

It's Complicated: Latinos, President Obama, and the 2012 Election*

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Objective. Assess Latino support past, present, and future for President Obama and his policies, and the role of the Latino vote in the 2012 election. *Methods.* Examine Latino voting patterns, administrative decisions and legislation enacted by President Obama affecting Latinos, and Latino public opinion polls to evaluate potential support for Obama by Latinos. *Results.* Despite disappointment and anger over immigration policy by President Obama, Latinos still indicate high levels of support for him and willingness to vote for him in the 2012 elections. Obama has demonstrated his commitment to issues salient to the Latino community in addition to appointing a large number of Latinos to top-ranking government positions. The influence of the Latino vote in 2012 is dependent on voter mobilization in competitive places. *Conclusion.* Latinos in the 2012 election could play a significant role in the presidential race but also in congressional races if they turn out in high numbers in competitive places to ensure their numbers result in influence.

The words “Yo Decido (I Decide) Why Latinos Will Pick the Next President” coupled with images of the heterogeneous Latino population comprise the cover of the February 2012 *Time Magazine*. The magazine cover and accompanying article are striking because they do not merely raise the question of the strength of the Latino vote in the 2012 election, but rather formally declare Latinos will be influential over the outcome. One reason for this definitive exclamation is the rapidly growing population of Latinos in the United States, and the consequent increase in eligible Latino voters. The 2010 Census counted the total Latino population to be 50.5 million people or 16 percent of the national population, which represents a 43 percent increase in the Latino population over the last decade. Moreover, estimates by the Pew Hispanic Center show each month 50,000 Latinos become eligible to vote by reaching the age of 18 (Voto Latino). Since 2008, an additional 2 million Latinos have become eligible voters (File and Crissey, 2010). Latinos have demonstrated their ability and willingness to be very politically active and vocal on issues that directly affect their community, as evidenced in the immigrant rights marches in spring 2006 (Zepeda-Millán, 2011), the marches in response to Prop 187 (García Bedolla, 2005), and their overall increased voter mobilization in the 2008 election.

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Questions over the potential strength and influence of the Latino vote in the United States have resurfaced in the 2012 elections. Scholars and media pundits have inquired as to whether Latinos will be a formidable political force, or become a critical swing vote in presidential elections (Fraga and Ramírez, 2003; DeSipio, 1996). However, by and large much of that excitement has failed to materialize in a critical role of Latinos determining the outcome in the election or in dramatic increases in Latino voter turnout until 2008. In the 2008 election, Latinos demonstrated the strength of their political power with increased turnout in key battleground states (Barretto, Collingwood, and Manzano, 2010). In 2008, Latino turnout increased by 2 million to 9.7 million compared to Census estimates of 7.6 million Latinos in the 2004 election. Latinos comprised roughly 40 percent of the total increase in voters in the 2008 election (File and Crissey, 2010). As more Latinos become eligible voters and if voter turnout continues to rise, particularly in battleground states, Latinos will become a force to be reckoned with in the 2012 election.

This article seeks to understand the role of Latinos in the previous presidential election in 2008, President Obama's relationship with Latinos, and the role of Latinos in the upcoming 2012 election. The article proceeds in the following five sections. First, an analysis of Latinos as a political electorate and how Latinos voted in the 2008 election. Second, it examines the ways in which Obama appealed to and courted this constituency. Next it turns to an investigation of the representation of Latinos by Obama once he was in office and assesses how missteps in immigration policy have hampered his relationship with Latinos. Fourth, the article analyzes the ways in which he has utilized his executive powers to improve and repair this relationship with Latinos in the latter portion of his first term. Finally, I develop an argument for the ways in which Latinos could greatly influence the 2012 election and why Latinos should turn out in high numbers in critical areas.

The Latino Vote

Despite the burgeoning size of the Latino population, heterogeneity among Latinos pushes some to ask whether there is even such thing as the so-called Latino vote. How can Latinos act as a unified voting bloc or anything resembling it due to their varied backgrounds in terms of national origin group, generation, socioeconomic status, regional differences, and partisanship? One way to address this question is to examine how Latinos view themselves—Do they share a common identity? According to the results of the Latino National Survey (LNS) conducted by Fraga et al. (2006), a majority of Latinos do perceive themselves as a group across a variety of dimensions. When asked if they considered themselves Hispanic or Latino, 100 percent of respondents answered in the affirmative and 63 percent indicated some belief in Latino linked fate. In terms of commonality with other Latinos regarding educational attainment, jobs, or income, 70 percent of respondents perceived

commonality with other Latinos. Moreover, in their analysis of the LNS focus groups, Fraga et al. (2008) find overwhelming evidence that for Latinos “pan-ethnic consciousness appears to have taken root in individual self-identity, the definition and understanding of community, and the intentional expression of political and social commonality” (2010:167).

Statistical analysis of the LNS data confirms a high level of ethnic identity among Latinos in addition to strong partisan identification with the Democratic Party (Barreto and Pedraza, 2009). Jiménez (2009) argues that anti-immigrant rhetoric over the last decade has solidified a common Latino identity, no matter how many generations their families have resided in the United States. Moreover, the marches of 2006 in response to the threat and targeting of not just immigrants, but all Latinos, were found to have reinforced Latinos’ perceptions of group identity (Silber, 2010; Pallares and Flores-Gonzalez, 2010; Barreto et al., 2009). Taken together, these results indicate a fairly high level of attachment to a larger pan-Latino group identity. This is not to say that distinctions between Latinos do not exist in terms of partisanship, region, and national origin groups. Rather, despite these differences, within the U.S. context Latinos demonstrate a strong ethnic identity and it has also become an increasingly salient political identity (Barreto, 2010).

