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The Latino Voter Registration Dilemma

Laird Bergad

Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies

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Center for Latin American, Caribbean & Latino Studies

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The Latino Voter Registration Dilemma

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About the CNN en Español and the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies Partnership:

[CNN en Español](#) (CNNe) and the [Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies](#) (CLACLS) at the [Graduate Center](#), City University of New York (CUNY), have partnered to provide an exclusive focus on Latino voters in America, the fastest growing minority voting bloc that could play an instrumental role in determining the next President of the United States. Through rigorous academic research generated by CLACLS' Latino Data Project, CNN en Español will broadcast detailed reports about Latinos in the American elections over several multi-media platforms geared toward Spanish-speaking audiences around the world, including 4 million U.S. households.

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The Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies is a research institute that works for the advancement of the study of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States in the doctoral programs at the CUNY Graduate Center. One of its major priorities is to provide funding and research opportunities to Latino students at the Ph.D. level.

The Center established and helps administer an interdisciplinary specialization in Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program.

The Latino Data Project was developed with the goal of making information available on the dynamically growing Latino population of the United States and especially New York City through the analysis of extant data available from a variety of sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Institute for Health, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and state and local-level data sources.

All Latino Data Project reports are available at <http://clacls.gc.cuny.edu>

For additional information you may contact the Center at 212-817-8438 or by e-mail at clacls@gc.cuny.edu.

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Executive Summary

The Latino electorate, citizens 18 years of age and older, has increased impressively between 1992 when it stood at approximately 8.8 million eligible voters and 2016 when it is projected in this report to be about 28 million possible voters.

Yet, in presidential elections from 1992 through 2012 less than half of all potential Latino voters actually went to the polls compared with about two-thirds of non-Hispanic whites and blacks who cast their ballots.

Although, Latinos have increased as a percentage of all voters from 3.7% of the total U.S. voting population in 1992 to a projected 9.9% in 2016, Latinos do not exercise their potential political power because of comparatively low participation rates.

The principal problem is not voter turnout. It is that Latinos register to vote at significantly lower rates than the other major U.S. race/ethnic groups. Between the 1992 and 2012 presidential elections the voter registration rate among eligible Latino voters has remained absolutely unchanged at about 58%, despite well publicized voter-registration drives. By way of comparison about 73% of non-Hispanic white and black potential voters registered to vote in the 2012 presidential elections.

The issue of Latino voter registration is exacerbated by the fact that about 62% of the Latino electorate is found in two age categories: 18 - 24 year olds and those between the ages of 25 and 44. These age cohorts had lower registration rates compared with older Latinos. Additionally, Latino men in these age categories registered at significantly lower rates than Latinas.

Once registered, Latinos do in fact vote at high rates. In the 2012 presidential elections over 80% of registered Latino voters went to the polls. Thus, the central problem facing Latino political, civic, religious, and other organizations is not a traditional 'get out the vote' campaign, which is always important on election day, but rather the challenge of increasing the Latino voter registration rate beyond the 58% level which has remained unchanged between 1992 and 2012. A central problem is with younger potential voters.

Thus, it is not that Latinos vote at lower rates than the rest of the population; it is that they don't register at comparable rates. There were differentials in registration and voting rates in key states where Latinos have played an important role in determining voting outcomes and these are examined in this report.

This study presents precise data on the Latino electorate, registered voters, and actual voters in presidential elections between 1992 and 2012 with projections to 2016. These data were derived from data bases on presidential elections created by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey November Voter Supplements for each presidential election year.

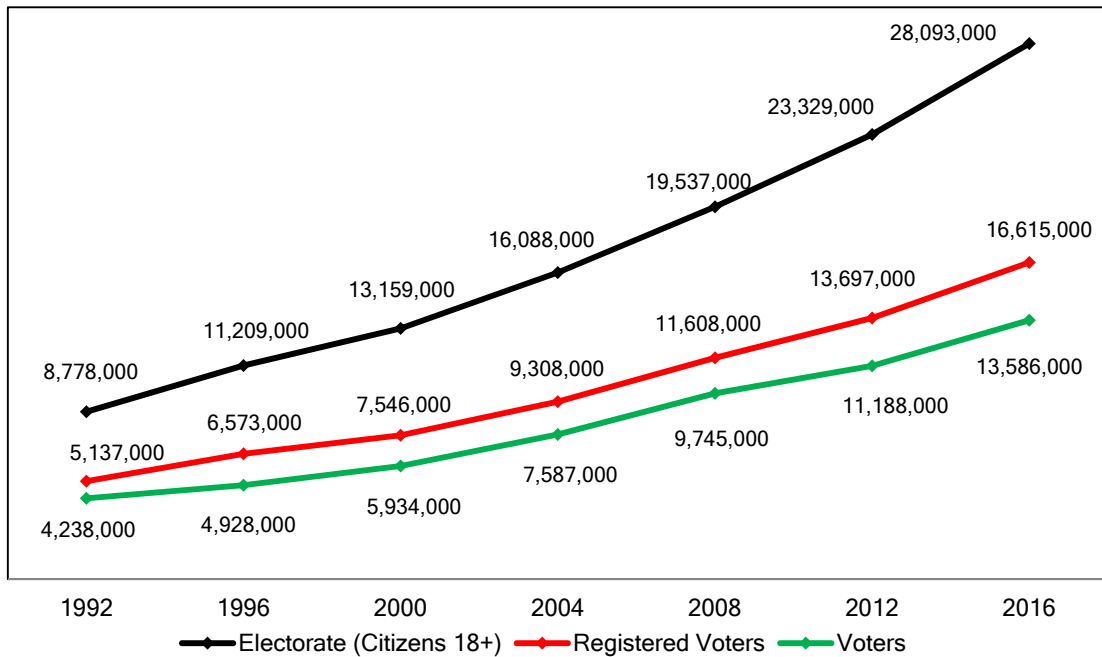
The Dynamic Expansion of the Latino Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters, 1992 - 2016

