



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

CUREJ - College Undergraduate Research
Electronic Journal

College of Arts and Sciences

4-23-2014

Unlocking the Latino Vote: Civic Organizations As Tools for Latino Voter Mobilization and Participation

Elizabeth L. Thom
thome@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/curej>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thom, Elizabeth L., "Unlocking the Latino Vote: Civic Organizations As Tools for Latino Voter Mobilization and Participation" 23 April 2014. *CUREJ: College Undergraduate Research Electronic Journal*, University of Pennsylvania, <https://repository.upenn.edu/curej/174>.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/curej/174>
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Unlocking the Latino Vote: Civic Organizations As Tools for Latino Voter Mobilization and Participation

Abstract

For decades now, politicians, pollsters and pundits have tried to define, unite and persuade Latino voters. Presidential campaigns dating as far back as the 1960s have made efforts to appeal to the Latino electorate in order to win elections. In 1983 Ronald Reagan concerned himself with winning over Latinos voters during his reelection bid. Today, the diversifying electorate has placed Latinos at the center of twenty-first century American politics.

It is no secret that Latinos are the largest minority population in the United States. Their share of the electorate increases daily, along with their importance in winning national elections. Now more than ever, the Latino voting bloc is the apple of every presidential campaign's eye. Part of the appeal is that Latino voters are largely undecided about their political party affiliations. They have supported both Democratic and Republican candidates in the past, and have taken both liberal and conservative stances on a variety of social issues. Another factor is that a good number of Latinos live in important swing districts across the country in states such as Colorado, Virginia and Florida. Their votes are critical to winning any presidential campaign.

For these reasons, the "Latino vote" has become one of the most talked about topics among politicians and strategists. However, absent from the discussion is whether or not a homogenous Latino vote actually exists. The diverse backgrounds and experiences among Latinos in the United States suggest that they share little in common with one another. So far, there is no indication of a pan-ethnic Latino identity or culture. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that Latinos in the United States are beginning to band together to push for common causes and agendas that are particular to their communities. Does increased unity among Latinos mean they will all vote in the same way?

This thesis weighs competing theories on the Latino vote through the lens of Latino civic organizations. Through two case studies of Latino civic institutions that operate at the local and national levels, and in suburban and urban communities, this thesis concludes that civic organizations are mainstays in Latino communities and provide important resources to Latinos of all backgrounds to participate in civic life. They are gradually becoming the primary places where Latinos can learn civic skills and mobilize to participate in political and nonpolitical activities. Due to their nonpartisan nature, though, they alone are not enough to confirm the existence of a Latino vote. By examining Latino civic organizations, this thesis contributes to theoretical discussions of Latino politics and draws conclusions about the feasibility and future of a homogenous Latino vote.

Keywords

latinos, voting, participation, mobilization, civic skills, civic organizations, politics, identity, demographics, latino vote, Political Science, John Dilulio, Dilulio, John

Disciplines

American Politics

**UNLOCKING THE LATINO VOTE:
CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS AS TOOLS FOR LATINO
VOTER MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATION**

By

Elizabeth Lynne Thom

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of**

**BACHELOR OF ARTS IN
POLITICAL SCIENCE WITH DISTINCTION**

THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

SPRING 2014

Advisor: Dr. John DiIulio

Abstract

For decades now, politicians, pollsters and pundits have tried to define, unite and persuade Latino voters. Presidential campaigns dating as far back as the 1960s have made efforts to appeal to the Latino electorate in order to win elections. In 1983 Ronald Reagan concerned himself with winning over Latinos voters during his reelection bid. Today, the diversifying electorate has placed Latinos at the center of twenty-first century American politics.

It is no secret that Latinos are the largest minority population in the United States. Their share of the electorate increases daily, along with their importance in winning national elections. Now more than ever, the Latino voting bloc is the apple of every presidential campaign's eye. Part of the appeal is that Latino voters are largely undecided about their political party affiliations. They have supported both Democratic and Republican candidates in the past, and have taken both liberal and conservative stances on a variety of social issues. Another factor is that a good number of Latinos live in important swing districts across the country in states such as Colorado, Virginia and Florida. Their votes are critical to winning any presidential campaign.

For these reasons, the "Latino vote" has become one of the most talked about topics among politicians and strategists. However, absent from the discussion is whether or not a homogenous Latino vote actually exists. The diverse backgrounds and experiences among Latinos in the United States suggest that they share little in common with one another. So far, there is no indication of a pan-ethnic Latino identity or culture. On the

other hand, there is evidence to suggest that Latinos in the United States are beginning to band together to push for common causes and agendas that are particular to their communities. Does increased unity among Latinos mean they will all vote in the same way?

This thesis weighs competing theories on the Latino vote through the lens of Latino civic organizations. Through two case studies of Latino civic institutions that operate at the local and national levels, and in suburban and urban communities, this thesis concludes that civic organizations are mainstays in Latino communities and provide important resources to Latinos of all backgrounds to participate in civic life. They are gradually becoming the primary places where Latinos can learn civic skills and mobilize to participate in political and nonpolitical activities. Due to their nonpartisan nature, though, they alone are not enough to confirm the existence of a Latino vote. By examining Latino civic organizations, this thesis contributes to theoretical discussions of Latino politics and draws conclusions about the feasibility and future of a homogenous Latino vote.

Acknowledgements

This capstone thesis would not have been possible without the generosity of the staff of Esperanza and the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. I am eternally grateful for their willingness to meet with me to discuss the important work they do in their respective communities. Their openness in response to my inquiries makes this body of research so rich. In particular, I would like to thank Reverend Luis Cortes, Pita Oxholm, Jody Reynhout, Lorna Velazquez and Nereida Quinones for their time and efforts in assisting me. I would also like to thank Dr. Catherine Wilson for allowing me to pick her brain about these issues during the early stages of my research. Her insight and experience helped to guide my research questions and steer me through the case study investigations.

Further, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. John DiIulio, for his wisdom, scholarship, and unwavering support. His gift for blending political theory with practical reality is unparalleled, just like his ability to boost my spirits during times of doubt. I will never forget that even on a bad day, I am still “batting .365 in the rain.” It would be remiss of me not to also mention the encouragement and enthusiasm of Dr. Eileen Doherty-Sil. I am so thankful for her efforts to create a community of political science honors students. It is in this community that I found lasting friendships and great companions for late nights in Van Pelt.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my Mom and Dad for their love and support throughout my academic career. I am so appreciative of all of their encouraging emails, texts, visits, and hugs over these past four years. They are my number one

cheerleaders and the best fans in the game. I feel blessed every day knowing they are by my side. Thanks to them, I will never stop asking the important questions.

Author's Introduction

I watched the United States 2012 presidential election unfold from the couch of my host family's apartment in Buenos Aires, Argentina. On the night of the election, I stayed up late with my Argentine host mother watching key battleground states like Colorado, Ohio, Virginia and Nevada turn blue. Around midnight, the electoral map determined that the Democratic Party would maintain its control over the executive branch. Almost immediately after President Obama's victory speech, political pollsters and pundits began to muse over how and why Mitt Romney had lost the election. Among many other explanations, they cited the Republican candidate's poor performance with Latino voters. In its post-election report, the Republican National Committee admitted that the party needed to do a better job relating to ethnic minority voters, particularly Hispanics¹. Members of both parties agreed that the Latino vote would be the minority vote of the future and the key to electoral success in the twenty-first century.

From my couch in Argentina, I began to question notions about the so-called Latino vote. Having studied the political and cultural histories of various Latin American countries, I found it difficult to imagine American Latinos voting as a homogenous bloc. Could Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorians, Cubans and Dominicans—the five largest Hispanic populations in the United States—really be expected to vote the same way?² According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the vast majority of Hispanics (nearly two to one)

¹ In this paper, the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" will be used interchangeably as both appear in the literature.

² "2011 Hispanic Origin Profiles," Pew Hispanic Center, accessed December 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>.

say that they do not think Latinos in the United States share a common culture.³ If Latinos do not share a common culture, can they share a common vote?

This question guides the research I present in this thesis about the American Latino population and its political behaviors and beliefs. The puzzle I seek to solve is twofold: the first part is a comprehensive understanding of the Latino political and demographic landscape, and the second is an investigation into the ways civic organizations can serve as vehicles for Latino political socialization, mobilization and participation. The two will provide insight into contemporary American and Latino politics, while assessing competing ideas about the existence of a Latino vote.

³ Paul Taylor, Mark Hugo Lopez, Jessica Martinez and Gabriel Velasco, “When Labels Don’t Fit: Hispanics and Their Views of Identity,” *Pew Hispanic Center*, April 2012, 2.

Table of Contents

Part One: *“Latinos are Republican—they just don’t know it yet.”*

I.	Introduction.....	10
II.	Latino Identity in the United States.....	14
III.	The Latino Political and Demographic Landscape	25
IV.	Literature Review.....	35
V.	Research Design.....	47

Part Two: *“Help him operate the pond.”*

I.	The National Story: Esperanza.....	51
II.	The Local Story: Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley.....	61

Part Three: *“It’s all about access.”*

I.	Painting the Full Picture: Case Study Analysis.....	69
II.	Conclusions.....	75

Part Four: *“What does Latino politics mean for American politics?”*

I.	Prospects for Future Research.....	79
----	------------------------------------	----

Appendix A.....	83
-----------------	----

Works Cited.....	87
------------------	----

PART ONE:

“Latinos are Republican—they just don’t know it yet.”

I. Introduction

While preparing for his reelection bid in 1983, Ronald Reagan famously told Latino businessman and political strategist Lionel Sosa that, “Latinos are Republican—they just don’t know it yet.”⁴ Over thirty years have since passed, and Latinos are still unsure about whether they are Republicans or Democrats. It is certain that, regardless of party allegiance, Latinos are the most coveted group of swing voters in contemporary American politics. In the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama spent roughly \$20 million on Latino voter outreach efforts.⁵ In 2012, his reelection campaign spent eight times the amount of money that the campaign spent in 2008 on Spanish-language political advertisements.⁶ The majority of the money went to crucial swing states such as Florida, Colorado and Nevada.⁷ These figures demonstrate that the Obama campaign believed Latino voters would be absolutely critical to electoral victory.

However, targeted campaigning to the Latino electorate is not a new phenomenon. In 1960, Jacqueline Kennedy recorded a televised Spanish-language political advertisement for John F. Kennedy’s presidential election.⁸ The first of its kind, the advertisement revolutionized political advertising and targeted campaigning to ethnic groups in the United States. In utilizing the Spanish-language rather than English, the ad sought to

⁴ “Mitt Romney Latino Loss Shows Republicans ‘Have Been Their Own Worst Enemy’,” *Huffington Post*, November 11, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/11/mitt-romney-latino-loss-republican_n_2104966.html.

⁵ Marisa A. Abrajano, *Campaigning to The New American Electorate: Advertising to Latino Voters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 147.

⁶ Greg Allen, “Campaigns Targeting Hispanics, But With Tight Focus,” *National Public Radio*, October 2, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/02/162173953/campaigns-targeting-hispanics-but-with-tight-focus>.

⁷ Allen, “Campaigns Targeting Hispanics, But With Tight Focus.”

⁸ Abrajano, *Campaigning to The New American Electorate*, 33.

appeal to a growing, but often neglected, segment of the electorate at the time: American Latinos. Perhaps Kennedy was ahead of his time in recognizing the growing importance of Latinos in electoral politics. Regardless, he realized that there was an opportunity to build a Democratic coalition of Latino voters. He saw the potential for victory in the Latino vote.

Today, the “Latino vote” has reached near mythological proportions. Every politico is talking about it and every presidential hopeful wants to win it. Even Jorge Ramos, an anchorman for the popular Spanish-language television network, Univision, is quoted as saying: “Nobody can make it to the White House without Univision.”⁹ Absent from the mainstream debate, however, is the question of whether or not there really is a Latino vote. For the past twenty-five years, political elites have tried to frame a national Latino politics and a pan-ethnic Latino identity, despite the evidence that suggests the improbability of either.¹⁰ Surveys conducted by organizations like Pew and Gallup show that American Latinos do not share a sense of common culture and identity, two associations that have often served to distinguish voting blocs.¹¹ Records show that Latinos have voted in favor of both the Democratic and Republican parties at times, demonstrating their tendency to eschew traditional party allegiances.

⁹ Abrajano, *Campaigning to The New American Electorate*, 147.

¹⁰ Louis DeSipio, “Latino Civic and Political Participation,” in *Hispanics and The Future of America*, ed. Marta Tienda and Faith Mitchell (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2006), 448.

¹¹ Taylor, “When Labels Don’t Fit,” 2.

Political scientist Louis DeSipio claims that the existence of a Latino vote, “may in fact be more of a wish than a reality”, especially to those who vote and are part of the Latino community.¹² Ana Castillo argues there is a “universe of differences” among the individuals that make up the Latino population in the United States.¹³ To classify them under one name or one party would diminish the significance of their cultural and historical differences. According to this analysis, it would be nearly impossible for there to be a Latino vote. And yet, as Christian Zlolinski notes, “there is a growing trend among these groups to unite under a single, inclusive pan-ethnic Latino umbrella to push their demands.”¹⁴ For instance, there is movement among Latinos to band together as a group to achieve political aims like immigration reform. Latinos are also uniting to advocate for better employment opportunities and improvements to their communities. They are beginning to realize the power of building coalitions. The question then is: Can Latinos of different races, ethnicities, countries of origins and backgrounds share a common “Latino vote”? If so, where do they find common ground and how do they mobilize? This thesis weighs competing theories and provides insight into the likelihood of the Latino vote and the ways in which Latinos are gaining political capital by organizing and participating in Latino civic institutions.

