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Latino Power?

It Will Take Time for the Population Boom to Translate

By Roberto Suro

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Politicians and the news media seem entranced by Latino voters. The chairmen of both national parties addressed the annual convention of the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, which wrapped up its annual convention in Puerto Rico yesterday. President Bush appeared before the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast earlier this month, and much of the buzz about the next Supreme Court nomination centers on whether a name with a lot of vowels will get sent up.

Meanwhile the Democratic National Committee has produced a 60-second radio ad in Spanish trying to mobilize Latino voters against Bush's proposed changes in Social Security. "Call your member of Congress and tell him or her not to privatize Social Security and threaten the future of Hispanic retirees and their families," the ad says. The White House, for its part, has dispatched Anna Escobedo Cabral, a Mexican American who is the treasurer of the United States, to tout the administration's Social Security ideas.

All this public wooing, and a good deal of behind-the-scenes strategizing, stems from a simple fact: The number of Latino votes in last November's election jumped 23 percent over those cast in the 2000 balloting. That was more than twice the growth rate for non-Hispanic whites, even though the election was marked by higher-than-normal turnout in a polarized white electorate. Moreover, all the trend lines point to continued growth in the Latino population in the future.

Normally, in an article of this sort, this would be the place to deploy the "sleeping giant" metaphor, hailing the rise of a powerful new voting bloc that's changing the American political landscape. But the Latino population isn't a cliché; it can't be so easily characterized. The rapid increase in its size has *not* produced a corresponding growth in its political clout -- and won't for some time to come.

Consider these contrasting pieces of information. The census report that made headlines a few weeks ago showed that Hispanics (that's the Census Bureau's official term) accounted for half of all the population growth in the United States over the past four years. But another, less heralded, census document showed that Hispanics accounted for only *one-tenth* of the increase in all votes cast in 2004 compared with the 2000 election. The growth of the Latino population as a whole may be gigantic, but only one out of every four Latinos added to the U.S. population is an added voter.

That's why in close elections, politicians tend to focus their ardor on traditional partners -- unions, churches, ethnic groups -- that have shown they can effectively bring voters to the polls. Cultivating a solid Hispanic constituency will require a lengthy courtship.

True, Latinos have made gains in elected positions, but the advances have been relatively modest. Two Hispanic U.S. senators were elected last year, and the number of Hispanics in the House edged up to 27.

But the Latinos who gain national prominence still tend to be the ones who have it bestowed upon them by white political patrons, such as President Bush's Attorney General Alberto Gonzales or President Bill Clinton's cabinet officers Henry Cisneros and Bill Richardson.

There are two reasons why Latino population growth hasn't translated directly into political clout, according to a new report by the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research organization where I work.

First, a lot of Latinos aren't U.S. citizens. A third of the Latino population increase between 2000 and 2004 came from an influx of adult immigrants who cannot vote here. Under current law, most never will. About two-thirds of the new arrivals have come here illegally. The rest, who are legal immigrants, are facing backlogs and processing delays that have slowed the pace of naturalizations since 9/11.

The other big source of population increases for Latinos comes from new births. Nearly a third of the Hispanic population growth since 2000 consists of people not eligible to vote because they are under 18 years of age. The vast majority of these individuals are native-born U.S. citizens, but it will be a long time before they are old enough to vote. About 80 percent of them will still be too young in 2008.

The impact of these two demographic factors becomes evident when you compare how black and Hispanic population numbers translate into numbers of voters. In 2004, Hispanics outnumbered blacks by nearly 5 million in the population count, but blacks had nearly 7.5 million more eligible voters. To put it another way, eligible voters made up 39 percent of the Hispanic population compared with 64 percent of blacks.

This demographic calculus calls for some caution when assessing the Latino population's impact on American politics. Last month, when Antonio Villaraigosa became the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles since 1872, commentators rushed to proclaim a new era. "Latino Power," declared the headline on Newsweek's May 30 cover story, complete with a sleeping giant metaphor. Villaraigosa was credited with generating a record turnout among Latinos, but given the low baseline, it wasn't hard. When it comes to counting people in almost any category, Latinos break their own records every day.

Villaraigosa's victory does not signal the arrival of a new ethnic colossus striding across the political landscape. Rather, it was a measure of widespread voter dissatisfaction with the incumbent, James K. Hahn, and of Villaraigosa's ability to draw votes from a variety of non-Hispanic constituencies. Latinos produced a quarter of the vote, according to Los Angeles Times exit polling. Sure, that was a record and by taking 84 percent of those votes, Villaraigosa helped assure himself of a landslide. But, Hispanics make up half of the city's population. So, even when a popular Latino is running for office in a city where

Hispanics are well organized and have elected many representatives to other posts, low numbers of voters cut Latino power in half.

Demographics aren't the only factors diluting the Hispanic presence at the polls. Last year, even though both major political parties, unions and nonpartisan groups all targeted Latinos with voter registration drives, Hispanics failed to fulfill their potential for political participation.

Even among eligible voters, only 58 percent of Latinos were registered last year and that was significantly fewer than either whites (75 percent) or blacks (69 percent). Actual turnout in the 2004 presidential election also was lower for Hispanics than for other groups, albeit by a lesser margin. If Latinos had registered and voted at the same rate as whites of the same age, they would have cast an additional 2.7 million ballots, increasing their tally of 7.6 million votes by 36 percent.

So part of the reason the metaphorical Latino giant is not a bigger player in the political game is because it is still half asleep.

That's why fears among some Americans that Latinos are about to "take over" are overblown. The Latino presence is more and more visible on our streets and in our neighborhoods, but less visible in the political process. About half of all whites, even counting kids and immigrants, cast ballots last November, meaning it took two white residents to generate one voter. But because of a combination of lack of citizenship, a big youth population and voter apathy, only one-fifth of Hispanics went to the polls in 2004. In other words, it took five Latino residents to produce one voter.

One side effect of this is that the average Latino voter doesn't have the same profile -- or the same interests and concerns -- as the average Latino resident.

As with all racial and ethnic groups, registration and voting rates among Hispanics increase with age, education and income. But there is another factor unique to Hispanics; a higher share of voters were born here than in the Latino population as a whole. That means Hispanic voters and non-voters do not necessarily even speak the same language. In the general Hispanic population, the share of households where only Spanish is spoken is three times higher than among Hispanic voters.

So it should come as no surprise that when it comes to matters of policy -- on immigration, trade or bilingual education -- Latino voters have a different point of departure than non-voting Latinos.

Two recent issues exposed this divergence. Despite intense lobbying by the governments of several nations that have contributed millions of people to the U.S. Latino immigrant population, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus voted overwhelmingly in May to oppose the Central American Free Trade Agreement. The caucus, which is made up of Hispanic Democrats, opted for party loyalty and the perceived economic interests of the largely working-class Latino voters who put them in office over ethnic bonds to other countries.

Similarly, when Mexican President Vicente Fox made remarks widely viewed as disparaging to blacks a few weeks ago, one of the quickest condemnations came from the National Council of La Raza. The nation's largest Latino civil rights organization hewed to core principles and long-standing alliances with black groups rather than cover for the leader of a country that is by far the largest source of new immigrants.

These are signs of *Hispanic* politics taking root here. Hispanic political power is growing, just not as fast as one might expect from the population numbers. Moreover, as Latinos become a more prominent political presence, what we hear from them may not be what people expect.

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