The Latino electorate, citizens 18 years of age and older, increased from approximately 8,778,000 potential voters in 1992 to 23,328,000 eligible voters in 2012. For the 2016 presidential elections an estimated 28,093,000 Latinos will be eligible to vote.¹

Latinos who were registered to vote rose from 5,137,000 in 1992 to 13,697,000 in 2012 and are projected to be approximately 16,615,000 in 2016.

Latinos who actually voted in presidential elections increased from about 4,238,000 in 1992 to 11,188,000 in 2012; 13,586,000 are projected to vote in 2016. (See figure 1).

Figure 1
The Latino Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters
Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016



Note: 2016 data are estimates based on projections using the annual rate of increase in each category between 2004 and 2012.

¹ All data derived from U.S. Census Bureau, Voting and Registration, found at: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/index.html>

These data originated in the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) data from the November Voter Supplements for each year. These are estimates based on sample data and a description of these data and their comparisons to officially released Federal government data is found at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/other/State%20User%20Note_Final.pdf

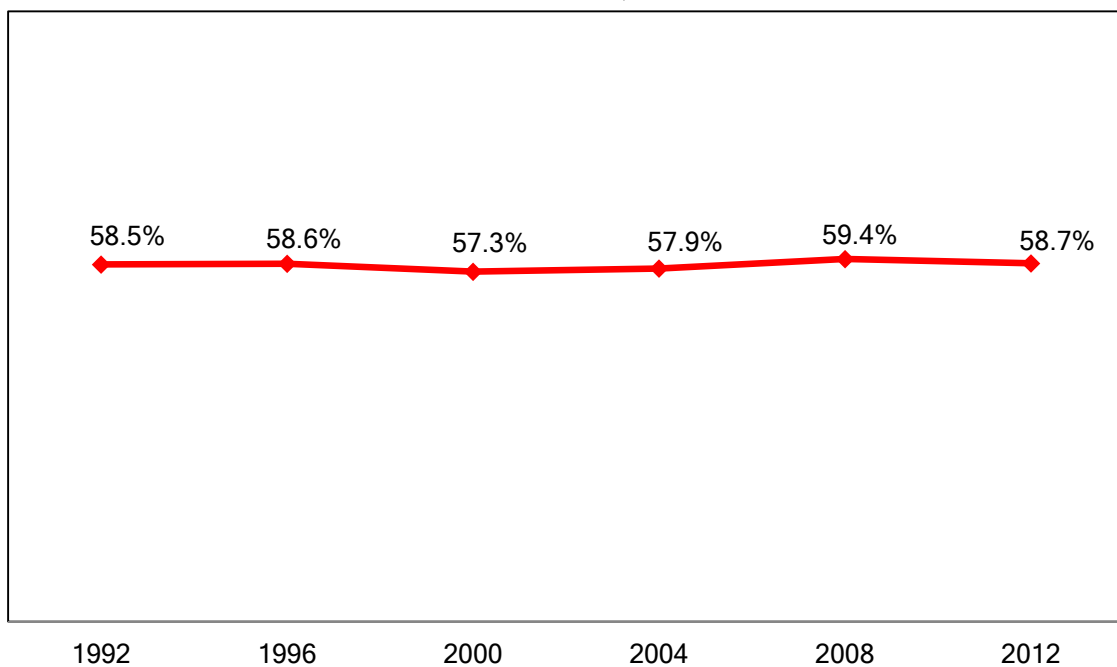
In the above report the Census Bureau observes "The estimates are also frequently accompanied by large margins of error, due to the small sample sizes involved. Data users are encouraged to interpret these results with caution. Despite these issues, the Census Bureau's November supplement to the CPS remains the most comprehensive data source available for examining trends in the social and demographic composition of the electorate in federal elections."

The 2016 estimate was derived by using the yearly percentage rate of increase between 2004 and 2012 and projecting to 2016 for the electorate, registered voters, and voters by CLACLS.

