

MOTIVATION OF LATINO VOTERS FOR POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT*

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In 1973, there were a total of 1600 Latino elected officials throughout the United States. That number provides neither adequate representation nor an effective political voice. While the general rule of electoral politics is that voter turnout increases between presidential elections, Latino voter turnout actually declined between the 1972 and 1976 presidential elections. Our politics at that time could have been described as the "politics of powerlessness." It was certainly perceived that way by elected and party officials at the national and local levels.

This "politics of powerlessness" left us with only three alternatives in the community. The first was to accept this fate and develop a case of psychological self-hate as a community. The second was to fight back and take immediate action. The third alternative was to get organized and change the way we acquire and utilize power—to empower ourselves politically. The immediate response was the second alternative. There were many confrontations: high school walk-outs, demonstrations, the Chicano Moratorium, the riots in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Denver, Colorado.

The third alternative was contemplated by only a very small number of people primarily because we lacked resources. People like Woody Velasquez, Mario Obledo and Vilma Martinez began to contemplate what the process of political empowerment meant for us. The answer involved a two step process. First, we had to realize that there were not enough Mexicanos/Chicanos/Latinos voting on election day. Second, we had to start making the Constitution work for Latinos.

In 1982, the Voting Rights Act was amended to protect Mexicanos/Latinos. This began the lawsuits against gerrymandering to dilute Latino voting power in New Mexico, Texas, and California. Claims challenging at-large elections were initiated by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

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(MALDEF), the Southwest Voter Registration Project, Texas Rural Legal Aid, New Mexican Legal Aid, and in some areas, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). All of these organizations came together and began to develop the kind of expertise needed to successfully challenge discriminatory voting systems.

We began to organize our vote—not to support presidential candidates, gubernatorial candidates, the Democratic party, or the Republican party—because none of the aforementioned wanted to see the Latino vote grow to any extent. The reality was that the political leadership, not only in Los Angeles, but also throughout California, Texas, and New Mexico knew that we were being gerrymandered. The leadership knew we were being kept from electoral participation because of at-large voting schemes and we knew that we could not depend on the political leadership to be our ally.

We formed the Southwest Voter Registration Project, which is dedicated to the concentration of resources and training for communities at the grassroots level—in cities as small as Artesia, New Mexico, and as large as Los Angeles. We also brought our resources to school districts as large as the Los Angeles Unified School District and as small as the Edgewood School District on the west side of San Antonio. We began to teach people how to organize, how to go door-to-door and invite others to register. The training was that basic.

As a result, from 1976 to 1988, Latino voter registration in the United States grew by 83%. We were the fastest growing registered voter community in the nation. In California alone, during the same period of time, Latino voter registration grew by 95.6%; in Colorado it increased 91%, 65% in Arizona, and 52% in New Mexico; in Texas, voter registration grew 125%. Latino voter turnout for five Western states also grew from 1976 to 1988 by a total of 61%. Voter turnout increased in California by 28.9%, in Colorado by 88%, 64% in Arizona, 59% in New Mexico, and by 114% in Texas. These increases did not come with the help of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, nor any major candidate, but by the sheer strength of Latino efforts in the courts and the community.

Between the 1984 and 1988 presidential elections, the national voter turnout grew .02%; for Latinos, it grew 20%. Moreover, there were 346,000 non-Latino, new voters throughout the United States in 1988. In contrast, 618,000 Latinos voted for the first time in 1988 nationwide. In the 1992 presidential election, preliminary estimates indicate that voter turnout increased by 14% since 1988. In real numbers, there were an additional 466,000 new voters. The Latino community itself contributed

more than one million new voters to the voting rolls in the presidential elections between 1988 and 1992.

Besides the increase in voter turnout, we [Southwest Voters Registration Project] also increased the number of elected officials in the country. By 1990, there were over 4,000 Latino elected officials in the country; Arizona experienced a 186% increase since 1973; in California this represented a 148% increase during the same period, 88% in New Mexico, and 240% in Texas. Texas now has 1,920 Mexicanos elected to office, including the State Attorney General. Latinos are now even represented in the Cabinet.

All this means that the myths about the Latino vote are strictly myths. The myths are not and have never been created or perpetuated by Latinos. They are myths of fear over what will happen when Latinos become a powerful voting bloc, because Latinos are not going to be the ones giving up assembly, supervisory, or governor's seats; it is Latinos or Latinas who will take them.

I said before that Latino politics in 1973 could have been characterized as a "politics of powerlessness." While I do not think we can characterize Latino politics today as the "politics of power," it may be appropriate to describe our politics as one of growing power. We still face incredible exclusions and discrimination in housing, education, health care, jobs, training, college access and enrollment, etc. However, we now have the ability to gather power in the hands of our people and our elected officials, which will in turn allow us to make changes.

However, we must take note of two important considerations. First, we have to continue doing the hard grassroots work. If we become comfortable with our gains, we will lose ground quickly. Whether we are students, parents, blue collar workers, or white collar workers, we have to continue registering our families, friends, and neighbors. Our greatest challenge will be to increase the size of our average voter turnout from 65% to 75% of our registered Latino voters. As a group, we still have the lowest voter turnout of registered voters. Anglo voter turnout is approximately 78% of the registered population, while African-American turnout is 73% of registered voters. We must keep the momentum growing.

Second, we must realize that we are running out of Mexicans. There are 3,100,000 registered voters in the southwest United States. There are 1,900,000 people in five states who are unregistered citizens over the age of eighteen. We have to work harder to register that 1,900,000 people, almost half of which are in California. In addition, there are 3,285,00 Latinos over eight-

een years of age who are not citizens; 2.5 million are in California. The "sleeping giant" must be addressed, not by Democrats, the courts, or the legislature, but by our community. We have to be inclusive as Mexican-Americans, Mexicanos, Chicanos, and Latinos. We have to reach out to the immigrant community; they are the Chicanos of the future, and *we* can determine whether they will have to endure the same struggle we did, or whether they will be part of a powerful political force in this country—for the good of our people and for the good of this nation.

We must also realize that with political power comes responsibility. Until now, it has been sufficient to be brown in order to get elected. We can no longer accept that "being brown" is the only criteria needed to get elected. We must demand that our elected officials remember the neighborhoods and communities from which they hail, and why and who elected them. Whether brown or not, an elected official who cannot meet that basic standard does not deserve the support of her constituency.

As leaders, we must set standards by which we judge people and make decisions about whether or not they deserve our support. For example, we must ask that our elected officials have courage. It will take courage to stand up for what is right. We must ask our leaders to have common sense. Do they have the intelligence not to repeat the mistakes of the people they replace? Can they avoid making ethical and legal mistakes? Do they have the smarts to build a voting bloc on a city council, school board, or legislature? Will they be able to remain united with their people and other representatives of color in the legislatures? Most importantly, our leaders must have compassion. Will they stand on the sidelines during riots or will they understand the feelings of exclusion and desperation? Finally, we must inquire about the values of our leaders—values about justice, inclusion, family community, jobs, and education. What values will our leaders support? Will they use compassion, courage, and intelligence to fight for those values?

Those are the important questions I pose. Yet these are questions we must also answer for ourselves, because we must possess all the aforementioned qualities to meet the challenges ahead. We simply cannot afford to replicate the politics of the people we are replacing.