

The Tomás Rivera  
POLICY INSTITUTE

# Policy Brief

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## A Glimpse Into Latino Policy and Voting Preferences

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### Introduction

As Latinos<sup>1</sup> are now the largest ethnic minority group of color in the nation, and with 23 of the 50 states now reflecting this new demographic reality, an understanding of Latino political preferences should be of much interest to the nation's political leaders and general public. This interest is reinforced when one considers that political parties and candidates are making well-publicized overtures to this population. The last 2000 presidential election serves as a good example. Both presidential candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore, made unprecedented attempts to court the Latino electorate by running commercials in Spanish and campaigning heavily in Latino events and communities. It was not unusual to see one or both of the presidential candidates as keynote speakers at national conferences sponsored by such Latino organizations as the

Latin Business Association, League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), National Association of Latino Elected Officials, and National Council of La Raza, to name a few.

Latinos' presence in the electoral arena was even more strongly felt at the state level. In particular, Latinos were seen as a critical voting bloc in large states such as California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. With this national and state level attention given to the Latino electorate, ascertaining their policy and voting preferences has become increasingly important to the course of the nation's political scene. Against this backdrop, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) conducted a telephone survey of 2,011 Latino registered voters, with about 400 each in those five large states prior to the 2000 presidential election.<sup>2</sup> This policy brief contains some preliminary but significant findings from the survey with respect to the policy and voting preferences of this burgeoning electorate.

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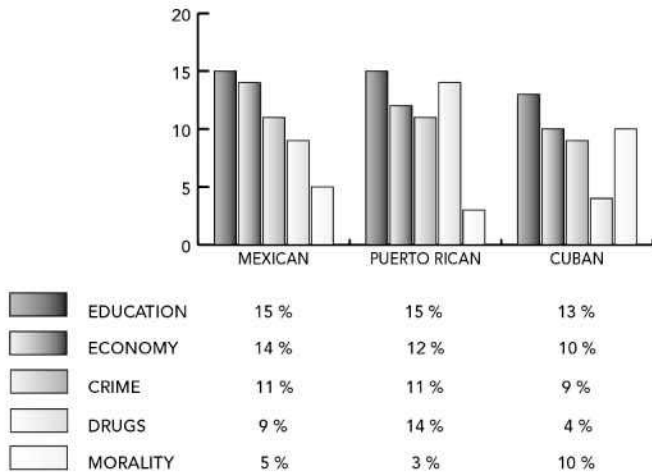
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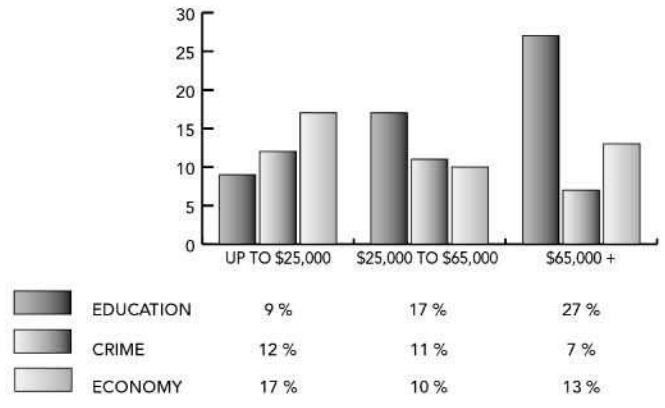
<sup>1</sup> We use the terms Latino and Hispanic interchangeably to refer to persons in the United States who can trace their ancestry to the Spanish-speaking regions of Latin America and the Caribbean.

<sup>2</sup> The telephone survey was conducted over a two-week period from October 8 to October 26, 2000.

