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HISPANICS IN THE AMERICAN POLITICAL THEATRE – LEADING OR SUPPORTING ACTORS?

ABSTRACT

This article presents the impact of Latinos' on American politics. Hispanic community living in the United States has become an important part of its society. Numbers describing Latinos are impressive as well as alarming. Data released by the U.S. Census shows a constant growth of Spanish-speaking population in the USA. Because of these numbers, questions asked about the political power of Hispanics seem legitimate. However, Latinos do not fully use their electoral power. Their voter turnout is, among other issues, the main reason of their limited political influence. On the other hand, Hispanic activists are trying to show members of different Latino subgroups that their future in America depends on their political participation. The following article discusses these issues and shows the long way that Latinos have to go to become a real political power in the United States.

Key-words: Hispanics, Latinos, immigrants in the USA, political activity, presidential elections

The political landscape of the United States resembles a huge puzzle – a colourful and complicated structure made of hundreds of little pieces. These small parts that play an important role in American political theatre are strictly connected with the specific character of the American state – the state created by immigrants, where foreign residents still play an important role, shaping its society and political landscape. Among these pieces are those connected with different political ideas, as well as those

with their foundations in American heritage. From the very beginning, immigrant groups have played a significant role in American society, but their political power has been built in a long process which has varied among different immigrant communities. Political awareness and power were discovered by minority groups at different stages of their development. The most important period of time in this respect was the Civil Rights Movement which made many of those groups believe that they had potential to create the American reality.

One of the most important immigrant groups in the United States nowadays are Hispanics. Their presence on the American soil is often portrayed and stressed as prior to the emergence of the United States. This idea in particular refers to Mexican population living in the U. S. It is often said, that in the past their ancestors did not come to the United States, but, thanks to the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, American state came to them. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was a document signed in 1848 between the United States and Mexico, ending the war between these two countries. The treaty gave the U.S. the Rio Grande boundary for Texas, the ownership of California and large area comprising of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, parts of Wyoming and Colorado. It was also a visible manifestation of American expansionism.¹ The frontier was moved south, and day by day, many Mexicans had to face a new situation. Having lived for generations as Mexican citizens on the territory of the present southern part of the U.S., they suddenly became Americans.² They were offered a choice of staying in the annexed areas and receiving American citizenship, or moving to Mexico. As most of them chose the first option, the United States government could announce that the residents of the newly annexed land would be *incorporated into the Union of the United States with the enjoyment of all the rights of citizens*.³

Nowadays, according to the U.S. Census, Mexicans in the United States constitute the largest group among Hispanic immigrants.⁴ They are also responsible for the political awakening of Hispanics, as they were one of the first communities that started conducting organized political activity. Following M. Gonzalez, it is worth mentioning *the most memorable of all the organizations constructed by the Mexican American Generation*, The League of the United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). The nation's oldest, founded in Texas in 1929, it was lauded *as the oldest Mexican-American civil rights association*.⁵ Many subsequent Hispanic organizations adapted its patterns of operation.

¹ M.S. Joy, *American Expansionism, 1783-1860. A Manifest Destiny?*, London 2014, p. 65 (*Seminar Studies in History*); D. Merrill, T. Paterson (eds.), *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations. Documents and Essays*, Vol. 1: *To 1920*, Boston 2009, p. 230 (*Major Problems in American History*).

² J. Davenport, *The U.S.-Mexico Border: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*, Philadelphia 2004, p. 47 (*Arbitrary Borders*).

³ M. Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race. The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans*, Austin 2001, p. 215 (*Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Series in Latin American and Latino Art and Culture*).

⁴ S.R. Ennis, M. Rios-Vargas, N.G. Albert, *The Hispanic Population: 2010*, U.S. Census Bureau, May 2011, at <<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>>, 8 January 2015.

⁵ M.G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos. A History of Mexicans in the United States*, Bloomington 2009, p. 182.

Today, the American political theatre is very sensitive to Hispanic impact. There are a few reasons responsible for the significance of the political power of Hispanics. The most important one is demography, and this reason has been invariable for the last few decades. Because of that factor the Hispanic community is at the centre of political attention at least every four years when presidential campaigns and elections are pending. Hispanic voters have become a significant part of this political battle, but rather as possibly influential objects than active and effective players. American politicians know very well that the number of Hispanics living in the United States who are eligible to vote is too high to be neglected. On the other hand, their present power is used only to a minor degree. Researchers of the Pew Hispanic Center and Hispanic activists explain that there are many obstacles preventing Hispanic voters from voting.⁶ Latino population living in the United States is younger than other minority groups. It is also less likely to hold American citizenship; therefore it is not eligible to vote. Minushkin and Lopez also stress that although presidential candidates show vivid interest in Hispanics, they don't have much to say or propose to them regarding race issues.⁷ Although the race issue is important for Latino voters, Barreto and Segura suggest that *it's the economy* that matters.⁸ The economic downturn may have impacted their registration. Other negative changes, like losing jobs or housing crisis, have made many of them to move. Researchers, like A. Gonzalez, say it could *mean that a disproportionate share of their voter registrations lapsed as a result of a change of address*.⁹

The focus of this article is presenting the impact of Hispanics on American politics, focusing on their role as voters or their civil rights activity. The experience of Hispanics as members of the American society is rich and diverse. To understand them it is necessary to keep in mind the basic facts connected with the Hispanic minority.