Moving beyond Latino political attitudes and views of themselves as a group, it is useful to examine Latino voting patterns to observe how the Latino electorate has behaved in past elections. Traditionally, Latinos vote in favor of Democrats over Republicans at a ratio of 2 to 1 (de la Garza and Cortina, 2007; Alvarez and Bedolla, 2003; Alvarez and Abrajano, 2010). A historical examination of Latino voting patterns between 1976 and 1996 demonstrates that 68 percent of Latinos on average voted for the Democratic candidate in the presidential election (Leal et al., 2005). Democrats wield a significant advantage over Republicans in currying the support of Latino voters, though this has not stopped both political parties from pursuing the Latino vote. Although Latino voting patterns demonstrate a significant preference for Democrats, a large enough percentage still vote for Republicans, thus keeping up Republican candidates’ hopes of winning a larger portion of the Latino vote. Moreover, in the 2004 election, Bush was able to secure a higher than average percentage of the Latino vote (Leal et al., 2005), thus providing even more fodder for Republican candidates.

In the 2008 election, 72 percent of Latinos voted for President Obama, indicating a very strong level of support among Latinos for his candidacy (Barreto et al., 2008). Recent data from an *ImpreMedia* Latino Decisions Poll of Latino registered voters in December 2011 suggest Latino support for President Obama is quite strong. Table 1 displays Latino approval ratings for Obama. Combining the two measures of approval, the result is 67 percent approval for Obama compared to 29 percent disapproval. When examining how this varies across heavily Latino populated states, California and Texas are essentially at the mean while Florida is below. The lower level of support in Florida is not surprising given the concentration of Cubans in the state,

TABLE 1
Latino Approval Ratings of Obama

	Total	CA	TX	FL	NY/NJ	Other
Strongly approve	32	30	34	29	47	26
Somewhat approve	35	40	32	29	41	35
Somewhat disapprove	11	15	9	13	7	8
Strongly disapprove	18	10	25	26	2	24
Do not know	3	5	1	1	2	6
Refused	1	1	0	3	0	1

SOURCE: ImpreMedia/Latino Decisions December 2011 poll.

TABLE 2
Latino Support for Obama in 2012 Election

	Total	CA	TX	FL	NY/NJ	Other
Likely vote for Obama	69	77	61	57	85	63
Undecided	11	10	10	9	8	15
Likely vote for Republican	20	13	29	34	7	22

SOURCE: Impre Media/Latino Decisions December 2011 poll.

who tend to be the most conservative among Latinos and most likely to vote for Republicans. The data across the states polled do not indicate a high level of dissatisfaction with Obama and in fact suggest moderate-to-high levels of support.

On vote choice in the 2012 election, the December 2011 poll also asked about the likelihood of voting for Obama, the Republican candidate, or whether a respondent is undecided. The results are displayed in Table 2. The data indicate 69 percent of respondents are likely to vote for Obama compared to only 20 percent for Republicans. Approximately 11 percent of those polled indicated they were still undecided. In essence, the data are congruent with past voting patterns among Latinos, with roughly 68 percent support for the Democratic candidate in the presidential election. Regionally, likely voters for Obama are the lowest in Florida with only 57 percent compared to 85 percent in New York and New Jersey. In sum, recent data on Latino support and attitudes toward President Obama, along with historical voting patterns, indicate a high level of support for Democrats among Latinos. Data from the Pew Hispanic Center in December 2011 confirm similar levels of support for Obama by Latino voters (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Motel, 2011).

In addition to Latino public opinion data and voting patterns, there is also substantial evidence that both partisan and nonpartisan Latino political organizations view Latinos as a constituency in the electorate. Organizations that began as Mexican-American-oriented groups, such as National Council of La

Raza (NCLR) and the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), have broadened their scope to become pan-Latino organizations aimed at pursuing the policy interests and representation of Latinos more broadly (DeSipio, 1996:40). The National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO) serves as a conduit between Latino representatives and the Latino community. A joint effort between NALEO, NCLR, Univision, ImpreMedia, MiFamilia Vota, and Entravision Communications has produced a multilayered Latino civic participation campaign called "Ya es Hora," which is aimed at increasing Latino participation in the 2010 Census, registration, mobilization, and naturalization in the lead up to the 2012 election.¹ The goal of the effort is to remove barriers facing Latinos from becoming full participants in the political system. Additionally, Voto Latino is a nonpartisan group aimed at the mobilization and registration of Latino youth. The organization has crafted a nationwide outreach campaign aimed to address the fact that a considerable portion of eligible Latino voters are youth. It has utilized innovative social media techniques and the Internet to target Latino youth, such its giveaway on Facebook of 30 free songs from iTunes to Latinos who pledge to register to vote in the 2012 election (Voto Latino). Efforts focused on Internet outreach by Voto Latino are likely to be effective among Latino youth given the evidence that online political activity has a strong positive effect on political participation offline (García-Castañón, Rank, and Barreto, 2011). In addition to Latino attitudes and political behavior, Latino organizations have also embraced the political identity of Latinos as a group.

Courting Latinos as an Electorate

Whether in actuality there is a monolithic Latino vote or not, one thing we are confident in is that political campaigns, especially at the presidential level, have sought aggressively to pursue the Latino vote through direct outreach efforts (Abrajano, 2010; Abrajano and Alvarez, 2010). The origins of appealing directly to Latino voters as a group can be traced back to the outreach efforts by John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential elections (Abrajano, 2010:32). Through the establishment of Viva Kennedy Clubs, Kennedy sought to directly appeal to Latino voters and create a political culture invested in the importance of political participation. Kennedy also ran the first-ever Spanish television political ad by utilizing the Spanish-speaking skills of his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy (Abrajano, 2010:33).