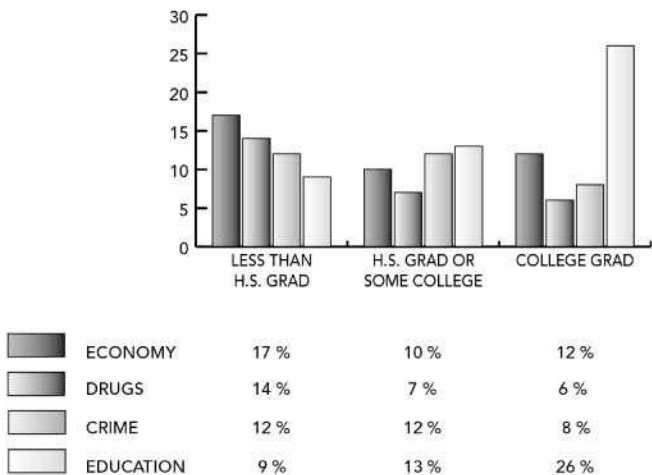
**Figure 1:  
Issue Priority for the  
Nation by National Origin**



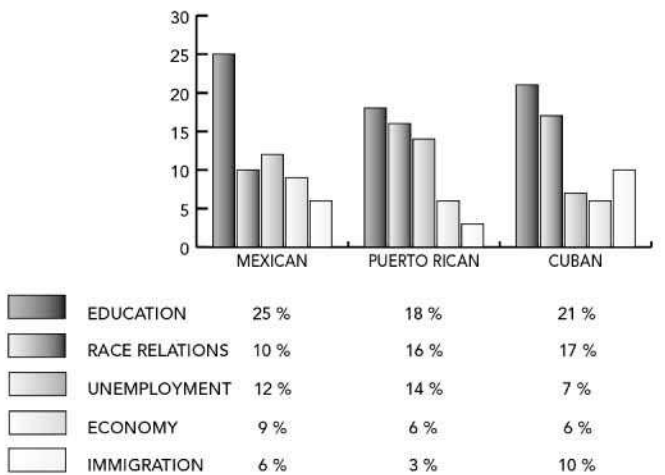
**Figure 3:  
Issue Priority for the  
Nation by Income**



**Figure 2:  
Issue Priority for the  
Nation by Education**



**Figure 4:  
Issue Priority for the Latino  
Community by National Origin**



There is currently a debate on the policy positions Latinos prefer and the subsequent appeals that both parties can make to this constituency. Some political pundits suggest that the Democrats have been more sensitive to Latino interests than have the Republicans. Others, however, point out that Republican candidates for state or national offices get about one-quarter to one-third of the Latino vote. This perhaps illustrates that the Latino electorate is not as homogeneous as many people believe. Although a large majority of Latinos identify with and vote for the Democrats, there can be variations within the electorate by socio-demographic characteristics such as education, income, age, gender,

place of birth, or national origin, and attitudinal factors such as political interest and political knowledge.

Our results indicate that across different segments of the Latino electorate, education is considered to be the most important problem facing both the nation and Latino communities. The survey further reveals that majorities of Latino voters support school vouchers, gun control, and abortion rights. Consistent in part with their policy preferences, the majority of Latinos, with the exception of Cuban Americans, indicated that they would support Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election.

As with non-Latinos, however, Latinos do exhibit differences in policy preferences. We find these differ-

**Table 1**  
**Issue Priority for the Latino Community by State**

#	Issue	California	Illinois	Texas	New York	Florida
1	Education/Schools	27.1%	19.5%	27.1%	20.7%	21.7%
2	Race Relations/Discrimination	10.8%	12.6%	8.2%	15.6%	14.1%
3	Unemployment/Jobs	8.6%	12.6%	15.8%	13.6%	9.5%
4	Economy	8.0%	7.8%	8.8%	6.3%	6.1%
5	Immigration	8.6%	5.7%	2.5%	5.4%	8.0%
6	Crime	7.2%	8.3%	5.1%	2.3%	4.0%
7	Drugs	3.0%	5.2%	3.7%	4.8%	2.4%
8	Family Values	1.4%	1.4%	2.8%	3.7%	2.4%
9	Health Care	1.4%	2.0%	1.7%	1.4%	1.5%
--	Something Else	17.7%	20.7%	19.5%	22.2%	22.3%

ences are primarily explained by variations in levels of income and education. Data from our pre-election survey show that the Democrats still maintain their great advantage over the Republicans in party identification and vote share of Latino voters. This does not mean that the Democrats can take the Latino vote for granted in the future. Instead, our data point to small but growing segments of the Latino electorate as a natural target for the Republican Party.

