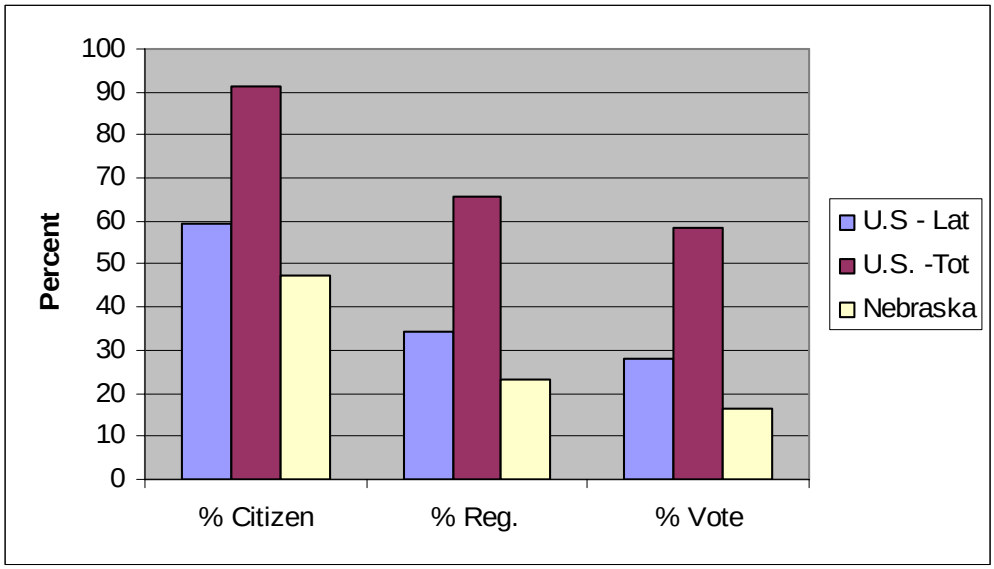
What is apparent from the available data is that Nebraska's Latino population is small but growing, and relatively less politically engaged than other Latinos across the United States. Nationally, Latino citizens registered to vote at higher rates than those in Nebraska (32 percent compared to 23 percent), and U.S. Latinos overall voted at significantly higher rates in the 2004 presidential elections than did Nebraska's Latino voters (29 percent compared to 17

[14] This task is well articulated in the report by Ted Wang and Robert C. Winn in *Groundswell Meets Groundwork: Preliminary Recommendation for Building on Immigrant Mobilizations* (June 2006), a Special Report from the Four Freedoms Fund and Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, 27 pp.

[15] This includes language and culturally competent door-to-door canvassing, with bilingual co-ethnics providing all materials in Spanish and English, whether these efforts are partisan or nonpartisan.

percent).[16] When compared to other Great Plains states where voting data were available, the turnout of Nebraska Latinos was significantly lower that that of Kansas (21 percent) and Minnesota (45 percent).[17] These figures indicate an interest gap or failure to engage Latino voters in Nebraska that must be addressed. Whether by default, neglect, or deliberate marginalization, it is a growing concern for Nebraska in general and Latinos in particular. But conservative estimates of the growth of eligible Latino voters indicate that they will quadruple in the next quarter century, increasing to approximately 14 percent by 2030.[18] According to statistics from the Department of Homeland Security, there are approximately 3,000 legal permanent residents residing in Nebraska who eventually will become eligible voters and well over 30 percent are Latino immigrants, but this differs greatly from the estimates provided in a report issued by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. That 2006 report estimated that there are approximately 27,000 potential additional immigrant voters presently residing in Nebraska.[19]

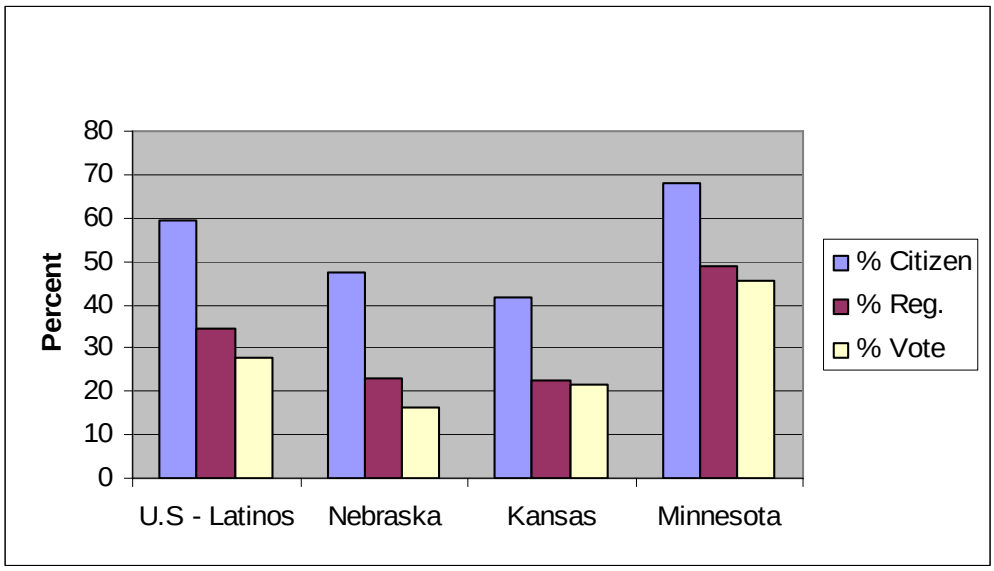
Chart 5: Comparisons of Latino Registration and Voting, 2004



Source: U.S. Census, 2005, prepared by the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006).

[16] 2004 U.S. Census data prepared by Jerry Deichert, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research (2006). Source: Table 4a, "Reported Voting and Registration in the Total Voting Age Population, by Sex, Race and National Origin, for States (November 2004)."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Estimates provided from U.S. Census data developed by Jerry Deichert, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006).
[19] These figures comprise the following: the estimated immigrants eligible to naturalize (21,000); U.S.-born, 18 to 24-year-old immigrants, presently not registered (3,700); and U.S.-born children of immigrants who will turn 18 by 2008 (2,500). For the full report, see Joshua Hoyt and Fred Tsao, "Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote" (June 2006), Center for Community Change, Chicago, Ill.

Chart 6: Comparisons of Latino Registration and Voting, Midwest States, 2004



Source: U.S. Census, 2005, prepared by the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha (July 2006).

Issue Articulation and Political Mobilization and the Future of Latinos in Nebraska's Political Life

The preliminary investigation of Latino political participation suggests there is much work needed to create opportunities that can attract and integrate this growing population into the political mainstream of state and national life. For Nebraska's Latinos there are many issues that can draw them into political processes, and not all of these necessarily imply or require citizenship. In actuality, many of the issues will impact Latinos long before they achieve any form of political legitimacy. A majority of Nebraska's Latinos are involved in "frontline" industries that require a steady flow of low-paid, minimally skilled persons willing to work in dangerous conditions with few, if any, benefits.

In itself, this situation creates an almost ready-made impetus for grassroots organization around fair labor standards in the food processing, construction, and service industries, in addition to the "900-pound gorilla" of immigration policy reform. Scholars have identified that this takes form in four specific sub-fields of political incorporation: electoral participation; nonelectoral participation; impact on political resources and standing of established political entities; and impact on the national political structure.[20] There are existing and growing efforts by unions, fair labor, political advocacy, and religious groups to organize this mostly Latino worker population to articulate concerns about fair wages and working conditions in these industries, in addition to wider environmental and health concerns in the workplace. These efforts are mobilizing Nebraska

[20] Helen Marrow, "New Destinations and Immigrant Incorporation," *Perspectives in Politics* (December 2005), Volume 3, Number 4, pp. 785-786.

Latinos and their supporters to conduct public forums, produce and disseminate policy briefs, engage government agencies and elected officials, and hold vigils and protest marches. All of this aims to raise awareness and give voice to a largely neglected population in the state that will grow in numbers in terms of total population and, more important, as voters. Opportunities already exist to accomplish this by simply increasing the registered voters within the existing pool of Latino citizens in Nebraska. But Helen Marrow warns that Latinos "without full political rights raises questions about the representation of their interests in a 'working' liberal democracy."[21]

Reflexively and not surprisingly, these activities may be prompting an immigrant backlash in Nebraska, as has occurred across the country. Although Nebraska has traditionally been a destination for immigrants since the late nineteenth century, there has been growing concern on the part of white, English-speaking, mainstream Nebraskans that the "new arrivals" will steal jobs, pilfer the tax coffers, and flood the country with Mexico's unwanted and unwashed masses. Moreover, this backlash has prompted development of a network of elected officials, media pundits, and ultra-nativist groups seeking to criminalize transnational processes of migration and demonize a similarly transnational labor force that is integral to the vitality of the U.S. economy. Fiona Adamson makes clear that by taking a balanced approach states can find effective means to take advantage of the many benefits of international migration patterns, writing,

> States that are best able to "harness the power of migration" through well-designed policies in cooperation with other states will also be best equipped to face the new global security environment.[22]

Additionally, by labeling the impact of immigration as a "threat" to American culture and national identity, these groups engage in a politics of fear where the "trend [is] toward cultural bifurcation," the driving force of which is "immigration from Latin America, and especially Mexico."[23] But within the context of the threats posed by immigrants, this is nothing new to the political debate, as Segura and Fraga have identified that "the question of national identity … has been a part of the American political discourse before there was even a formally structured American polity."[24]

Few would argue that the current system of immigration and naturalization is not broken, yet unless there is a sober and objective dialogue, misinformation

---

[21] Ibid. p. 789.

