



# Latinos in the Voting Booth

**MI:**

*In the midst of the 2008 presidential primary campaign, an old friend, a lawyer who has been very much involved in the political life of his country, told me: “If I were a Norteamericano, I’d vote for Hillary Clinton for president. This surprised me, both because my friend has been affiliated with a conservative political party, and because I knew him to be quite traditional in his views, including those having to do with gender roles. I asked him why he would vote for her, and he responded that he admired Hillary Clinton for her strength and intelligence, and that he had been impressed by the dignidad (class) she had shown during her husband’s Monica Lewinsky scandal. Other Guatemalan friends later expressed similar sentiments to me about Ms. Clinton.*

That Latinos and Anglos may approach politics differently does not come as a surprise to many U.S. citizens, having witnessed from the relative tranquility of their own country the turbulence which has characterized political life in much of Latin America. The reasons for that turbulence are historical and complex, and beyond the scope of this book.

Like Anglos, Latinos want leadership that will provide them with safety and prosperity. However, cultural differences between the two groups often lead Latinos to employ different criteria than Anglos in choosing their leaders.

## A Sleeping Giant

The potential importance of Latino votes has been a subject of interest since the national elections of 1960, when some writers described the Latino vote as a “sleeping giant” (García 2003). By the time of the 2000 elections, Latino voters constituted 8 percent of the U.S. electorate, were being described as the “soccer moms of 2000” (García 2003), and were actively courted by both Republican and Democratic candidates for national and local office.

However, contrary to expectations, the Latino vote did not make a critical difference in the extremely close presidential race of 2000 (Garcia and Sanchez 2007). It also did not make a difference in the presidential election of 2004. In that election, the largest states, California, Texas, and New York, each produced lopsided majorities among Latino voters for the candidate who would have carried the state without them (Garcia and Sanchez 2007).

Latinos held 3,251 elected positions in California in 2007 (Hispanic PR wire), and a Latino, Antonio Villaraigosa, has served as mayor of Los Angeles. However, voter registration has not increased over several years among the large Latino populations of New York state and Arizona, and Latino political power in those and other states has not grown as expected (García 2003).

Across the U.S., Latinos eligible to vote in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections exercised their right to do so in significantly lower numbers than Anglos. In 2000, only 57 percent of eligible Latino citizens registered to vote versus 72 percent of Anglos. In 2004, these figures were 58 percent vs. 75 percent (Garcia and Sanchez 2007).

Among the explanations students of U.S. politics have offered for these differences in voting rates has been that many Latinos have felt alienated from and powerless to affect U.S. politics (Garcia and Sanchez 2007), and that Latinos are cynical about the democratic process, coming from countries where that process is so often subverted through election fraud, voter intimidation, or a choice of candidates whom potential voters believe are corrupt. Central and South American voter participation, with the exception of Colombia, where all eligible citizens

are required to vote, is the lowest of any region in the world (Highton and Burris 2002).

Low voter participation among Latinos is also believed to be influenced by the fact that many self-identify according to their country of origin, as Mexicans, Colombians, Puerto Ricans, and so on, as opposed to “Latinos” (Garcia and Sanchez 2007). Because they do not see themselves as members of a huge and potentially powerful group of voters, this may give Latinos less incentive to vote.

Despite obstacles, the sleeping giant of Latino political power is awakening. A surge in Latino political awareness and involvement occurred in California following passage of Proposition 187 in 1996, which limited immigrants’ access to social services and education (it was subsequently declared unconstitutional by the courts), and of Proposition 227, in 1998, which ended bilingual education programs. The passage of these propositions was widely perceived by Latinos, including those of the second or third generation in this country, as motivated by racism (García 2003, Garcia and Sanchez 2007).

The current immigration debate appears to be creating the same heightened political awareness and interest in voting among Latinos (Constable 2007). As political awareness among Latinos increases, a pan-Latino identity (García 2003, Garcia and Sanchez 2007, Porter 2001) is growing, nurtured by the popularity of Spanish language TV networks such as Univision, which serve as a kind of pan-Latino media town hall, and by intermarriage between Latinos from different countries of origin.

