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## **Hispanic Americans' Political Clout Expected To Increase**

**As more Hispanics reach voting age or become citizens, influence will rise**

By Stephen Kaufman USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- U.S. Census records indicate the 44-million-member Hispanic community is the fastest growing minority group in the United States, accounting for as much as half of the total population growth. However, because Hispanics account for only 10 percent of new U.S. voters, their growing numbers are not translating into political influence yet, says researcher Richard Fry.

In an interview with *USINFO*, Fry, a senior research associate at the nonpartisan Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, outlined three major factors that "siphon off [Hispanics' political] clout from their population growth." He also cited indicators that the community will become a much greater political force in the future.

Hispanic Americans sometimes have played a crucial electoral role in states where they are more concentrated, such as Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado and Florida. However, Hispanics accounted for only 6 percent of the voters in 2004 even though they constituted 15 percent of the U.S. population.

The Hispanic community is "a young population," with many under age 18 and therefore ineligible to vote, Fry said, pointing out that many are U.S.-born children of Mexicans and Central Americans who came to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. This "very large group, called the 'Hispanic Second Generation,'" had an average age of 11 in 2004, he said.

"They're aging now. They're working their way through our elementary schools and high schools and pretty soon they are going to turn age 18," he said. This factor partially explains why experts think "the size of the Hispanic vote will increase," he said. However, Fry said, as with other ethnic groups, Hispanic Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 have traditionally lower rates of voting compared to their elders.

The U.S. cable television station Mun2, which is aimed at young Hispanics, is teaming up with the Telemundo television network in the "Vota Por Tu Futuro / Vote 4 UR Future" campaign to encourage youth voter mobilization in 2008. Although the Hispanic Second Generation is a very young group, Fry said, it constitutes a very significant portion of the community, and people analyzing Hispanic voting trends will be watching it.

Another factor affecting Hispanics' political clout is that about 25 percent are ineligible to vote because they are not U.S. citizens. Although organizations such as the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) and the Spanish-language Univision television network actively promote citizenship drives, the naturalization process is not quick.

"You don't simply decide to become a citizen," he said, adding that not every community member is even eligible to apply since there are residency requirements for voting along with the citizenship test. "It's not clear how quickly those drives for 2008 actually produce voters," he said. But, as more go through the process of becoming citizens, Hispanics will be in a position to affect future elections more.

The third factor is the lack of participation in elections by many Hispanics who are U.S. citizens, according to Fry. In 2006, for example, only 5.6 million of the 17.3 million eligible Hispanic voters participated.

This factor is "not unique" to the community since "Hispanics, like African Americans don't register at the rate whites do and they don't vote at the same rates that whites do," Fry said, but Pew research data showed they were even less likely to vote than their African-American counterparts.

Ahead of the 2004 election there were many efforts to get Hispanic Americans to vote, and when compared to the 2000 election, both registration and voting rates rose. However, Fry said, white registration and voting rates increased even more. "So keep in mind that we can have Hispanic mobilization efforts but it's also the case that we can have mobilization efforts in segments of the white population as well," he said.

## **COMMON TRENDS ACROSS RACIAL, ETHNIC LINES**

Fry said that despite the community's 2006 mobilization in favor of

immigration reform and recent state and federal actions that target illegal immigrants, "it's hard to know how some of the changes in the political environment are or are not going to mobilize Hispanics" in 2008.

Data from 2004 actually indicates that immigration, while on the minds of many Hispanic voters, was not one of the top issues of concern.

A Pew survey of Hispanic registered voters before the 2004 election asked about issues "extremely important in determining their vote for president," and found education was the top concern with 54 percent, economic and health care issues tied for second at 51 percent, and concerns over terrorism were third at 45 percent. Immigration factored in at 27 percent. Fry said the figures show Hispanic-American voters have very similar priorities as their white and African-American counterparts, with the main difference being the level of concern over education.

Like other groups, Hispanics have seen a split within their community along religious lines. "Growing numbers of Hispanic adults are non-Catholic, and particularly evangelical [Christian]," Fry said. Hispanic evangelicals are a growing group, attracting more of the U.S.-born population.

Pew data found that while only 33 percent of Hispanic Catholics voted for President Bush over Democratic challenger John Kerry in 2004, some 56 percent of Hispanics who identified themselves as non-Catholic Christians voted Republican.

"Hispanics are not unique in sort of having this religious divide. It's just that in 2004 the religious divide was a little bit sharper among Hispanics," Fry said.

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