As a result of his efforts to appeal to Latinos, he was able to win the support of 85 percent of the Latinos who voted (Schmal, 2004). Even in this first electoral appeal to Latinos, the influence of their votes was important. Schmal (2004) argues that given the closeness of the 1960 election

¹For more information see <http://corporate.univision.com/univision-story/community-relations/ya-es-hora/> and <http://www.yaeshora.info/english>

with a margin of only 114,673 votes in favor of Kennedy, his targeting of Latinos in key areas that were very close such as Texas and Illinois were critical to his eventual success in the overall election. Moreover, as Abrajano (2010) points out, Kennedy's actions are important because they increased the salience of Latinos as a constituency that presidential candidates needed to court.

In the subsequent presidential election campaigns over the next 50 years, candidates continued to pursue Latinos and increased their efforts, particularly in light of changing demographics. This is indicated by the rise of television advertisements in Spanish, ads featuring Latinos, use of Spanish broadcast television networks such as Univision, and designing specific campaigns aimed at Latino voters. By 1980, both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates were utilizing these techniques to win the support of Latinos (Abrajano, 2010). By 2000, the rise of Spanish-language ads extended to state-level political offices in addition to congressional and presidential campaigns. In the 2004 presidential campaign, it is estimated 8.7 million dollars were spent on Spanish-language ads with 4.4 million spent directly by the presidential candidates (Segal, 2006). Attracting the interest of Latino voters as a group has been incorporated as a necessary component of any mainstream presidential candidate's campaign, either Republican or Democrat.

Most recently in the 2008 election, presidential candidates crafted campaigns that directly targeted the Latino vote. In part this strategy was motivated by Latinos comprising sizeable portions of the electorate in battleground states, such as New Mexico, Florida, Nevada, and Colorado, and the revised primary schedule that propelled some of these states' primaries to occur earlier in the schedule than is typical (Barreto, Collingwood, and Manzano, 2010). The presence of a Latino candidate, Bill Richardson, in the Democratic primary and his potential to mobilize the Latino vote no doubt increased the salience of campaigning toward Latinos (Barreto et al., 2008).

In the general election, both John McCain and Barack Obama mounted targeted campaigns aimed at Latino voters and aired Spanish-language advertisements in Nevada, Florida, Colorado, and New Mexico (Barreto, Collingwood, and Manzano, 2010). Both candidates attended events organized by Latino organizations such as NALEO, MALDEF, and NCLR, demonstrating their desire to appeal to the Latino electorate (Abrajano, 2010). Abrajano (2010) also notes Obama emulated Kennedy by establishing "Viva Obama" clubs across the country in an effort to mobilize Latinos. He ran on a campaign of hope and change with slogans such as "Change We Can Believe In," "Yes We Can" (borrowed from the United Farm Workers), and posters of himself with the words "Change," "Hope," or "Progress" underneath his image. The rhetoric in his campaign was highly effective in mobilizing voters, particularly among African Americans and Latinos, with an additional 2 million voters from each group, respectively (File and Crissey, 2010).

The influence of the Latino vote in the 2008 election was substantial because of the growth of Latino voters and turnout in competitive general election states (Barretto, Collingwood, and Manzano, 2010). According to their composite measure of group influence, which includes competitiveness of the state, minimum group size and unity in Latino voting behavior, and campaigns' mobilization of Latinos, Latinos had a substantial effect on the race in several key battleground states. They had the greatest influence in Florida and Nevada, followed by Colorado and New Mexico. Putting the influence of Latinos in 2008 in perspective, Barretto, Collingwood, and Manzano (2010) conclude Latinos "did not deliver the power punch in what became a landslide victory for Obama, but was far from irrelevant" (2010:11). In the case of Florida, Latinos were 11 percent of the electorate and Obama was able to win the state in addition to a majority of its Latino voters. This feat is significant because Florida has only been won two other times by Democratic presidential candidates since 1968 (Abrajano, 2010), and Latinos in Florida, who are predominantly Cuban, typically vote for the Republican candidate. Latinos responded positively to Obama's efforts and campaign messages as evidenced by their support and mobilization in the election in 2008 and began to demonstrate their political strength as a group. However, Latinos entered the Obama presidency with high hopes and expectations on the type of policies he would be able to deliver.

The Rocky Waves of Immigration Policy

A critical component of President Obama's 2008 appeals to Latino voters was "La Promesa de Obama" or Obama's promise for immigration reform. This promise entailed a comprehensive immigration reform bill in his first year of office. Latinos' desire for immigration reform to repair the broken immigration system is rooted in frustration over the slow processing of applications, limited avenues for the undocumented population to legalize its status, and the separation of families while they navigate the immigration system in an attempt to adjust their status. Not only did comprehensive immigration reform fail to occur in Obama's first term, but less-expansive bills such as the DREAM Act of 2010, which would have allowed a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people who are college students or in the military, were not able to successfully navigate the legislative process. In fact, the immigration legislation President Obama did sign in 2010 increases funding for border enforcement by \$600 million through additional border agents, drones, and border stations (Preston, 2010). In essence, during Obama's first term in office, reform in terms of immigration legislation have been nonexistent. The failure of Obama to deliver on his promise is difficult for Latinos to accept, since the reach of the issue extends into their daily lives, and commentators on Spanish-speaking television, such as Univision's Jorge Ramos, anchor of *Al Punto*, frequently raise the issue on their nightly programs.

In addition to overpromising and underdelivering on immigration policy, President Obama utilized his executive powers to take concrete steps toward increasing immigration enforcement and deportations. In other words, he engaged in actions on immigration policy that were unlikely to be supported by Latinos and were likely to inflict negative consequences on the constituency who had so eagerly supported him in 2008. One of the most consequential choices of the executive is the dramatic increase of deportations under his administration, which were already substantial under President Bush's mass deportations. Since Obama assumed office in January 2009 to the end of 2011, 1.2 million Latinos have been deported (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Motel, 2011). The effects of the deportations on the lives of Latinos have been widespread, devastating, and significant. Families are torn apart and separated, people live in fear of deportation, and racial profiling has increased. The effects are not confined to the undocumented Latino population but rather a significant portion of the Latino population due to the number of people in mixed-status households, which is roughly 8.8 million Latinos (Passel and Cohn, 2009).

