

## About the Researcher



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## Electoral Engagement among Latinos

- Latinos are less likely to vote than non-Hispanic African Americans or non-Hispanic Whites.
- Electoral participation is especially low among young Latinos.
- Latinos show willingness to engage in other political activities comparable to that of non-Latinos.
- Changes in registration and voting procedures would probably increase the voter turnout among Latinos.

**This report highlights differences in voter turnout and registration rates within the Latino community and in comparison to other groups, with a special emphasis on young voters who constitute a larger proportion of the Latino electorate than in other communities. It also examines recent findings about other measures of electoral engagement as revealed in a recent large national survey.**

## Introduction

Voter registration and voter turnout are two direct forms of citizen civic engagement and democratic participation. Among Latinos, particularly young Latinos, voter registration rates and voter turnout rates are lower than those of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans. Despite the rapid growth in the Latino population, recently surpassing the non-Hispanic African American population in size, Latinos have not yet exerted their political potential. This partly stems from

two factors. First, a large number of Latinos are below voting age; specifically, in 2000 there were 10.4 million Latino citizens between the ages of 0 and 17, representing one-third of all Latino citizens. Second, a large proportion of Latinos of voting age, 40 percent, are noncitizens and hence not eligible to vote. Thus, a growing Latino population does not necessarily translate into a greater number of votes cast.

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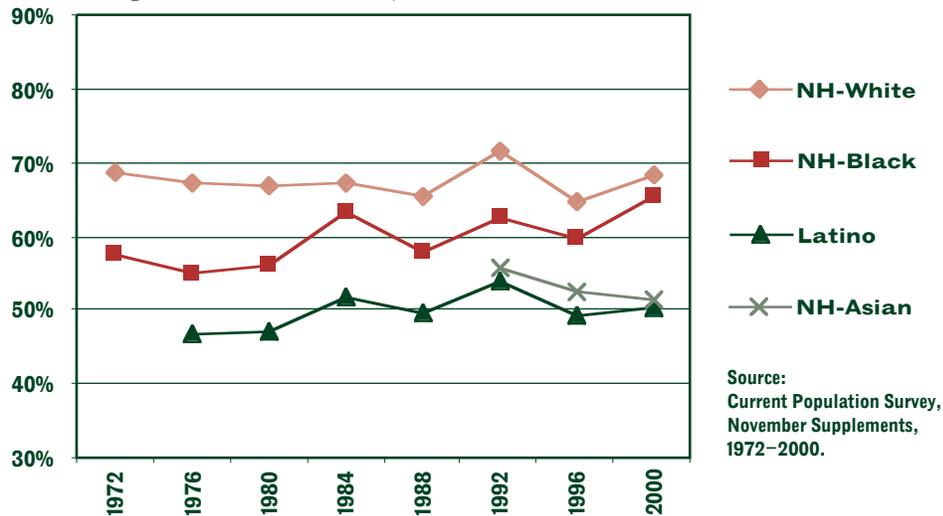
# Introduction

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Among those Latinos who are eligible to vote, however, there is still a substantial gap between their voter turnout and those of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans. To a large extent, this difference is explained by differences in educational attainment, age, socioeconomic status, and other observable measures (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; DeSipio 1996) but, unfortunately, controlling for these factors does not entirely account for the gap.

On a more positive note, voting is not the only way in which citizens can express their political voice and influence the political process. In a recent report produced for The Pew Charitable Trusts, Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins (2002a) found that on a wide range of electoral and political voice measures, Latinos are only slightly less engaged than or as engaged as their non-Latino counterparts.

**Graph 1  
Voter Turnout  
Among Adult Citizens 18 and Older, Presidential Years**



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1972–2000.

## Voter Turnout among Citizens<sup>1</sup>

Voter turnout among Latinos has consistently lagged behind that of non-Hispanic White and African American citizens. Tabulations from the 2000 November Supplement of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' monthly Current Population Survey (Table 1) show that Latino citizens over the age of 18 turned out to vote at the rate of 50.4 percent. In contrast, non-Hispanic African American citizens turned out at the

rate of 65.6 percent, while non-Hispanic White citizens turned out at the rate of 68.6 percent. This difference in electoral participation continues a trend since 1976. As shown in Graph 1, over the past 25 years turnout among Latinos has lagged behind the rates of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans by 10 to 20 percentage points, even though turnout among Latinos has risen slightly since 1976.

