

Political Participation and Civic Engagement Among Latinos in South Bend

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Why Study Politics?

This study of how Mexican immigrants in South Bend participate politically, either in the United States or Mexico or both, seeks to fill a gap in the current knowledge base while providing a different viewpoint on their assimilation and transnational behavior.

Adding a political dimension to current research is a step towards a more holistic picture of the Mexican community in South Bend. Actions in the political sphere provide an additional framework to describe and measure both assimilation into American life and transnational identification with home communities.

Whether or not immigrants seek U.S. or dual citizenship, what they expect from politicians, how they participate in Mexican politics and what they know about American politics are all indicators of both how they are assimilating and how they retain ties with Mexico.

Based on the citizenship classes provided by La Casa de Amistad, this brief combines academic

literature information about various actors in South Bend to form a background against which political involvement might be better understood. Although it lacks detailed communication with members of South Bend's Latino community, hopefully further investigation will be able to bridge these gaps.

**South Bend
Courthouse,
1908**



Overview of Terminology

Politics

Involvement in government, through policy making, elections, or interaction with state-run agencies, including education.

Here, "politics" is primarily used to refer to participation in elections, while "civic engagement" covers other types of involvement.

Assimilation

This term is loaded with ethnocentric connotations in which an "inferior" ethnic groups becomes more like the dominant group.

In this brief, "assimilation" is meant to indicate growing ties to the community of residence. With politics, in particular, it can mean that the interests of the new group become a part of the interests of the community and that those assimilating identify with the community.

Transnationalism

"Transnationalism" signifies that national identity transfers across political borders.

For the individual, this means being fully a part of society in two different countries.

A "transterritorial" country extends political rights, recognition and participation to members who live outside its borders. It is a nation not encompassed within one state.

Participation in Mexico

Staying Connected

- Phone calls, email, Skype
- Remittances
- Increased availability of travel, either by road or air

Immigration to the United States no longer means breaking all ties with one's country of origin. There are institutions, such as Home-town Associations, that facilitate interaction between immigrant communities and Mexico. In Chicago and other metropolises, the presence of ethnic enclaves extends the feeling of home to the United States.

Students in La Casa's citizenship class typically go back to Mexico once a year to visit family for a couple of days.

Immigrants can attempt to use their remittances and influence in their home-

town to petition the government and seek favorable policies.

Because of the influence of migrants, Mexico permits dual citizenship, absentee voting, and matches migrant funding for public works projects. A traveling consulate in the U.S. is also available, providing convenience for national groups who do not live near one of Mexico's twenty-eight consulates.

Some immigrants may want an even closer connection to Mexican politics. Running as a candidate in Mexican elections is not unheard of. Andrés Bermudez, *el Rey de Tomate*, became a successful business man in the United States be-

fore running for office in his home state of Zacatecas. Although his victory was initially challenged because he had not resided in Zacatecas for a full year before the election, Bermudez eventually won. He now represents Zacatecas in the federal legislature.

Candidates like Bermudez challenge traditional notions of what it means to belong in a place and of the necessary characteristics to politically represent a region.

Absentee Voting in Mexican Elections

Requirements:

- Provide proof of US address
- Pay \$8 plus postage to send a registered letter to Mexico

Statistics:

- 55% did not even know about last years presidential election in Mexico
- Only .5% attempted to obtain an absentee ballot
- 87% reported that they would vote in the next Mexican election if they were able to vote in it



Actions Speak More Than Pictures

“Do you know the candidates?”

Hometown Associations

Hometown Associations (HTAs) are organizing bodies for Mexican immigrants within the United States. These are often based on state of origin, such as Guanajuato or Michoacán. As a self-help group, they organize projects and channel remittances. There are more than 600 HTAs in the U.S. Most are based from rural areas in Mexico and located in urban areas in the United States. Although economic aspects are a primary focus, many HTAs are supported by the Mexican government through its consular offices in order to re-incorporate migrants into national and political life.

HTAs currently face the challenge of forming relationships with city and state governments in the United States and Mexico. They remain isolated from other organizations and institutions that work on Mexican immigrant issues. HTAs traditionally form a bonding group, focusing their attention on Mexican affairs and maintaining their distance from broader Latino groups as well as non-Latino community organizations. However, Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro says that this has begun to change (Vonderlack-Navarro 2007). She argues that the Mexican government has begun

to utilize HTAs to promote favorable policies by the U.S. government, especially in the case of Mexico's position vis-à-vis America deteriorates. As the clubs develop "binational civic engagement," their role as integrators into American society grows. Enlaces America, which operates as a facilitator and advisor to immigrant organizations, stresses the importance of making alliances and connections as well as having a voice in American policy making.