President Obama also supported and developed the Secure Communities Program and the use of 287g agreements with local law enforcement. The Secure Communities Program intends to make our communities safer from criminals by utilizing a fingerprinting system and to identify undocumented immigrants with a criminal background (Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2012). These data are then used by ICE to identify immigrants for deportation. However, less than 40 percent of the deportations under Obama have been of people who have a criminal background (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Motel, 2011), and many of those with criminal backgrounds are low-level offenders with misdemeanor records rather than serious felonies (Coleman, 2012). The use of 287(g) agreements allowed local law enforcement to enter into agreements with the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) ICE, which grants local police the powers of federal immigration agents, including investigating immigration cases, arresting immigrants, and transporting immigrants to detention facilities (Senghetti, Viña, and Ester, 2006). The program has been criticized for increasing racial profiling and targeting immigrants without suspicion of criminal activity. In the midst of criticisms and flaws in implementation, Obama announced in February 2012 the end of the 287(g) program and a focus instead on the Secure Communities Program.

The motivations for the mass deportations, 287(g) agreements, and the Secure Communities Programs are difficult to understand because the policies are inconsistent with President Obama's campaign position on immigration and the general Democratic stance on the issue. The disjuncture between President Obama's actions and his reliance on Latinos as a significant component of his reelection constituency is striking. One possible explanation for his behavior is that he believed he could win the support of moderate voters and moderate Republicans in Congress if he demonstrated some willingness

to engage is substantial enforcement by being “tough on immigration.” However, if this was his strategy it has not increased congressional Republicans’ willingness to work with him on this issue, and is unlikely to have increased support for him among moderate Republican voters. One of the primary reasons for this is the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party. The rise of the Tea Party in 2009 and 2010 fundamentally changed the rhetoric of the Republican Party and led to the usage of more extreme language and policy stances on issues such as immigration. Party polarization has increased but more importantly the center of the Republican Party has moved dramatically to the right (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, 2011). The result is that few Republicans, if any, will be willing to support President Obama’s legislative agenda. President Obama was unable to pass immigration reform in the first two years of his term when Democrats controlled Congress, but the possibility of doing so under divided government post the 2010 election was even more improbable.

It’s Personal: Latinos, Anger Over Immigration

President Obama’s actions on immigration have led to feelings of disillusionment and betrayal among Latinos, especially in light of his earlier promises of immigration reform. In recent Pew Hispanic survey data, among Latinos who were aware of Obama’s deportation practices, 77 percent disapproved of his actions (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Motel, 2011). One reason for the strong negative sentiments may be that 25 percent of Latino voters indicated they knew someone who has been deported under the Obama administration and another 53 percent knew someone who was undocumented (Sanchez, 2011).

Moreover, the effects of a climate of fear from deportation on children living in mixed-status or undocumented households can result in negative effects for their development in terms of health, education, and psychosocial growth (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Approximately 4 million (79 percent) of children of unauthorized immigrants are American citizens (Passel and Taylor, 2010). This means that despite the security obtained from their own citizenship status, the duress of living in fear and worrying about what may happen to their parents and fallout that will follow from their family being torn apart exacts a heavy toll on these children. Likely consequences of living in these conditions include an undermined sense of belonging and trust (Suárez-Orozco, 2011), and for those children whose parents do get detained evidence suggests they may suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. The fear of deportation of their parents is not unfounded—a recent memo released by ICE in 2012 indicates that in the first six months of 2011, 46,500 parents of U.S.-born children were deported (Foley, 2012). Latinos feel strongly that an environment of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment exists (Sanchez, 2011). Together these factors

create a high level of personalization of the issue that is difficult to overcome, no matter what else the executive of the country has done in the past or does in the future.

The disillusionment of Latinos with the state of the political landscape is not triggered by President Obama's actions alone. The Republican Party, in particular the Tea Party, has engaged in more total and repeated acts that harm Latinos than President Obama. The rise of the Tea Party movement reflects a new strain of conservatism that is distinct from the mainstream Republican Party (Barreto et al., 2012; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). Data from the 2010 Multi-State Survey on Race and Politics (MSSRP) reveal that 27 percent of the national public or 63 million Americans strongly approve of the Tea Party. The Tea Party embraces virulent anti-immigrant language, and supports anti-immigrant policies and other extreme social policy positions that are rarely in Latinos' interests. When examining racial and social attitudes among whites, the views of strong supporters of the Tea Party are starkly different compared to those who strongly oppose the Tea Party. The results indicate a high level of intolerance by Tea Party supporters (MSSRP, 2010). Moreover, supporters of the Tea Party seem to be motivated by fears of changing social demographics and a strong sense of out-group anxiety (Barreto et al., 2012). The combination of the stance of the Tea Party, its incorporation into the Republican Party, and a significant number of Tea Party candidates winning congressional seats in 2010, as well as considerable support from the public is an alarming development for the representation of the Latino electorate.

Not only are Latinos conscious of the dominance of anti-immigrant rhetoric but they also indicate that it mobilizes them to vote and plays a critical role in vote choice (Manzano, 2012). Recent data suggest Latinos perceive Republicans as not caring about them as a group (46 percent) or being hostile toward Latinos (27 percent) (Latino Decisions, 2011). Both the Republican candidate and President Obama will have to work hard to demonstrate to Latinos they will offer representation for their salient public policy interests.

Repairing the Damage

Advocates of the Latino community, Spanish-language media, and Latinos themselves have heavily critiqued Obama's policies on immigration. When assessing Obama's job performance on immigration, it is important to consider his failures and his successes. While he has utilized his executive powers over administrative agencies to create some harsh immigration policy, he has in the latter portion of his term taken affirmative steps to create nuance in immigration policy as well as curtail some of the most harmful effects on Latinos' lives.