¹² DeSipio, “Latino Civic and Political Participation,” in *Hispanics and The Future of America*, 449.

¹³ Maria Luisa Chávez, overview to *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook*, ed. by Sharon Ann Navarro and Armando Xavier (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 3.

¹⁴ Christian Zlolinski, “Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, ed. Havidán Rodríguez, et al. (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2008), 359.

Part One of this thesis provides an overview of contemporary thoughts on Latino identity politics and Latino political behaviors in recent history. As Maria Luisa Chavez writes, it is imperative that one understands the historical backgrounds of Latinos in the United States before making assumptions and assertions about their political behaviors.¹⁵ The literature review in this section places the thesis research on Latino civic organizations in the context of political mobilization, socialization and participation. The research design outlines two case studies of Latino civic organizations at the national and local levels. Parts Two and Three discuss the types of activities and programs sponsored by these organizations. In-depth analysis will reveal the ways in which these two Latino civic institutions are promoting civic and political participation among their Latino constituents, and what this means for the existence of a Latino vote. Part Four will highlight the prospects for future research in this ever-changing, ever-growing and ever important segment of American politics.

¹⁵ Chavez, overview to *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook*, 2.

II. Latino Identity in the United States

Understanding the ways in which Latinos self-identify in the United States is essential to any analysis of contemporary American Latino politics. “Identities can be powerful political forces,” writes Benjamin Marquez, but Latino identity formation often takes a “fractured and less-predictable course” as a result of “a complex array of subnationalities, subcultures and economic classes.”¹⁶ Rodolfo Espino and David Leal also point out that conversations about Latino politics and identity do not fit easily within the traditional narrative of American politics. Espino and Leal contend that, for the past two centuries, American politics has been framed within the context of the European, white immigrant experience and the trials of the African American population.¹⁷ As a result, issues of race and discrimination have dominated the political discourse.

The rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States presents an interesting dilemma.¹⁸ Latinos do not fully conform to either the immigrant mold in American politics or the racial one. The experiences of American Latinos are as diverse as the ethnic makeup of the population itself. Some Latinos, like Mexican-Americans, can trace their roots to the American Southwest further back than any Caucasian-American of European decent.¹⁹ Some can recount escaping political oppression in their home countries and finding hope as a new class of American immigrants. Some, like all Puerto

¹⁶ Benjamin Márquez, “Latino Identity Politics Research: Problems and Opportunities,” in *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation*, ed. Rodolfo Espino, David L. Leal, and Kenneth J. Meier (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 18-19.

¹⁷ Márquez, “Latino Identity Politics Research,” in *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 3-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 1.

Rican-Americans, can legitimately call themselves American citizens. Others live among the shadows as undocumented and illegal. The immigrant experience does not necessarily bind Latinos together and neither does race. In truth, it is nearly impossible to identify the population on racial grounds alone.

The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino”, often used to describe the population, are largely constructs of the American vocabulary. In 1976, the United States Congress passed a law mandating the collection of public information and data about Americans of Spanish-speaking origins.²⁰ The term “Hispanic” was used to identify this growing segment of the population in government reports. In 1997, the term “Latino” was introduced as an alternative descriptor.²¹ These terms, which are nearly exclusive to the United States and are rarely used to describe Spanish-speaking populations in other countries, hardly capture the diversity within the population.

In fact the majority of adults in the United States from Spanish-speaking countries do not self-identify as either “Latino” or “Hispanic.” According to a poll conducted in 2011 by the Pew Hispanic Center, 51% of respondents said they primarily identify themselves by their family’s country of origin (for example, Mexican or Cuban).²² The rest either self-identify as Hispanic or Latino (24%), or simply as American (21%). Overall, the Pew report finds that, “The government’s system of ethnic and racial labeling does not fit

²⁰ Paul Taylor et al, “When Labels Don’t Fit”, 2.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

easily with Latinos' own sense of identity.”²³ Unlike other segments of the electorate, such as the African-American population, Latinos do not appear to have a universal sense of group identity. At the very least, there is no one descriptive term that unites them all.

The lack of universal group identity is perhaps due to the fact that American Latinos tend to feel strong ties to their countries of origin. Louis DeSipio finds fascinating the fact that Latinos still primarily identify personally with their country of origin, considering the twenty-five years of efforts by political elites to create an American Latino identity.²⁴

Studies show that many American Latinos, particularly Mexicans, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, still participate in electoral and political activities in their native countries.²⁵ They are able to keep up with the politics of their home countries through the Spanish-language media outlets available in the U.S.²⁶ The interest of American Latinos in transnational politics stems from the likelihood that they have friends or family who still reside in these Latin American countries. In fact, the vast majority of American Latinos have a living family member who migrated to the United States²⁷, which makes it even more probable that existing connections to their home countries will draw their attentions away from domestic affairs and politics in the U.S.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ DeSipio, “Latino Civic and Political Participation,” in *Hispanics and The Future of America*, 448.

²⁵ Kim Geron and Melissa R. Michelson, “Latino Partisanship, Political Activity and Vote Choice,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, ed. Havidán Rodríguez, et al. (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2008), 330.

²⁶ Geron and Michelson, “Latino Partisanship, Political Activity and Vote Choice,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 330.

²⁷ Rodolfo Espino, David L. Leal, and Kenneth J. Meier, *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 74.

Latinos in the United States can trace their ancestries to several different Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and Europe. The five largest Hispanic populations living in the United States are Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorians, Cubans and Dominicans²⁸. These five countries have distinct political and cultural histories. Furthermore, each of these countries has a different geopolitical relationship with the United States. The nature of this relationship, and the extent to which the United States has demonstrated power over a particular Latin American country, tends to shape the experiences of those Latinos who settle in the U.S.²⁹ For example, Cubans are able seek political asylum in the United States, while Mexicans must immigrate and go through the lengthy process of earning citizenship. As a result, many Mexicans are compelled to immigrate illegally. This ultimately affects their socioeconomic status and their chances for upward mobility.

Class is one of the most striking differences among the Latino population in the United States. Gilda Ochoa argues that these class differences among Latino subgroups stem in part from, “the context of reception upon entering the United States”, meaning whether or not a person of Hispanic descent is received as a citizen, an asylum seeker or an illegal immigrant.³⁰ She contends that skin color and educational attainment also play a role. It is

²⁸ “2011 Hispanic Origin Profiles,” Pew Hispanic Center, accessed December 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>.

²⁹ Gilda Ochoa, “Theorizing, Researching, and Constructing Cross-Latino/a Relations in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, ed. Havidán Rodríguez, et al. (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2008), 266.

³⁰ Ochoa, “Theorizing, Researching, and Constructing Cross-Latino/a Relations in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 266.

likely that these three factors, along with English-language skills and personal wealth, all influence the economic positions of various Latino subgroups.

Cubans, Spaniards and South Americans tend to earn far more than other Latinos in the United States. In 2011, South Americans and Spaniards in particular reported median household incomes that were \$12,000-\$17,000 higher than those of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.³¹ The reality is that the majority of Latinos in the United States are poor or working class.³² According to the same 2011 report, 28% of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Dominicans are living in poverty.³³ Historically, working-class Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have banded together to support labor unions and defend worker rights.³⁴ However, it is difficult to imagine that the highest Latino income earners would share similar problems, hardships and political outlooks with the lowest income earners. Even a coalition of Latinos based on class alone would be unlikely considering the diverse day-to-day life experiences of Latinos that may share a socioeconomic status.

The differences among American Latinos becomes even more pronounced when taking into account the fact that the Latino population is spread out across various regions and cities of the United States, and tends to self-segregate by national origin. The Cuban population, for example, is highly concentrated in southern Florida. South Americans

³¹ “2011 Hispanic Origin Profiles,” Pew Hispanic Center, accessed December 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>.

³² Ochoa, “Theorizing, Researching, and Constructing Cross-Latino/a Relations in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 266.

³³ “2011 Hispanic Origin Profiles,” Pew Hispanic Center, accessed December 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>.

³⁴ Márquez, “Latino Identity Politics Research,” in *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation*, 19.

also tend to settle there in large numbers. On the other hand, the majority of the Mexican population is located in southern California, Texas, Arizona and other western states. Puerto Ricans can be found in major east coast cities like New York and Philadelphia. Salvadorians and Dominicans have settled everywhere from Prince George County, Maryland to Providence, Rhode Island, and San Bernardino, California.³⁵ The diverse set of experiences that comes from living in such drastically different geographic locations decreases the likelihood that American Latinos will share a sense of collective identity.

Race is another identifier that Latinos in the United States do not always agree upon. When asked a question about one's race, an American Latino could answer in several different ways, including "black", "white", or "indigenous", to name a few. There is no uniform method to categorizing the race of the Hispanic population, and it generally depends on the individual's self-reporting. Even the United States Census Bureau has had difficulty handling the race issue when trying to account for the country's increasing diversity. In fact, in the 2010 census, so many Hispanics identified themselves as either white or "some other race" that "some other" became the country's third-largest racial group.³⁶ Steps are being taken to rewrite this question to accurately capture the subtleties and multiplicities within the Latino population.

Despite the lack of consensus about the racial identity of American Latinos, race and ethnicity are not irrelevant when it comes to Latino identity politics. While different from

³⁵ "2011 Hispanic Origin Profiles," Pew Hispanic Center, accessed December 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>.

³⁶ "Some Other Race: How Should America Count its Hispanics?," *The Economist*, Feb 9, 2013.

the way in which race plays a role in African-American identity politics, race is a factor that is capable of either binding or fracturing the Latino population in the United States. On the one hand, Latinos of all skin tones face a certain degree of racial discrimination based on ethnic appearances that differ from whites of European descent (and from blacks of African descent, for that matter). Together, Latinos share in what it means to be part of the “other” in America’s “racially stratified society.”³⁷ However, because of their wide range of skin tones, hair textures, and facial features, not all American Latinos face an equal amount of discrimination.³⁸ This range of experiences could lead to differing opinions about American life and disparate outlooks on American politics as a whole.

Limiting Latino identity politics to race, ethnicity and class would suggest that Latinos in the United States have very little in common. Upon further investigation, however, it becomes apparent that this is not the case (once again, Latino identity can be unpredictable and difficult to pinpoint at times). Matt Barreto contends that despite the heterogeneity within the American Latino population, there are four characteristics that unite all Latinos, no matter where they come from. These include: Latin American heritage, the immigrant experience, Spanish language, and Spanish colonial influence.³⁹ Barreto writes that, “When any one of these components of ethnic identity comes under cultural attack, Latinos are likely to draw together around their common heritage.”⁴⁰

While this assessment is true, I would argue that there is enough variation and diversity in

³⁷ Ochoa, “Theorizing, Researching, and Constructing Cross-Latino/a Relations in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 265.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Matt A. Barreto, *Ethnic Cues: The Role of Shared Ethnicity in Latino Political Participation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9.

⁴⁰ Barreto, *Ethnic Cues*, 9.

the Latino immigrant experience to prevent *all* Latinos from uniting together for a particular cause. What is more likely to bring Latinos of all ancestries together is the ethnic discrimination they face as a result of inadequate immigration policies and the influx of illegal Latino immigrants.

Still, Barreto accurately points out that common geographical ties and language, two social constructions that have long been used for group identification, weave a common thread among American Latinos.⁴¹ No matter how they arrived in the United States, the majority of American Latinos can trace their roots to Latin America and Spanish colonial rule. While it is perhaps difficult to articulate the ways in which Spanish colonialism affects Latinos in the United States today, it is worth noting that this is a part of history that Latinos of almost all heritages share in common.

The Spanish-language is a more tangible link that unites American Latinos. Language distinguishes Latinos from other segments of the English-dominant population and allows them to communicate uniquely with one another. It will be interesting to see in the coming years, as third and fourth generation American Latinos grow older and become bilingual or primarily English-language speakers, if the Spanish-language continues to be a characteristic that brings Latinos together and distinguishes them among the American population.

⁴¹ Ibid, 8-9.

According to the 2012 National Survey of Latinos, even more similarities exist within the Latino population. The survey shows that, on the whole, Latinos across the country share a similar set of values, perhaps suggesting there is more Latino, pan-ethnic identity than one might assume. Compared to the white population, which tends to be older, primarily native-born, more educated and higher income than others, the Hispanic population is younger, less educated and more likely to be poor.⁴² This tends to hold true throughout different regions of the country. Additionally, Latinos in the U.S. are more religious than the general population. According to the Pew Hispanic Survey, 83% of Latinos report being affiliated with a religious organization.⁴³ The vast majority of them are of the Christian faith, and three out of five identify as Catholic.⁴⁴ In the same survey, Hispanics reported believing strongly in the efficacy of hard work leading to success, and believing that they were better off in the U.S. than in their ancestors' country of origin.⁴⁵

When asked about what issues mattered most to them in the 2012 election, a majority of Latinos said education, jobs and the economy, and health care were most important.⁴⁶

These responses come as no surprise, considering that Latinos tend to be less educated and underemployed. Barreto notes that Latinos of all nationalities, especially immigrant Latinos, tend to struggle to overcome structural barriers to attaining high-paying jobs,

⁴² Roy Teixeira ed., *Red Blue & Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 85-86.