In South Bend

South Bend does not have any HTAs. While it is possible that Mexican immigrants in South Bend may travel to Chicago to attend meetings, cases of this have not yet been found. Tight budgets could be prohibitive to traveling for political reasons. Non-participation in HTAs excludes South Bend's Mexican population from campaigning efforts by Mexican politicians.

The film "The Sixth Section," tells the story of a group of men who form their own hometown association, the Grupo Unión in the town of Newburgh, New York. The formation of Grupo Unión in a town one third the size of South Bend indicates that, if they choose, Mexican immigrants in South Bend can certainly form a hometown association.

National Politicians

South Bend's national congressmen have mixed records on support for immigrants. Senators **Richard Lugar** (R) and **Evan Bayh** (D) have both voted in favor of building a fence along the Mexican border, as well as changes to the path to citizenship and allowing illegal immigrants access to social security.

Representative **Joe Donnelly** (D) takes a harsher stance towards immigration. According to his campaign website, he does not support amnesty and promotes tighter border security. Also, Donnelly supports improving workplace enforcement as one of the best places to begin to address immigration.

The **Obama** campaign did not focus on reaching Latino voters in South Bend. However, the campaign's strategy of encouraging registration and new voters affected any population with low political participation, such as Latinos.

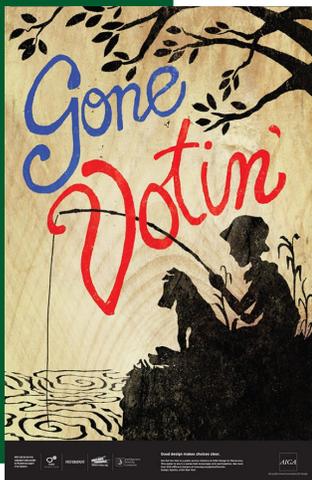
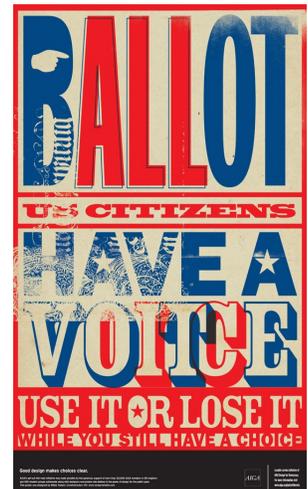
The only Latino South Bend has ever elected to public office was a fire chief.

Ethnic Mobilization

South Bend has only put one Latino into elected office, as fire chief. How might Latino candidates encourage the political involvement of South Bend's Latinos?

Matt Barreto suggests a relationship between ethnic candidates and political behavior (Barreto 2007, 64). Under the two theories that 1) ethnic candidates increase level of psychological engagement among ethnic voters, and 2)

ethnic candidates direct more resources to mobilize voters in ethnic communities, he argues that the "electoral context surrounding the campaigns of Latino candidates is a mobilizing factor that leads to strong levels of support for the coethnic candidate."



AIGA
"Get Out the Vote" posters
2008

- 1) Ethnic candidates increase level of psychological engagement among ethnic voters.
- 2) Ethnic candidates direct more resources to mobilize voters in ethnic communities.

IF there is a Latino candidate, and
IF there is "high ethnic identification"
THEN there will be increased political awareness, interest in election, mobilization/contact, and group benefits
LEADING TO higher voter turnout and more votes for the ethnic candidate

Transforming Action through Power

There is more to political life than national elections and issues. Mexican immigrants may be most affected by local affairs. South Bend is home to an extremely high number of organizations that aim to improve the city, some of these serve to integrate immigrants into civil society.

Transforming Action through Power (TAP) is involved in a variety of local level political issues including education, immigrants' rights, and economic opportunity. By organizing to address topics like education, immigrants can learn how to become involved in American politics and further weave themselves into society.

Because it seeks to be "broad-based," TAP does not focus solely on immigrant issues. By doing so, it creates a bridge between immigrants and others in the community, rather than a mere bonding

group. In order to gather support for their causes, members must appeal to other groups in the community.

TAP organizes through religious institutions, therefore, it gathers most of its Latino members from St. Adalbert's parish. Father Cox, the pastor of St. Adalbert's, is one of the founders of TAP.



Latino Issues

Behind the inquires of what issues South Bend's immigrants care about most is an assumption that Latinos, and immigrants specifically, have distinct political views. David Leal suggests that there are two relationships to consider: the "Latino" vote versus white or African American votes; and nation-based preferences within the Latino population (Leal 2007, 38).

When comparing Latinos with whites, findings show that Latinos "supported more government spending, more immigration, more gun control, more bilingual education, and more govern-

ment regulation of HMOs; they also expressed less support for the death penalty" (Leal). While they were more conservative on the issues of divorce and assisted suicide, Latinos "did not have distinct opinions" about children out of wedlock, abortion, or support for gays and lesbians (Leal).

