INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American politics has featured an ever-increasing amount of attention to Latinos and, more specifically, the Latino vote. The 1980s were labeled the “Decade of the Hispanic” (de la Garza 1987, 1) and every two to four years since then journalists and pundits have referred to Latinos as the “sleeping giant” and pondered whether this was the election year in which Latinos would “awaken” (Campbell, 199). However, “each election is followed by a somewhat disappointing review in which the Latino promise is not met and in which ongoing problems (most notably low turnout) are advanced as easy explanations” (Suarez-Orozco 2002, 398). Nevertheless, some scholars have claimed, “…the most important demographic trend in America today is the significant increase in the size and share of the Latino population” (Campbell, 200).

Given that, why has Latino political power not realized it’s true potential? The logical extension of that question seems to be the question of whether Latinos will play an important role in electoral politics in the United States? The purpose of this study is to understand why the Latino community has yet to realize its political potential by examining the barriers that the Latino political community faces in achieving political influence and representation. The answer to this question may be best understood by examining three distinct aspects of the Latino community: voter turnout, partisanship, and electoral success.

Latinos surpassed African-Americans to become the largest minority group in the United States in 2002 (Miller, 1). Currently, Latinos make up 40.5 million, or 14.2 percent, of the U.S. household population while African-Americans consist of 36.6 million, or 12.8 percent of the U.S. household population. It is projected that by 2050 the Latino population will triple to 132.8 million. This growth doubles the Latino share of the overall population from 15 percent to 30 percent (Bernstein, 1). In spite of this explosive
growth, Latinos still lag behind African-Americans in political representation. The 1990 Statistical Abstract reported that Latinos had 4,000 elected officials throughout the country and by 2000, that figure had grown to 5,200. African-Americans, on the other hand, had 8,000 and 9,000 elected officials respectively (Segura and Bowler, 3).

In light of these statistics, it seems critical for those who study American elections to begin to understand what shapes, molds, and ultimately drives Latino political participation.

THEORIES OF ASSIMILATION AND ACCULTURATION

Group political participation is likely when groups find themselves treated differently. Being treated differently then results in the group needing to find methods of reacting to that treatment. Some groups seek accommodation with the dominant culture; others reject the dominant culture, while others still strive to drastically alter the dominant culture (LeMay, 37). To examine civic participation and assimilation, as this thesis will attempt to do, several indicators of civic assimilation will be looked at. These indicators include 1) the degree to which a group votes as a cohesive bloc, 2) the turnout rate, 3) the willingness of a group to cross ethnic lines and vote against one of its own for strategic reasons, and 4) the number of members from a group that have been elected to political office (see LeMay).
These indicators of civic assimilation will be affected by a variety of internal and external factors. Internal to the group, variation in social and economic assimilation will correlate with civic assimilation. As Latinos become integrated into the economy there may be reasons why this would also increase civic assimilation. While not unique to Latinos, the research shows that the longer a Latino has lived in the United States, the more education they have received, and the higher the income, the more assimilated they are, the more likely it is they will participate in the political system. Furthermore, social assimilation, such as interracial marriage or friendships outside of their culture, may reduce group voting blocs.

External to the group, how the dominant culture treats the group will influence civic participation. Economic and social discrimination may hinder economic and social
assimilation but stimulate political assimilation. A stark example of this is seen in the
effect several Propositions had on the Latino community in California during the 1990s.
Prior to 1994, Latinos in California had turnout rates similar to Latinos in other parts of
the United States; however, with Governor Pete Wilson’s re-election campaign in 1994
and the first of three propositions aimed specifically at the Latino community, Latinos
had been galvanized. Specifically, Latino voter registration figures were up, their turnout
percentage was up, and Latinos were now identifying as solid Democrats in much larger
numbers than they had during the 1980s. Conversely, states such as Texas and Florida,
two states that also have large Latino populations, did not have contentious ballot
initiatives like those in California, and Latino electoral participation and partisanship did
not see drastic changes in comparison to the previous decade (Segura, 150).

COHESIVENESS: THE LATINO COMMUNITY

Before one can examine the partisanship of U.S. Latinos, it is useful to discuss
one of the most debated subjects in the Latino political behavior literature: whether or not
a Latino community actually exists. Concepts like ‘Latino’ and ‘Hispanic’ are mainly
American social constructions and research has been conducted on whether Latinos
actually think of themselves in panethnic terms (Campbell, 203). In fact, during the
1970s, the Census Bureau began to discuss how best to label those who, up until that
time, had been labeled Spanish speaking or Spanish surnamed. What the Bureau decided
upon “came right out of the dictionary”: Spanish/Hispanic origin (Jones-Correa 1996,
216).