[22] Fiona Adamson, "Crossing Borders: International Migration and National Security," *International Security*, Volume 31, Number 1 (2006), p. 198.

[23] Frank D. Bean, Susan K. Brown, and Ruben Rumbaut, "Mexican Immigrant Political and Economic Integration," *Perspectives in Politics* (2006), Volume 3, Number 4, p. 309. Originally cited in Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2004), p. 221.

[24] Luis R. Fraga and Gary M. Segura, "Culture Clash? Contesting Notions of American Identity and the Effects of Latin American Immigration," *Perspectives in Politics* (2006), Volume 3, Number 4, pp. 279-280.

and the more strident voices promoting fear and uncertainty across the American heartland will dominate and derail this overdue discourse and stifle any hope for resolving the issue.[25]

Simultaneously, there is also the potential for conflict among minority groups, especially if the allocation of scarce resources to these communities is cast in the form of a "zero-sum" game, where the gains of one group necessarily imply direct loss for another. This is a legitimate concern in Nebraska's urban areas, where lower socioeconomic groupings of minorities are found. For example, in the East Omaha metropolitan area, African Americans are predominant in North Omaha and Latinos in South Omaha. A nascent coalition has developed to address the efficacy of government to apply resources equitably to issues affecting the entire population of East Omaha. This is an attempt by the mayor's office and black and brown community leaders to coalesce and articulate the political and social interests of blacks, Latinos, and other minority groups in the areas of employment, education, housing, and health care. Recently, in debating the attempt by the Omaha Public Schools to consolidate all schools within the city boundaries into one school district, the black and Latino communities joined a coalition of groups supporting the policy as it pertains to equity of resources and opportunities in P-12 education in Omaha.

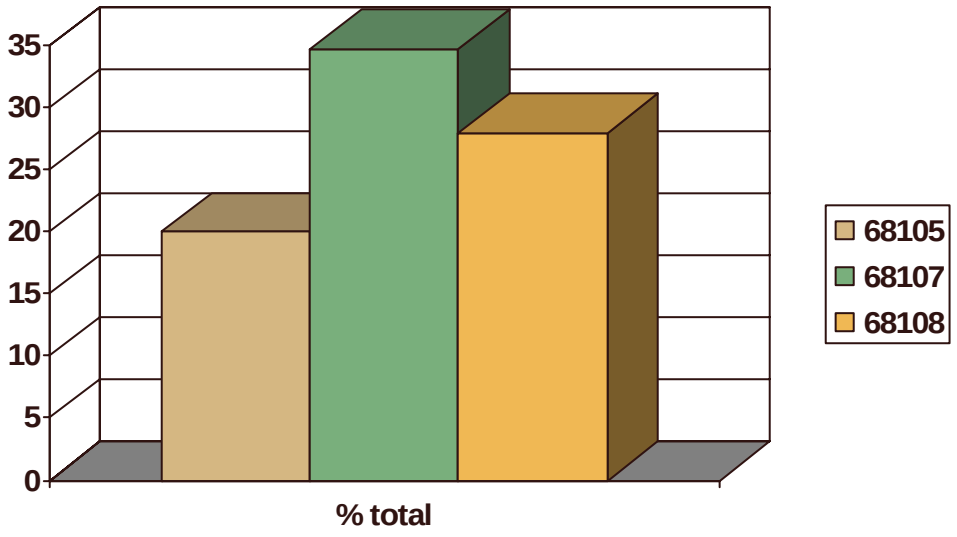
For Latinos, a lack of formal representation continues at almost all levels of government, with some notable exceptions. Statewide, there is only one Latino elected official, Ray Aguilar, a Republican senator representing Nebraska's 35th District in Grand Island. At the local level, Mark Martinez represents Sub-district 7 of the Omaha Public Schools on the OPS School Board. It is in such districts where we see the greatest promise of Latino leaders being elected to public office primarily due to two factors. The first is the concentration of Latinos in specific urban and rural communities across Nebraska. For example, we are beginning to see minority-majority districts develop in communities like South Omaha, where in three census tracts the concentration of Latinos ranges from 20 to 35 percent; in specific neighborhoods in South Omaha, the concentrations are estimated to be as high as 70 percent (see Chart 7). A second factor is the growth of minority-majorities in children 5 to 18 years of age. While these groups comprise only 16 percent of students district-wide in OPS, in specific schools the concentrations are as high as 80 percent Latino. Slowly and unabatedly, the face of South Omaha has changed from a concentration of Central and Eastern European immigrants and their descendants to one that is increasingly Latino in nature. As a consequence of these two factors, one can easily surmise that the change to the demographic makeup of Latino communities in Nebraska is both dynamic and permanent in nature, and it will provide opportunities for Latinos to run for local and state offices in areas like South Omaha in the not-too-distant future.