The average Latino voter turnout rate of 50.4 percent masks large differences in turnout by age and by ethnicity within the Latino community.

**Table 1 – Voter Turnout among Citizens in 2000**

Age Group	All Latino	Central or South American	Cuban American	Mexican American	Puerto Rican	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic African American	Non-Hispanic Asian American
<b>18–30</b>	34.9	39.2	50.1	32.7	31.7	48.7	50.4	40.0
<b>31–55</b>	51.1	60.6	72.0	46.3	57.4	67.9	68.5	53.2
<b>56+</b>	63.2	68.0	72.9	61.2	58.5	77.4	74.1	57.2
<b>All</b>	<b>50.4</b>	<b>57.8</b>	<b>68.3</b>	<b>46.6</b>	<b>50.4</b>	<b>68.6</b>	<b>65.6</b>	<b>51.4</b>

Note: All results are for citizens only. All results are based on the author's tabulation from the Current Population Survey, November Supplement 2000.

<sup>1</sup> Voter turnout and voter registration rates presented here are for citizens only. Furthermore, all figures have been adjusted to remove nonresponses or refusals from the pool of potential voters. This results in a set of turnout rates that reflects turnout only for citizens who answered “yes” or “no” to the question “Did you vote in the November election?” For more discussion of how this turnout rate is measured see Levine and Lopez (2002).



## Youth

Young Latinos, ages 18 to 30, are less likely to vote than their older counterparts. In 2000 young Latinos turned out to vote at the rate of 34.9 percent, compared to a rate of 63.2 for Latinos over the age of 55. This large gap, almost 30 percentage points, is similar to age differentials observed among non-Hispanic White and African American citizens, but the latter's turnout is higher than that of Latinos in all age groups. Furthermore, the trend in youth voter turnout among young Latinos has remained relatively unchanged over the past thirty years. According to recent reports from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, since 1976 the voter turnout rate of young Latinos has lagged behind the turnout rate of non-Hispanic Whites by approximately 13 percentage points (Levine and Lopez 2002; Lopez 2003).

Part of the observed differences between the voting rate of younger Latinos and those of older Latinos and non-Hispanics generally may be driven by factors reflected in young Latinos' view of their efficacy and role in the political process. While a large majority of young people say that it is not difficult to cast a vote, young Latinos are more likely to say that it is difficult compared to young non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans (Lopez 2003). Similarly, young Latinos are less likely than their non-Hispanic White counterparts to say that they can make a difference in solving the problems of their communities (Lopez 2003), and young Latinos are less likely to say that they talked about politics

with their parents (LSPA and the Tarrance Group 2002). Finally, young Latinos are more likely than their non-Hispanic White or African American counterparts to say that "candidates do not take young people seriously," that candidates never come to their communities, and that candidates "would rather talk to older/wealthier voters." All of this suggests not only that young Latinos tend to have less confidence than other young people about their potential impact on the results of elections but also that the political process pays relatively little attention to the needs of Latino youth (Lopez 2003).

## Different Ethnic Groups

Unsurprisingly, there are significant differences in turnout among Latino ethnic groups. Cuban Americans continue to turn out at rates that are similar to those of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans. In contrast, Mexican American and Puerto Rican citizens are considerably less likely to vote. Although the explanation for the higher mobilization rates among Cuban Americans in South Florida and lower mobilization rates among Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans is not entirely clear, the difference may be partially explained by the reasons for which each group has migrated to the United States. Specifically, exile may create a stronger political identification, and thus a greater propensity to vote, though this phenomenon may not persist into subsequent generations (García, Falcón, and de la Garza 1996).



The Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR) is a nationwide consortium of 18 Latino studies centers with its headquarters at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame.

IUPLR's purpose is to strengthen its centers' capacity, expand the pool of Latino scholars and leaders, increase the availability of policy-relevant, Latino-focused research, and advance the national intellectual presence of Latino scholarship.