### Most Important Problems Facing the Nation and Latino Communities

What do Latino voters think is the most important issue facing the nation today?<sup>3</sup> Across different national origin groups, respondents most frequently pick education (e.g., public schools), the economy, crime, and drugs as the most important problems facing the nation. In particular, 15% of respondents of Mexican origin indicate that they believe education is the most important problem facing the nation. As shown in Figure 1, however, moral issues are the most salient issue of concern for 10% of Cuban American respondents, while for Puerto Ricans drugs are among the top concerns.<sup>4</sup>

One's national origin, however, does not shape issue priority as much as do his or her level of education and income. As reported in Figures 2 and 3, Latino registered voters with a higher level of education and income are more likely to select education as the

nation's most important issue. Education is clearly the most important issue for those who graduated from college. As with education, the level of income tends to shape how different issues are prioritized. The higher the level of income, the more likely respondents are to consider education as the most important national issue.

The survey also includes an open-ended question asking respondents to spell out the most important problem facing the Latino community. Responding to this question, Latino registered voters express concern over a variety of issues, of which education is the most frequently mentioned. As shown in Figure 4, race relations and/or racial discrimination are also considered as a salient problem across different national origin groups including Cuban Americans. The issue of unemployment or job creation is also an important issue for Latinos. As reported in Table 1, the same pattern emerges across different states.

### Opinions About Issues of the Day

Turning now to the specific questions about school vouchers, gun control, and a woman's right to choose, we find interesting differences of opinion. Respondents are asked to express their opinion on the three issues. Then they are asked to evaluate the importance of each of the three issues. Table 2 displays how Latinos rank the importance of the three issues, and what their opinions are on each. Of the three issues, gun control is seen as the most important, with almost

<sup>3</sup> The survey includes an open-ended question that allows respondents to specify any issue of concern.

<sup>4</sup> For ease of presentation, Latinos whose ancestry is traced to a country (or region) other than Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba are excluded. Sampling errors for these sub-groups vary, but around +/- 5 percentage points.

**Table 2**  
**Opinions on School Vouchers,  
 Gun Control, and Abortion**

	<i>Vouchers</i>	<i>Gun Control</i>	<i>Pro-Choice</i>
<b><i>How Important?</i></b>			
Very Important	46.0%	73.9%	65.5%
Somewhat Important	23.7%	15.8%	17.9%
Somewhat Unimportant	11.2%	4.0%	6.8%
Not at all Important	13.0%	4.4%	6.1%
<b><i>Do you Support?</i></b>			
Strongly Support	29.1%	64.7%	37.8%
Somewhat Support	23.6%	11.8%	12.7%
Somewhat Unimportant	12.5%	6.1%	8.0%
Not at all Important	26.0%	13.8%	34.6%

**Table 3**  
**Percent that "Strongly Support"**

	<i>Vouchers</i>	<i>Gun Control</i>	<i>Pro-Choice</i>
Total	29.1%	64.7%	37.8%
California	28.8%	63.5%	38.8%
Illinois	30.7%	64.3%	39.2%
Texas	24.6%	57.2%	34.9%
New York	27.7%	72.5%	43.6%
Florida	33.8%	65.9%	32.6%
Mexican	27.8%	62.2%	37.2%
Puerto Rican	27.4%	71.2%	40.1%
Cuban	37.2%	68.4%	35.6%
Other	28.6%	62.5%	38.3%

umn. As shown in Table 2, there seems to be consensus on only the issue of gun control with more than 75% of Latinos supporting tighter restrictions on guns. The others—school vouchers and abortion rights—demonstrate that a divide exists within the Latino community. While 38% of Latinos strongly support a woman's right to choose, 35% feel that abortion is always wrong. Similarly, 29% are strong supporters of school vouchers and 26% are strong opponents.