Stagnation of Registration and Voting Rates

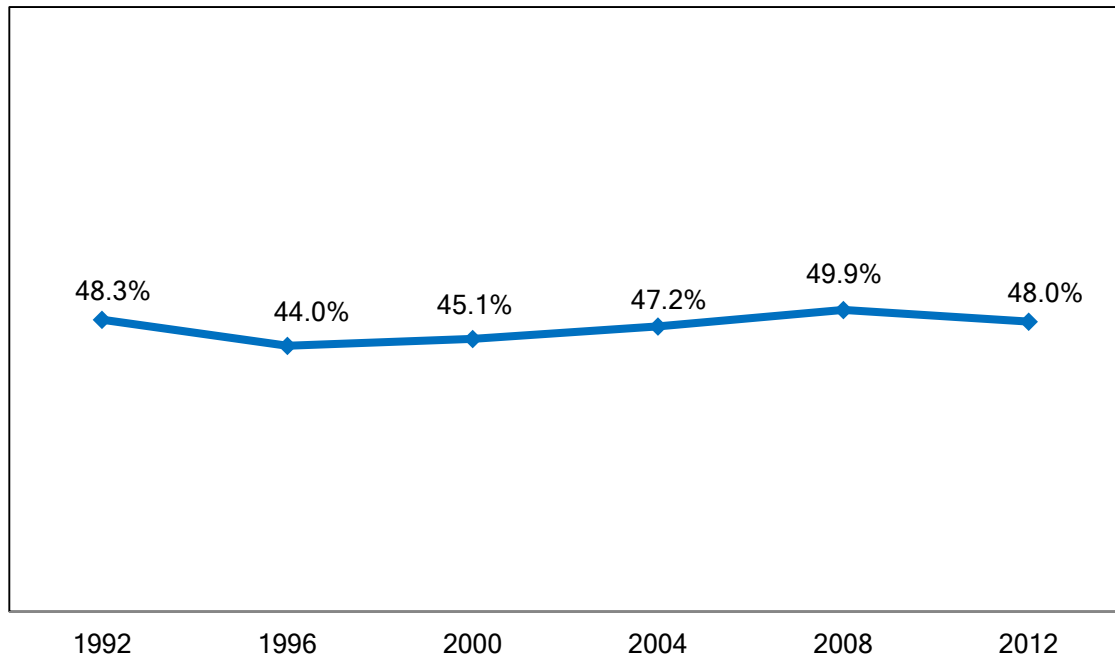
However, despite the fact that the absolute number of Latinos eligible to vote, registered, and who actually voted grew dramatically, the rates of Latino voter registration were almost exactly the same in 2012 at 58.7% as in 1992 when this rate was 58.5%. There is no reason to believe that this will change substantially by 2016 despite many announced voter registration drives. (See figure 2).

Figure 2
Latino Registered Voters as a Percentage of all Eligible Latino Voters (the Electorate)
Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2012



Because of this relatively low registration rate the percentage of eligible Latinos who voted in presidential elections also remained completely stagnant between 1992 and 2012. Some 48.4% of the Latino electorate, citizens 18 years of age and older, voted in 1992 and 48.0% voted in 2012. It is likely that this will not change in November 2016. (See figure 3).

Figure 3
 Latino Total Voters as a Percentage of all Eligible Latino Voters (the Electorate)
 Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2012



However, once registered to vote, Latinos turned out at the polls at fairly high rates: 82.5% in 1992 and 81.7% in 2012. There is no reason to believe that this will change in 2016. (See figure 4).

Compared with the largest voting blocks, non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks, whose registered voters comprised about 73% of their respective electorates, Latino registration rates at 58.7% were clearly much lower. About two-thirds of all eligible non-Hispanic white and black voters actually voted in the 2012 presidential election compared with only 48% of the Latino electorate.

Had Latino registration rates been higher, the overall impact of Latinos in the national elections would have been even more significant than they were. This is because over 80% of registered Latinos actually voted in the 2012 presidential elections as indicated previously. Although this rate was lower than non-Hispanic whites and blacks, even at an 80% of registered voter turnout had registration rates been higher Latinos would have exercised a greater degree of political influence on the 2012 election. (See figure 5).

Figure 4
 Latino Voters as a Percentage of all Registered Latino Voters
 Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2012