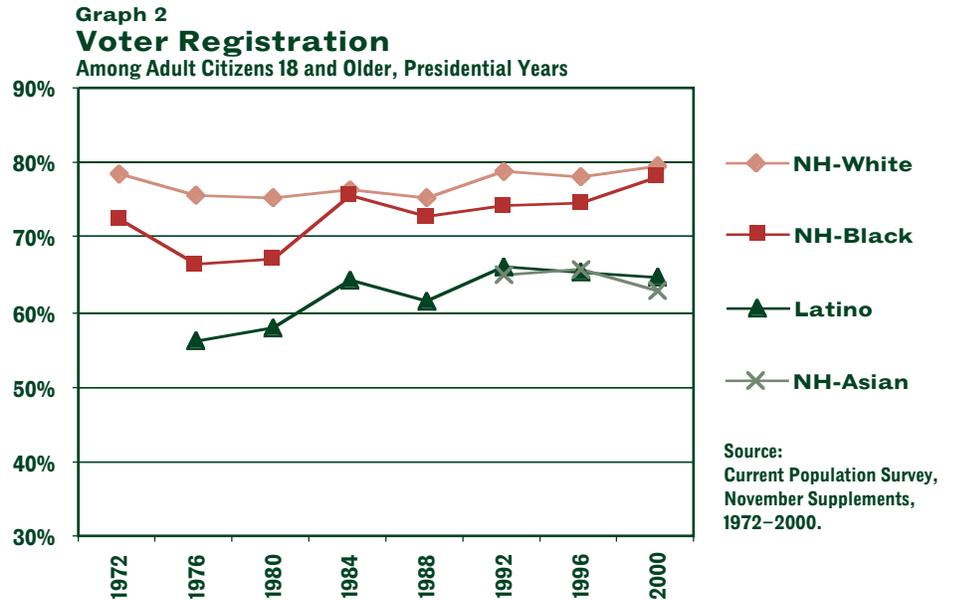
This report is one of a series of investigations into the current status of Latinos according to various social and economic indicators, which was carried out by a team of IUPLR researchers with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

# Voter Registration among Citizens

Voter registration rates among Latinos continue to lag behind those of non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic African Americans. As shown in Table 2, in 2000 64.8 percent of Latino citizens reported that they were registered to vote, whereas 79.8 percent and 78.3 percent of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans respectively were registered. Furthermore, as shown in Graph 2, while Latino registration rates have improved since 1976, they are still lower those of non-Hispanic Whites by 15 percentage points. Over the same period voter registration rates for non-Hispanic African Americans rose to almost match those of Whites.

## Youth

As with voter turnout, voter registration rates among Latinos range from a low of 51.6 percent for 18- to 30-year-olds to a high of 73.8 percent for Latino citizens over the age of 55.



Many of the same factors that explain voter turnout also explain voter registration. For example, while a majority of young people, including young Latinos, say that it is not difficult to register to vote, a larger proportion of young Latinos report that it is difficult compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts (Lopez 2003).

## Different Ethnic Groups

Similarly again, the average Latino registration rate masks differences across ethnic groups, with Mexican Americans, the largest Latino ethnic group, reporting a registration rate of 62.9 percent, while Cubans report a registration rate of 79 percent.

