

The Hispanic Electorate in 2004

Total Population vs. Eligible Voters

The rapid growth of the Latino population has been a subject of intense public attention since the 2000 Census reported a 58% increase over the 1990 total and later Census Bureau estimates concluded that Hispanics had surpassed African Americans in number. However, because of the distinctive factors generating this growth—immigration and high birth rates—increases in raw population do not automatically produce increases in the number of voters.

In 2000, for example, the Hispanic and African-American populations were of roughly similar size, about 35 million people. However, there were 23 million African American eligible voters compared to 13 million Latinos. The major cause of the difference was the large number of adult Latinos who are non-citizen immigrants. While citizens accounted for 95% of the African American voting-age population, they made up only 60% of the Latino population at least 18 years old.¹

Based on the most recent population data available, in March 2003 the Hispanic population totaled 39.4 million people, and 40% of them, 15.7 million people, were eligible voters.² In contrast, 73% of the total non-Hispanic population was eligible.

Nonetheless, the Hispanic electorate is growing much faster than the non-Hispanic electorate. Between the 2000 vote and the election this November, the number of eligible Latino voters will have increased by about 20% to about 16 million people. The rate of increase is about six times faster than for the non-Hispanic population.

The Youth Vote

The Hispanic population on the whole is younger than the rest of the U.S. population. Among Latinos, for example, 34% of the population is less than 18 years old compared to 23% of the non-Hispanic white population. Moreover, this segment of the Latino population is growing much faster than in the population overall. As a result, young, native-born Latinos are a disproportionately large source of growth in the youth electorate and they are by far the largest source of growth in the Latino electorate.

Every year since the 2000 elections an average of 425,000 native-born Latinos has turned 18 years old and become eligible to vote. While Latinos make up 8% of eligible voters, they represent 12% of the electorate that is between 18 and 24 years old. Given their fast rate of growth, Latinos will account for 68% of the increase in this segment of the electorate between the 2000 and 2004 elections.

Similarly, these young voters represent the lion's share of growth in the Latino electorate. Nearly eight out of every ten (78%) new Latino eligible voters since the last presidential election is a native-born U.S. citizen who has become old enough to vote as opposed to an immigrant who has become a citizen through naturalization.

Like others their age, Latino young adults are less likely to vote than older people. Among Latino U.S. citizens aged 18 to 29 years old 60% say they are registered to vote compared to 79% of Hispanic U.S. citizens who are at least 55 year old, according to the 2004 National Survey of Latinos.³ Among Latino registered voters, only 66% of the young adults say they have ever voted versus more than 90% in every other age group.

Young adult Latino registered voters also take distinctive views on some issues. For example, in the survey 18 to 29 years olds were the only age group in which a majority (55%) said they opposed a constitutional amendment that would, in effect, ban same-sex marriages. In contrast, 39% of Latino registered voters 55 years old or more opposed the amendment. They are also more skeptical on the conduct of the war in Iraq with 68% saying President George W. Bush does not have a clear plan to bring the conflict to a successful conclusion compared to 55% of those at least 55 years old.

Hispanics and the Electoral College

Although it has been dispersing to new settlement areas, the Hispanic population remains concentrated in a few states. Several of those states were decided by wide margins in the last presidential election and do not appear to be battlegrounds in the current campaign. Texas, California and New York are all generally considered uncontested states in the presidential race, and 58% of all Latino eligible voters live in those three states alone.

Among the 18 states generally considered battlegrounds in the presidential election because they were decided by a margin of less than 7% of the popular vote in 2000, Latinos comprise at least 10% of the eligible voters in Florida, New Mexico, Nevada and Arizona. The Hispanic electorate has distinctly different characteristics in each of those states and different patterns of growth since 2000.

- Florida: Hispanics make up 14% of the eligible voters, and they are unusual because so many are naturalized citizens (44% of Latino eligible voters in Florida compared to 24% nationally). Nonetheless, the fastest growth has been among native born Latinos who account for 83% of the new eligible Latino voters in Florida.
- New Mexico: Latinos are 40% of the eligible voters, a greater share by far than in any other state. These voters are overwhelmingly native-born citizens, 93%.
- Nevada: Latinos account for 13% of the eligible voters but their numbers are growing very fast. Since the last presidential election, the number of eligible Latinos in Nevada has increased by about 50%, and Latinos account for about half of all the increase in the Nevada electorate. About two-thirds of the Latino eligible voters in Nevada are native born.
- Arizona: Some 16% of eligible voters in Arizona are Hispanics, and 80% are native-born citizens.

¹ "Voting and Registration in Election of November 2000," Current Population Reports, P20-542, U.S. Census Bureau.

² Annual Demographic Survey conducted in March 2003 as a supplement to the Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau, tabulations by the Pew Hispanic Center.

³ The 2004 National Survey of Latinos: Politics and Civic Participation, The Pew Hispanic Center and the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation.