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Latino Electoral and Non-electoral Political Participation: Findings from the 1996 Chicago Latino Registered Voter Survey

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Introduction

The Latino population in the United States has been expanding at a tremendous rate over the last two decades, so much so that it is predicted that Latinos will become the largest ethnic minority group shortly after the turn of the century. In 1990, one out of every ten persons counted in the US census was Latino, and the Bureau of the Census projects that by the year 2050 one of every five US residents may be Latino (US Bureau of the Census 1993:2). As the number of Latinos in the United States grows, so does their potential for influencing American politics. Yet, we have a very limited understanding of Latino civic engagement and political behavior.

Few Americans, whether Latino or not, are politically active at high levels or in sustained fashion. Voting turnout has thus become a very common manner in which to measure political participation, since many individuals participate in this perennial political activity. When citizens vote they exhibit at least a minimum level of political activity, even if only once every four years.

While voting is an important measure of political participation, it does not capture other forms of civic engagement, such as participation in political organizations or other private voluntary associations (e.g., charities, community groups, religious organizations). A multi-dimensional conceptualization of political participation incorporates a broad spectrum of citizen mobilization like voting, campaigning, participation in community activities, involvement in collective action to solve a problem, public discourse, and many other forms of non-electoral political activity. Furthermore, some analysts have argued elsewhere that taking part in private voluntary associations is strongly associated with voting and other political activity (Verba & Nie 1972, Putnam 1994, Diaz 1996). Thus, a view that incorporates both electoral and non-electoral political behaviors provides a more
accurate picture of civic engagement and political participation.

In this study, we attempt to gain a multidimensional understanding of Latino political participation by looking at different measures of participation, including an index of political participation. Our hope is to contribute more understanding to the little studied phenomenon of Latino political participation.

**Literature Review: Latino Political Participation**

**Electoral Participation:**

Political surveys have historically ignored, undercounted, or oversimplified Latino political behavior. Arvizu and Garcia have pointed out that "... the omission of ethnicity by most major voting studies and data sets has created an incomplete and inaccurate depiction of the American voting public" (1996: 110).

As the number of Latinos in the United States grows, so does their potential for influencing American politics.

It has only been in the last two decades that researchers have begun to give serious attention to Latino political participation. Most of the research thus far, however, is limited to comparisons of Latino and Anglo voting rates. While this is an important vein of research, scholars must be prepared to accept that such comparison may be akin to comparing apples and oranges, since the Latino population may exhibit important differences from the Anglo population that affect levels of political behavior.

Perhaps the first attempt to understand Latino voting behavior can be found in Wolfinger and Rosenstone's, *Who Votes* (1980). Their findings indicate that while Chicanos were three percent more likely to vote than the general population, when controlling for socioeconomic status, their potential political power was compromised by high levels of noncitizenship and low naturalization rates. Similarly, Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) note the diluted voter potential among Latinos due to lack of citizenship. Interestingly, Garcia and Arce (1988) found higher voter turnout rates among naturalized and first generation, American-born Chicanos in contrast to second generation and beyond Chicano citizens.

Nearly a decade later, Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) reported Latino voter turn-out to be 51.8 percent, 15 percentage points lower than that of the US population in general, contradicting Wolfinger and Rosenstone's earlier findings. However, Calvo and Rosenstone found considerable ethnic group differences among Latinos. For example, Cuban turnout rates exceed that of non-Latino voters and Puerto Ricans are least likely to vote among Latinos. Similarly, de La Garza and others (1992) found Latino participation to lag substantially behind that of non-Latinos.

More recently, Diaz (1996) indicates that Latino voter registration rates were
approximately 20 percent lower than those of non-Latinos, in the 1990, 1992, and 1994 election years. Diaz also found ethnic variation in voter registration rates when analyzing data from the Latino National Political Survey. For example, he found that approximately 66 percent of Mexican Americans, 65 percent of Puerto Ricans, and 83 percent of Cuban Americans were registered to vote. Furthermore, he found that approximately 78 percent of Mexican Americans, 74 percent of Puerto Ricans, and 88 percent of Cuban Americans had ever registered to vote. The lower registration rates, when paired with lower voter turnout rates produced a substantial difference between the proportion of Latino and non-Latino voters in the 1994 election, in which approximately one third of Latino citizens voted, in contrast with one-half of non-Latinos. We can see, then, that part of the Latino population is distinct from the Anglo population in that some Latinos — non-citizens — must surmount barriers to participation that Anglos do not confront. Latinos of voting age, who are not citizens, must become engaged in the process of becoming citizens before they can register to vote. This additional hurdle is likely to significantly attenuate overall Latino voting rates.

Previous studies of the general electorate have indicated that participation in electoral politics is positively associated with increases in socioeconomic status (Verba and Nie 1972). There is some evidence of a similar pattern among Latinos. Higher levels of educational attainment and occupational status were found to increase Mexican and Puerto Rican voter turnout, while having virtually no effect on Cuban voting (Calvo and Rosenstone 1989). Calvo and Rosenstone (1989) argue that, while education was found to be the best socioeconomic predictor of increased voting for the general US population, its impact on Latinos, while significant, was less pronounced. They found the same pattern regarding income: increases in income were associated with rising turnout rates for both the general and Latino populations, but were more marked for the former. Wrinkle and others (1996) observe that increases in income promoted non-electoral political activity among Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Cubans, but found that increases in education had a positive effect on Puerto Rican and Mexican Americans only. Arvizu (1994, 1996) found the interaction between education and age to be important in predicting Latino voter turnout. Older, rather than younger, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were found to be more likely to vote.

Gender has been identified in previous research to be a significant factor in political participation and opinion formation. Numerous studies have documented lower participation levels in electoral and nonelectoral political activities among
women prior to the 1970s (Andersen 1975; Welch 1977; Conway 1985; Romer 1990). However, the reversal of this trend in the last two decades has been noted by several researchers. Stanley and Niemi (1992) found stronger voter turnout rates among women since the 1970s in federal elections, and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) reported a closing of the gender gap in traditional politics, during the 1970s and 1980s. Gender differences have also been identified in measures of Latino political participation. Welch and Sigelman (1992) uncovered a gender gap among Latinos on measures of political ideology, party identification, and presidential voting.

Nonelectoral Participation:

Hero and Campbell (1996) found that, while Latinos may be less likely to vote than non-Latinos, Latino participation in a number of other nonelectoral forms was not distinct when socioeconomic differences were considered. More specifically, when socioeconomic variation is accounted for, there is not a significant difference between Latino and non-Latino nonvoting political participation, such as attending public meetings, writing to public officials, attending rallies, and contributing money. Significant differences between the two groups were found only in the rates of volunteering for a candidate or party and signing petitions.

Wrinkle and others (1996) found that participation in nonelectoral political activities increases for all Latino groups with higher incomes, similar to patterns observed in voting behavior in the general population. They also found that nonelectoral political participation was boosted by increased levels of education among Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans, while not affecting Cubans. They did not find significant differences between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in their patterns of nonelectoral political activity. Yet, they did find that Cubans, while having higher voting rates, were less likely to engage in nonelectoral political activities than were Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. They also found age to be significant in predicting Mexican American and Puerto Rican nonelectoral political participation.

Winkle and others (1996) also identified gender as a significant predictor of nonelectoral political activity among Mexican Americans. They found Chicanas were more likely to write letters, attend public meetings, and engage in other nonelectoral political activities than their male counterparts.

In summary, we can see that numerous factors have been found to affect Latino political participation. Both education and income seem to be positively
related to political participation, with education clearly the stronger predictor. Numerous studies have also found age to influence political activity, with older individuals participating at higher levels than younger individuals. Finally, there have been varied findings concerning the effects of gender on voter participation. Some studies have indicated that while women voted with less frequency than men prior to the 1970s, the gap has been closed in recent decades. Other research has shown that women participate at higher rates than men in nonelectoral political activities.

Methodology and Operationalization

**The Survey:**

In order to collect data on Latino political participation as well as other predictor variables, we developed a 54 question telephone survey, which was administered during a two-week period in late October 1996, just prior to the national elections. We collected data on demographic characteristics, nonelectoral and electoral political participation, public policy opinions, and candidate choices. The instrument contained both multiple choice and open ended questions. The questionnaire was piloted on a small number of individuals and modified according to the feedback received. The survey instrument was administered by about 40 volunteers in both Spanish and English and required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

**The Sample:**

The Cook County Board of Elections provided two electronic files for the purpose of drawing a sample. One file contained a complete list of all registered voters in Chicago, with phone numbers when available. The second file contained a list of Latino surnames developed by the US Census Bureau. The total list of registered voters (N=1,374,644) was matched with the Latino surname file, yielding 141,659 estimated Latino registered voters for the city of Chicago. A five percent random sample of voters with phone numbers was drawn from this file to generate a list for conducting the survey. A total of 408 surveys were completed during the two-week period.

The sample represented the following general characteristics. Women comprised 61 percent of all respondents. With regard to national origin, 46.7 percent were of Mexican heritage, 37.7 percent were Puerto Rican, and 15.6 percent were of other Latino heritage. Sample frequencies and means indicated that the typical Latino registered voter was 40 years old, had some college education (30.9 percent), was foreign born (54.2 percent), had immigrated to the US at 18 years of age, was married (54.3 percent), and was overwhelmingly of the Catholic faith (77.1 percent). Furthermore, the average Latino registered voter lived in a four-member household (3.74), in which Spanish is more likely to be spoken than English (43 percent), and was a full-time employee (52.5 percent) with a total annual family income ranging from $20,000 to $29,000.
Measuring Political Participation:

Our goal was to measure political participation broadly. We therefore constructed three questions on political participation. First, we asked the respondents whether or not they had voted in the last election in which they were eligible to vote. Second, we asked if they had ever participated in a political organization. Third, we asked the respondents if they had ever been active in a community or religious organization. These questions allow us to look at political activity involving both electoral and non-electoral forms. For example, some Latinos may be reticent to vote, yet may be very active in a grassroots political organization or in a religious organization that is highly involved in community activities.

It would be logical to assume that some respondents will be active in all three types of activities. For example, we may surmise that an individual who votes is much more likely to belong to a community or political organization than an individual who does not vote. Interestingly enough, however, in our sample there is little covariance among our three measures of participation. Table 1 shows that voting (VOTED), being active in a political organization (POLORG), and being active in a community or religious organization (COMORG) are weakly correlated. These findings suggest that voting captures only a slice of political participation and that other forms of political activity must be taken into account by scholars in order to construct a valid measure of political involvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VOTED</th>
<th>POLORG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POLORG</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMOG</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keeping the above correlations in mind, we constructed a simple index of political participation. Combining the three variables above, we created an index with four values, from zero to three. If an individual did not vote and did not participate in a political or community organization, s/he would represent the lowest level of participation, receiving a zero. At the other extreme, a respondent who voted, participated in both a political organization and a community organization was coded as a three, representing the highest level of participation. With this index, we measure participation beyond just casting a vote every two or four years, in hopes of capturing political involvement more fully. Additionally, the index yields a variable that depicts political participation in increments rather than simply dichotomously.

Consequently, we use four dependent variables. Three variables measure different forms of participation dichotomously: voting, involvement in a political organization, and involvement in a community or religious organization. Our
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fourth variable is an index that attempts to measure political participation more generally and fully by combining the three forms of participation.

**Measuring Predictors of Political Participation:**

Guided by previous research, we constructed a survey which would generate the variables most commonly cited as probable predictors of political participation. At the same time, we did not want to be constrained completely by previous findings and thus constructed numerous questions simply based on a possible, logical relationship with political participation. We employed the following independent variables:

**AGE:** Age of the respondent. Several studies have found that young people tend to be less active politically. As an individual gets older, s/he is more likely to become incorporated in the political system, perhaps because s/he has more at stake in the community.

**BORNUS:** Dichotomous variable depicting whether or not the respondent was born in the United States. This variable tests whether those who are immigrants (not born in the United States) are less likely to be involved in the political system.

**EDU:** Level of education. Numerous studies have found that increased levels of education correspond with increased levels of political participation, especially voting.

**EMPLOYED:** Dichotomous variable depicting whether respondent is in the workforce full-time. A full-time worker (whether an employee or self-employed) may have more of an interest in being politically active than someone who is not fully engaged in the workforce.

**FEMALE:** Dichotomous variable for gender (female or not). Our sample is composed of 60 percent women, which suggests that Latinas may be more likely to register to vote and perhaps participate politically.

**HOMEOWN:** Dichotomous variable measuring whether respondent is a homeowner. We may expect to find that homeowners are more actively involved in their communities and in the political process, since they have more at stake, at least economically.

**INCOME:** Total family income. Some studies have found that higher income leads to higher levels of political involvement.

**MEX and PR:** Dummy variables for Mexican and Puerto Rican ancestry. Some studies have found differences in political activity based on the national origin of Latinos. In Chicago, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans dominate the Latino community numerically. Since most studies have found that Cubans differ in participation from other Latino groups, we did not expect to find a significant difference between Mexi-
cans and Puerto Ricans. Regardless, we created dummy variables to see if differences were present.

