

The New York Times

LATINO GROWTH NOT FULLY FELT AT VOTING BOOTH

By Adam Nagourney
June 9, 2012

DENVER – The nation’s rapidly growing Latino population is one of the most powerful forces working in President Obama’s favor in many of the states that will determine his contest with Mitt Romney. But Latinos are not registering or voting in numbers that fully reflect their potential strength, leaving Hispanic leaders frustrated and Democrats worried as they increase efforts to rally Latino support.

Interviews with Latino voters across the country suggested a range of reasons for what has become, over a decade, an entrenched pattern of nonparticipation, ranging from a distrust of government to a fear of what many see as an intimidating effort by law enforcement and political leaders to crack down on immigrants, legal or not.

Here in Denver, Ben Monterosso, the executive director of Mi Familia Vota, or My Family Votes, a national group that helps Latinos become citizens and register to vote, gathered organizers around a table in his office and recited census data demonstrating the lack of Latino participation.

“Our potential at the ballot box is not being maximized,” Mr. Monterosso told them. “The untapped potential is there.”

More than 21 million Latinos will be eligible to vote this November, clustered in pockets from Colorado to Florida, as well as in less obvious states like Illinois, Iowa, North Carolina and Virginia. Yet just over 10 million of them are registered, and even fewer turn out to vote.

In the 2008 presidential election, when a record 10 million Latinos showed up at the polls nationwide, that amounted to just half of the eligible voters. By contrast, 66 percent of eligible whites and 65 percent of eligible blacks voted, according to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center.

That disparity is echoed in swing states across the country. In Nevada, 42 percent of eligible Hispanics are registered, while just 35 percent are registered in Virginia, according to Latino Decisions, which studies Latino voting trends.

Although Latinos do not turn up at the polls in the same numbers, relative to their population, as other ethnic groups, their overall numbers are growing so rapidly that they are nevertheless on the verge of becoming the powerful force in American politics that officials in both parties have long anticipated — an effect that would only be magnified should they somehow begin to match the voting percentages of other ethnic groups.

Mr. Obama’s campaign has seized on that as a central part of his re-election strategy, with an early burst of three Spanish-language television advertisements in four swing states, including Colorado, and voter registration drives in Latino neighborhoods.

"Hi, are you registered to vote?" Linda Vargas, 62, called out in English and Spanish to people walking into a public library on the outskirts of Denver as she sat behind a table stacked with voter registration forms.

This segment of the American electorate is by any measure sprawling, with near-explosive population growth in places like California and Texas and growing numbers in swing states like Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Nevada and New Mexico. Their presence in such politically important states has only fed the frustration of Latino organizers over their underrepresentation at the polls.

Matt A. Barreto, an associate professor of political science at the University of Washington and head of Latino Decisions, said the population growth had produced a higher Latino vote in every presidential election over the last decade, a number that had the effect of masking the political apathy of many Latino voters.

"The population growth has driven increases in the Latino vote every year," he said. "But we still need to confront a registration gap that is quite significant."

Jim Messina, Mr. Obama's campaign manager, said Latino voters were a critical factor in the president's re-election hopes. "Look, if we do our job right and have a good ground game, I absolutely believe that Latino voters can be one of the big reasons we win this election," he said.

Officials in Mr. Romney's campaign argued that he would cut into Mr. Obama's Latino support by challenging his record on the economy, and how, they said, it had been particularly harmful to Latinos. Last week, the Romney campaign posted a Spanish-language advertisement on its Web site pointing to rising unemployment among Latinos.

"Understand the dynamic of this election: it's about the economy and it's about jobs," said Joshua Baca, who is responsible for the Romney campaign's Hispanic outreach. "Whatever the Obama campaign wants to do with regards to targeting Hispanic voters, that's fine. Our message is going to be, 'It doesn't matter if you are Hispanic, if you're a woman, if you're African-American: it's the economy.' "

Latino voters overwhelmingly support Mr. Obama over Mr. Romney, according to recent polls. The anger at Republicans for supporting tough immigration laws, like the one passed in Arizona last year, is powerful and potentially damaging to Mr. Romney after a Republican primary in which the candidates largely rallied behind that law.