In August 2011, he announced a prioritization of deportations toward people with a criminal background (Pear, 2011). The result was the “Morton Memo” from the director of ICE, John Morton, urging his agency to utilize prosecutorial discretion and direct scarce resources toward offenders who are serious criminals. In January 2012, Obama also announced changes to the regulations regarding the adjustment of status for undocumented people. The changes will allow people to apply for hardship waivers to be exempted from the requirement that applicants must return to their country of origin to adjust their status and be subjected to a penalty waiting period in their home country before they can return (Preston, 2012). As mentioned previously, Obama announced in February 2012 the end of the 287(g) program in terms of signing new agreements or training additional local law enforcement, but fell short of immediately dismantling it by cancelling the existing agreements. Nevertheless, the end of the program will reduce the ability of local law enforcement to target immigrants as the current agreements expire.

While these changes may appear minor, their effect is considerable on the lives of undocumented people and Latinos more broadly. The changes in the deportation policy and the end of 287(g) agreements allow people to feel greater security in their daily lives without daily fears of deportation. The change in adjustment policy allows families to remain united while navigating the immigration process without disruption to their incomes and stability. These are crucial wins for Latinos given the scope and range of the devastating effects of immigration policies, and will facilitate healing the wounds inflicted by Obama’s harsher immigration policies.

Thinking Beyond Immigration Policy

Obama ran on a campaign of hope, change, and promises, which consequently resulted in his supporters’ expectations reaching incredible heights. Unfortunately, on a practical level it would have been quite difficult for him to meet these promises under unified government, but nearly impossible to achieve such a feat after facing a divided government. As Binder (1993) notes, “periods of legislative prowess are the exception not the rule” (2003:3). Moreover, she emphasizes that social policy reforms are more difficult to achieve under divided government compared to economic reforms. In this sense, Obama became his own worst enemy by supplying his detractors with ample ammunition against him when he could not deliver on all of his promises. Obama made huge promises on immigration policy, but he also campaigned on several other issues that he felt were critically important to address in his first term in office. Health-care reform, energy legislation, and education were also strong components of his campaign. Although he underdelivered on immigration, other areas of his record reflect significant policy changes on his part.

When evaluating an executive, presidential scholars often attempt to assess the efficacy and strategies of the president in achieving his agenda (Neustadt, 1991; Kernell, 2006; Rudalevige, 2002). A president would likely be considered successful in terms of policy if substantial reform in one or two policy areas via legislation or significant administrative actions transpired. In the case of Obama, he enacted several significant policy changes including health-care reform, a recovery package to limit the effects of the 2008 recession, and financial regulations such as credit reform, in addition to utilizing appointments to increase Latino representation. While these policy changes may not seem directly relevant to Latinos, there are numerous ways in which in these reforms do serve the Latino community. It is crucial for scholars, the media, political parties, and the candidates not to reduce the Latino electorate to simply one public policy issue in the 2012 election. Caring about only immigration is not reflected in Latino public opinion polls nor does it correspond to the objective problems Latinos face.

In assessing Obama's representation of Latinos outside of immigration, it is relevant to note that an overwhelming proportion of Latinos currently identify as Democrats or lean Democrat (Latino Decision Poll, 2011). Thus, any liberal reforms or policies enacted by Obama reflect to some degree the political attitudes of the majority of Latinos. Beyond generalities, when we examine Obama's policies and administrative appointments, we recognize there is a strong record for representing the needs and concerns of Latinos in the United States. For example, healthcare is a top issue facing the Latino community. The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act signed into law in March 2010 extends access to healthcare, provides subsidies, eliminates lifetime and annual benefit limits, and limits insurance companies' ability to deny coverage based on preexisting conditions or drop people from plans (Stolberg and Pear, 2010). Latinos constitute a larger proportion of people who are uninsured or underinsured compared to any other racial or ethnic group (Medeiros, 2012). According to the Office of Minority Health, in 2010, 30.7 percent of the Latino population lacked health insurance coverage compared to 11.7 percent of the non-Latino white population (Minority Health Office, 2012), thus making the health-care reform bill critically important for Latinos. Moreover, the Latino community continues to struggle with increasing obesity and rising levels of long-term health conditions such as diabetes (Woodward-Lopez and Flores, 2006). The potential reversal of the legislation by the Supreme Court during the term ending in June 2012 would be devastating for Latinos.

In terms of economic policy, Obama has also served the Latino community. After the economic crash in 2008 and the subsequent recession, data from the Pew Hispanic Center indicate Latinos suffered from the most severe economic effects compared to other racial and ethnic groups. The median net worth of Latino households dropped 66 percent from 2005 to 2009. This drop is in addition to a lower-level baseline of Latino net worth of \$6,325 compared to whites at \$113,149 (Kochlar, Fry, and Taylor, 2011). Factors leading to

declining overall net worth include losses on the value of houses and dramatic increases in unemployment rates for Latinos. For example, 33 percent of Latinos were underwater on their mortgages compared to 15 percent of blacks and 13 percent of whites. Latinos were also disproportionately affected by foreclosures, with 8 percent of Latino losing their homes between 2007 and 2009, and another 21.4 percent at imminent risk of foreclosure (Kochlar, Fry, and Taylor, 2011).

Obama crafted a trio of housing programs aimed at stemming the housing crisis and its effects on Americans. His Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP) is aimed at helping those at risk of foreclosure by lowering monthly payments. The Home Affordable Refinance Program (HARP) is designed to help homeowners to refinance their mortgages (Mearle, 2011). The Emergency Homeowners Loan Program and the Hardest Hit Fund are additional programs to help homeowners and states in particularly dire situations. While these programs have been critiqued for being plagued with bureaucratic red tape or only helping a small portion of the population, they do demonstrate a significant effort by the executive to address the housing crisis.