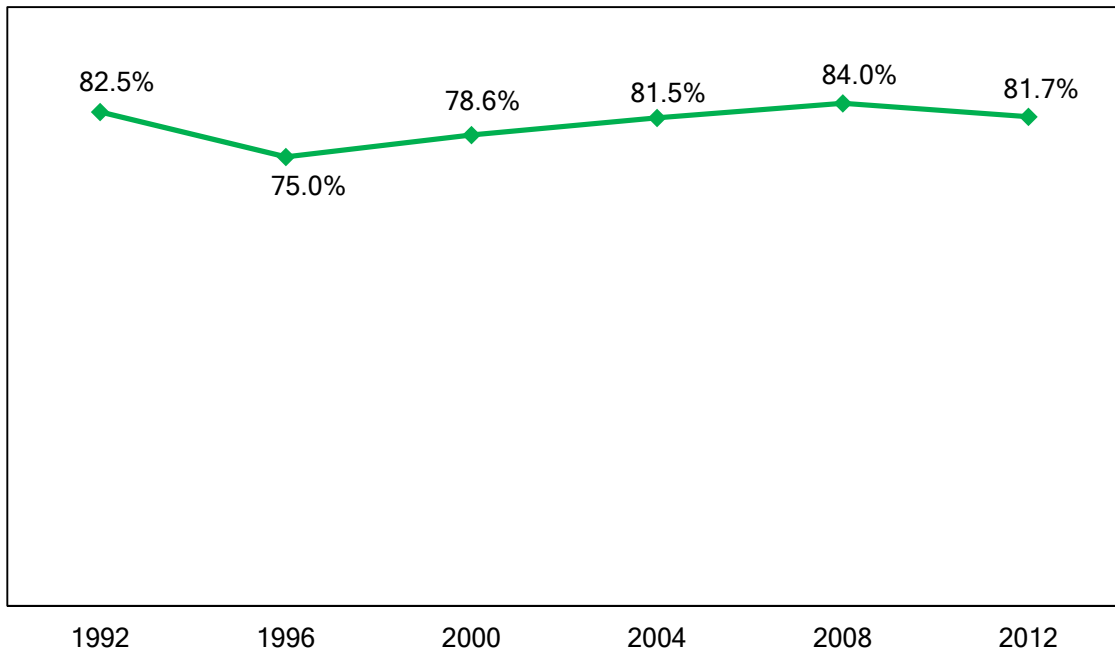
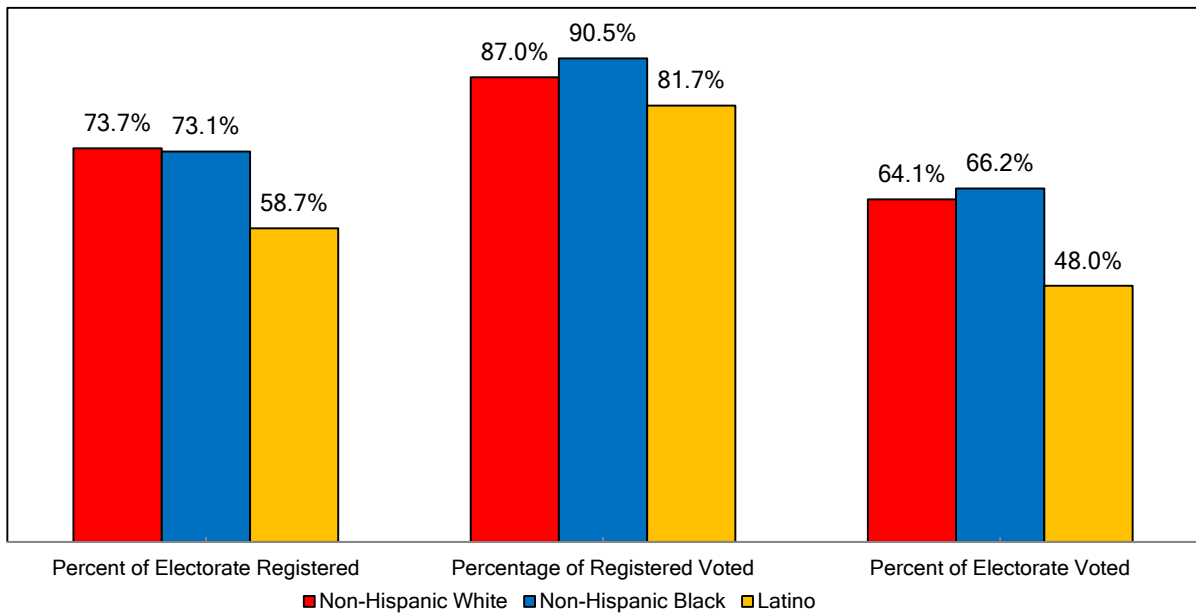


Figure 5
 Percentage of Electorate Registered and Voted by Race/Ethnicity
 Presidential Elections, 2012



Latinos as Percentages of Total U.S. Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters 1992 - 2016