⁴³ Paul Taylor et al., "When Labels Don't Fit", 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mark Hugo Lopez and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Latino Voters Support Obama by 3-1 Ratio, But Are Less Certain than Others about Voting," *Pew Hispanic Center*, October 2012, 8.

sending their children to adequate schools, and accessing healthcare.⁴⁷ However, these struggles and concerns also resonate with national concerns over the health of the economy, the sustainability of the health care system and the state of childhood education. It is clear that Latino values are in fact American values, and no different from the rest of the nation's.

Immigration remained a concern for Latinos according to the survey, but did not dominate the responses.⁴⁸ This is perhaps due to the fact that, as previously noted, immigration issues disproportionately affect certain subgroups of the Latino community. As the immigration debate pivots away from being primarily a Latino concern and becomes more of a national issue, we will see whether or not this topic has the power to transform and unite Latinos of all subgroups.

This complex portrait of American Latino identity gets at the heart of the difficulties in studying Latino politics. Scholars of all backgrounds disagree on the degree to which Latinos in the United States relate and identify with one another in the twenty-first century. Enough evidence exists to believe those who think it is possible for a pan-ethnic American Latino identity and those who do not. Maria Luisa Chavez contends that the lack of agreement over a common Latino identity will keep, "Latinos' common plights and struggles from being known and acted upon in the political arena."⁴⁹ The key

⁴⁷ Rodolfo Espino, David L. Leal, and Kenneth J. Meier, *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 74.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Chavez, overview to *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook*, 6.

question moving forward is one that Marquez asserts is at the center of current research: Do Latino ethnic and political identities “converge in any meaningful ways?”⁵⁰ In other words, is there enough common ground on Latino political identity to suggest the possibility of a Latino coalition, or perhaps a pan-ethnic Latino vote?

The power of identity politics lies in its ability to bring members of a group together around a particular “frame of reference” in order to influence political behavior and the distribution of resources.⁵¹ Within the framework of American politics, it is well understood that identity can be used to gain political clout. Since Latinos are an ethnic minority whose narrative falls outside the bounds of traditional American politics, it would be to the political advantage of the Latino community to coalesce around where their commonalities “converge”. “Failing to form a voting bloc”, Chavez writes, “may slow down the progress toward political incorporation of Latinos as a whole.”⁵² The next section of this paper will discuss current levels of Latino political engagement and incorporation, as well as the ways in which Latinos across the country are beginning to take action together as a distinct group.

⁵⁰ Márquez, “Latino Identity Politics Research,” in *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation*, 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵² Chavez, overview to *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook*, 6.

III. The Latino Political and Demographic Landscape

There are three main reasons why politicians and politicians consider Latinos to be the most coveted segment of the American electorate. The first is that, as previously mentioned, Latinos now make up the majority of the minority population in the United States. They compose a sizeable portion of the American public and their growth rates show no signs of slowing down. The second is that Latinos as a whole are largely undecided about their political party affiliations. At times they swing “red” and at other times “blue”, not allowing either Democrats or Republicans to claim them as their own. They are “purple” in a political climate that eschews ambiguity. The third is that independent Latino voters are choosing to settle in purple swing states, like Colorado, Florida and Virginia. As a result, their votes have become ever more critical to victory in the complex game of electoral politics.

With the exception of Cuban-Americans, Latinos have historically aligned themselves politically with the Democratic Party. The Cuban population in the United States has preferred the Republican Party for decades, originally as a result of the party’s, “traditional hard-line stance on Communism, which is more salient to Cubans than to other Latinos.”⁵³ The rest of Latinos in the United States tend to support the Democrats because they are widely viewed as being more responsive than Republicans to the needs of minority communities.⁵⁴ Most Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Central Americans vote

⁵³ Geron and Michelson, “Latino Partisanship, Political Activity and Vote Choice,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 326.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Democratic in national elections.⁵⁵ This division in Latino partisanship largely holds true today, although the lines are beginning to blur, as social issues and immigration reform become even greater political hot topics.

Latino voters are hard to pinpoint as either conservative or liberal. The most recent Pew polling suggests that, overall, Latinos are slightly more liberal than the national average, although this generalization does not hold true for all demographic and age subgroups within the population. Again, Cuban Latinos would likely fall outside of this general description because they tend to be more conservative. Latina women tend to be slightly more liberal and Democratic than Latino men; however, differences in political ideology between genders are usually small.⁵⁶ Latinos have a tendency to move back and forth on the conventional liberal and conservative scales depending on the issue at hand. For example, they can be considered socially conservative on abortion, but have recently taken more liberal stances on gay marriage.⁵⁷ In fact, only five years ago the majority of Latino voters in California voted in favor of Proposition 8, which banned gay marriage in the state.⁵⁸ Two years ago, in 2012, was the first time in which the Pew Hispanic Center Survey recorded more Latinos favoring gay marriage than opposing it.⁵⁹ It would appear

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 328.

⁵⁷ Paul Taylor et al., “When Labels Don’t Fit”, 38-9.

⁵⁸ “Blacks, Hispanics Nixed Gay Marriage,” *The Washington Times*, November 8, 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/08/blacks-hispanics-nixed-gay-marriage/?page=all>.

⁵⁹ Mark Hugo Lopez and Danielle Cuddington, “Latinos Changing Views of Same-Sex Marriage,” *Pew Hispanic Center*, June 19, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/19/latinos-changing-views-of-same-sex-marriage/>.

that the majority of Latinos have changed their opinions on gay marriage. This is in tune with evolving public opinion on the issue nationwide.

Religion plays a tangled role in Latino politics and most likely influences more of the conservative positions on social issues like abortion. For example, the majority of Latinos believe abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, while the majority of Americans overall believe it should be legal.⁶⁰ Latinos are more religious than the national average, which may influence their views on abortion.⁶¹ Figures 1 and 2 below demonstrate Latinos' competing views on abortion and gay marriage, two hot-button social issues in contemporary American politics. The figures compare Latino public opinion to overall public opinion, and even break down Latino public opinion by demographic subgroups. The data here show that younger Latinos hold more liberal views than their parents and grandparents. Latino men and women share similar social beliefs, although a slightly higher percentage of women favor gay marriage and a slightly higher percentage of men support abortion rights. Figure 1 illustrates the complex role religion plays in formulating Latino public opinion. The data show that a majority of Latino Catholics support gay marriage; however, a majority of Latino Protestants does not. There is no evidence of a homogenous opinion on this issue.

According to the 2012 National Survey of Latinos, Latino voters showed a strong allegiance to the Democratic Party in the 2012 elections. Gallup polling supports this

⁶⁰ Mark Hugo Lopez and Danielle Cuddington, "Latinos Changing Views of Same-Sex Marriage," *Pew Hispanic Center*, June 19, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/19/latinos-changing-views-of-same-sex-marriage/>.

⁶¹ Taylor, "When Labels Don't Fit," 30.

conclusion and finds that Latinos of all ages currently favor the Democrats over Republicans. However, as recently as 2004, 40% of Latinos voted for the Republican Party nationwide.⁶²

Figure 1: National and Latino Specific Support for Gay Marriage (2013)

	Support Gay Marriage	Oppose Gay Marriage
All Americans	51%	42%
All Latinos	52%	34%
Latinos Ages 18-29	68%	25%
Latinos Ages 50-64	45%	39%
Latinos Over 65	18%	60%
Latino Men	51%	36%
Latino Women	54%	33%
Dem Leaning Latinos	60%	30%
Rep Leaning Latinos	39%	51%
English Dominant Latinos	59%	32%
Catholic Latinos	54%	31%
Evangelical Latinos	25%	66%
Mainline Protestant Latinos	46%	37%

*These figures are derived from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013⁶³

Figure 2: National and Latino Specific Support for Abortion (2012)

	Should be legal	Should be illegal
All Americans	54%	41%
All Latinos	43%	51%
Latinos Ages 18-29	53%	43%
Latinos Ages 30-49	43%	51%
Latinos Ages 50-64	35%	58%
Latino Men	44%	50%
Latino Women	42%	52%

*These figures are derived from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012⁶⁴

⁶² Teixeira ed., *Red Blue & Purple America*, 11.

⁶³ Mark Hugo Lopez and Danielle Cuddington, "Latinos Changing Views of Same-Sex Marriage," *Pew Hispanic Center*, June 19, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/19/latinos-changing-views-of-same-sex-marriage/>.

⁶⁴ Taylor, "When Labels Don't Fit," 32.

In 2000, Puerto Ricans favored Al Gore in the presidential election, while Cubans and Mexicans from Texas voted in favor of George W. Bush. In fact, Bush received one-third of the overall Latino vote in the 2000 election.⁶⁵ According to Kim Geron and Melissa Michelson:

Most research indicates that Latinos are willing to cross party and ethnic lines for a candidate they support, either for partisan, ethnic, or other reasons such as ideology and issue positions. Whereas low-education/low-information Latino voters are more likely to use non-policy cues (such as speaking Spanish), high-education/high-information Latino voters are more likely to consider ideology and issue positions.⁶⁶

So, while Democrats have been able to capitalize on the liberal tendencies of Latino voters in some of the most recent elections, their stronghold on the Latino electorate is neither definite nor secure. Latino voters, especially well-educated ones, are willing to cross party lines for particular issues or for candidates that they feel will best protect their interests. So far, partisan affiliations do not dominate the political preferences or voting choices of most Latino voters.

Recent Gallup polling also confirms that Latino party allegiances are not yet set in stone. According to Gallup's report, "More than half of U.S. Hispanics younger than 30 initially identify as political independents when asked which party they support."⁶⁷ This is an especially significant finding considering that 33.2% of Hispanics are under the age of

⁶⁵ Chavez, overview to *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook*, 30.

⁶⁶ Geron and Michelson, "Latino Partisanship, Political Activity and Vote Choice," in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 326.

⁶⁷ Frank Newport and Joy Wilke, "Hispanics of All Ages Tilt Democratic," *Gallup*, July 15, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163451/hispanics-ages-tild-democratic.aspx?version=print>.

eighteen.⁶⁸ Younger generations of Latino voters, who will soon make up a large portion of the electorate when they all reach the voting age, are just as undecided about their party affiliations as their elders. If there really is a Latino vote, it is clear that Latino men and women of all ages have yet to reach consensus about which party they will favor in future elections. It remains to be seen whether or not the passage of immigration reform will be a watershed moment in which Latinos of all backgrounds will coalesce around a particular political party. Thus far, no single political issue has been able to unite Latino voters in support of one party over the other.

While pinpointing party affiliations is important to discussions of Latino politics, another issue of political participation is also critical to the debate. As Verba, Schlozman and Brady contend, political participation can take many forms, including voting, volunteering on a campaign, contacting public officials, protesting, serving on an electoral board, or contributing to a campaign.⁶⁹ They also argue that non-political participation can be just as important to civic engagement as overtly political activities. Being involved with a church or community organization teaches and encourages the use of civic skills in the same way that political activities do.⁷⁰ Researchers agree that American Latinos lag behind other ethnic groups in nearly every kind of political and non-political participation.⁷¹ This gap is most apparent at the polls.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 9.

⁷⁰ Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*, 16-18, 40-42, 304-333.

⁷¹ Geron and Michelson, "Latino Partisanship, Political Activity and Vote Choice," in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 326-328.

Voter turnout among eligible Latino voters remains low despite recent upsurges. Latinos made up 17% of the United States population in 2012, and 8.4% of the voting electorate.⁷² A record number of 11.2 million Latinos voted in the 2012 election, but 12.1 million Latinos were eligible to vote and did not.⁷³ As the U.S. Census Bureau reports, “Despite having an increased share of the voting population, in every presidential election since 1996, Hispanics have still accounted for a smaller percentage of actual votes cast than their share of the eligible electorate would indicate.”⁷⁴ They are the only demographic group for which this is true.

Pew predicts that by the year 2060, Hispanics will make up 31% of the United States population.⁷⁵ This is a remarkable figure and demonstrates an enormous demographic shift. It has the potential to forever alter the American political landscape. However, Latinos will continue to be underrepresented in politics and will lose political power if they do not turn out to vote in higher numbers in future elections. They will also lose political clout if they continue to be plagued by low levels of political and non-political participation outside of the voting booth. In order to increase participation in these activities, Latinos need to find the means to overcome socioeconomic barriers like low levels of education and low incomes in their communities. Verba, Schlozman and Brady assert that socioeconomic factors like age, education and income have long been associated with traditional models of political participation. Their model, the Civic

⁷² Paul Taylor et al., “When Labels Don’t Fit”, 35.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “The Diversifying Electorate—Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections),” *United States Census Bureau*, May 2013, 6.

⁷⁵ Paul Taylor et al., “When Labels Don’t Fit”, 35.