In light of the effects of the economic recession on Latinos, President Obama's actions in this area to stem the financial crisis through his economic recovery plan, including the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, often called the stimulus package, have provided benefits for the Latino population. Unemployment among Latinos dramatically increased from 5.9 percent in 2007 to 12.6 percent in 2009. Components of the stimulus plan attempted to stymie unemployment by creating new jobs in infrastructure. Moreover, the Credit Card Reform Act of 2009 limits increases on interest rates and adds considerable protections to consumers from unfair practices by credit card companies. While his economic policies and actions were not created solely for the benefit of Latinos, these reforms positively impacted Latinos' ability to improve their economic situation and cope with the effects of the crisis.

Possibly the most important action Obama has engaged in to increase the representation of Latino interests in government is his use of administrative appointments to improve diversity in the highest echelons of the bureaucracy and government. Obama has demonstrated a commitment to increasing Latino descriptive representation and is on track to have the largest number of Latino appointments compared to any other executive (Wides-Munoz, 2009). He nominated and swore in the first Latino/a Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor. Former Congresswoman Hilda Solis is the Labor Secretary while other Latinos also serve in top government positions such as Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. At the end of his first year in office, Obama had nominated and received Senate approval for 35 Latinos, more than any other president across their entire term in office (Wides-Munoz, 2009). Most recently, in January 2012, he appointed one of his aides, who was a former immigration activist and former Senior VP at NCLR, Cecilia Muñoz, to be White House Director

TABLE 3
2012 Number of Latino Voters Projections

	Projected Number of Latino Voters	Increase from 2008 (%)	Projected Share of Latino Vote (%)
National	12,237,000	25.60	8.70
Arizona	359,000	23.20	12.00
California	3,911,000	32.10	26.30
Colorado	224,000	15.00	8.70
Florida	1,650,000	34.50	18.30
Illinois	433,000	37.80	7.60
New Jersey	392,000	16.20	10.40
New Mexico	329,000	14.00	35.00
New York	845,000	13.70	10.80
Texas	1,987,000	17.10	21.30

SOURCE: NALEO (2012); <http://www.naleo.org/latinovote.html>.

of Intergovernmental Affairs. The appointment of Latinos to top-ranking positions is critical to ensuring that issues that the Latino community faces are less likely to be ignored by the administration.

2012 Election and Swing States

When looking ahead to the 2012 election, it is clear that the Latino vote could be very influential in key battleground states where the stakes are high. The NALEO estimates 12.2 million Latinos will vote in the 2012 election, which is a 26 percent increase from 2008 (NALEO, 2011). The executive director of NALEO, Arturo Vargas, believes that Latinos will play a decisive role in the 2012 election in part because they will account for at least 8.7 percent of the country's voters but in certain states will represent at least one in five voters (NALEO, 2012). Not just the total number of Latino voters matters but also their proportion of voters in certain competitive places. The top nine states with Latino voters are Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, and Texas. Three of these states, Florida, New Mexico, and Colorado, are states that swung Democrat in the 2008 election, which had previously been Republican (Barreto and Segura, 2012). Table 3 displays the number of projected Latino voters in terms of raw number of voters, share of the vote in each state, and the increase from 2008.

Reflecting on the 2008 presidential race and the data in Table 3, several states jump out as key battleground states that could be greatly influenced by Latinos. The mountainous interior West will remain a key area. Nevada is important because it was the fourth state that swung Democratic in 2008 but with a very small vote margin, thus making it a key battleground state. In Colorado, Latinos will comprise nearly 9 percent of the electorate in a state where

the race will likely be very tight. Additionally, in states such as New Mexico Latinos will play a significant role because they constitute 35 percent of the electorate and thus candidates from both parties will have a stake in securing support from Latinos. Barreto and Segura (2012) utilize data across a variety of electoral variables including the percent of Latino eligible voters, recent close elections, party vote among Latino voters, and party vote among non-Latinos in each state to assess the places where Latinos will be influential in the 2012 election. They identify 16 states: New Mexico, Texas, California, Arizona, Florida, Nevada, Colorado, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Washington, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Barreto and Segura emphasize the importance of place in terms of battleground states while also considering factors such as the size of the Latino electorate, highly salient races across other elected positions, and new places where Latinos may not be considered electorally important but are an emerging component of the electorate.

Despite a large increase in the number of Latino eligible voters since 2008, recent analysis of the Current Population Survey data by Antonio Gonzalez, president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, indicates that the number of registered Latinos has actually dropped from 11.6 million to 10.0 million in 2010 (Quinton, 2012). These results are contrary to the historical pattern of the rising overall number of registered Latinos. While some of the drop off can be accounted for by lower registration during midterm election years, Gonzalez has suggested the decrease is likely the result of the recession, which has had the greatest impact on Latinos (Kochlar, Fry, and Taylor, 2011). As a result of negative impacts of the recession such as lost jobs, increasing debts, and lost equity in homes, Gonzalez argues that Latinos were more likely to move to find work and new opportunities, which could account for the precipitous drop in registrations (Quinton, 2012). Political scientist Ricardo Ramírez agreed, suggesting mobility compelled by the recession is the most probable explanation but also adding the possibility of more difficult voter registration regulations as an additional explanatory factor (Quinton, 2012). The drop in Latino registered voters in 2010 does not preclude current efforts aimed at mobilizing the Latino electorate for 2012 from being successful. However, it should provide ample evidence to nonpartisan organizations, political parties, and the candidates that efforts to identify, register, and mobilize Latino voters are necessary in the wake of this pattern.