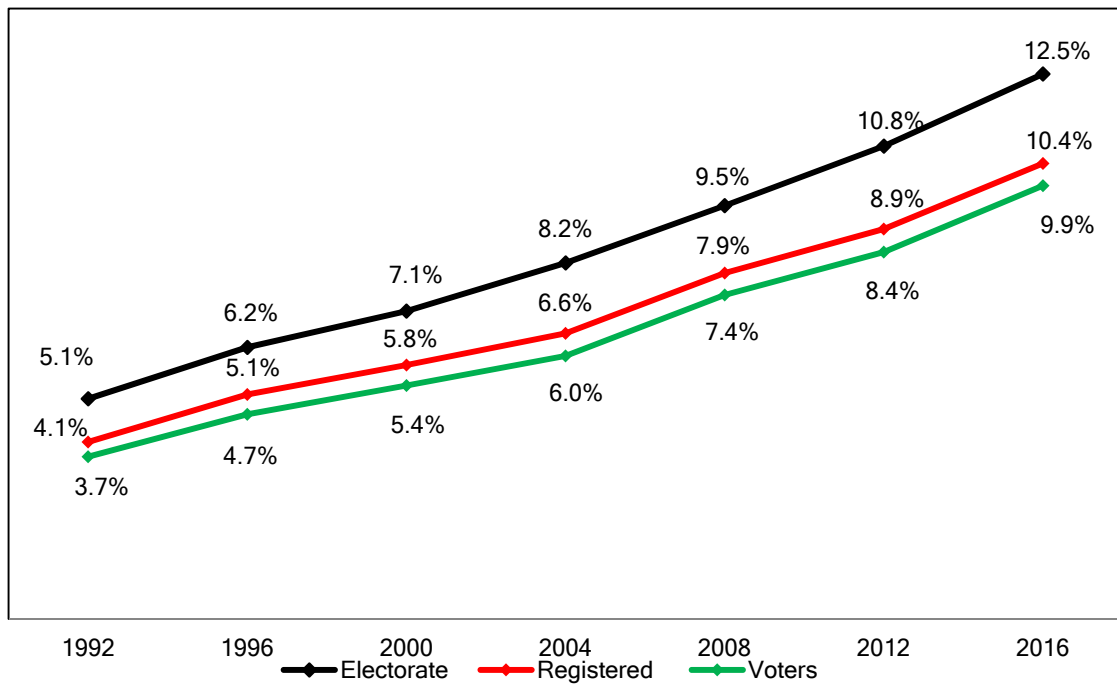
In 1992 Latinos who were eligible to vote comprised only 5.1% of the U.S. electorate. By the presidential elections of 2012 they were 10.8% of all eligible voters and CLACLS projects that they will be about 12.5% of the total U.S. electorate in November 2016 based on yearly rates of increase between 2004 and 2012.

In 1992 Latinos were only 4.1% of all registered voters and CLACLS projects they will comprise approximately 10.4% of total registered voters for the 2016 presidential elections.

In 1992 Latinos were 3.7% of all those casting ballots in the presidential election. This increased to 8.4% in 2012 and CLACLS projects that Latinos will make up about 9.9% of all voters in the 2016 presidential elections. (See figure 6).

With higher registration rates Latinos have the potential to exert much more political influence in presidential elections.

Figure 6
The Latinos as a Percentage of the total U.S. Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016



Note: 2016 data are estimates based on projections using the annual rate of increase in each category between 2004 and 2012.

Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Age Categories and Sex

One of the problems with respect to Latino voter registration and participation rates revolves around the age structure of the electorate. Latino voters are very young with about 61.7% of all potential voters falling between 18 and 44 years of age according to 2014 data released by the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Slightly over 21% were between 18 and 24 years of age. (See table 1).

In the 2012 presidential elections both registration and voting rates were significantly lower in the 18 - 24 and 25 - 44 year-old age categories than among older voters as indicated in figures 7 through 9.² The overall Latino voter registration rate in 2012 was about 58% but only 45.3% of Latinos ages 18-24 were registered and only 34.2% of the total Latino 18-24 year old electorate voted.

Among 25 to 44 year olds, the largest segment of the Latino electorate at 40.3% in 2014, 59% were registered, and 46.6% of potential voters voted.

These data suggest that voter registration efforts must target younger Latinos if registration and participation rates are to rise in the future.

Table 1
Age Structure of Latino Electorate, 2014

Age Category	Size of Electorate	% of Total
18 - 24	5,556,720	21.4%
25-44	10,468,748	40.3%
45-64	7,118,225	27.4%
65-74	1,683,790	6.5%
75 +	1,140,332	4.4%
Total	25,967,815	100.0%

Source: American Community Survey, 2014.

² The data for tables 7 through 9 were derived from table 2.6., Census Bureau, Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012 found on the internet at

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.html>

Figure 7
Percent of Hispanic Electorate Registered by Age Category
2012 Presidential Election