Voluntarism Model, expands upon these factors to incorporate the motivation, capacity and networks of recruitment that are involved in the participation process as well.⁷⁶

According to these authors, the three main reasons why people either do or do not participate in politics are resources, engagement and recruitment.⁷⁷ Latinos trail other groups in all three categories, and in particular with respect to resources, which Verba, Schlozman and Brady argue are manifested in money, time and civic skills.⁷⁸ In political terms, the viability of the Latino population will hinge upon its ability to successfully overcome these barriers to participation.

Perhaps complicating political participation even further is the “suburbanization”⁷⁹ of the United States. The face of suburbia is changing, as immigrants increasingly choose to settle in the suburbs of metropolitan cities rather than in the urban cities themselves. Today, the suburbs are “quasi urban” with sometimes greater racial and age diversity than their neighboring cities.⁸⁰ Immigrant families today are moving into suburban communities with little or no immigrant histories, like Scranton, Pennsylvania.⁸¹ In fact, from 2000 to 2010, Scranton saw a 140% increase in its immigrant population.⁸² Many of these immigrant families are choosing to settle in suburban areas where they feel they can find affordable housing, good schools and safe neighborhoods.⁸³ It is safe to say that

⁷⁶ Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*, 3-6.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 15-16.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁷⁹ Jill Wilson and Audrey Singer, “Immigrants in 2010 Metropolitan America: A Decade of Change,” *The Brookings Institution*, 2011, 2.

⁸⁰ Teixeira ed., *Red Blue & Purple America*, 25.

⁸¹ Wilson and Singer, “Immigrants in 2010 Metropolitan America”, 4.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 7.

many of these new suburban metropolises are thriving with Mexicans, who make up the largest group of immigrants in the country,⁸⁴ as well as Latinos of all national origins.

While settling in suburban areas can be a positive experience for Latino immigrants, these communities often lack the infrastructure and neighborhood support systems found in the inner city. Housing in the suburbs tends to be more spread out and neighbors may have less face-to-face contact with one another. Public transportation is often not easily accessible, making the communities less mobile and fluid. These factors, while seemingly minor, may be enough to prevent Latinos in these communities from participating in political activities like voting, attending town hall meetings, fundraising, or community organizing. Such activities are critical in the development of civic and political skills.⁸⁵

Adding fuel to the fire for politicians is the fact that many of the suburban communities where immigrant Latino families are choosing to settle lie in important swing states across the country. Demographer William Frey breaks down these swing states into fast- and slow-growing purple states. The fast-growing states include Nevada, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, Oregon and New Mexico.⁸⁶ The slow-growing states include traditional swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan.⁸⁷ Each of these states has witnessed an uptick in its ethnic minority population over the past decade. Frey notes that in fast-growing purple states, 25%, or fully one-quarter, of the eligible voters are

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*, 16-18.

⁸⁶ Teixeira ed., *Red Blue & Purple America*, 11.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

minorities.⁸⁸ While not all minority voters are Latinos, they certainly make up a significant portion of this shifting electorate.

Taking all of these trends into consideration, it is clear that Latinos are altering the political and demographic landscapes of the United States. As largely unaffiliated voters residing in swing states across the country, they are capable of becoming the new power players in electoral politics. However, the low voter turnout rates and low levels of political participation among Latinos overall raise the question of whether or not a homogenous Latino voting bloc will wield much political power. Unlocking and unleashing the political potential behind the Latino electorate will be the key to twenty-first century American politics. Critical to this cause will be the mobilization of Latino voters in both urban and suburban communities, despite the socioeconomic and recruitment barriers outlined by Verba, Schlozman and Brady. The idiosyncrasies of the Latino population, and the fact that Latinos buck nearly every trend in American politics, will make mobilizing them in large numbers for political or non-political causes no easy task. Perhaps an investigation into the institutions that, as Verba, Schlozman and Brady argue, are fundamental to the civic development of adults, will answer some of the questions regarding the existence and viability of the Latino vote. Further inquiry into institutions like Latino civic organizations, for example, might provide insight into the ways in which Latinos already organize and mobilize themselves for political or non-political action.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

IV. Literature Review

The previous two sections demonstrate that there is little consensus on a pan-ethnic Latino identity, despite overall shared values, and little confidence about which party Latinos will favor if and when they vote in large numbers. From this analysis it would appear that there is no basis for a Latino political coalition and no unity around a Latino vote. However, certain trends (for example, the fact that more Latinos are voting than ever before and voting more Democratic), suggest that Latinos are becoming more civically engaged and politically socialized. The question, therefore, is: where and how are these processes taking place? Evidence in the social science literature on American-Latinos suggests that the answer might be found in Latino community and civic organizations. The literature in this area reveals that, while not always overtly political, Latino community and civic organizations are key institutions that teach and encourage civic engagement among the Latino population.

* * *

Since the historic 2000 presidential election, in which the fate of the presidency rested on a few votes in a state with a sizeable Latino population, much has been written about Latino politics, participation and mobilization. Topics such as door-to-door canvassing and get-out-the-vote efforts in Latino neighborhoods, the use of Spanish-language political ads in campaigns, and the impact of Latino political candidates have all been researched by political parties and campaigns in an attempt to better understand, and ultimately win over, Latino voters. While the vast amount of material on the subject is certainly helpful, one of the challenges of studying the American Latino population is

that it is constantly growing and changing. As a result, there is plenty of room to retest old hypotheses in present circumstances or to add new ideas to the political discussion.

Political science literature is replete with theories and models of political participation, particularly as they pertain to different segments of the American electorate. Research on political participation among Latinos began in earnest in the 1990s, when Latino immigration reached its peak. It is around this time that political scientists began to seriously consider the political implications of this influx of new voters into the electorate.⁸⁹ In their seminal work, *Voices and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady carefully examined and compared levels of participation among Anglo-Whites, African-Americans and Latinos through the lens of their Civic Voluntarism Model. Their research constructed one of the first comprehensive analyses of Latino political life in the United States, and their conclusions remain relevant to the study of Latino politics today.

According to Verba, Schlozman and Brady, political participation provides, “a mechanism by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences, and needs and generate pressure to respond.”⁹⁰ In sum, political participation serves as a voice for communities to express concerns in the political realm. The authors’ Civic Voluntarism Model is based on the idea that whether or not someone will participate in a political activity depends on a person’s motivation, capacity and network

⁸⁹ Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds., *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

⁹⁰ Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*, 1.

of recruitment.⁹¹ In other words, a person must be politically engaged or want to be politically active, and have the resources and connections, in order to participate.

The authors find that limited access to resources—which they measure in terms of money, time and civic skills—likely hinders Latino participation in political activities.⁹²

The standard SES model of political participation shows that people with higher socioeconomic status (high levels of education, occupation and income) are more likely to participate in politics than people of a lower socioeconomic position.⁹³ The Civic Voluntarism Model incorporates a more robust interpretation of socioeconomics, but ultimately reaches a similar conclusion. Of the three groups studied by Verba and colleagues, Latinos demonstrated lower levels of overall participation in political and non-political activities.⁹⁴ This is not surprising, considering that Latinos are generally poorer and less educated compared to other groups, making time and money difficult to spare. Additional efforts to overcome these barriers would be required to mobilize Latinos to participate.

Another narrative that runs throughout the authors' study is a broad understanding of civic voluntarism in America. They contend that participation and voluntarism are uniquely embedded in American society, and that non-political activity, more so than

⁹¹ Ibid, 3, 15-16.

⁹² Ibid, 16.

⁹³ Ibid, 19.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 231-235. It should also be noted that not all of the Latinos in their sample were citizens, although even when taking this into account, Latinos' levels of activity were still lower than others.

political activity, is widespread in the United States.⁹⁵ Indeed, there is a “fuzzy border” between the two types of activities, and the authors assert that voluntary activity of any kind “shapes the allocation of economic, social, and cultural benefits and contributes to the achievement of collective purposes.”⁹⁶

Just as political participation takes on several forms, non-political participation can include a myriad of activities like being a member of a religious organization, volunteering for a non-profit institution, organizing a charitable event, or serving on a committee.⁹⁷ Verba and colleagues show that Americans feel a certain amount of civic gratification by participating in these non-political activities.⁹⁸ More than just gratification, however, the authors argue these institutions and organizations provide opportunities for Americans to enhance political engagement and to acquire political resources.⁹⁹ Moreover, these institutions are readily open and available to citizens of all socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds.

The authors write that these organizations are places where average Americans can build civic skills, defined as, “the communications and organizational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life.”¹⁰⁰ Verbal skills, including proficiency in the English-language, are included in this definition of civic skills. The authors contend that proficiency in English is critical to full participation in political

⁹⁵ Ibid, 3, 6-7, 74-79.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 75.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 117.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 304.

activities.¹⁰¹ This may help to explain why some Latino voters, especially those who do not speak English with ease, do not participate in politics at high levels.

According to the authors, people with strong civic skills are more likely to participate in politics and to feel more confident doing so. They contend that, “activity that has nothing to do with politics or public issues can develop organizational and communications skills that are relevant for politics and thus can facilitate political activity.”¹⁰² Non-political activity is therefore capable of fostering civic engagement, and ultimately political participation. It is in these technically non-political environments that people learn skills, are exposed to political cues, and form interpersonal networks that cultivate community and political engagement.¹⁰³

In sum, “Both the motivation and the capacity to take part in politics have their roots in the fundamental non-political institutions with which individuals are associated during the course of their lives.”¹⁰⁴ It is in these non-political institutions that citizens, especially minorities, gain the skills and the voice to act in the political sphere. According to the authors’ definitions, Latino civic organizations would be included among such “fundamental” institutions that foster political engagement. If structural barriers like time, money and civic skills prevent Latinos from participating, the resources offered by civic organizations are capable of filling this gap to mobilize Latinos. Additional research

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 305-306.

¹⁰² Ibid, 17-18.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 3.

confirms that community organizations have helped bridge socioeconomic and political gaps for Latinos in the United States for several decades now.

There is a rich tradition of grassroots mobilization, community organization and civic activism in the American Latino community. Sharon Navarro writes that, since minority communities, like the Latino community, face barriers to political activities like voting, they have historically chosen to organize through collective action in interest or social groups as “an alternative medium for political participation.”¹⁰⁵ Richard Wood argues that the roots of community organizing in Latino communities can be traced to the efforts of Saul Alinsky in Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Wood, the organizing strategies employed by Alinsky taught minority groups, “a kind of secular technique for cultivating power in poor communities.”¹⁰⁶ The most celebrated community organizer in Latino history is Cesar Chavez, who, in the 1960s and 1970s, fought for the rights of Latino farm workers in the southwest and effectively provided a “public political space” for Latinos to fight for justice and equality in America.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Sharon Ann Navarro, and Armando Xavier Mejia, eds., *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 92.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Wood, “Fe y Acción Social: Hispanic Churches in Faith-Based Community Organizing,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* edited by Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 146.

¹⁰⁷ Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds., *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

However, this “long and dynamic” tradition of Latino grassroots organizing goes back even further in American history than the 1960s.¹⁰⁸ Lisa Magana and Armando Mejia identify five major stages in the history of Latino grassroots politics. They begin with the nineteenth century struggle against poverty and discrimination after the forcible takeover of native Latino lands.¹⁰⁹ The other four stages include: the labor activism of Mexican and Puerto Rican Latinos in the 1920s; the fight against discrimination in housing and employment services during the post-World War II era; the protest politics of union organizers like Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s; and, finally, the current era’s struggle for immigration reform.¹¹⁰ The authors argue that this modern period is unique because of the increasingly heterogeneous coalitions of various Latino subgroups.¹¹¹ Civic organizations have played a key role in mobilizing these coalitions.

While grassroots or community organizing can take on several forms, it is generally understood to be the non-electoral activism by which disadvantaged groups voice their demands in the political sphere.¹¹² Louis DeSipio asserts that, for Latinos, community organizing is manifested in political organizations, institutions that share a common religion or identity, or community organizations that unite people around specific demands.¹¹³ Most social science researchers agree that the majority of the Latino population directs its political and every day concerns at the community level, outside the

¹⁰⁸ Zlolniski, “Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 354.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 354.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

electoral realm. It may be here that they feel most comfortable voicing their opinions and have the most access to resources to participate.

In fact, approximately one-third of Latinos report being members of a community-based organization.¹¹⁴ If you include church membership in this definition, nearly three-quarters of the Latino population are civically involved to some degree.¹¹⁵ Building on the previous literature on community organizations, Louis DeSipio argues that these organizational efforts at the community level help to “forge a pan-ethnic political agenda” at the national level.¹¹⁶ DeSipio cautions, though, that this shared agenda in no way “ensures partisan unity”.¹¹⁷ A common agenda does not necessarily mean a common vote or a common political ideology.

DeSipio also claims that civic organizations are capable of “filling the gap” left by weakened political party machines.¹¹⁸ At the national level, both the Republican and Democratic parties have lost power. According to DeSipio’s account, civic organizations are mobilizing and socializing Latino voters, particularly young and new voters, in ways that political party institutions are either not capable or not willing to carry out. He notes that new techniques utilized by political party machines to identify and target particular voters often leave Latinos behind, because they are not always registered and do not

¹¹⁴ DeSipio, “Latino Civic and Political Participation,” in *Hispanics and The Future of America*, 456.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 455.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 461-462.

always turnout to vote.¹¹⁹ Institutions like civic groups that operate at the community level, by contrast, do not often forget to count these constituents in their mobilization efforts.