However, before we rejoice at the political power of Latinos, a few key hurdles must be overcome for their political power to materialize. First, if President Obama wants Latinos' support, he needs to reassure Latino voters that he is the candidate who will offer them the greatest amount of representation of their interests. Not only will he need to do it in the future, but also he needs to highlight elements of his record that demonstrate he has done it in the past. This will involve explaining his policy choices on areas such as deportation in a way that Latino voters find acceptable or possibly only

forgivable. He should draw attention to his considerable efforts at increasing Latino political representation in government through administrative appointments of top-ranking Latino officials. It is also crucial for him to highlight elements of his record on other high salience issues such as healthcare and the economy to demonstrate that his policy positions and actions do serve Latinos' interests. While immigration remains a top issue for Latinos, they cannot be reduced to solely a one issue electorate. Recent data (Latino Decisions, 2011) suggest that in addition to immigration, Latinos are equally as concerned with the economy and unemployment as immigration, with education ranking not far behind. It would be prudent of both candidates in the general election to engage in a discussion with Latinos that substantively engages public policy issues such as immigration in addition to other high-salience issues.

Second, Latinos' confidence in Obama or the Republican candidate, Gov. Romney, must be high enough that they are mobilized to turn out in high numbers. Despite the large size of the Latino population in the United States, their relative political power has been hampered by three elements. First, a significant disparity between their raw population and number of voters exists (Lopez and Taylor, 2011). A large component of their population is not eligible to vote because they are noncitizens. On this first dimension, there is nothing that can be done in the short term to improve political power for the 2012 election. Long term, greater ability to convert one's immigration status, such as lower fees and barriers to naturalization, could have substantial effects on the total number of eligible Latino voters.

Another second complicating factor is that turnout among Latinos is low (Michaelson, 2003; DiSipio, 1996; Hero and Campbell, 1996). According to the Census, of Latino registered voters, only 49 percent voted in the 2008 election compared to 64 percent of African Americans and 66 percent of whites (File and Crissey, 2010). Low voter turnout among Latinos is partially due to the proportion of the Latino vote that is young. For Latinos, 50 percent of all eligible Latino voters are under 40 and 33 percent are between 18 and 34 (Voto Latino, 2012). Among the 9 million American Latino youth, only a small fraction vote (Voto Latino, 2012). Additionally, socioeconomic status is one of the most significant predictors of participation, and Latinos have a larger percentage of voters with lower SES than other racial and ethnic groups (Michaelson, 2003). These factors substantially complicate efforts to increase voter mobilization and registration among Latinos. Specifically, targeted get out the vote efforts such as door to door canvassing can substantially increase Latino turnout (Michaelson, 2003). Moreover, there is substantial evidence indicating the use of co-ethnic appeals to Latino voters can influence vote choice (Nuño, 2007; Barreto and Nuño, 2011).

Third, despite increased geographical dispersion across the United States to new places, Latinos remain spatially concentrated in terms of constituting a sizeable portion of the electorate within a state or congressional district. This means that in order for Latinos to wield a significant amount of power,

the places where races will be close at the congressional and senate levels, as well as the presidential race, need to be the same places where Latinos live. Fortunately, where Latinos live and swing and battleground states do overlap in some instances such as Florida, New Mexico, and Colorado (Barretto, Collingwood, and Manzano, 2010). If the conditions of restoring Latinos' confidence in the political system and mobilizing Latino voters in places that matter can be achieved, then Latinos will play a significant role in the 2012 election.

Maximizing Latino Political Power

We don't need perfect political systems; we need perfect political participation.

—César E. Chávez

The quote by César Chávez is important in highlighting one of the main obstacles in the influence of Latino voters—themselves. The key to Latinos being influential in the 2012 election is that they participate and participate more than they ever have before. Given the crushing disappointment in Obama's choices in deportation policy, throngs of Latino voters might feel tempted to punish him by failing to turn out to vote. While it is true that President Obama campaigned on strong idealistic policy changes that would be difficult to implement, he nevertheless delivered on many liberal policies that have been supported by Latinos, such as health-care reform and housing programs. Despite the fact that the majority of Latinos identify as Democrats, many feel isolated by both the Republican Party and President Obama, thus making it unclear how they may behave in the 2012 elections.

One potential electoral game changer was the announcement of a significant immigration policy shift on June 15, 2012. President Obama issued a directive to the DHS to halt deportations of undocumented youth. Youths who were brought to the country when they were under 16 years of age, have lived in the United States for at least five years continuously, are currently under the age of 30, completed high school or are currently enrolled in school or have served in the military, and do not have any serious criminal convictions would be eligible to apply for relief from deportation and obtain a work permit. While the directive falls short of being an executive order, it does grant significant authority to utilize prosecutorial discretion in preventing deportation proceedings. In a memo regarding the policy shift to the DHS, Janet Napolitano, Secretary of DHS, indicates that there should be a way for people to apply for relief who are in various situations, such as people encountered by ICE, those currently in removal proceedings, and those who are not involved in removal proceedings but meet the requirements for relief. The directive marks a significant change in the president's immigration policy in light of the number of deportations that have occurred during his presidency.

The announcement of the policy generated considerable discussion by both Republicans and Democrats, elected officials at the national, state, and local levels, and policy groups. The Obama directive was lauded by Latino elected officials and Latino advocacy groups as a step in the right direction toward helping Latino youth. Others criticized it for failing to offer a permanent change in immigration status, such as a pathway toward citizenship, and being a temporary stop gap measure. Some compared it to Republican Senator Marco Rubio's version of the DREAM Act, which would allow some undocumented youth to stay in the United States by being awarded nonimmigrant visas, while not containing a pathway to citizenship (Cooper and Gabriel, 2012). Some Republicans, including Sen. Rubio, have publicly criticized the president for utilizing executive powers to make a significant policy change by going around Congress and characterized President Obama's actions as overreaching of his constitutional powers (Steinberg, 2012).