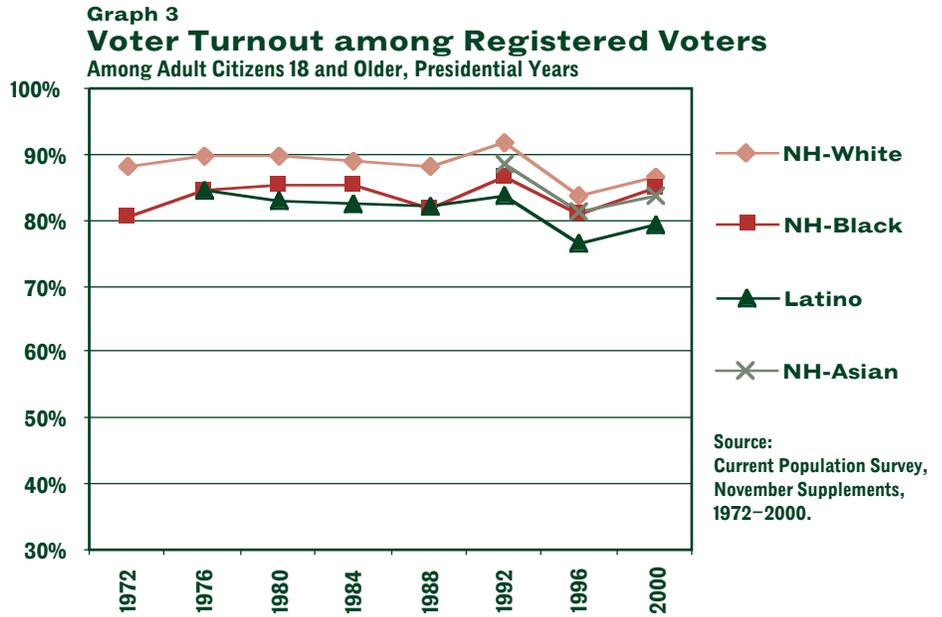
**Table 2 – Voter Registration Rates among Citizens in 2000**

Age Group	All Latino	Central or South American	Cuban American	Mexican American	Puerto Rican	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic African American	Non-Hispanic Asian American
<b>18–30</b>	51.6	48.9	70.6	50.9	47.0	65.8	68.3	52.1
<b>31–55</b>	67.6	67.9	85.1	65.4	71.5	79.0	79.9	64.1
<b>56+</b>	73.8	77.5	79.6	72.8	68.8	86.2	84.2	69.2
<b>All</b>	<b>64.8</b>	<b>66.7</b>	<b>79.0</b>	<b>62.9</b>	<b>63.5</b>	<b>79.8</b>	<b>78.3</b>	<b>63.1</b>

Note: All results are for citizens only. All results are based on the author's tabulation from the Current Population Survey, November Supplement 2000.

# Voter Turnout among Registered Voters

Even once registered, Latinos are still less likely to vote than their non-Hispanic counterparts. This is particularly true for young Latinos and for Mexican Americans. As shown in Table 3, in 2000 the voter turnout rate among registered Latinos was 79.3 percent, compared to turnout rates among registered voters of 86.9 percent, 85.3 percent, and 83.8 percent for non-Hispanic White, African American, and Asian American citizens respectively. Since 1976, as shown in Graph 3, voter turnout among the registered, while more compressed, has generally fallen off in recent years, especially for Latinos.



**Table 3 – Voter Turnout among Registered Voters in 2000**

Age Group	All Latino	Central or South American	Cuban American	Mexican American	Puerto Rican	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic African American	Non-Hispanic Asian American
<b>18–30</b>	70.0	80.98	69.6	66.8	71.1	75.8	76.6	80.1
<b>31–55</b>	77.3	90.7	87.3	72.9	80.1	87.0	87.0	84.1
<b>56+</b>	86.5	88.3	92.5	84.8	85.9	90.4	88.8	85.1
<b>All</b>	<b>79.3</b>	<b>87.6</b>	<b>87.2</b>	<b>75.8</b>	<b>80.7</b>	<b>86.9</b>	<b>85.3</b>	<b>83.8</b>

Note: All results are for citizens only. All results are based on the author's tabulation from the Current Population Survey, November Supplement 2000.

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# Improving Voter Turnout and Voter Registration among Latinos

There are two ways to improve the voter turnout of Latinos: first, getting more Latinos registered to vote—even though the turnout rates among registered Latinos are not as good as they could be, they are still quite high (Glass, Squire, and Wolfinger 1983). Second, get-out-the-vote efforts and voting laws that keep polling places open later would immediately improve turnout among the registered.

Recent research suggests that there are several things that states can do to make it easier for citizens to register and to cast a vote, and that voter mobilization drives can improve voter turnout. Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin (2003) have shown that states that have extended polling hours, mail sample ballots, and provide polling place information to registrants have voter turnout rates among Latinos that are 6.8 percentage points higher than in states without

any of those practices in place. This difference is also the largest among all major racial/ethnic groups, which suggests that changes in voting laws are particularly important for Latino voter turnout. Fitzgerald (2002) has found that easier voting methods, such as same-day registration, boost the youth voter turnout generally, including that of young Latinos.