In a comprehensive study of how to effectively mobilize various emerging, low-income communities in the United States to vote, Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson cite a series of Latino civic organizations in Los Angeles County who actively work to mobilize Latino voters and get them to the polls. Organizations like SCOPE, CARECEN and SVREP all seek to register Latinos to vote, among other activities (like providing legal services and reducing structural barriers to economic opportunities).¹²⁰ These organizations have adopted a mobilization aspect to their civic work to encourage Latinos to participate, and have been extremely successful in their efforts thus far. Civic institutions, especially local organizations, not necessarily the political party machines, are the ones socializing and mobilizing these communities to participate.

In discussions of Latino organizing, one would be remiss not to mention the pivotal role that religious institutions have played in Latino civic activism. The Church, both Catholic and Protestant, has been instrumental in developing and introducing a unified Latino voice into the public sphere since the heyday of community organizing in the 1960s. Christian Zolniski and others contend that Latino churches have been so successful in organizing Latino communities because they are able to unite Latinos of different races,

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 81-103.

nationalities and ideologies “under a single umbrella.”¹²¹ Religiosity and the Christian faith are two things that nearly all Latinos have in common. Verba, Schlozman and Brady believe churches are key institutions in American political life that are capable of mobilizing the disadvantaged in society and, “nurturing politically relevant skills and exposing members to various sorts of political stimuli,” just like other civic organizations.¹²² In fact, church clergy and civic leaders often work in tandem with one another to address issues like poverty, housing, public education and unemployment in Latino communities. Both the Hispanic clergy and civic leaders tend to operate from a grassroots position.

Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States, edited by Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda, is a collection of essays devoted almost entirely to what Richard Wood refers to as “faith-based community organizing.”¹²³ Faith-based civic institutions bridge the many divides in the Latino community highlighted in this paper. They build networks, formulate policy initiatives and influence political leaders on behalf of the local community.¹²⁴ Moreover, Wood contends that these faith-based organizations represent “a crucial emerging form of Latino political engagement.”¹²⁵ They offer similar opportunities as non-religious civic organizations do for Latinos to gain the civic skills

¹²¹ Zloliniski, “Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States,” in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 362.

¹²² Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*, 385-386.

¹²³ Wood, “Fe y Acción Social: Hispanic Churches in Faith-Based Community Organizing,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, 145.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 147.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 145.

deemed important by Verba, Schlozman and Brady for political participation. All in all, faith-based organizations are mobilizing Latinos for action as well.

Political scientist Catherine Wilson recently completed a detailed investigation of Latino faith-based community organizing in the United States that closely examined three faith-based organizations in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, respectively. Her Philadelphia case study centers on Nueva Esperanza, the original Philadelphia branch of the national organization, Esperanza. Wilson focuses primarily on Esperanza's role as a faith-based and religious organization in its North Philadelphia neighborhood. She writes that Esperanza's primary focus is on institutional development in Latino communities, and its work to build Latino-owned and -operated businesses and organizations, is inspired by Christian faith.¹²⁶ Since the publication of Wilson's book, Esperanza has expanded its scope and grown into one of the largest Latino civic institutions in the United States. The research in this paper draws on Wilson's conclusions about Esperanza as a force in the Philadelphia Latino community, but focuses more on the political and civic activism sides of the organization as opposed to the religious one. It should also be noted that Nueva Esperanza was recognized in the *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* literature as a prominent faith-based organization working to grow the capacity and institutional infrastructures of Latino communities, while also advocating for Latino issues in Washington, D.C.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Catherine Wilson, *The Politics of Latino Faith: Religion, Identity, and Urban Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 135-6.

¹²⁷ Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds., *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 309-313.

Although Latino civic institutions are technically listed as 501C3 tax-exempt organizations under the IRS code and cannot officially endorse political candidates or fundraise for political campaigns, they are teaching members of the Latino community valuable skills and building coalitions for Latinos to participate and engage in political and civic affairs. Thus far, the political science research on Latino civic organizations has largely been limited to models of participation. Other researchers have looked at these institutions from a faith perspective, but little has been done to examine them as tools for Latino political mobilization and socialization. Additionally, the Latino population continues to grow at such a fast pace that the literature on Latino politics tends to become quickly obsolete. There is a need to constantly reassess prior notions and ideas about this segment of the population. As questions mount about Latino political party affiliations and the existence of a homogenous Latino vote, it will become ever more important to have a contemporary understanding of how civic organizations mobilize, unite, educate and advocate on behalf of members of the Latino community.

V. Research Design

Through the selection of two case studies, the research in this paper examines the programs and activities of two different Latino civic organizations in the United States. The case studies will test the extent to which Latino civic organizations are building civic and political skills in Latino communities, and the ways in which they might be contributing to notions of the Latino vote. Ultimately, the two cases will provide evidence to either support or reject the hypothesis that Latino civic organizations are building coalitions of Latino voters by teaching civic skills and encouraging participation, but that these civic organizations alone are not enough to confirm the present existence or future prospects of a homogenous Latino vote.

The two case studies were selected for their differences in geographic location, size and scope of activities. While both located in the state of Pennsylvania, one is headquartered in the City of Philadelphia and has both a national and local reach, while the other is based in the suburban town of Bethlehem and has only a local focus. Political scientist Gustavo Cano believes that there are three levels of political action in Latino politics: local-neighborhood, local-community and national-community.¹²⁸ Thanks to the dual local and national focus of the Philadelphia-based institution, these two case studies cover all three levels of political action in Latino politics. Both institutions exemplify the type of community outreach historically associated with Latino civic organizations, and both demonstrate the capacity to promote civic activism. Not surprisingly, both have historical ties to Hispanic churches and clergy. Because of their different locations,

¹²⁸ Zlolniski, "Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States," in *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*, 354.

populations and programming, the two could be indicative of a larger narrative about Latino civic organizations nationwide. It should also be noted that geographic proximity to the researcher (a senior political science honors student at the University of Pennsylvania) was taken into consideration during the case study selection.

The first case study will investigate Esperanza, one of the largest Latino organizations in the nation. Originally named Nueva Esperanza, the organization was founded by the Reverend Luis Cortes in 1987 to address violence and poverty in the Latino neighborhoods of North Philadelphia.¹²⁹ The organization, now known simply as Esperanza, is still headquartered in the Hunting Park neighborhood of North Philadelphia. Thanks to the leadership of Reverend Cortes and his brother, Reverend Danny Cortes, today Esperanza is a key actor in Latino civic and political life at the national, state and local levels.

The second case will examine a Latino civic organization of a much smaller scope but with just as rich a history. This case study centers on the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley (HCLV), an organization founded in 1968 in response to the needs of a growing Puerto Rican immigrant population in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. Like Esperanza, the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley seeks to alleviate poverty in the communities it serves through housing, employment and education initiatives. While the two institutions share much in common, their programming activities differ in important ways and each organization faces different challenges. For instance, HCLV attracts Latinos from towns

¹²⁹ "History," *Esperanza*, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.esperanza.us/site/c.inKOIPNhEiG/b.5570917/k.C5A2/History.htm>.

ten to thirty miles away. Transportation to and from the center poses a challenge to some who have to rely on the Lehigh Valley's underdeveloped and sometimes unreliable public transportation system. Meanwhile, Esperanza's central location in the City of Philadelphia is advantageous for its mission. Residents can easily access all of the resources the organization has to offer. In many ways, HCLV represents the challenges and opportunities that face Latino civic organizations in the new suburban frontier that demographers claim is becoming a more popular option than traditional urban cities for immigrants. While research on Latino institutions tends to focus on large, national groups, this local case study may paint a more accurate picture of the activities of contemporary Latino civic organizations in the United States.

* * *

The research involved in these two case studies consisted of a series of interviews and meetings with executives and staff members of both Esperanza and the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. The interviews were conducted in-person and on-site in the Hunting Park office of Esperanza and the Bethlehem office of HCLV. In a few instances, follow-up questions were emailed to the executives for further clarification or information on a particular subject. Copies of the interview questions asked of employees of both organizations are included in Appendix A. The following sections outline the data and results of these interviews.

PART TWO:

“Help him operate the pond.”

I. The National Story: Esperanza

The Hunting Park neighborhood of North Philadelphia is home to one of the largest and most sophisticated Latino civic institutions in the United States. Known in the local community and across the country as Esperanza, the organization is a voice and an advocate for Latinos in all aspects of public life. It builds institutions and coalitions to break down the barriers that Latinos across the country face to secure basic needs like a quality education, employment and housing. Founded in 1987 by the Reverend Luis Cortes, a prominent member of the Hispanic Clergy of Philadelphia, the organization initially sought to address issues of violence and poverty in Latino neighborhoods in North Philadelphia through affordable housing initiatives. Today, the organization focuses primarily on community development and education as means to alleviate poverty and expand economic opportunity in low-income communities at the local level. In keeping with its name, Esperanza, which means “hope” in Spanish, the organization strives to sustain hope and faith in individuals and families by providing the tools to build strong Hispanic communities.¹³⁰ Additionally, according to the organization’s website, “We [Esperanza] talk to local, state and federal politicians, as well as world leaders, about how they can make better policies for Hispanic communities. We give Hispanic faith and non-faith communities a voice by providing the platform for them to speak to government on their own behalf. We are one of the most relevant voices for the Hispanic community for both faith and non-faith audiences.”¹³¹ Esperanza strives to be an advocate for Latinos in Philadelphia and across the country.

¹³⁰ “Who We Are,” *Esperanza*, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.esperanza.us/site/c.inKOIPNhEiG/b.5570917/k.C5A2/History.htm>.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Esperanza operates from a faith-based perspective like some other Latino civic institutions. Catherine Wilson's investigation of Esperanza concentrates almost exclusively on this aspect of the organization. However, Reverend Cortes also views Esperanza's mission as a fight for access. More specifically, he sees it as a fight for access to the kinds of civil rights—like the right to a quality education—that he believes should be available to all citizens. As a result of this dual focus, Esperanza is uniquely positioned between Hispanic clergy, churches, community leaders and political leaders to carry out its mission.¹³² It is this positioning at the intersection of all avenues of civic and religious life that allows Esperanza to be involved in a number of different ventures at both the national and local levels.

Since its founding, Esperanza has grown from a local organization of just a few employees in Philadelphia to a local and national group with more than two-hundred employees.¹³³ Within Esperanza, there are five 501C3's, including a cyber charter school, a middle school, and a two-year college with ties to Eastern University. The organization's operating budget is approximately \$29 million. It receives funding from city, state and federal sources, as well as from competitive grants and corporate donations. At its headquarters in Hunting Park, Esperanza offers immigration and legal services, welfare to work assistance, housing and economic development planning, citizenship classes, financial planning services, arts initiatives and English classes.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ "History," *Esperanza*, accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.esperanza.us/site/c.inKOIPNhEiG/b.5570917/k.C5A2/History.htm>.

Through these services, the schools, and the college, Esperanza assisted roughly 10,000 people from the community in the 2013 calendar year.¹³⁴

In addition to serving individuals in the community, Esperanza has developed key partnerships with other Latino national and local nonprofit organizations. An essential part of Esperanza's mission is to collaborate and share its resources with other groups to further grow and empower Latino communities. Through mentoring programs, and educational and professional workshops, Esperanza teaches other nonprofit groups how to build their organizations using models for best practices.¹³⁵ Known as the Esperanza Capacity Institute, this portion of the organization has helped Esperanza to establish relationships and networks with over 12,000 clergy, churches, and community leaders across the United States.¹³⁶ Esperanza is not only one of the largest Latino institutions in the United States, but also one of the best connected.

Key to Esperanza's success is its ability to effectively blend its national programming with its local operation in Philadelphia. The local Latino population it serves in Hunting Park has called North Philadelphia its home since the 1960s. The neighborhood is about 65% Puerto Rican and 33% Dominican. Most are second or third generation Latinos, whose ancestors moved to Philadelphia from New York in search of shipping jobs in the Port Richmond area. Today, Hunting Park is a low-income community, with the median

¹³⁴ Pita Oxholm, Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development, Esperanza, interviewed by the author, February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹³⁵ "Who We Are," *Esperanza*, accessed January 6, 2014,

<http://www.esperanza.us/site/c.inKOIPNhEiG/b.5570917/k.C5A2/History.htm>.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

family household earning approximately \$20,000 per year. This is well below the median for the City of Philadelphia. Additionally, eighty percent of the residents do not have a college education.¹³⁷ Despite these challenges, the Hunting Park community is relatively close-knit. There are powerful, grassroots churches in the neighborhood, and the park itself serves as a good meeting ground for community members.