De la Garza and DeSipio argue that viewing Latinos as a monolithic group
“…confuses rather than clarifies our understanding because of the characteristics that
distinguish the national-origin groups… (De la Garza & DeSipio 1994, 3). In 1989-1990,
the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) was conducted and it, for the first time, allowed researchers to compare the opinions of Cuban-, Mexican-, and Puerto Rican-Americans. The authors concluded by stating “There may be a Hispanic political community, but its parameters do no fit any existing presuppositions” (De la Garza, et al 1994, 13).

Since the results of the LNPS were made public, scholars have become increasingly sensitive in their use of panethnic terminology. In fact, most articles reviewed always contain a footnote explaining that ‘Latino’ is used for ease of explanation and does not represent a homogenous group of individuals. Additionally, the research and literature post-LNPS seems to pay much more attention to the national-origin of the respondents. In a re-examination of the Latino National Political Study, Jones-Correa and Leal delve further into the concept of panethnicity and its meaning. What they found is that Latinos predominately self-identify through national labels, such as Mexican-American (Jones-Correa 1996, 215). Their conclusions further reinforce the notion that Latino panethnicity is simply an American idea. They state that if panethnicity were being used panethnically, one could expect to find some sense of political similarities among the Latino subgroups in matters such as ideology, partisanship, and party identification, however, none of these is the case (Jones-Correa 1996, 239). Those that do self-identify with a panethnic label tend to have a weaker sense of common panethnic agendas than do other Latinos. Surprisingly, those who choose to identify in such a fashion may do so because they lack any strong ethnic attachment at all. Additionally, those who tend to identify panethnically, tend to do so for several reasons: “…distance from the immigration experience, youth, and education…” (Jones-Correa 1996, 240).
It is difficult to argue that using the term ‘Latino’ or ‘Hispanic’ does not offer either journalists or researchers a simple-to-use and simple-to-understand label from which to operate. To be sure, simplicity of language is an appreciable concept and the term ‘Latino’ is used throughout this research design; however, most of the literature seems to point out that nation of origin does indeed have a profound influence on the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of immigrants to the United States. Since the sub-groups that fall under the ‘Latino umbrella’ prefer to be identified by their nation of origin, and because these groups have distinct, if not profound, differences, it seems the most useful research into the political participation of Latinos would best be conducted by taking into account nations of origin. Indeed, as Jones-Correa and Leal state, “until researchers reach the answers to these questions [involving the nature of panethnic descriptions and the role they play], Latino politics in the United States will never fully be understood” (Jones-Correa 1996, 240).

GROUP VOTING BEHAVIOR

Shortly after the 2004 election, Republican pundits were quick to claim that President Bush won forty-four percent of the Latino vote in his re-election campaign, which would be a record high for any Republican presidential candidate. Republican strategists generally have attributed this unusually high vote share, and hope for greater continued support for Republican candidates by Latinos, on rising Latino incomes and conservative family values. The literature, however, has contested the forty-four percent figure. Depending on which exit polls one considers, President Bush received between 31.4% to 45.0% of the Latino vote (de la Garza 2007, 214). Further, some scholars place Bush’s actual Latino vote share closer to forty percent mark (Suro 2005, ii). Regardless of the actual final percentage, Bush’s share of the Latino vote is the highest a Republican
It is difficult to place Latinos within one particular party, though if one must do so, they align most with the Democrats (De la Garza, et al, 1992, 16). The question that flows logically from the fact that Latinos fit best under the Democratic umbrella then is, given that Latinos tend to support policies and programs advocated for by the Democratic Party, how do they become Democrats? How strong is their attachment to any particular party and what is the basis of their gaining partisanship?