Given that many of the differences between Latinos and non-Latinos are related to observable differences such as educational attainment or age, voter turnout will likely improve as Latinos' educational attainment increases and as Latinos age, even if no policy changes are made.

Perhaps most promising, recent research on get-out-the-vote efforts among young Latinos suggests that simple canvassing with nonpartisan messages can increase the likelihood that Latinos will turn out to vote.

Michelson (2003), using a randomized experimental design in Fresno during California's gubernatorial election in 2002, demonstrates that when the canvasser is Latino and delivers a generic message encouraging a Latino voter to get out and vote on election day, turnout among young Latinos rises by 2.9 percentage points. These findings echo the results of Gerber and Green (2000) who found, also in a randomized experimental design, that youth voter turnout rises when young people are contacted face to face.



The three wavy lines shown throughout this publication are a symbol from ancient times representing the human intellect in action. From *The Book of Signs*, collected, drawn, and explained by Rudolf Koch (London: The First Edition Club, 1930, page 8).

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## Other Forms of Electoral and Political Engagement

Voting is not the only way in which citizens can express their views on politics or public policy. Citizens can express their political views through activities such as contacting public officials, the print media, or the broadcast media, or signing a petition or boycotting or ‘buycotting’ a product.<sup>2</sup> Table 4 shows the results of a recent national survey of adults 15 and older as reported by Keeter et al. (2002b).

Latino adults in many respects engage in electoral and political activities at the same rates as their non-Hispanic White and non-Hispanic African American counterparts, though Latino adults are less likely to participate in petitions or contact the print media. However, Latino adults are more likely to protest. This suggests that, while Latinos are less likely to be registered to vote or to vote than their non-Latino counterparts, they are just as engaged as non-Latinos in a wide range of electoral and political voice activities.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 4 – Percentage of Those Surveyed Who Engaged in Electoral and Political Voice Activities Other than Voting**

Activity	Latino	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic African American
<b>Electoral Activities</b>			
Persuading others to vote	34	33	34
Displaying buttons, signs, etc.	24	25	35
Political campaign contributions	11	14	11
Volunteering for a candidate or political organization	5	6	7
<b>Political Voice Activities</b>			
Contacting public officials	13	18	13
Contacting the print media	7	11	9
Contacting the broadcast media	9	7	13
Protesting	8	4	6
E-mail petitions	7	13	8
Written petitions	16	24	20
Boycotting	35	39	33
Buycotting	30	35	34
Canvassing	3	3	3

Source: Keeter, et al. (2002b). Results based on a national survey of 3,500 adults 15 and older conducted in the summer of 2002. See Keeter et al. (2002a).

<sup>2</sup> Buycotting, as opposed to boycotting, occurs when a person buys a product to support the cause of an organization or firm. The actual survey questions read: “Have you bought a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it?” “Have you NOT bought something because of the conditions under which the product is made or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it?”

<sup>3</sup> Keeter et al. (2002b) report, however, that in a range of civic activities Latinos lag significantly behind their non-Latino counterparts. For example, 32 percent of non-Hispanic Whites compared to only 26 percent of Latinos reported working to raise funds for charity.

## Conclusion

In 2000 Latinos registered to vote and voted at rates that were lower than those of their non-Hispanic White and African American counterparts, continuing a trend that remains only slightly changed since the mid-1970s. To a large extent, these disparities are driven by observable differences in socioeconomic circumstances and age. However, even controlling for these factors, Latinos are less likely to register to vote and to vote than non-Latinos. Recent evidence suggests that changes in state laws and greater—and simpler—voter mobilization efforts can lead to sizeable increases in Latino voter turnout.

Beyond voting, however, Latino adults are as involved with their communities' political processes as their non-Latino counterparts. From activities such as persuading others to vote and making campaign contributions to boycotting and buycotting, Latino adults are just as likely as non-Latinos to be engaged.

This suggests that perhaps it is not so much choice as barriers to voting that are impeding Latinos from participating more in the electoral process. Easier voting methods and laws that keep polls open longer, together with face-to-face, nonpartisan encouragement, would probably improve the Latino voter registration and voter turnout rates.



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– M. Lopez

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