According to Esperanza's Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development, most people in the community know about Esperanza and the services it provides. This is especially true as Esperanza continues to build successful charter schools in the neighborhood. By building institutions like schools, Esperanza works to address the systemic problems of poverty in this Latino community. Employment, housing and economic development initiatives also play an integral part in this operation; however, in recent years, Esperanza has shifted its focus to education as the main avenue through which to alleviate poverty in the community. Esperanza stresses that it is an "opportunity creating organization" for members of the local community to build better lives for themselves and their neighbors.¹³⁸

Another opportunity Esperanza provides its residents is the chance to personally engage with public officials. While Esperanza does not participate in GOTV efforts and does not publicly support any political candidates or parties, it does provide a platform for community members to become politically and civically engaged. The organization

¹³⁷ Pita Oxholm, Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development, Esperanza, interviewed by the author, February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

assembles meetings and forums for elected officials to speak with community members about a variety of issues and concerns. The organization extends invitations to political leaders and local officials of both parties, and views facilitating conversations with them as opportunities to work together towards common goals. “The doors are open to everyone”, says Esperanza’s Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development.¹³⁹ Just this past January, Republican Governor of Pennsylvania Tom Corbett visited Esperanza’s charter school in the midst of major Democratic protests against his education policies. Prior to his election in 2000, Republican President George W. Bush paid Esperanza a visit at its Hunting Park headquarters to speak to Reverend Cortes and other members of the city’s Hispanic clergy.¹⁴⁰ Democratic city and state representatives visit Esperanza regularly to address issues in the local community. According to the Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development, Esperanza views the “political pieces as an extension of the faith”, and religion as a “language with which you can speak to authority, to motivate power towards your ultimate goal.”¹⁴¹ She argues that organizations like Esperanza are important because they create spaces for politicians to lead and to act, instead of just making political calculations. The Founder and President of Esperanza, Reverend Cortes, argues that Esperanza is a voice for the Latino community in that, “We speak to government at all levels on issues of importance

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Time Staff, “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America,” *Time*, February 7, 2005, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1993243_1993265,00.html.

¹⁴¹ Pita Oxholm, Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development, Esperanza, interviewed by the author, February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

representing our churches, nonprofits and individuals.”¹⁴² Moreover, this voice is not limited to just the Latino communities of North Philadelphia.

At the national level, too, Esperanza creates connections and serves as a bridge between Hispanic clergy and politicians (and even academics). Despite the fact that the national and local programs of Esperanza do not interact that much, they are essentially two sides of the same coin, or “two expressions of the same calling”, according to Esperanza’s Special Projects Director.¹⁴³ She refers to the divide as “Community small c in Philadelphia and big C nationally.”¹⁴⁴ Esperanza’s national programming is driven by its President, Reverend Cortes, who, in 2005, was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the nation’s 25 most influential evangelicals.¹⁴⁵ He has testified before Congress on several occasions and currently serves on President Obama’s Hispanic Advisory Committee and his Immigration Committee. While maintaining his nonpartisan stance and that of his organization, Reverend Cortes regularly visits members of Congress and the administration with whom he has a relationship in Washington D.C. to discuss and advocate for issues pertinent to Latino communities across the country. Esperanza is known in the halls of the Capitol and among some of the most powerful political leaders in the district. This is partially because, in addition to organizing regional events and

¹⁴² Luis Cortes, President, Esperanza, email message to author, March 13, 2014.

¹⁴³ Jody Reynhout, Special Projects Director, Esperanza, interviewed by the author, February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Time Staff, “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America,” *Time*, February 7, 2005, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1993243_1993265,00.html.

conferences for churches and nonprofits across the country, Esperanza coordinates and hosts the annual National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast.

Reverend Cortes initiated The National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast in 2002 as a way to unite members of the Hispanic clergy from across the country in civic engagement and prayer.¹⁴⁶ For several years, Reverend Cortes was invited to attend the National Prayer Breakfast as a Hispanic faith leader. He realized that there was not a similar forum for the growing number of Latino faith leaders, so he created a breakfast for Hispanic clergy leaders to convene and discuss important matters in their communities. According to Esperanza's Special Projects Director, the goal of The National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast was to "spark dialogue about topics that the church does not naturally engage in."¹⁴⁷ Esperanza sets the agenda for the breakfast and is looked to as a leader in the discussions that take place. Keeping in tune with the issues that affect local Latino communities, immigration, jobs and education have dominated the discourse at the breakfast for the past few years.

Esperanza has hosted the breakfast every year since 2002. Despite the increasing polarization in Washington, Esperanza has remained steadfast in its commitment to bipartisanship, if not nonpartisanship. In 2002, and throughout his presidency, President George W. Bush served as the keynote speaker for the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast. Since then, President Obama and other Democratic political leaders have

¹⁴⁶ Jody Reynhout, Special Projects Director, Esperanza, interviewed by the author, February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

given the keynote address. This past year, the chairs of both the Democratic and Republican National Committees attended the breakfast.¹⁴⁸ It is clear that both parties see the importance and value in engaging with Hispanic clergy members. In addition to attending the actual breakfast, Hispanic clergy participate in visits to members of Congress as part of the legislative advocacy portion of the event. They meet with Congressmen of both parties on Capitol Hill to discuss national initiatives to improve the lives of American Latinos. According to the Special Projects Director, the aim is to, “get Hispanic clergy in the room with people they otherwise wouldn’t have access to.”¹⁴⁹ In Esperanza’s eyes, the most important thing it can do as an organization is provide Latino leaders with this access. Some Hispanic clergy members say that these meetings on Capitol Hill are the most important aspect of the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast. The national component of Esperanza empowers and equips Latinos leaders to advocate on behalf of their communities. Ultimately, Esperanza hopes for these leaders to return to their respective communities with the tools necessary to teach others how to advocate for and change the lives of Latinos across the country.

In addition to the breakfast, Esperanza has been involved intimately in the national immigration reform debate for over ten years. A few years ago, Esperanza hosted a National Immigration Forum with several Latino leaders as part of its “Esperanza America Initiative”. The Special Projects Director refers to Esperanza’s immigration advocacy works as an “unfunded mandate” that will continue until some form of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

legislation is passed in Congress.¹⁵⁰ Under the Esperanza America Initiative, Esperanza has organized information campaigns and calls to action during particular steps of the most recent immigration bill's legislative process (the bill is now stalled in the House). Esperanza, like other national organizations, has focused on immigration as an economic and family values issue. It is likely that immigration will remain an important topic at events like the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast until progress with immigration reform is made. In the meantime, Esperanza has begun to focus on other issues, like climate change, that will impact the growing Latino community, as well as the rest of the nation, in years to come. In fact, the Vice President for Esperanza's National Programs Division recently sat on a White House panel about climate change.¹⁵¹

It is evident that Esperanza is a force in the North Philadelphia community, and it is growing into an extensive national network as well. Esperanza is even spreading its scope worldwide as a representative for Latinos in the World Evangelical Alliance.¹⁵² A grassroots spirit lies at the core of Esperanza, and that spirit drives the relationships the organization builds, as well as the initiatives to which it gives life. At both the national and local levels, Esperanza is a bridge and a voice for the Latino community. According to Esperanza's Special Projects Director, Revered Cortes is often quoted as saying, "Don't give a man a fish; don't teach him how to fish; help him operate the pond."¹⁵³

Through all of its programming initiatives, Esperanza is empowering Latino individuals

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

and organizations across the country to “operate the pond” and make a difference in their communities.

II. The Local Story: Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley

Located on the south side of the small city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley (HCLV), a nonprofit civic organization, is a mainstay for the burgeoning Latino community in the Lehigh Valley. The city of Bethlehem and two other small cities in the Lehigh Valley, Allentown and Easton, are situated in the middle of the large metropolitan centers of Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York. According to 2010 census data, Latinos make up roughly 24% of the population in Bethlehem.¹⁵⁴ There is a similar percentage of Latinos living in Allentown and Easton. These figures are indicative of national trends that show Latino immigrants are increasingly choosing to settle in suburban cities and towns rather than larger urban areas.

While this is largely a recent trend, many Latinos have called the Lehigh Valley home for over fifty years. In fact, the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley was founded in 1968. Originally known as the Council of Spanish Speaking Organizations of the Lehigh Valley, it was created to help the vast number of new Latino residents find employment in the area and learn English.¹⁵⁵ Most Latinos in the Lehigh Valley can trace their roots to Puerto Rican ancestors who left New York City in the 1950s and 1960s to find jobs as steel workers in the once booming Bethlehem steel industry. Bethlehem offered economic opportunities that were not available to Latinos in the neighboring big cities.

¹⁵⁴ “State and County QuickFacts,” United States Census Bureau, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/4206088.html>.

¹⁵⁵ “Our Past,” *Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley*, accessed February 4, 2014, http://www.hclv.org/#!about_us/csgz.

Today, the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley still serves a primarily Puerto Rican Latino population. Unemployment in the community is its main concern these days. According to HCLV's Community Resource Coordinator, unemployment plagues Latino communities in Bethlehem and the greater Lehigh Valley area.¹⁵⁶ The decline of the steel industry, coupled with the recent recession, has left many in the city without a job. The Latino population, especially those Latinos without strong English-language skills, took a hard hit during the economic downturn. According to the Community Resource Coordinator, most of HCLV's constituents struggle with English.¹⁵⁷ Weak English-language skills pose a major barrier to finding employment and participating in civic activities in the community. HCLV tries to help its constituents overcome these barriers.

The Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley's stated mission is, "to improve the quality of life of Hispanic and other families by empowering them to become more self-sufficient, while promoting an intercultural understanding in the Lehigh Valley."¹⁵⁸ Like Esperanza, HCLV seeks to *empower* community members to improve their circumstances and become contributing members of society. Providing residents with the resources to find economic opportunities lies at the heart of this mission. Additionally, HCLV enumerates on its website a series of values that it champions. Among them are, "All people deserve a 'voice' in their community and government", and "Progress is dependent upon the

¹⁵⁶ Nereida Quinones, Community Resource Coordinator, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley, interviewed by the author, March 10, 2014, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ "Mission Statement," *Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley*, accessed February 4, 2014, http://www.hclv.org/#!about_us/csgz.

ability to form effective partnerships with others in the community.”¹⁵⁹ Employment, affordable housing and a quality education are also listed. These are similar to Esperanza’s objectives for the Hunting Park neighborhood. Like Esperanza, HCLV works to ensure that Latino residents in the Lehigh Valley have access to resources to make their voices heard. The organization also tries to teach its constituents important civic skills and instill in them a sense of leadership so that they can go out into the community and have a positive impact on their respective neighborhoods.

HCLV supports its mission and list of values through a series of programs that target Latino youth, seniors, and every age group in between.¹⁶⁰ Essential to the success of HCLV’s programming are the partnerships it forges with other organizations in the Bethlehem community. For example, HCLV is currently partnering with a temp agency in the area to find service jobs for its constituents with limited English skills. So far, they have been able to place twenty-five residents in jobs since the New Year. HCLV also works closely with the schools in the community. Through the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, HCLV and the Bethlehem school district sponsor after school programs for youth. Additionally, the organization coordinates with the Community Voices Clinic to host a monthly food pantry for food insecure residents.

On its own, HCLV connects constituents to community resources like food stamps, medical services, and job applications, and assists with computer training and resume

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Nereida Quinones, Community Resource Coordinator, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley, interviewed by the author, March 10, 2014, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

building. It also offers free English classes taught by retired teachers in the area. Once a week, a lawyer visits the center and offers pro bono services to help residents with immigration issues. For those residents who cannot read or speak English, HCLV will translate bills or government papers for them, and make telephone calls on their behalf if necessary. In fact, during the course of the interview with the Community Resource Coordinator, three members of the community walked into the center to have documents translated. This is clearly an important component of HCLV's work.

This past year, the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley's twelve employees officially served over three hundred people.¹⁶¹ This number does not include the countless people who walk through the center's doors to have a document translated or a piece of mail read to them. According to the Community Resource Coordinator, Latino residents from Allentown and as far as Easton visit the center for its services. That Latinos travel across the county to visit HCLV is quite impressive, considering that Easton is ten to thirty miles away and difficult to reach by public transit. It is obvious that the center is recognized as a resource for more than just the immediate Bethlehem community. While most people own cars, those that do not struggle to get around using the underdeveloped public transportation system. This limits job opportunities for some and makes visiting the center difficult for others.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

HCLV relies primarily on grants to support its programming. The organization's operating budget is \$696,000 and approximately 85% of these funds come from grants.¹⁶² HCLV's Executive Director spends the majority of her time writing these grants to ensure that HCLV can continue to serve the community. Securing these funds and more every year will help to expand the organization's Community Empowerment Program. According to the Community Resource Coordinator, who oversees this initiative, the program is "all about civic education."¹⁶³ It aims to provide "opportunities for individuals to develop skills" so that they can engage and strengthen the community, while simultaneously empowering families to vote and fight for a better quality of life.¹⁶⁴ The program is in its infancy, but it has already begun to collaborate with other community organizations in the neighborhood to foster civic engagement.

As an organization, the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley does not participate in GOTV efforts and does not promote any one candidate or party. Additionally, the organization is not involved in any specific political or governmental issues. However, HCLV does work closely with its State Representative, Democrat Steve Samuelson, and his office.¹⁶⁵ The HCLV staff agrees that the local and state representatives are attentive to the needs of the Latino communities in the Lehigh Valley. In fact, HCLV and the local representatives in

¹⁶² Lorna Velazquez, Executive Director, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley, email message to author, March 14, 2014.

¹⁶³ Nereida Quinones, Community Resource Coordinator, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley, interviewed by the author, March 10, 2014, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

¹⁶⁴ "Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley Community Empowerment Program," *Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley*, accessed February 4, 2014, http://www.hclv.org/#!/about_us/csgz.