Table 3 reports the percentage of respondents that "strongly support" each issue and displays the state and national origin variations. Support for gun control is lowest in Texas (57%) and highest in New York (73%). Florida has the lowest support for abortion rights (33%) and Illinois the highest (39%). On school vouchers, Florida demonstrates the most support (34%) and Texas the least (25%). Interesting variations also exist when broken down by national origin. However, in general the aggregate results bear out across state and national origin.

three-quarters of respondents listing it as "very important," and an additional 16% considering it as "somewhat important."<sup>5</sup>

The abortion issue also commands a good deal of attention with two-thirds of Latinos citing it as "very important." Concerns over school vouchers are somewhat less notable with less than half (46%) of Latinos calling it very important, although in total about 70% do see it as important. In sum, Latino registered voters see these three policy issues as relevant and salient to them.

Latino registered voters express different opinions across the three issues, which makes it difficult to pigeon-hole them into the liberal or conservative col-

### **Latino Policy Preferences and Voting**

When all five states are pooled, we found that a majority of Latinos planned to vote for Al Gore in 2000. Specifically, 54% of Latinos supported Gore, 28% supported Bush, and 15% were still undecided (with 3% supporting another candidate). Aside from Florida, the pattern of support for Gore over Bush was consistent across the remaining four states. Table 4 displays the results of candidate preference for Latinos broken down by state. New York and California show the strongest support for Gore while Illinois and Texas are closer to the average. It is worth noting that Bush

<sup>5</sup> Latinos of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban origin are found to consider the issues of school vouchers, gun control, and abortion as important to a similar degree.

did receive more support in his home state, Texas, than in California, Illinois and New York, although still less than 30% of Latino respondents planned to vote for him in the weeks before the election.

Florida's Latino electorate, with a large Cuban population, is traditionally more conservative and displayed strong support for Bush (61%), as did Cubans as a whole (70%). Mexican and Puerto Rican respondents were more likely to support Gore than Latinos of Central and South American ancestry (here "other"). Support for Gore also paralleled support for Democrats in the Congress at the state and national origin levels.

Despite attempts by both candidates to communicate with Latinos in Spanish, this did not seem to be an overriding concern for Latino voters. Only about one in three Latinos reported that it was very important that the presidential candidate be able to speak Spanish, and more than a quarter felt that it was not important at all. While reaching out to the Latino community in Spanish was an important symbolic gesture, our survey results suggest that Latinos are more concerned about substantive issues facing their community.

Issues in fact are consequential for candidate preference. Table 5 reports candidate preference by the most important issue facing the Latino community. Among respondents indicating that education is the most important issue, 57% and 29% report they would support Gore and Bush. Respondents concerned about race relations and crime are much more likely to support Gore while Bush garners large support from those concerned about moral issues. Interestingly, however, those Latinos concerned with immigration are the most likely to be undecided, although they still express a strong support for Gore.

As shown in Table 6, most of those who identify with either the Democrats or the Republicans indicate that they would vote for the candidate of their party. Some cross-over voting is evident with about 8% of Democrats planning to support Bush and 9% of Republicans planning to support Gore. Of Independents, there is more or less an even split with 38% supporting Gore, 36% supporting Bush, and 26% undecided.