In particular, the reaction to the announcement by Republican candidate, Gov. Mitt Romney, was one that both Republican Party members and Latino voters were eager to hear. A week after the announcement both President Obama and Gov. Romney spoke at NALEO's national conference. President Obama emphasized that the new directive "lifted young people out of the shadows and was the right thing to do" (NALEO, 2012). He admitted it was a temporary measure and expressed regret over not being able to implement a more permanent solution. He placed blame squarely on the legislative branch by acting as a do-nothing Congress on this issue and urged them to work together in a bipartisan fashion to bring permanent comprehensive immigration measures to his desk to sign.

The day prior to Obama's speech, Gov. Romney indicated the directive was a strategic move by Obama in an election year to curry favor with Latino voters. He stated Obama took Latinos' votes for granted and Obama would likely indicate to them he was their only choice. Romney has been reluctant to provide a formal response to the new change. He raised the issue in his speech but was only willing to say "I will put in place my own long-term solution that will replace and supersede the president's temporary measure" (NALEO, 2012). He did not offer his specific reactions to the components of the changes made by Obama and likely left many Latinos voters confused on where he stands on the issue. In a poll conducted by Latino Decisions in battleground states immediately after the announcement, 49 percent of Latinos were more enthusiastic about Obama after the announcement (Barreto, 2012). Romney did offer some specifics on his plans for immigration reform that included securing the border, implementing a strong e-verify system in the workplace, family reunification, and permanent resident cards for immigrants who obtain advanced degrees. His position seemed to represent a more moderated stance on immigration since the Republican primary race in December 2011. At that time Romney indicated he would veto the DREAM Act if president and advocated self-deportation, whereby policies are passed to make undocumented immigrants' lives difficult, thereby encouraging them to leave voluntarily. In

the same Latino Decisions poll, Latino support for Romney decreased by 49 percent if he advocated the self-deportation and Arizona-style models of immigration reform (Barreto, 2012). Taken together, this suggests if Romney took a more hard-line position on immigration policy, this would be unlikely to assist him in securing a greater share of the Latino vote.

At the NALEO conference, both Obama and Romney indicated their unhappiness that members of Congress have dug their partisan heels in so to speak, and refused to engage in bipartisan efforts to reform immigration policy. The partisan composition of Congress in tandem with the president's party post-2010 accounts for a significant portion of the inability to enact comprehensive immigration legislation. Mayhew (1991) declared the same amount of important legislation passes under divided versus unified government, therefore divided government does not lead to gridlock. However, many scholars challenge Mayhew's proposition and find evidence of divided government hindering the legislative process (Edwards, Barrett, and Peake, 1997; Kernell, 1991; Sundquist, 1992; Binder, 1993), while others find evidence confirming the majority of Mayhew's findings (Fiorina, 1996). Edwards, Barrett, and Peake (1997) found that under divided government, the odds of important legislation failing to pass are significantly higher as is the president's opposition to more legislation. Sundquist (1988) argues unified government allows the executive and the legislative branch to work together closely to achieve policy goals. Binder (1997) finds substantial evidence indicating deadlock is more likely in divided government. Moreover, she also finds evidence that party polarization limits the legislative capacity of Congress and the ability of the president and Congress to reach agreement on the issues before them. In light of this line of research, if federal immigration reform is one of the primary policy goals of Latinos, they would be well served to not only turn out to vote for the presidential race, but also vote in congressional races to try to restore unified government.

Latino voters are likely left confused on how they feel about both candidates on immigration. On the one hand, Obama has recently enacted policies that have helped many immigrants, but he has also engaged in an aggressive deportation regime. On the other hand, Republicans have raised issues of birthright citizenship, securing the borders, and clamping down on illegal immigration, while pursuing state-level anti-immigrant initiatives such as Arizona's SB 1070 and Alabama's HB 56 (Wallace, 2011). However, Romney recently stated that he would support family reunification programs for immigrants and an adequate number of temporary work permits. Moreover, a very strong supporter of Romney, Sen. Mark Rubio, proposed his own version of the DREAM Act during the spring of 2012. Latinos voters must weigh the parties and their candidates by thinking about immigration but also other high-salience issues to the Latino community such as jobs, education, and healthcare.

Latino turnout in competitive congressional races could play a major role in the balance of power across political institutions. For Latinos to maximize

political representation, this means not only voting in swing states in terms of the Electoral College, but also voting in close congressional races. If Latinos desire large-scale policy changes, such as education or immigration reform, the most promising way to achieve these goals is through enough agreement across the executive and legislative branches to amass sufficient votes to ensure the ability to navigate the legislative process smoothly. The controversial nature of immigration policy, the polarization between the political parties, and the movement of the Republican Party further to the right on the ideological spectrum suggest that Democrats need not only a majority in Congress, but a super-majority that is filibuster-proof in the Senate. Without the necessary 60 votes in the Senate to invoke cloture, any hope that they will be able to succeed in passing their reforms is slim to none. If Obama gets reelected and enjoys a greater number of Democrats in both legislative chambers, this would create an ideal test case for his devotion to Latinos. Institutional constraints will no longer be a viable excuse for lack of reforms and the onus will be on the executive to produce substantive policies that serve Latinos and Democrats more broadly.

Ultimately, the potential power of Latinos is in the hands of Latinos themselves. They possess sufficient numbers in key places to be influential; however, Latinos must utilize their political voice to assure that the person in the executive seat will best represent their interests. President Obama has a long way to rebuild and repair his relationship with Latinos, but if he can succeed in mending fences, then it may be difficult for Romney to gain much support among Latinos. As a group, Latinos can seize the moment by registering to vote, voting on Election Day, and encouraging their friends and family to do the same. Only time will tell, but “Ya es Hora” that Latinos embrace their potential political power and demonstrate to politicians they are a constituency that cannot be ignored.

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