But an increase in the number of Latinos (citizens and noncitizens) residing in Nebraska is no guarantee there will be a commensurate increase in

[25] Bill Ong Hing, "Misusing Immigration Policies in the Name of Homeland Security," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 6, Number 1 (2006), pp. 194-224.

opportunities for Latino civic participation. There have been notable developments in civic organizations aimed at expanding Latino awareness and representation in terms of the labor market and business interests. In addition, there is growing awareness of the transnational dimension of politics for Mexican immigrants seeking to retain political as well as economic and social ties with their sending communities through what are termed "hometown associations." But this is occurring only at the margins, and as of yet, little has been done formally by organized political entities in Nebraska to increase voter registration and facilitate actual voting by Latino citizens. And as long as the road to naturalization remains fraught with potholes, detours, and washouts, we should not expect an explosive growth of Latino voters to match that of Nebraska's Latino residents.

Chart 7: Percent of Latino Population in Selected Omaha Zip Codes



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, Calculations by: Nebraska State Data, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Conclusions

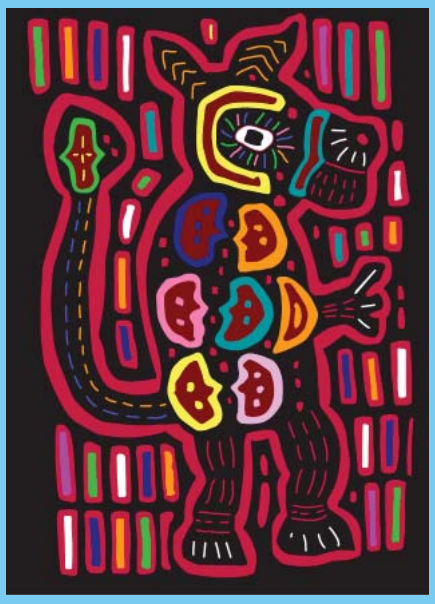
The necessity to increase awareness of the legal and policy concerns and issues affecting Latinos is relevant to all Nebraskans and to our neighbors on the Great Plains. Unfortunately, political interest in Latinos in the 2006 elections was cast in negative terms in relation to the immigration debate/backlash. Even under the most optimistic projections for the future, the Latino portion of the state population may reach only 20 percent. Although not enough to "overrun" the state, as some fear, it is certainly enough to turn a close election at all levels in Nebraska.

There is another potential factor of influence that bears watching over the course of the next few years. Earlier it was stated that Latino voters should not

be construed as a monolithic, singular bloc, because the diversity of racial, ethnic, and national origin dimensions of America's Latino population created natural interest divisions that limited the possibility they would ever approach all political matters in lock-step. But it may come to pass that immigration, because of the growing opposition to Latinos as an entire class, may serve as the catalyst for unifying their disparate interests, identities, and desires to form a pan-Latino response. This is ironic because the word "Latino" as a distinct social identity exists only in the United States and nowhere else. It may be that the opposition, in its most negative manifestations, will coalesce and motivate Latino interests and will serve to awaken a dormant and perhaps reluctant political "giant." Regardless of what happens in the immigration debate on Capitol Hill and across the United States, the size of Nebraska's Latino population will, at a minimum, triple in size in the next twenty years. Just as impressive, the Latino voting bloc in Nebraska will increase four-fold in the same time span, and it stands to become a much more influential actor as a consequence.

This too presents a new consideration worth noting here. Recent research has shown that the more diverse a community is, the less likely its inhabitants are to trust anyone other than those from the same group (social, ethnic, and racial), from the "next door neighbor to the mayor." A study by Robert Putnam suggests that in the presence of diversity we "hunker down." Given the growing diversity within the state of Nebraska, this poses a potential obstacle to the full political integration, participation, and representation of its Latino population.[26] What policymakers, community leaders, and the general public do to address this and the aforementioned issues will eventually determine the state and quality of political and social life in Nebraska for the twenty-first century.

[26] "Harvard study paints bleak picture of ethnic diversity," *The Financial Times*, October 8, 2006, at http//www.msnbc.com.



Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS)
University of Nebraska at Omaha
www.unomaha.edu/ollas