Bruce Cain, D. Roderick Kiewiet, and Carole Uhlaner attempt to answer these questions in their study of immigrant and second or later generation Latinos. The basis of their research rests on three hypotheses: 1) factors that influence the attractiveness of parties to immigrants; 2) how continued exposure to U.S. politics effects partisanship; 3) how immigrant’s partisanship is affected by the political climate in the U.S. when they arrive. The authors draw upon data from a statewide survey of Californians conducted in 1984 because the impact of Latino immigrants had been felt most in California (Cain, et al 1991, 391). Their results are not surprising. The longer that a Latino immigrant has been in the United States, the more likely they are to identify as Democratic. Second, and subsequent, generation Latinos show similar age-related gains in Democratic identification. Additionally, the lower the income a Latino earns, the more likely they are to identify as a Democrat. Latino partisanship intensifies the longer they are in the U.S., when Latinos are committed to remaining in this country, and when they have obtained more education (Cain et al, 1991, 416). The authors are candid, however, as to what their study cannot address. For example, it may be possible that “younger Latinos are more Republican than their elders because their political experience disproportionately reflects the relatively popular presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush” or perhaps
“older Latinos are relatively more Democratic because of events that occurred during a formative period of their lives” (Cain et al 1991, 417).

In a more recent study, R. Michael Alvarez and Lisa Garcia Bedolla examine the same issue using evidence from the 2000 election. Their findings are similar in most regards. Latino partisanship evolves over time spent in the United States, however, newer and younger voters lean toward independence, not being Republican (Alvarez 2003, 44). Older Latinos, on the other hand, have firmly established partisanship and as Latinos become more socialized in American politics, they move toward the dominant party for their group, being Democrats for Puerto Ricans and Mexicans and Republicans for Cubans. The authors claim that because partisanship is derived from policy issue preferences, these attachments are unlikely to change unless the two major American political parties undergo a vast transformation. The authors conclude by stating, what so many others have: that Latinos are a heterogeneous group, both across the different national origins and across generations. The authors believe that there is still much research that needs to be done to better comprehend how Latinos learn about the American political system and how that learning is rendered across the generations (Alvarez 2003, 46).

YOU CAN LEAD A HORSE TO WATER BUT YOU CAN’T MAKE IT DRINK:
LATINO VOTING TURNOUT

Latino participation has lagged far behind all races in respect to voter registration and the act of voting.
Latino Voting-Age Population, Registration, and Voting, 1984-2004*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Voting-Age Population</th>
<th>Registration</th>
<th>Voting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>9.5 (170.0)</td>
<td>40.1% (68.3%)</td>
<td>32.6% (59.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>12.9 (178.1)</td>
<td>35.5% (66.6%)</td>
<td>28.8% (57.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>14.7 (185.7)</td>
<td>35.0% (68.2%)</td>
<td>28.9% (61.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>18.4 (193.7)</td>
<td>35.7% (65.9%)</td>
<td>26.7% (54.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>21.6 (202.6)</td>
<td>57.3% (63.9%)</td>
<td>45.1% (54.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>27.1 (215.7)</td>
<td>34.3% (65.9%)</td>
<td>28.0% (58.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Units: Voting-age population in millions of persons; percent reporting registration and percent reporting voting out of the voting-age population.

* Chart adapted from information found in Hispanic Americans: A Statistical Sourcebook

As is evident by the chart above, the Latino voting population had steadily grown since 1984 but voter registration has not kept pace. In fact, it has actually decreased from the 1984 levels while the overall populations voter registration figures have remained relatively constant.

THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG: LATINO ELECTED OFFICIALS

The paradox in minority representation appears to be evident in the Latino community, as well. Latino turnout is likely to be stimulated if Latinos are on the ballot, but if turnout is low then it is unlikely that Latinos will win, thus high quality Latino candidates are unlikely to run.

The minority empowerment thesis states that minorities could become “empowered” after they achieved influence and representation in government (Segura 194). This empowerment would lead to increased levels of participation and it should
also change levels of trust and efficacy, which should lead to change in the relations among the majority (white) – minority differences. Susan A. Banducci, Todd Donovan, and Jeffery A. Karp studied the effects of the minority empowerment thesis in regards to African-Americans who had an African-American or non-African-American representative in the U.S. Congress. Their results largely mirrored the thesis. African-Americans with an African-American Representative were more likely to feel that government was responsive to their needs and more likely to vote, although they were still just as cynical towards government as those African-Americans with descriptive representation. The effects of the minority empowerment thesis were strongest for the least-education citizens and there was little evidence of substantial white reaction to non-descriptive representation. (Segura 209).

As of June 2007, there were 5,129 Latinos serving in elected office nationwide (NALEO, 1). This represents a 37% increase in the total number of Latino elected officials since 1996, when the National Directory of Latino Elected Officials first began publishing their list. Even more striking is that Latinos serving in the federal and state government has grown over 50% and that 43 states now have Latinos elected in some capacity (NALEO, 1). Also, 2008 marked a political milestone for Latinos with Governor Bill Richardson running as the first viable Latino candidate for President from a major political party.