**REGISTR:** Length of time respondent has been registered to vote. Since Latinos are a special case in the American political system, because many have to become citizens before they can vote, we hypothesized that the length of time an individual has been registered to vote would help to explain whether that individual is active politically or not. Those who have just recently registered to vote may not be as active as those who have been registered for a longer time.

**SPANISH:** Dichotomous variable for language used in the home. Those who still speak Spanish predominantly in their homes may not be as connected to the US political system as those who speak mostly English, or both languages, and thus be less likely to participate in that system.

**YEARSUS:** Number of years respondent has been in the United States. As with age, those who have been in the US for a longer period of time may have become more incorporated into the political system.

Rather than constructing parsimonious models based on the findings of previous studies, we entered the independent variables above in a pool and used forward stepwise selection, with the likelihood-ratio test criterion for removing variables from the pool, to determine which covariates were significantly related to our three dichotomous measures of participation (See Norusis 1992: 15-19; Hosmer and Lemeshow 1989: 82-91; and Menard 1995: 54-57). We used the same procedure for each dichotomous dependent variable — VOTED, POLORG, and COMORG — in a logistic regression analysis. We introduced some interactive terms for variables that exhibited a high degree of covariance, particularly age and time the respondent has been in the United States, and income and education. However, these interaction terms did not yield any significant results. After the forward, stepwise process was completed, we were left with only those variables that were significant at least at the .05 level of confidence. We then ran a logistic regression model with only the significant variables included, in order to see the effects of these variables with a maximum number of cases. The results with larger Ns were always slightly better in terms of prediction than the initial results, which had all possible predictors included in the regression analysis. For our fourth dependent variable, political participation, we ran a linear, multiple regression analysis, using a step-wise procedure for determining which variables to keep in the model.

**Data Analysis**

Our results are interesting because different types of participation appear to be correlated with different combinations of predictor variables. Table 2 shows that voting is best explained by two variables: how long the respondent had been registered to vote and the age of the respondent. These results seem logical and consistent with some previous findings. However, they do not square with find-
ings which show that education is an important predictor of voting turnout. Some studies, however, point out that education is not as important a factor in Latino voting turnout than in the voting turnout of Anglos (Calvo and Rosenstone 1989). Additionally, other studies have not used a variable that measures how long the respondent has been registered to vote. In our study this factor appears to be paramount in predicting voting turnout. Age has also been found to be important in predicting voting turnout in other studies. Our results show that while age is a significant factor, the length of time a respondent has been registered to vote is clearly the most important element in predicting that respondent's likelihood of voting.3

Table 2. Logistic Regression Predictors of Voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long registered to vote</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.91</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correct prediction = 77.6 percent
N = 402

We can surmise that when first registering to vote an individual may still be hesitant to vote or not be completely sure about the voting process, thus minimizing his or her chances of actually voting.4 Once registered for several years, how-

...[F]our factors best predict political participation in our sample: age, education, gender and how long the respondent has been registered to vote.

 ever, the registrant is much more likely to have become enfranchised into and familiar with the political system. And, the older the registrant, the more likely it is that s/he will vote.

Table 3 indicates that gender, level of education, and the number of years the respondent has been in the United States all determine whether an individual will participate in a political organization. It is not surprising that education level and number of years in the United States emerge as significant factors, since other studies have pointed to their influence on political participation. The importance of gender, especially since it appears to be the most salient factor, is surprising, however. It appears that women are less likely than men to participate in political organizations, despite previous findings suggesting that women and men participate at similar levels.
Table 3. Logistic Regression Predictors of Participating in a Political Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-1.28</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in the US</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.76</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correct prediction = 84.5 percent
N = 401

Table 4 displays that education is the only factor that significantly predicts whether a respondent will become involved in a community or religious organization. Again, education appears as an important influence on political participation, which is consistent with previous studies. We can see from Table 4, however, that education's influence on this type of community activity is slight. It is interesting to note that no other factor had a significant effect on this type of community involvement. Perhaps an individual's level of community participation is more the result of personal networks than any other factor except education.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Predictor of Participating in a Community or Religious Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.92</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correct prediction = 61.98 percent
N = 405

Finally, we look at an index variable, political participation, that incorporates our previous measures of participation. Table 5 shows that four factors best predict political participation in our sample: age, education, gender and how long the respondent has been registered to vote. That age and education are positively related to political participation is no surprise, since previous studies have consistently shown similar results. However, again we see that in our sample women tend to exhibit a tendency to be less active politically than men. And, we also see
that the length of time an individual has been registered to vote has the strongest, positive influence on political participation.