**Table 4**  
**Support for 2000 Presidential Candidates**

	<i>Gore</i>	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Undecided</i>
Total	55.5%	28.8%	15.7%
California	66.7%	16.4%	16.9%
Illinois	59.8%	21.5%	18.7%
Texas	54.5%	29.3%	16.2%
New York	70.1%	15.4%	14.5%
Florida	26.9%	61.0%	12.1%
Mexican	61.6%	21.7%	16.7%
Puerto Rican	64.1%	18.5%	17.3%
Cuban	19.7%	70.0%	10.3%
Other	56.5%	28.1%	15.4%

**Table 5**  
**Support for 2000 Presidential Candidates**  
**by Issue Importance**

	<i>Gore</i>	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Undecided</i>
Total	55.5%	28.8%	15.7%
Education	57.3%	28.5%	14.1%
Race Relations	64.2%	25.8%	10.0%
Unemployment	57.5%	24.4%	18.1%
Economy	55.2%	28.8%	16.0%
Immigration	52.0%	27.0%	21.0%
Crime	70.1%	20.7%	9.2%
Drugs	56.5%	29.0%	14.5%
Family Values	43.2%	45.9%	10.8%
Other	53.8%	31.2%	15.0%

### **Beyond Party Identification**

The survey inquires about the socio-political groups with which Latino registered voters identify. Specifically, the question reads, "when the media and candidates speak about voters, they often speak of them as being members of certain groups in the electorate. As I read you a list of such groups, please tell me the groups you often identify with. If you do not identify with any of the groups, please feel free to tell me so." This question is followed by a question asking respondents to name the group with which they most identify.

We find that the most popular identification is simply as "working families" with 45% of all respondents identifying with this group, and 27% further reporting that they most identify with "working

**Table 6**  
**Support for 2000 Presidential Candidates**  
**by Party Identification**

	<i>Gore</i>	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Undecided</i>
Total	55.5%	28.8%	15.7%
Democrats	80.7%	7.7%	11.6%
Republicans	8.9%	82.1%	8.9%
Independents	38.4%	35.7%	25.9%

**Table 7**  
**Latino Group Identification \***

<i>Group Identity</i>	<i>Most Identify</i>	<i>Identify</i>
Working Families	27.2%	44.7%
Latinos	20.0%	42.7%
Soccer Moms	8.7%	16.7%
Democrats	6.6%	28.7%
Elderly	5.7%	21.8%
Republicans	4.6%	12.4%
Christian Right	3.4%	14.4%
Conservatives	2.8%	14.8%
Minorities	2.4%	24.7%
Union	2.4%	11.8%
Liberals	1.6%	11.5%

\* Multiple Responses allowed for "Identify" and only One Response allowed for "Most Identify."

families" in responding to the follow-up question. Not surprisingly, Latinos also often identify themselves as "Latinos" in an election year, a year in which they are targeted as a voting bloc by the media and the candidates. Table 7 displays the full results of group identification. Other popular groups with which Latinos identify are "Soccer Moms," Democrats, the Elderly, and Republicans.

Overall, we find that the Democrats enjoy a 3-to-1 advantage over the Republicans in party identification. In all five states combined, 58% of Latinos reported being Democrats, 20% reported being Republicans and 22% as Independent. Among Democrats and Republicans, about 40% declare that their party identification is very strong. We also ask Independents if they "leaned" toward supporting one of the two parties. Through this series of questions we are able to construct a seven-point partisan identification scale including Strong Democrat, Weak Democrat, Democratic Leaner, Independent, Republican Leaner, Weak Republican, and Strong Republican.