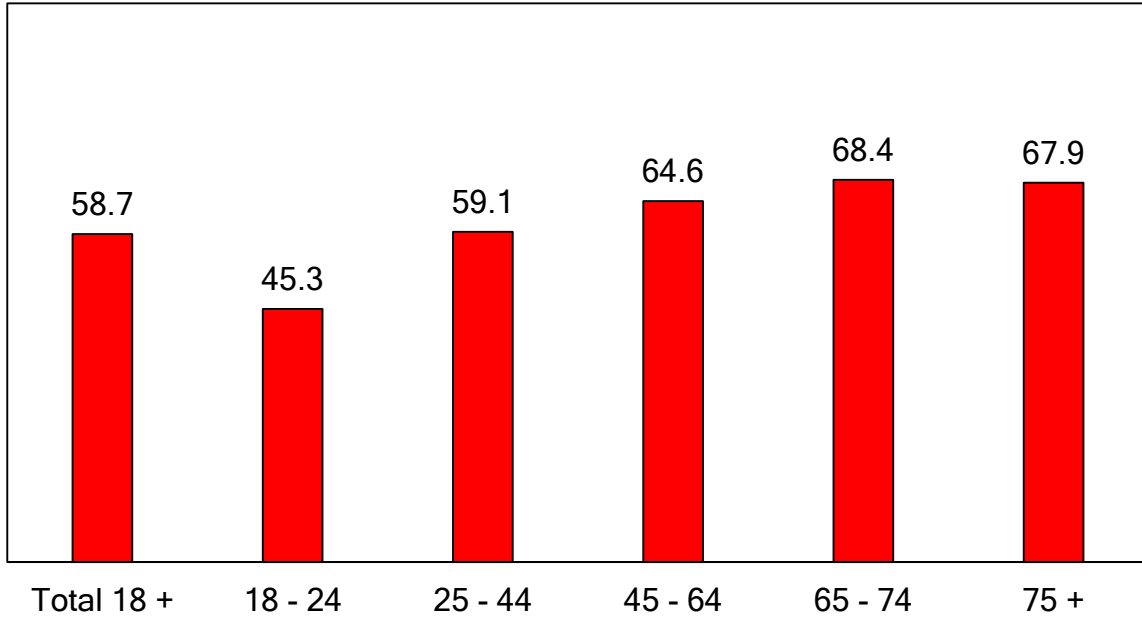


Figure 8
Percent of Hispanic Electorate Voted by Age Category
2012 Presidential Election

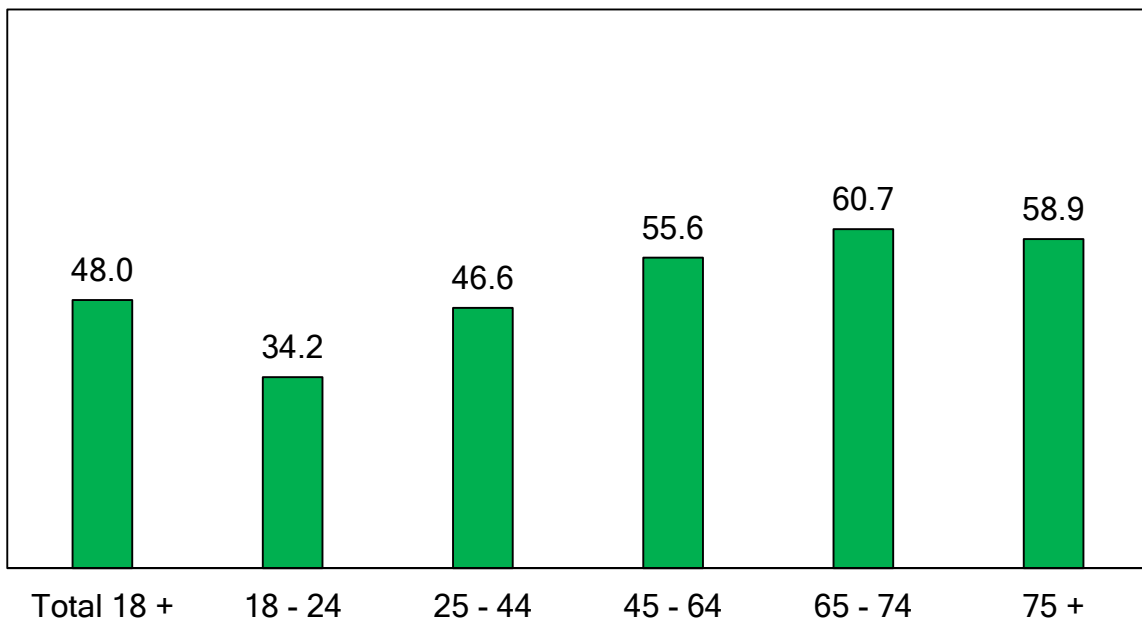
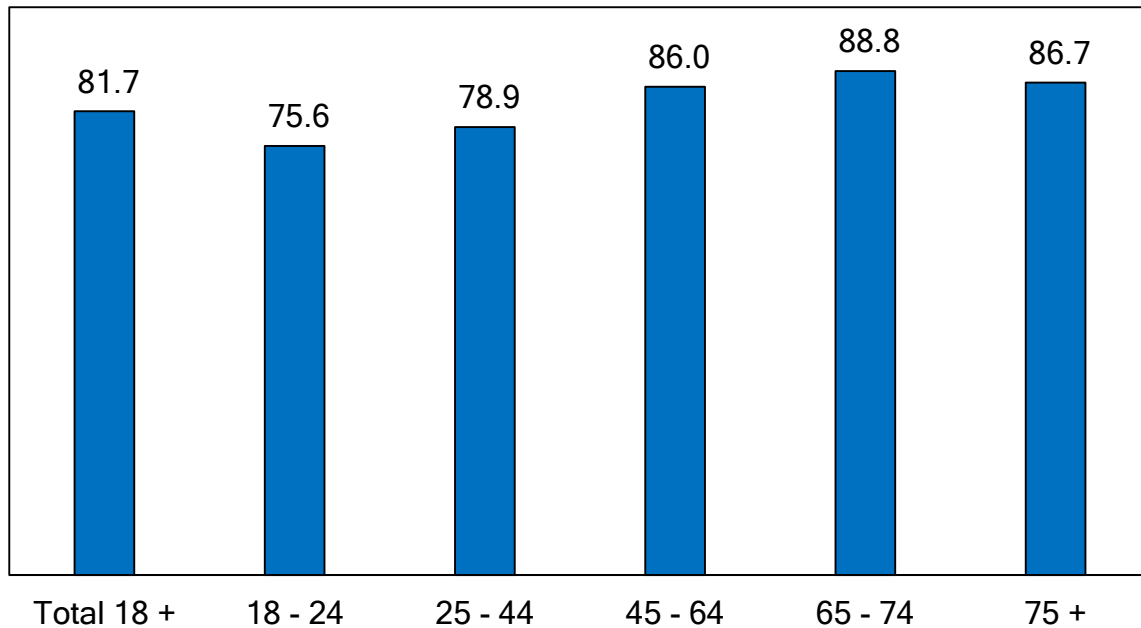