A potentially even greater factor in the growth of Latino political power is the high birth rate among Latinos, which has been estimated to be six times the overall U.S. birth rate (García 2003). The children of Latino immigrants who are born in this country are automatically U.S. citizens, regardless of whether their parents are here legally or illegally. They, along with their parents who are able to obtain citizenship, will inevitably swell the already sizable ranks of eligible Latino voters.

## Family Values

Latino voters in the United States, with the notable exception of Cuban-Americans, have traditionally been strong supporters of the Democratic Party (García 2003, Garcia and Sanchez 2007). Most Cuban-Americans, strongly focused on their opposition to Fidel Castro, have allied themselves with the Republican Party, which they have perceived as more hostile and unbending toward Castro's Cuba.

In the 2000 and 2004 national elections, George W. Bush and the Republican Party were able to effectively portray themselves as the guardians of family values. By doing this and by extensively targeting the Latino electorate with Spanish language TV ads and appearances in heavily Latino-populated locations, Bush was able to win 40 percent of the Latino vote in 2004, up from the 21 percent received by Bob Dole in his 1996 Republican presidential bid (García and Sanchez 2007).

Despite Bush's effective use of the family values banner, it is the Democratic Party that has mostly been perceived by Latino voters as the party that cares about families, demonstrating this with their greater support for social welfare programs, health care reform, education, and a living wage. The perception that the Democratic Party supports families, as well as the perception that many Republican lawmakers are anti-immigrant, based on their positions during Congressional debate over immigration reform, helps to explain why Latino support of the Democratic Party continues to grow (Bowler, Nicholson, and Segura 2006). A hot-button issue for Latinos has been the separation of families through deportation of illegal immigrant parents from their children born in the United States, something viewed with particular horror by Latinos, but not apparently by Anglo hardliners who insist on the need to deport illegal immigrants. By enforcing the law regardless of human cost, these individuals emphasize the difference between traditional Anglo and Latino conceptions of moral behavior.

For many Latinos, recent cases of families separated through a parent's deportation carry unpleasant echoes of the Elían González case. During the battle over whether or not the six-year-old Elían should be reunited with his only surviving parent in Cuba, most Republican

lawmakers demanded that he remain in the United States. Among Latinos, only Cuban-Americans typically agreed that separation from his father was justified, in order to prevent Elían from having to live under Fidel Castro (Garcia and Sanchez 2007).

## Charisma

In addition to their preference for candidates who are seen to strengthen families, Latino voters may also prefer charismatic leaders who are able to strongly inspire identification with them, and loyalty. The same is no doubt true of Anglo voters as well, though being able to inspire voters may be less crucial to political success in the United States.

Among those who have been elected to the highest office in the United States are some who have famously lacked charisma. The most taciturn and unapproachable of these men was probably “Silent Cal” Coolidge. Coolidge was vice president under Warren G. Harding. He ascended to the presidency upon Harding’s death in 1923, and was re-elected in 1924 despite the fact that he was said to be “shy, retiring, and somber” (Gilbert 2007, 1032). Coolidge was once approached at a state dinner by a woman who told him that she had made a bet that she could get him to say more than two words. His reply was: “You lose” (1032). When the witty writer Dorothy Parker was told that Coolidge had died, she asked: “How can they tell?” (Sherrin 2005, 86).

The power of identification with leaders and of loyalty in Latin American politics can be seen in the adulation Eva Peron generated in Argentina, as well as the personal popularity Fidel Castro enjoyed in Cuba despite the nearly 50 years of deprivation that Cuban citizens have suffered under his rule (Canadian Broadcasting Company 2006, British Broadcasting Company 2007).

The U.S. presidents of the last 50 years arguably most admired in Latin America are John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Kennedy’s considerable popularity in Latin America was increased by his initiatives in the region, including the Alliance for Progress, an ambitious attempt to reduce poverty and social inequity (Lowenthal 1991). Clinton generated great affection despite the United States’ unpopular

interventions during the decade preceding his presidency. Once when speaking before the National Assembly of El Salvador, Clinton even received a standing ovation from members of the leftist FMLN party who had belonged to guerrilla groups suppressed with the help of U.S. arms and military advisors (Engler 2007).