¹⁶⁵ Nereida Quinones, Community Resource Coordinator, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley, interviewed by the author, March 10, 2014, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

the area often work with one another to achieve common goals. For example, HCLV has worked with Representative Samuelson's office to improve the parks and streets of the south side Bethlehem community. Today, there are more streetlights and green space in the south side than in years past.

The Community Empowerment Program has begun to collaborate with Representative Samuelson's office as well. The day after this interview was conducted, HCLV held an event in conjunction with Representative Samuelson's office called "Voter Education Hands on Workshop" that demonstrated to local residents, many of whom do not speak English, how to use a voting machine. An actual voting booth machine was brought to the center to show residents which buttons to press to properly cast their votes on Election Day. A member of Representative Samuelson's staff was present to answer any questions residents might have during the demonstration.¹⁶⁶ The Community Empowerment Program sponsored the voter education workshop in an effort to promote civic education and engagement. According to HCLV's Executive Director, most of the seniors in the community are politically active, but the rest of the community is not.¹⁶⁷ They wish to encourage political participation among all age groups and demographics. They hoped that the voter education workshop would help to alleviate concerns or anxieties about the voting process and ultimately encourage residents to vote in the upcoming May primary. Through events like these, HCLV wishes to empower Latinos in the community to take action to better themselves and their neighbors.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Lorna Velazquez, Executive Director, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley, email message to author, March 14, 2014.

The micro level focus of HCLV's operations allows it to have an immediate and meaningful impact on local Latino communities in the Lehigh Valley. These communities, according to the Community Resource Coordinator, are vibrant and prideful, and they collectively view HCLV as a place they can believe in and trust. HCLV is responsive to the immediate needs of these communities, like the need for employment opportunities, but also encourages them to learn civic skills and to take responsibility for the welfare of their communities. HCLV acts as a voice for Latinos in the Lehigh Valley, while simultaneously teaching Latinos how to build and strengthen their own voices.

PART THREE:
“It’s all about access.”

I. Painting the Full Picture: Case Study Analysis

Discussions about the existence of a Latino vote would be futile without a clear indication that Latinos are interested in participating in politics. Evidence shows that Latinos have increased their participation rates in recent years and are turning out to vote in higher numbers than ever before. Despite these increases, though, Latinos continue to participate at lower levels compared to other ethnic groups in the United States. As cited previously, Verba, Schlozman and Brady propose that lower participation rates among Latinos are likely the result of the limited access that Latinos have to the resources—like time, money, and civic skills—to participate. Additionally, both the SES and Civic Voluntarism Models of participation show that people in lower socioeconomic positions are less likely to vote and participate than people in higher ones. Latinos tend to be less educated and less affluent than other ethnic groups in the country, which helps to explain why they might participate at lower rates than others.

The two case studies in this paper show how Latino civic organizations like Esperanza and the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley are actively working to close this Latino participation gap. Their primary goal is to provide Latino communities and individuals with *access* to resources that they would not otherwise have access to. As Verba, Schlozman and Brady state, these resources are an essential component to any form of participation, whether political or nonpolitical. Thanks to the rich tradition of Latino grassroots organizing, civic organizations like Esperanza and HCLV naturally fit into the landscape of Latino communities. In fact, these two organizations fight for access, justice and equality just like the grassroots campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s once did. Verba

and his colleagues are also careful to note that a spirit of civic voluntarism runs throughout American culture. Americans generally want to participate and be included in their respective communities. As a result, they are involved in civic organizations, recreational activities, churches, and community groups. Latinos are no exception. One-third are involved in civic activities, and nearly three-quarters are active in civic affairs, if community churches are included. There is most certainly a place for organizations like Esperanza and HCLV in the civic lives of Latino Americans to grow their capacities to take part in politics.

As HCLV's values statement notes, all people deserve a voice in government and in their respective communities. Both Esperanza and HCLV are voices and advocates for the Latino community in their own respective ways. HCLV develops partnerships with politicians and other local organizations in the Lehigh Valley to improve neighborhood conditions, assist the poor, and help residents find jobs. The new parks and green space that were added with the help of Representative Samuelson's office have allowed residents to take pride in their south Bethlehem community, and the food pantry has ensured that no one in the neighborhood goes hungry. HCLV's employment assistance has helped residents find jobs and contribute to the community. All in all, the organization is helping to build a stronger Latino community in the Lehigh Valley and empowering individuals to become more independent and active citizens.

Due to its unique positioning at the crossroads of several different civic, religious and social causes, Esperanza is a voice and an advocate for the Latino community at both the

local and national levels. In Philadelphia, Esperanza regularly meets with local officials and representatives to discuss community development plans. Esperanza's employees serve as intermediaries between leaders in the Hunting Park neighborhood and city government officials. They work tirelessly to improve conditions in the community and rely on their positive relationships with local leaders of both parties to accomplish their goals.

Washington D.C. is where Esperanza advocates on behalf of the national Latino community. Reverend Cortes and others regularly meet with Congressmen and other political leaders to discuss particular issues, like immigration, that affect Latinos. Ultimately, they try to influence national policy so that it favors and benefits Latino communities across the country. Esperanza's voice in D.C. is so well respected that President Obama appointed Reverend Cortes to serve on his Hispanic Advisory and Immigration committees. Esperanza's voice, and its advocacy work on behalf of the faith and secular Latino communities across the country, extends all the way to the Oval Office and the ears of the President of the United States.

Esperanza and HCLV devote time and money to various advocacy activities. These two resources, which not all of these organizations' constituents have access to, are incredibly important to political participation, according to Verba, Schlozman and Brady. To make up for the lack of these resources in many Latino communities, Esperanza and HCLV contribute their own time and money, acting on their constituents' behalf. Collectively, these organizations are helping to break down barriers to participation. The third resource

that Verba Schlozman and Brady believe is critical for participation is civic skills. It is perhaps by building this resource that these two civic organizations, and others across the country, have the biggest impact in Latino communities.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady show that people with strong civic skills are more likely to participate in politics and to feel more confident doing so.¹⁶⁸ If time and money are limited resources among Latino citizens, civic skills are tangible objectives that civic organizations can teach and build to encourage participation. To review, the three authors define civic skills as “the communications and organizational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life.”¹⁶⁹ The authors also stress the importance of verbal skills, and especially the importance of having a proficiency in English, to participating fully in political activities.

The English classes that both Esperanza and HCLV offer are essential to building the civic capabilities of their constituents. Without strong English skills, Latino Americans not only have difficulty finding jobs, but they often have trouble participating in basic civic and political activities. They may struggle to communicate clearly with local officials, may feel intimidated by the prospect of interacting with others in a volunteer capacity, and may even have trouble translating voting materials. Instead of facing these obstacles to participation, it can seem easier to just stay home and not get involved. By offering English classes, Esperanza and HCLV are helping to lower one of the key barriers to both participation and employment for many American Latinos. English-

¹⁶⁸ Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*, 75.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 304.

language skills arm Latinos with the power to interact with others and contribute to the community. Classes like these build the capacity within Latino communities to participate.

Teaching community members important skills is a key component to the civic education initiative of the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. The voter education workshop hosted by HCLV is a wonderful example of the ways in which HCLV is promoting civic education among its constituents. By demonstrating how to use a voting machine to members of the community (many of whom are not proficient in English and cannot read the voting instructions or buttons), HCLV is literally teaching its constituents how to participate. In the process of providing its community with access to resources, HCLV is also building civic skills. The organization is equipping its constituents with the confidence to enter a voting booth. Participating in Voting Machine Day may even convince Latino residents to turnout to vote on Election Day. If other civic organizations across the country are arranging similar activities, this may help to explain the increase in Latino voter turnout in the past few election cycles.

On a more macro scale, Esperanza is also building the capacity of its constituents and empowering them to participate. Through the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast, Esperanza provides hundreds of Hispanic clergy members with a platform to speak with government officials about faith and non-faith issues that concern them and their communities. Again, it is all about access. Esperanza utilizes its own resources and connections to bring groups of people around the table that would not ordinarily meet.

Through meetings on Capitol Hill with political leaders, Esperanza shows other Hispanic clergy how to develop their civic skills, particularly communication and advocacy abilities, so that they can convey the needs and policy preferences of their communities. Esperanza fosters an environment in which other Hispanic leaders can grow so that they, in turn, can carry those skills back to their respective neighborhoods across the country.

Esperanza cultivates this environment at the local level, too. It provides a platform for local community members to meet with elected officials to discuss important topics in the neighborhood. Esperanza has hosted and facilitated meetings with federal, state and local politicians so that Latinos in the Hunting Park community can express their views and opinions. Esperanza provides community members with access to the avenues to participate and presents a forum for their voices to be heard. The organization is both a bridge and a platform, and it simultaneously builds civic skills.

Esperanza's immigration reform efforts teach community members how to participate in politics. The organization's efforts motivate Latinos to get involved in the immigration debate, an issue that uniquely affects their lives. By organizing information campaigns and calls to action, Esperanza is helping to educate citizens about the intricacies of immigration reform legislation, and encouraging Latinos to engage with their local representatives. Ultimately, Esperanza is teaching Latino communities how to advocate on their own behalves.

II. Conclusions

This paper examines the following research questions: Can Latinos of different races, ethnicities, countries of origins and backgrounds share a common “Latino vote”? If so, where do they find common ground and how do they mobilize? The case study analysis suggests that there is not a shared common Latino vote. Yet, in the absence of political party machines, Latino civic organizations are educating and mobilizing Latino populations across the country. In fact, it would appear that Latino civic institutions are becoming alternative mediums for political and nonpolitical participation in Latino communities as they educate populations on how to vote and how to be political advocates, as well as organize community development projects and food drives. As Verba, Schlozman and Brady state, “Activity that has nothing to do with politics or public issues can develop organizational and communications skills that are relevant for politics and thus can facilitate political activity.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, the programming and activities sponsored by Latino civic institutions do not even need to serve overtly political purposes in order for them to build civic skills among their populations. By building these skills, civic organizations are mobilizing and equipping this segment of the population with the tools and resources that they need to participate.

Through these efforts, it would appear that Latino civic institutions are organizing and uniting Latinos of all backgrounds together under one umbrella. It is true that they bring together Latinos of all origins and subgroups. In politics, particularly ethnic and identity politics, power often lies in numbers. In fact, a pan-ethnic political agenda would

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 17-18.

probably benefit the Latino community and its causes. It would be easy, therefore, to mistake these two institutions' mobilization efforts for evidence that a homogenous Latino vote exists. However, this is not exactly what we see in the two case studies. Esperanza and the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley mobilize, educate, advocate and provide access for Latinos in the United States, but they do not support one party or candidate, and do not tell their constituents how to vote. HCLV teaches members of the community how to operate a voting booth, but does not tell them who to vote for. Esperanza provides a platform for Latino leaders to speak with politicians, but it exposes them to both political parties and does not claim that one side is better than the other. Esperanza and HCLV provide access; they do not provide votes. Civic institutions may fill the gap to mobilize Latino voters, but they are not political party machines.

Additionally, while civic institutions unite Latinos around common issues, they cannot erase the inherent differences among the various subgroups. It is these differences that prevent a homogenous vote. This is why it is important to remember that the majority of Latinos in the United States feels strong ties to their countries of origin and do not believe there is a common Latino culture. Civic institutions can do their part to provide resources and break down barriers to mobilize Latinos to participate but, unless they overtly proselytize for one party or candidate, they will never formally contribute to a homogenous Latino vote. Once they get their constituents involved and to the polls, it is ultimately up to the individual to decide which party to vote for. The fact that an increasing number of Latinos are participating does not necessarily mean they will all increasingly vote for the same party.

The tendency so far has been to compare the Latino vote with other homogenous votes, like the African American voting bloc. However, the evidence here suggests that a homogenous Latino vote is both unsubstantiated and unlikely. In fact, the Latino vote is more likely to be a convenient idea than a plausible reality. If Latinos are increasingly voting for one party over another, it is not likely because they suddenly all identify with one another and agree to support the same candidates. It is more likely the result of one party or candidate supporting more relevant policies and appealing to the needs of Latino communities. This pattern mirrors the independent white vote more than the African American vote. Indeed, the differences and range of opinions among Latino voters more closely resembles either the white or Asian electorate than the African American one. Perhaps Latino voters will simply blend into the political landscape like white European immigrants did in the late nineteenth century. Whatever the future holds, Latino civic organizations provide the tools to unlock the immense potential behind the Latino electorate.

PART FOUR:

“What does Latino politics mean for American politics?”

I. Prospects for Future Research

In the foreword to the collection of essays assembled in *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization, and Representation*, political scientist Rodney Hero stresses the importance of the study of Latino politics to examining, “a variety of substantial, yet often-neglected, assumptions and theoretical, normative, and empirical questions in American politics and American political science.”¹⁷¹ These assumptions include the ways in which we choose to identify minority and disadvantaged communities, and how we think about identity politics as a whole. There is a tendency or inclination in American politics to classify, sort and fit minority groups into particular molds to better understand them. This systematic process of classification has been practiced throughout American political history.