On the whole, 22% of Latinos can be categorized as strong Democrats, 33% as weak Democrats and 10% as leaning towards the Democratic Party. Conversely, 7% identify as strong Republicans, 11% as weak Republicans and 6% are Republican leaners, leaving about 11% as pure

**Table 8**  
**Latino Party Identification**

Total	21.6%	32.8%	9.9%	11.4%	5.8%	11.1%	7.4%
California	21.5%	44.8%	10.0%	8.3%	3.3%	7.3%	5.0%
Illinois	25.7%	32.7%	12.2%	14.5%	5.5%	5.7%	3.7%
Texas	20.1%	35.6%	11.1%	11.1%	7.6%	7.9%	6.6%
New York	29.0%	38.4%	10.9%	10.4%	2.7%	4.7%	4.0%
Florida	11.8%	12.3%	5.3%	13.0%	9.8%	30.3%	17.5%
Mexican	22.5%	39.5%	11.3%	10.4%	5.0%	6.7%	4.6%
Puerto Rican	26.6%	38.4%	9.4%	11.8%	4.0%	5.1%	4.6%
Cuban	10.8%	8.0%	2.8%	10.4%	8.8%	38.0%	21.2%
Other	21.7%	28.8%	11.4%	13.6%	6.9%	10.1%	7.5%

Independents. In sum, about 65% of Latinos are Democrats and 24% are Republicans. Table 8 details the party affiliation of Latinos across all five states and national origin groups. Latinos in New York are the most likely to identify as strong Democrats (29%) and Latinos in Florida are the most likely to identify as strong Republicans (18%).

## Looking Ahead

With the exception of Cuban Americans, Latinos have a long-standing attachment to the Democratic Party, which is rooted in the party alignment of the 1930s, and have voted overwhelmingly Democratic in past presidential elections with the notable exception of 1984 when Ronald Reagan made significant inroads into the Latino vote. Our survey findings do not lead us to expect that Latinos' affinity for the Democrats would change dramatically in the near future, unless the Republicans switch to a liberal position on socio-economic issues that a great majority of Latino respondents indicate they would take.

With luck, however, the Republicans might expect modest gains by taking advantage of elements seated deep inside Latino minds as we have earlier presented. There are some rather strong conservative elements among Latinos on social issues. For instance, as shown earlier, a majority of Latinos support school vouchers and a significant minority take a pro-life stance on the abortion issue. How and to what extent such conservative elements coupled with a growing number of Latinos with a higher level of income and education would help the Republicans is still an open question and remains to be seen.

Perhaps without hoping to achieve a dramatic conversion of many Latino Democrats to their column, the Republicans might intend to simply maintain their Latino vote share not only by preventing Latinos en masse from turning their back on them, but also by promoting Republican-leaning Latinos to stay with them. The Latino vote has grown so significantly in key states that this incremental strategy might yield very positive results for Republican candidates.

## Respondent Demographic Characteristics

### Education

8th Grade or less	16.1%
Some High School	13.8%
High School Graduate	25.9%
Some College	21.9%
College Graduate	16.4%
Post Graduate	6.0%

### Income

Less than \$15,000	15.9%
\$15,00–\$25,000	17.4%
\$25,001–\$35,000	14.3%
\$35,001–\$50,000	13.5%
\$50,001–\$65,000	9.1%
\$65,001–\$80,000	3.8%
\$80,001–\$100,000	3.1%
More than \$100,000	3.6%
Not Reported	19.2%

### Age

18–24	9.9%
25–30	16.1%
31–40	18.3%
41–50	22.5%
51 and over	33.2%

### Gender

Male	48.3%
Female	51.7%

### Nativity

Foreign-born	45.8%
Native-born	42.9%
Puerto Rico	10.4%

### National Origin

Mexican	44.6%
Puerto Rican	18.5%
Cuban	12.4%
Dominican	4.4%
Colombian	3.0%
Salvadoran	2.3%
Guatemalan	1.3%
Other Latino	13.5%

### Generational Status

1st Generation	45.8%
2nd Generation	36.9%
3rd Generation	16.4%

### Marital Status

Married	64.9%
Single	17.8%
Divorced/Separated	10.2%
Widowed	5.7%

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**Mission Statement**

Founded in 1985, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute advances critical, insightful thinking on key issues affecting Latino communities through objective, policy-relevant research, and its implications, for the betterment of the nation.

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