Among the qualities that inspire identification and loyalty among Latinos is *personalismo*, or the ability of their leaders to speak to them in a way that communicates genuine interest and caring about their personal welfare. John F. Kennedy had this talent, and moved millions when he told a German audience “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” (I am a Berliner) and when he requested Americans to “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Bill Clinton also had this gift, as did Ronald Reagan and Franklin Delano Roosevelt before him.

### Politics and Marital Fidelity

Anglo and Latino voters also differ with regard to the importance they place upon marital fidelity in their leaders. Most Latinos are less upset than Anglos by male infidelity (but not female infidelity). The alleged infidelity of John F. Kennedy (Hersh 1997) and the Monica Lewinsky affair, over which Bill Clinton was nearly impeached, have done little to lessen the affection of Latinos for either.

What is of great importance to most Latinos is a man’s respect for his family, and his discretion. John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton were both seen as good fathers and family men, and each remained in their marriages. They were largely forgiven by Latinos for their infidelity. Latino voters are likely to be less generous toward other politicians, such as 2008 Republican presidential candidate Rudy Guliani, who is not only known to have been unfaithful to his wives, but has broken up his family by divorcing twice.

### Madam President

While this book was being written, U. S. voters were considering the candidacy of the first female contender for president of the United

States. Many Anglos believe that Latino men are macho and chauvinistic and Latino women powerless and dependent, although the truth is more complicated. It is in Latin America that four women have served as presidents of their countries, Lidia Gueler Tejada of Bolivia (1979–1980), Violetta Chamorro of Nicaragua (1990–1996), Michelle Bachelet of Chile (2006–), and Cristina Kirchner of Argentina (2007–). A fifth woman, the enormously popular Eva Peron of Argentina, would likely have also been elected had she not died of cancer at the age of 33 in 1952. Latino culture, at least since the reign of Queen Isabella of Spain in the fifteenth century, has welcomed powerful women leaders.

Latinos who are raised in healthy families grow up appreciating maternal power. The Latino wife is expected to use subtlety in wielding her power, outwardly deferring to her husband and indulging her children. However, Latino children know they must not displease or ever disrespect their mothers, and Latino husbands are equally aware that if they wish their lives to remain pleasant and tranquil the decisions they make for their families must be ones that do not displease their wives.

Latina executives in Latin America as well as Latinas who are teachers are often more powerful and respected than their male counterparts because they are able to demand the respect due them as women, as well as that due them because of their positions of authority. Latinas in positions of authority are expected to show respect for the female role, demonstrating this through their devotion to their families, their attention to their appearance, and their decorum. As long as they do so, they may in fact enjoy more power and respect than most women are able to obtain in Anglo culture.

Latino voters do not have difficulty voting for a woman for president, as long as she possesses the qualities of strength and *personalismo* they admire, and she demonstrates respect for the female role. Many Latinos supported Hillary Clinton during her 2008 presidential bid, feeling that she demonstrated that respect by staying in her marriage despite her husband's infidelity, by raising, with her husband, an impressive daughter, and by focusing on issues involving the needs of children (Clinton 1996) and health care.

## Advice to Candidates

To gain their support, candidates for public office must convince Latino voters that they will work to support families. Following the rash of recent tawdry scandals involving politicians who were elected under the banner of “family values,” both Anglos and Latinos are understandably cynical about the issue of family values. However, Latino voters will continue to support candidates who demonstrate a commitment to the real family values of providing a better life for children, the elderly, and the poor.

Under the specter of terrorism, both Anglo and Latino voters want a president who will provide for the security of the United States. Voters are likely to use different yardsticks to measure each candidate’s ability to provide that security, including his or her military policy and foreign policy experience. Latino voters are also likely to choose a leader whose *personalismo* and charisma inspire their trust and communicate to them the strength needed to face threats to our country.

Gender may be a less important variable for the Latino voter than for the Anglo voter. Latinos will vote for either a male or female candidate who exhibits qualities of charisma and *personalismo*. In addition, a male candidate must be viewed as a man of strength who has respect for his family, and a female candidate as a woman of strength who has respect for her femininity.