Table 5. Linear Regression Predictors of Political Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long registered to vote</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multiple R = .41
Adjusted R square = .16
N = 406

Conclusions and Implications

Our data tend to corroborate the findings of previous studies in a limited manner. As in other studies, our data support the notion that education is positively related to political participation. Those Latinos with higher levels of education tend to be more active politically than those with lower education levels. Additionally, we find that maturity, or simply time, has a positive effect on participation. Those who are older or have been in the United States longer tend to participate more than those who are younger or have been in the United States only for a short time.

Our study, on the other hand, yields some new and interesting findings. For example, our data suggest that women tend to participate at lower levels than men. We can surmise that women may be less focused on politics because they may be more involved than men in time-consuming family activities and responsibilities. It is also possible that women are active in school and community activities that detract from electoral political participation, but nevertheless reflect community involvement. We cannot reach any conclusions about why women seem to be less active politically than men without collecting and analyzing more data. Our findings are surprising because our sample was composed of 60 percent women. Since there are more men than women in the Chicago Latino population, we were convinced that Latinas were much more likely to register to vote than Latino men, and consequently we expected to find that women would be more active politically.5

Our study uncovers a predictor of political participation — how long a respondent has been registered to vote — that has not been explored in the past. For example, the Latino National Political Survey did not ask respondents how long they had been registered to vote (See de la Garza and others 1992: Appendix 1). Since much of the work on Latino political participation has used the data from
this extensive, national survey, no one has found a relationship between participation and the length of time a respondent has been registered to vote. Those Latinos who have been registered to vote for more than four years tend to participate at higher rates than those who have recently registered. This finding suggests that in a period of a large-scale Latino voter registration campaign (like the Latino Vote 96 campaign), the Latino vote may not be as large as hoped by activists. However, in the long run, registration efforts will yield large dividends.

What we did not find in our analysis is also of interest. For example, it appears that Latinos who were born in the United States are no more likely to participate politically than Latinos who are immigrants. Likewise, Latinos who speak Spanish predominantly in their homes are just as likely to participate politically than those who speak English principally. Being more “American,” as defined by speaking English or being born in the United States, does not seem to increase political participation, at least among those who are citizens and registered to vote.

Another important finding is that we did not uncover a very strong relationship between education and age and political participation. This could be due to the fact that Latinos may be motivated to participate politically by factors different from those that motivate the population at large or more specifically the Anglo population. One of the questions in our survey asked the respondents whether they thought their political participation would increase if there were more Latinos running for public office. The results were quite startling: 61 percent said that their participation would increase or dramatically increase. Latino political participation, like the participation of other minorities, may be greatly affected by the fact that candidates do not usually come from their ethnic group. If Latinos knew that they were going to be represented by a Latino it is much more likely that their political participation would follow the general patterns of Anglo voters. Thus, when Latinos can vote for Latinos to represent them we may see increased levels of participation, and participation patterns that resemble more closely the patterns of Anglo voters.

**Endnotes**

The authors would like to thank Angela Anderson, Lewellyn Cornelius, and Keith Kilty for their insightful comments in the preparation of this manuscript. Our graduate assistants, David Jesuit and Angela Nircchi, were instrumental and invaluable in the preparation and administration of the survey. The survey could not have been accomplished without the financial support of the Center for Urban Learning and Research, at Loyola University Chicago, headed by Phil Nyden. We especially would like to thank Juan Andrade, Director of the Midwest
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Northeast Voter Education Registration Project (MNVREP), who allowed us to use his facility and staff for the administration of the survey. And finally, we wish to thank the many volunteers, most of whom were provided by MNVREP, who selflessly gave up their time to accomplish this survey.

1 We used SPSS Windows for all statistical analysis.

2 When we ran the regression with all twelve independent variables we were left with an N of only 360, owing to missing data. When we ran the regressions again, using only the variables that were significant, our N increased to over 400 for each of the four models.

3 Since age is a continuous variable and the length of time the respondent had been registered to vote was not (categorical with four categories), we would expect the B coefficient to be smaller for age. When we recoded age as a categorical variable, in increments of ten years, the B coefficient increased by a factor of about 10 but still remained smaller than the coefficient for length of time the respondent had been registered to vote.

4 One of the reasons given for registering to vote was “to get an ID card.” While this seems like a reason that few scholars would look for, it may actually be a more important reason for registering than we may think.

5 We must keep in mind, however, that we are comparing registered Latinas with registered Latinos. If we were to look at the entire Latino population, we would perhaps find that Latinas are more likely to vote and participate politically than Latinos.

References