Figure 9
Percent of Hispanic Registered Electorate Which Voted by Age Category
2012 Presidential Election



The issue of Latino voter registration and voting rates must also be considered by sex and age. In the youngest age cohort, 18 - 24, a significantly higher percentage of females registered for the 2012 presidential elections (48%) compared with males (42.5%) and Latinas voted at higher rates as well at 36.8% of the total female electorate voting compared with 31.7% of Latino males in the electorate who voted.

This same pattern, higher registration rates for Latinas, was also evident in the most numerous age category, 25 to 44 year olds. Some 62.1% of Latinas in this age category were registered compared with 56.1% of males. Latinas voted at a rate of 49.2% of the female electorate in the 2012 presidential elections compared with a 44% rate among males in the 25 to 44 year old category. (See table 2).

Thus, the issue of targets for voter registration efforts must focus not only on all Latinos at younger ages but must specifically target men who register and vote at significantly lower rates.

Table 2
Percentage of Electorate Registered and Voted by Sex and Age Category
2012 Presidential Elections

Age Category	% of Electorate Registered		% of Electorate Voted	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
18 - 24	42.5	48.0	31.7	36.8
25-44	56.1	62.1	44.0	49.2
45-64	64.0	65.2	54.3	56.7
65-74	69.3	67.7	61.5	60.1
75 +	71.7	64.9	63.7	55.3

Registration and Voting Rates by Key States 1996 - 2012: California, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Virginia, and Iowa

Latinos as Percentages of Total Voters

Latinos in the states considered here made up varying percentages of overall voters who cast ballots in the presidential elections of 1996 through 2012. In New Mexico, where Latinos were the largest percentage of total voters, there was only marginal change between 1996 when they accounted for 32.9% of ballots cast to 2012 when 34.9% of all voters were Latinos.

In California, Florida, and Nevada there were extraordinary increases in Latinos as a percentage of all voters. California's Latino vote accounted for 23.5% of all votes in 2012 a dramatic increase from 11.7% in 1996. In Florida the rise was as impressive: Latinos cast 9.2% of all votes in 1996 and 17.3% in 2012. Nevada's Latinos made up only 3.9% of all voters in 1996 and soared to 15% in 2012.

Colorado's Latinos comprised a significant 10.4% of those who voted in 2012 which was an increase from 7.7% in 1996.

Virginia is an example of a state where Latino voters made up a small but critical share of the voting electorate. In 1996 they were only 1.1% of all actual voters and this increased to 2.7% in 2012. But President Obama won Virginia by a razor-thin margin in 2012 garnering 49.4% of the total vote to Mitt Romney's 48.8% of all votes cast. Despite the fact that Latinos accounted for a relatively small 2.7% of the vote in 2012, they may have tipped the state to President Obama.

Similar observations may be made about Iowa. There are no reliable data for 1996 on Latino voters because they were such a small share of the overall voting population. But by 2012 1.9% of all Iowa ballots were cast by Latinos.³ President Obama carried Iowa by a 5.6% margin of victory in 2012. It is uncertain how important Latinos were in his victory. (See table 3 for these data).

³ The sample sizes on Latinos registered to vote in Iowa and the portion of the electorate which voted were too small to be statistically reliable and are not analyzed in subsequent sections on the states.

Table 3
Latinos as Percentage of Total Voters by Selected States
1996 - 2012 Presidential Elections

	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
New Mexico	32.9%	29.5%	33.0%	34.2%	34.9%
California	11.7%	13.9%	16.2%	21.4%	23.5%
Florida	9.2%	11.3%	11.2%	15.4%	17.3%
Nevada	3.9%	7.0%	8.3%	11.6%	15.0%
Colorado	7.7%	9.7%	7.9%	8.4%	10.4%
Virginia	1.1%	3.0%	2.2%	3.7%	2.7%
Iowa			0.8%	1.3%	1.9%

Registration Rates

Voter registration rates among Latinos varied by the states considered in this section and did not necessarily fall into the national registration rate of 58.7% for the presidential election of 2012. Nevada, Colorado, and California Latinos registered at rates of between 56.6% and 59.9% in 2012, more or less following national averages. However, 64.1% of Latinos in New Mexico were registered to vote in 2012; 72.1% in Florida; and 73.6% in Virginia where Latinos were only 2.7% of total voters as observed previously.