Leal quotes Rodolfo de la Garza's "American as Tamale Pie: Mexican American Political Mobilization and the Loyalty Question" stating that Mexican Americans and whites "do not constitute distinct electorates" (Leal 2007). He points to a number of issues such as

spending on crime, drugs, defense, foreign aid, and urban problems where the two groups agree (Leal 33).

Among the Latino groups that he studies (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central/South American), Leal finds that they do not differ in a consistent manner. He proposes that what differences exist are more likely from "random variation, idiosyncrasies, or socio-economic differences rather than deep-seated cultural differences" (Leal 40).

A story from South Bend...

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act Section 287(g), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) provides local law enforcement with funds and training while giving them authority to identify and detain immigration defenders they encounter during their regular law enforcement activities. Pressure from Latinos in South Bend got the South Bend Police Department to decline 287(g) funding.



Seeking to Naturalize

There are certain privileges and rights associated with citizenship which can encourage an immigrant to consider naturalizing. Citizens can vote in federal elections, are eligible for certain jobs from which non-citizens are restricted, and their status, unlike permanent residents', is not subject to legislative measures denying benefits. Also, it is easier to obtain green cards for relatives of citizens.

In the classes used to prepare for the citizenship interview, most applicants state that their main reason for seeking citizenship is to be able to vote for president.

Louis DiSipio and Rodolfo de la Garza point to status and sociological factors as indicators for why certain immigrants seek citizenship while others do not (DiSipio 1998, 84). These “denizen character-

istics” include socioeconomic factors, English-language ability, reasons for migrating, and attachment to the US. They conclude that the “most reliable predictor” is “time; that is, the longer immigrants are in the United States, the higher the chance that they will be U.S. citizens.”

“[A] problem with the citizenship process is that it’s so focused on the federal and state levels. But, truly where people are probably effecting the most change would be on the local level. That’s not even touched on in the citizenship process. And to tell you the honest truth, if they’re not getting it there, I don’t think they’re getting it.”

-Jen Betz

Preparation

Classes to study for the U.S. Citizenship test are offered through La Casa de Amistad and Catholic Charities. Except for the workbooks and other study materials, the students do not pay for the classes. La Casa offers the classes three times a year in fall spring and summer sessions. In addition to the larger classes in English, a small class for those eligible

to take the test in Spanish is also available.

The classes primarily focus on the interview segment of the application process. Attention is given to the 100 questions on U.S. history and politics which the applicants are expected to know, as well as the English proficiency required for the interview.

Applicants often take the class multiple times before actually scheduling their interviews, though not all people take a class. All applicants are at different levels of readiness, which can be largely attributed to their level of proficiency in English. They usually come to the classes with family members or friends, lending a social aspect to the process.



Above: English Citizenship Class
Right: Citizenship Class in Spanish
Both at St. Adalbert’s, through La Casa



Taking the Test

The purpose of the test and interview is to grant citizenship based on the desired characteristics for US citizens. Currently, these characteristics deal mostly with ability to read, write and speak English, as well as knowledge of fundamentals of U.S. history and the principles of U.S. government.

The application also seeks to make distinctions based on the moral qualities of the applicant. These include drinking history, involvement with illegal gambling and violations of the law, as well as political leanings, especially communism and Nazism. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

charges a fee of \$675 to apply for citizenship. The process involves completing the application, having photos and fingerprints taken, an interview at the local USCIS office (in Chicago for South Bend) and finally taking the oath.

“From the point of view of citizenship, there are two kinds of Americans—those who are American involuntarily by birth and those who are American by choice.”

-John Palmer Gavitt

Eligibility Requirements

These are not the only rules on who can apply, but they provide a basic idea.

Requirements for Citizenship			
In English	Legal Permanent Resident for at least 5 years <i>Able to read, write and speak English</i> Have knowledge and understanding of US history and government	With Marriage to Citizen: Legal permanent resident for at least 3 years <i>Married for at least that three years</i> Fulfill all other requirements	With Parent: Legal permanent resident minors under the age of 18, living with parent who successfully gains citizenship
In Spanish	50 years or older Legal permanent resident for at least 20 years	55 years or older Legal permanent resident for at least 15 years	

Dual Citizenship

Both Mexico and the United States permit dual citizenship. Mexico adopted dual citizenship in 1998, allowing Mexicans who gain citizenship in another country to retain their nationality.

U.S. law does not require naturalized citizens to give up their nationality of birth.

Looking Ahead

The Hispanic population in South Bend is young. Nationally, 35% of Hispanics were under the age of 18 in 2000, compared to 25.7% of the nation as a whole. Figures for South Bend were unavailable. However, South Bend’s Mexican immigrant population is very new. Many of the families have young children. Even though Hispanics make up 11.4% of South Bend’s population, their share of the voting age population is probably lower.

As this second generation grows up, it will be interesting to see how they interact with the political system and make their voice heard.

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