However, the growing Latino population presents an interesting dilemma because it does not fit neatly into any one mold or classification. The historical, regional and ethnic differences among the population paint a complicated picture of the future of American politics. The simplicity that once came with classifying something as either “white” or “black” no longer exists. One can no longer assume the existence of a homogenous voting bloc, like the “Latino vote”. Future research should adapt to the nuances and diversity that now exist in American politics.

¹⁷¹ Rodney Hero, introduction to *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation*, edited by Rodolfo Espino et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), ix.

Rodney Hero poses three questions that suggest there is plenty of work to be done to better understand American political science: “What does American politics mean for Latino politics? What does Latino politics mean for American politics? And what does Latino politics mean for Latinos?”¹⁷² The research presented in this paper only begins to brush the surface of each of these three questions. By examining Latino and American politics through the lens of civic organizations, this paper proposes that civic institutions, rather than political parties or machines, hold the keys to unlocking the potential in the Latino electorate. Civic institutions are the forces behind mobilizing Latino voters and are building civic skills to encourage Latinos of all backgrounds to participate. While their work does not result in a homogenous Latino vote, the fact that these civic organizations hold the power to mobilize Latino voters, instead of political parties, represents an interesting change in American politics.

In addition, more work needs to be done to examine what long-term influences these civic groups and the political activities they promote will have on the conditions and qualities of life in Latino communities. It would be useful to have quantitative data to measure the organizational impact on Latino communities and Latino politics over time. Future research should attempt to quantify and not merely describe the impacts of civic organization activities on Latino participation. For example, efforts to correlate attendance at community center activities such as English-language classes or voter machine demonstrations with participation in subsequent elections would help to draw

¹⁷² Hero, introduction to *Latino Politics*, x.

more robust conclusions about the power of civic institutions to mobilize Latino communities.

It is also critical that additional research examines power players in Latino communities other than civic associations. Based on observations gleaned from this research experience, the role of Latina women within their respective communities warrants further study. The number of Latina women working in civic institutions and supporting community initiatives appears to outpace that of Latino men. In fact, all twelve employees at the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley are Latina women, and several members of the senior staff at Esperanza are also Latina women. Furthermore, according to the Special Projects Director at Esperanza, “Women are the ones that get stuff done in Hispanic communities and Hispanic churches. Women are the workhorses behind the initiatives.”¹⁷³ More research needs to be done to recognize the particular influence that Latina women have in American and Latino politics.

The Latino electorate has often been researched and compared to other minority groups like African Americans and Asian Americans. However, as this thesis shows, the Latino electorate is distinct in many ways from other groups. While sharing similar experiences of racial discrimination with others, many Latinos must also face language and cultural barriers in everyday life. The diversity of national origin groups that make up the Latino population in the United States alone is unique. Instead of focusing on comparisons between the Latino electorate and the African American electorate, more research should

¹⁷³ Jody Reynhout, Special Projects Director, Esperanza, interviewed by the author, February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

focus on the differences and similarities between the Latino electorate and the Asian American electorate. Asians represent the only other minority group in the United States that is comprised of a variety of national origin groups, faces racial discrimination and in many instances must overcome language barriers. Research questions could include how, as the new minorities, the Asian and Latino electorates will impact American politics, and whether or not their votes will remain distinct or simply blend into the overall population.

Additional research should continue to track how Latinos vote in elections, and which party, issue or candidate they support. In just the past fifteen years, Latinos have shifted their positions on social issues such as gay marriage and have supported both the Democrats and Republicans. While this paper asserts that there is no homogenous Latino vote to date, it would be useful to political strategists to see if any one party, candidate or issue can unite Latino voters. Immigration reform appears to be the only foreseeable issue capable of mobilizing Latinos around a common vote. What other emerging issues will have the potential to mobilize the Latino vote?

Plenty of research remains to be done with respect to Latinos and identity politics. It is essential that researchers eschew the temptation to boil down the complexities within the Latino population into sound bites like “Latino vote”. This body of research requires a full and rich understanding of all the ways in which the Latino population is unique and significant in American politics. After all, a comprehensive understanding of Latino politics and identity is necessary to inform American politics in the twenty-first century.

Appendix A

Case Study Interview Questions

National Case Study Interview Questions

General questions about Esperanza:

- What were the initial concerns that drove the creation of Esperanza in 1987?
- What is Esperanza's operating budget?
- Where do you receive most of your funding?
- Approximately how many staff members work for Esperanza (does this include the college/schools)?
- Are there other offices besides the Hunting Park facility?
- About how many people does your organization serve? What is the national origin makeup of the population you serve?
- How many other nonprofit organizations does Esperanza collaborate with (locally and nationally)? What influence has your organization had on other community organizations?
- Could you explain the differences between Esperanza as a national organization and Esperanza as a local organization? Are they two separate entities?
- What is your role within the organization (asked of the President and CEO)?

Organization's Goals:

- What have been Esperanza's main goals and how successful have you been in achieving them?
- More specifically, in what ways is Esperanza carrying out its mission for civic engagement, community advocacy and political mobilization?
- In what ways is Esperanza a voice for the Latino community?

National/Political activities:

- How involved is your organization in political/governmental issues?
- What were your goals in initiating the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast? How does it tie in with Esperanza's mission?
- How are you able to get high profile politicians to speak at the breakfast?
- Is the focus of the breakfast on faith or the relationship between the Hispanic community and government?
- What are your political affiliations? What are the political affiliations of the population you serve?
- Have you or your brother ever served as advisors to the White House or members of Congress either formally or informally?
- In what ways do you encourage members of the Latino community to be politically active/engaged?
- Does Esperanza participate in any GOTV efforts?

- In your opinion, is there a “Latino vote”?
- How do you balance the religious aspect of Esperanza with the political?

Immigration

- In what ways are you currently involved in the immigration reform debate?
- What are the goals and activities of Esperanza for America (or Esperanza para America)? Is it a PAC?
- Do you think the passage of comprehensive immigration reform will do for the Hispanic community what the passage of the Civil Rights Act did for the African American community (in that it will create a homogenous voting bloc for/against one party if one party is able to claim responsibility for it)?
- Would you agree that Latina women have played a critical role in grassroots organizing/mobilization around the immigration debate?

Local Case Study Interview Questions

General questions about Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley:

- What were the initial concerns that drove the creation of the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley in 1968?
- What is the Hispanic Center's operating budget?
- Where do you receive most of your funding?
- Approximately how many staff members work for HCLV?
- Are there other offices besides the Lehigh Valley facility?
- About how many people does your organization serve? About how far do they live from your facility?
- Is there a Latino neighborhood here in the Lehigh Valley or is the community more spread out?
- Why do you think there is such a large and vibrant Latino community in the Lehigh Valley?
- Why do you think people have chosen to settle here over bigger, metropolitan cities?
- What is the national origin makeup of the population you serve?
- How many other nonprofit organizations does HCLV collaborate with (locally and nationally)? What influence has your organization had on other community organizations?
- What is your role within the organization (asked of Director of Community Programs)?

Organization's Goals:

- What have been HCLV's main goals and how successful have you been in achieving them?
- More specifically, in what ways is HCLV carrying out its mission to empower Latinos in the Lehigh Valley?
- In what ways is HCLV a voice for the Latino community? Is HCLV a voice for the Latino community in local government specifically?
- What do you believe is the perception of HCLV in the Latino community of the Lehigh Valley?

Local/Political activities:

- How involved is your organization in political/governmental issues?
- What are the political affiliations of the population you serve? Are your constituents politically active?
- In what ways do you encourage members of the Lehigh Valley Latino community to be politically active/engaged?
- Does HCLV participate in any GOTV efforts?
- What is the Community Empowerment Program and what are its goals? Where does the program stand in its process of development?

- In what ways does/will the Community Empowerment Program encourage or support community organizing? Will you encourage your constituents to attend local political meetings (if they don't already)?
- Do you believe that local and state officials are attentive to the needs of the communities you serve? Is there more attention now to the Lehigh Valley Latino community than before?
- In your opinion, is there a Latino vote?

Immigration:

- Are you currently involved in any way in the immigration reform debate?
- Do you think the passage of comprehensive immigration reform will do for the Hispanic community what the passage of the Civil Rights Act did for the African American community (in that it will create a homogenous voting bloc for/against one party if one party is able to claim responsibility for it)?
- Would you agree that Latina women have played a critical role in grassroots organizing/mobilization around the immigration debate?

Works Cited

- Abrajano, Marisa A. *Campaigning to The New American Electorate: Advertising to Latino Voters*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Allen, Greg. "Campaigns Targeting Hispanics, But With Tight Focus." *National Public Radio*, October 2, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/02/162173953/campaigns-targeting-hispanics-but-with-tight-focus>.
- Barreto, Matt A. *Ethnic Cues: The Role of Shared Ethnicity in Latino Political Participation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- "Blacks, Hispanics Nixed Gay Marriage." *The Washington Times*, November 8, 2008. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/08/blacks-hispanics-nixed-gay-marriage/?page=all>.
- Cortes, Luis. President, Esperanza. Email message to author. March 13, 2014.
- DeSipio, Louis. "Latino Civic and Political Participation." In *Hispanics and The Future of America* edited by Marta Tienda, and Faith Mitchell, 447-479. Washington: The National Academies Press, 2006.
- "The Diversifying Electorate—Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections)." *United States Census Bureau*, May 2013. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-568.pdf>.
- Esperanza. "About Us." Accessed January 6, 2014. http://www.esperanza.us/site/c.inKOIPNhEiG/b.5510503/k.C744/About_Us.htm
- Espino, Rodolfo, David L. Leal, and Kenneth J. Meier. *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- Espinosa, Gastón, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds. *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Garcia Bedolla, Lisa, and Melissa Michelson. *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. "About Us." Accessed February 4, 2014. http://www.hclv.org/#!about_us/csgz.
- Hugo Lopez, Mark, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Latino Voters Support Obama by 3-1 Ratio, But Are Less Certain than Others about Voting." *Pew Hispanic Center*, October 2012.

- http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/10/2012_NSL_latino_vote_report_FINAL_10-18-12.pdf
- Hugo Lopez, Mark, and Danielle Cuddington. "Latinos Changing Views of Same-Sex Marriage." *Pew Hispanic Center*, June 19, 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/19/latinos-changing-views-of-same-sex-marriage/>.
- Márquez, Benjamin. "Latino Identity Politics Research: Problems and Opportunities." In *Latino Politics: Identity, Mobilization and Representation* edited by Rodolfo Espino, David L. Leal, and Kenneth J. Meier, 17-26. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- "Mitt Romney Latino Loss Shows Republicans 'Have Been Their Own Worst Enemy'." *Huffington Post*, November 11, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/11/mitt-romney-latino-loss-republican_n_2104966.html.
- Navarro, Sharon Ann, and Armando Xavier Mejia, eds. *Latino Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004.
- Newport, Frank and Joy Wilke. "Hispanics of All Ages Tilt Democratic." *Gallup*, July 15, 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163451/hispanics-ages-tild-democratic.aspx?version=print>.
- Ochoa, Gilda. "Theorizing, Researching, and Constructing Cross-Latino/a Relations in the United States." In *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America* edited by Havidán Rodríguez, Rogelio Sáenz, and Cecilia Menjívar, 263-276. New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2008.
- Oxholm, Pita. Executive Director for Housing and Economic Development, Esperanza. Interviewed by the author. February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Pew Hispanic Center. "2011 Hispanic Origin Profiles." Accessed December 3, 2013. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>.
- Quinones, Nereida. Community Resource Coordinator, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. Interviewed by the author. March 10, 2014, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.
- Reynhout, Jody. Special Projects Director, Esperanza. Interviewed by the author. February 27, 2014, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Rodríguez, Havidán, Rogelio Sáenz, and Cecilia Menjívar. *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America*. New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2008.

- “Some Other Race: How Should America Count its Hispanics?,” *The Economist*, Feb 9, 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/usa/21571487-how-should-america-count-its-hispanics-some-other-race>.
- Taylor, Paul, Mark Hugo Lopez, Jessica Martinez and Gabriel Velasco, “When Labels Don’t Fit: Hispanics and Their Views of Identity.” *Pew Hispanic Center*, April 2012. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/04/PHC-Hispanic-Identity.pdf>.
- Teixeira, Roy, ed. *Red Blue & Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008.
- Tienda, Marta, and Faith Mitchell, eds. *Hispanics and The Future of America*. Washington: The National Academies Press, 2006.
- Time Staff, “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.” *Time*, February 7, 2005. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1993243_1993265,00.html
- United States Census Bureau. “State and County QuickFacts.” Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/4206088.html>.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Wilson, Catherine. *The Politics of Latino Faith: Religion, Identity, and Urban Community*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Velazquez, Lorna. Executive Director, Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. Email message to author. March 14, 2014.
- Wilson, Jill, and Audrey Singer. “Immigrants in 2010 Metropolitan America: A Decade of Change.” *The Brookings Institution*, 2011. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/10/13-immigration-wilson-singer>.
- Wood, Richard. “Fe y Acción Social: Hispanic Churches in Faith-Based Community Organizing.” In *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* edited by Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, 246-173. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Zlolniski, Christian. “Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States.” In *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the Face of America* edited by Havidán Rodríguez, Rogelio Sáenz, and Cecilia Menjivar, 352-368. New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2008.