Yet interviews suggest lingering concerns with what many see as Mr. Obama's failure to deliver on promises to change the immigration system, as well as distress about his stewardship of the economy. Together, those forces appear to be producing a general wariness of government.

"They promise, 'Oh, we're going to do this for the Hispanic community, we're going to do that,' and we never get even half of the things that they promise," said Derkis Sanchez, 51, an independent who lives in Miami.

Evidence of the lack of participation can be found across the West, and particularly in Colorado, a state that could be one of the most contested in November. In 2010, 114,000 of the 455,000 Latinos eligible to vote in the state turned out, a study by Latino Decisions found; 47 percent of eligible voters are registered today.

The number of Latinos eligible to vote nationally may overstate their actual influence. Of the 21 million, nearly 10 million live in California or Texas, which are unlikely to be in play in November.

And while an influx of younger voters is helping to push up the overall number, younger voters have historically been disproportionately uninterested in politics, a particular challenge in Colorado given that the Latino population is younger than the overall population. A Pew study found that one-third of the nation's eligible Hispanic voters are between 18 and 29; but they make up just 22 percent of the overall population.

Arturo Vargas, the head of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, said his organization projected that 12.2 million Latino voters would turn out this November.

"But we do have a performance gap between Hispanic voters and non-Hispanic voters," he said.

Many analysts argue that the demographic wave of Hispanic voters that began in California in 1994, with a backlash to a state voter initiative backed by Republicans that prohibited illegal immigrants from using public services, is now sweeping over Arizona and Colorado, and eventually will return even Texas to the Democratic fold.

"I believe long term all those states are coming on the map," Mr. Messina said.

Democrats and Republicans have recognized the rising power of Latino voters for over a decade; advisers to George W. Bush had repeatedly identified Hispanics as central to building a long-lasting electoral coalition. But the Republican position has dropped sharply as the party has been identified with tough policies focused on illegal immigrants.

Republicans have also pushed to impose tough restrictions on voter registration, which Democrats and Latino groups attacked as a way to discourage Hispanics, among others, from voting.

"Our state government is kind of repressive against immigration," said Alejandro Martinez, 32, a Democrat who lives in Nogales, Ariz. "They're afraid to go out there and vote."

Organizers meeting with Mr. Monterosso said they had encountered deep reservations among Hispanics across party lines.

"When I hear a lot of Latinos say they are U.S. citizens but they are not registered to vote, that makes me worried: we are not helping one another," said Jose Sanchez, 24. "I'm seeing in our community a lot of frustration, a lot of anger, a lot of disappointment and a lot of fear. We have a president that promised so much to our community but has offered us really bad news."

Mr. Monterosso, sitting quietly as Mr. Sanchez spoke, responded that Republicans had led the way in demonizing Latinos for political gain. "Every single attack on our community has come from the Republican side," he said.

Just outside Denver, Daniel Lucero, the co-owner of a barbershop, said neither political party had paid enough attention to Latino voters.

"I would say the majority I know, maybe 10 to 12 percent of them vote," said Mr. Lucero, 66. "The rest don't care. They feel like politics doesn't affect them."

In Nogales, Barbara Gudenkauf, said many of her fellow Latinos "feel like their issues aren't being addressed. 'My vote is not going to count. Why bother to take the time off work if it's not going to make a difference?' "

On a hot afternoon in Las Vegas recently, Leo Murrieta, the director of Mi Familia Vota in Nevada, drove to the Department of Motor Vehicles office in a Latino neighborhood and watched as his workers, voter registration forms in hand, stopped people outside the office.

"I have staff out in 10 places today," he said. "There's a lot of work to be done."