Since Latinos have had explosive growth in their elected representatives, especially at the federal level an updated view (and one that is Latino-centric) of the minority empowerment theory is needed.

**METHODOLOGY**
Two surveys will be analyzed and compared to help answer why Latinos have not met their political potential. The first survey is the 1989-90 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS). One of the first surveys of its kind, this data collection measures the political attitudes and behaviors of three specific Latino groups in the United States: Mexican-, Puerto Rican-, and Cuban-Americans. Information collected ranges from political participation to policy issues to demographic information. The survey population, randomly selected from forty Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas across the United States, was representative of 91% of the nation’s Latinos. This survey will be used to provide a baseline of information on group cohesion (feelings of solidarity), partisanship, and political information. This baseline information will be compared with the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS).

The LNS, the most recent survey of Latino behaviors and beliefs, contains 8,634 completed interviews of self-identified Latino/Hispanic residents of the United States. Interviewing was conducted from November 2005 through August 2006. The survey contained approximately 165 distinct items ranging from demographic descriptions to political attitudes and policy preferences, as well as a variety of social indicators and experiences and is representative of 87.5% of the U.S. Latino population.

Using these two separate national U.S. Latino surveys, my analysis of the data will attempt to answer three specific questions: 1) Has the cohesiveness, or lack thereof, in the Latino community persisted since the original 1989 survey?; 2) Has Latino partisan affiliation changed over the course of time (1989-2006) and finally; 3) Are Latinos more informed politically than they were twenty years ago? Additionally, these surveys will be used to find what factors explain the change in these important dimensions of political participation.
My analysis will begin with a descriptive economic and socio-demographic profile of Latinos in the two specific time periods. For this analysis, I will use the following variables: state/region of residence, country of origin (ethnic background), religion, household income, educational background, race, gender, and age.

Then, to answer the three questions laid out above, I will use the appropriate statistical techniques, such as logit, to determine first, the degree to which the Latino subgroups agree on the major issues facing the Latino community as suggested by the literature: education, healthcare, and the economy. Additionally, I will examine Latino attitudes towards the social issues that the Republicans claim make Latinos a natural fit for their party: non-traditional marriage and abortion. Second, I will examine the pattern of partisanship changes and, most importantly, the demographics of those who changed their views of the parties, moved closer to one party versus the other, or changed partisan affiliation. Finally, I will examine the changes in the level of political information Latinos are receiving. By using two surveys of U.S. Latinos taken over a seventeen-year time span (1989 through 2006), my analysis will be unique in that it will not be isolated to a single data set from a given time period.

CONCLUSION

As is typical every election year, Latinos were hailed as the swing constituency for the 2008 elections and the expectations were large, both on the part of the media and the campaigns themselves. Additionally, we can expect to find that Latino outreach reached unprecedented levels (Page, 1). Furthermore, we can expect Latinos to continually be in the spotlight in U.S. elections as their percentage of the overall population continues to increase. In light of this, an updated view on where U.S. Latinos
stand and the likelihood of their reaching their political potential is very much in order, which this research project will attempt to provide.

ORGANIZATION OF THESIS

I. INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH QUESTION: WHY HAVE LATINOS NOT MET THEIR POLITICAL POTENTIAL?
GROWTH IN LATINO POPULATION
LACK OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION COMPARED TO BLACKS
LATINOS CONSIDERED THE LEAST ASSIMilated ETHNIC GROUP IN U.S.

THEORY

METHODOLOGY

II. ASSIMILATION AND COHESIVENESS - IS THERE A LATINO COMMUNITY?: MORE ALIKE THAN DIFFERENT?

NATiONALITY DIFFERENCES
GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES
IMMIGRATION/CITIZENSHIP STATUS
RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY
PERSONAL IDENTITY

III. TURNOUT

CONTEXT
ARE LATINOS MORE INFORMED?
IS IT INCREASING?

IV. PARTISANSHIP

THE TWO PARTY SYSTEM
WHICH PARTY?
WHY?
CHANGE IN PARTISANSHIP OVER TIME?

IV. ELECTORAL SUCCESS

CHANGES OVER TIME
WHERE/WHEN ARE LATINOS GETTING ELECTED?

THE HOLY GRAIL

DESCRIPTIVE VS SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION

V. CONCLUSION/SUMMARY