In Colorado, California, and New Mexico registration rates did not change significantly between 1996 and 2012. (See table 4). However in Florida Latino registration rates increased from 62.5% to 72.1% of the electorate between 1996 and 2012 surpassing the national average for non-Hispanic whites and blacks. In Nevada there was also an extraordinary rise from 39.7% in 1996 to 59.9% in 2012. Virginia's small Latino population (an electorate of 291,519 in 2014) experienced an increase in registration rates from 56.7% in 1992 to 73.6% in 2012, and this may have been crucial to President Obama's victory in the state.

Table 4
Percentage of Latino Electorate Registered by Selected States
1996 - 2012 Presidential Elections

State	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Virginia	56.7%	73.6%	57.8%	56.5%	73.6%
Florida	62.5%	63.4%	64.0%	69.4%	72.1%
New Mexico	61.8%	56.1%	65.0%	64.2%	64.1%
Nevada	39.7%	46.9%	55.0%	57.2%	59.9%
Colorado	57.8%	57.0%	56.5%	59.1%	57.2%
California	59.8%	55.0%	55.4%	62.8%	56.6%

Voting Rates among Registered Voters

Once registered Latinos voted at high rates. In Virginia and Colorado over 90% of registered Latinos voted in the 2012 presidential elections. In New Mexico the rate was 87.6%; 86.2% in Florida; 83.8% in California; and 81.7% in Nevada. (See table 5). These state-level data underline the fundamental misconception that Latinos vote at low rates. In fact Latinos vote at high rates once they are registered. The problem with the Latino electorate and voting rates is that Latinos register at such comparatively low rates at the national level as observed above, although these state data indicate important exceptions to this pattern.

Table 5
Percentage of Registered Latino Electorate which Voted by
Selected States, 1996 - 2012 Presidential Elections

State	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Colorado	79.1%	79.4%	80.9%	86.7%	91.1%
Virginia	91.2%	84.9%	89.7%	90.0%	90.3%
New Mexico	81.7%	79.9%	87.3%	83.5%	87.6%
Florida	78.9%	84.5%	89.2%	88.9%	86.2%
California	78.7%	83.2%	84.8%	88.2%	83.8%
Nevada	71.0%	84.9%	86.7%	90.8%	81.7%

Voting Rates among Total Latino Electorate

The state-level voting data on the percentages of all eligible Latinos who voted in presidential elections indicate quite clearly that the key variable between 1996 and 2012 was registration rates. Simply stated registration rates determined voting rates in each state.

In Virginia, with its relatively small Latino electorate, but high rate of voter registration, two-thirds of all eligible Latino voters went to the polls in 2012, the same percentage found nationally among non-Hispanic whites and blacks. In the key state of Florida, 62.2% the Latino electorate voted; 56.2% in New Mexico; 52.1% in Colorado; 52% in Nevada; and in the state with the largest Latino electorate, California, less than half of all eligible voters (48.5%) voted in the presidential election of 2012. (See table 6).

Table 6
Percentage of Total Latino Electorate which Voted by
Selected States, 1996 - 2012 Presidential Elections

	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Virginia	51.7%	62.5%	51.9%	56.5%	66.8%
Florida	49.4%	53.6%	57.1%	61.7%	62.2%
New Mexico	50.5%	44.8%	56.8%	53.7%	56.2%
Colorado	45.7%	45.3%	45.7%	51.4%	52.1%
Nevada	28.2%	39.8%	47.7%	52.1%	52.0%
California	47.1%	45.8%	46.9%	57.0%	48.5%

The Key to the Latino Vote is Registration

Despite the fact that the Latino population of the United States has increased meteorically since the 1992 presidential elections, that the Latino electorate, registered voters, and actual voters have risen just as impressively in real terms and as percentages of the totals in each category, Latinos have not exerted their potential political influence because of relatively low voter registration rates.

Despite well publicized voter registration drives the national Latino voter registration rate has remained at about 58% in all presidential election years between 1992 and 2012. There were important variations at the state level as indicated previously, but the overall registration rate has remained stagnant.

It is often written that Latinos don't vote at the same rate as non-Hispanic whites and blacks whose participation rates in presidential elections are at about two-thirds of their respective electorates. In fact, less than half of all Latinos eligible to vote actually voted in the 2012 presidential elections. Yet, once they are registered over 80% of Latinos at the national level go to the polls and although this a lower rate than non-Hispanic whites and blacks it is still fairly high and has been consistent between 1992 and 2012. It is not that Latinos don't vote at rates commensurate with the nation's other race/ethnic groups. It is that they don't register at similar rates.

The problem is exacerbated by the registration and participation rates in different Latino age categories. The Latino electorate is relatively young, and over 60% of all potential voters are between 18 and 44 years of age. Yet these potential voters have the lowest registration and voting rates among the Latino population. Only 34.2% of eligible Latino voters between 18 and 24 years of age voted in 2012 and 46.6% of those between 25 and 44 years of age cast their ballots.

The challenges for Latino community leaders, civic organizations, political leaders, and religious groups are clear. They are not faced with a traditional 'get out the vote' problem, although that is always important on election days. The real issue is to get potential Latino voters to register.