Historically, Hispanic immigration to the United States has been growing constantly since 1970.¹⁰ According to the United States Census, in 2010 there were more than 50 million people of Hispanic origin living in the United States. Three years later their

⁶ M.H. Lopez, S. Motel, E. Patten, *A Record 24 Million Latinos Are Eligible to Vote, but Turnout Rate Has Lagged That of Whites, Blacks*, p. 9, The Pew Hispanic Center, 1 October 2012, at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/10/trends_in_Latino_voter_participation_FINALREVISED.pdf>, 8 June 2013.

⁷ S. Minushkin, M.H. Lopez, *The Hispanic Vote in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries*, The Pew Hispanic Center, 7 March 2008, at <<http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/86.pdf>>, 9 January 2015.

⁸ M. Barreto, G. Segura, *Latino America. How America's Most Dynamic Population is Poised to Transform the Politics of the Nation*, New York 2014, p. 153.

⁹ A. Gonzalez, 'The Good News: "Off Year Cycle" Latino Registration and Voting Surged During 2006-10', The William C. Velásquez Institute, 7 March 2012, at <http://wcvi.org/press_room/press_releases/2012/120308_release.pdf>, 9 January 2015.

¹⁰ C. Gibson, K. Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000* U.S. Census Bureau, Washington 2006 p. 27 (*Population Division Working Paper*, No. 81), at <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0081/twps0081.pdf>>, 7 June 2013.

population increased by 2 million people more.¹¹ Every year, the number is growing. Michael C. LeMay, citing data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Pew Hispanic Center, says that by 2050 the structure of American society will be completely different.¹² Reports released in 2008 projected that by 2050 Hispanic population would, at least, triple.¹³ The projections were based on assumptions about births, deaths and immigration levels, taking into account both recent and past trends. The biggest problem of the research was the unpredictability of immigration levels. Immigration is a constantly changing process and it is very sensitive to many different factors. The economic condition of countries of origin, recession in the United States, American immigration policy, as well as the condition of housing and labour market are the fields that play an important role in shaping immigration trends. After 9/11 terrorist attacks, many researchers (J. Farnam, A.Ch. D'Appollonia, J.X. Inda, T. Givens)¹⁴ were predicting substantial changes in the U.S. immigration policy,¹⁵ which predictions turned out to be true.

Subsequent years have shown the new direction in the immigration policy of the United States. More complicated entry procedures, implementing new high technologies at border crossings, and new law provisions were visible signs of changes, and they did affect immigration. The main goal that the American government wanted to achieve was gaining more control over the stream of immigration, as well as decreasing its size. The assumption of the researchers that the immigration rate would stay constant turned out to be inaccurate.

Even if a general number of immigrants is going to diminish, the Hispanic population will probably not be affected by this phenomenon. Hispanics' share of the American society is steadily growing thanks to high birth rates. As a group, they have higher birth rates than the overall population, because of, at least, two reasons. Firstly, the age of the population living in the United States and secondly, the cultural pattern of family present in Latino families. According to the U.S. Census data, the median age of Hispanic residents in the United States is 39.1 years. It is only a year more than

¹¹ H. El Nasser, 'Census Rethinks Hispanic on Questionnaire', *USA Today*, 3 January 2013, at <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/03/hispanics-may-be-added-to-census-race-category/1808087/>>, 27 June 2013.

¹² A.M. Camarillo, F. Bonilla, 'Hispanics in a Multicultural Society: A New American Dilemma?' in N.J. Smelser, W.J. Wilson, F. Mitchell (eds.), *America Becoming. Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, Vol. 1, Washington 2001, p. 103.

¹³ M.C. LeMay, 'An Overview of Immigration to the United States, 1945-2010' in idem (ed.), *Transforming America. Perspectives on U.S. Immigration*, Vol. 3, Santa Barbara 2012.

¹⁴ J. Farnam, *US Immigration Laws under the Threat of Terrorism*, New York 2005; A. Chebel d'Appollonia, *Frontiers of Fear. Immigration and Insecurity in the United States and Europe*, Ithaca 2012; J.X. Inda, *Targeting Immigrants. Government, Technology and Ethics*, Oxford 2008; T. Givens, G.P. Freeman, D.L. Leal (eds.), *Immigration Policy and Security. U.S., European and Commonwealth Perspectives*, New York 2008.

¹⁵ J.M. Chacón, 'The Security Myth. Punishing Immigrants in the Name of National Security' in A. Chebel d'Appollonia, S. Reich (eds.), *Immigration, Integration, and Security. America and Europe in Comparative Perspective*, Pittsburgh 2008, p. 157 (*Security Continuum*).

this of African population (38 years). If we consider only the age category, both these groups are leaders among other minorities. The median age for other countries is: Asia – 42.7 years, Europe – 51.7, Northern America – 51.3, and Oceania – 40.6.¹⁶ In case of Hispanics, more than half of that group is between 18 and 44 years old. Their age, combined with their number, are two factors responsible for high birth rates among the overall Hispanic population. The other reason which should be considered in estimating Latino birth trends is a cultural family pattern. The stereotypical Latino family was a multigenerational one with many kids. However, recent changes have shown that the contemporary pattern is strongly connected with the level of acculturation. Hispanic-Americans, more used to the American lifestyle, want to follow the rules more familiar to them which they observe in their closest neighborhoods. Those who are most devoted to traditional family patterns, known from their Latin roots, are newcomers.¹⁷ Over time, these attitudes change, and become very much like those found in the mainstream.

Tab. 1. Change in the Hispanic Population, by State. 2000-2011

“New” Leader States	Percent change 2000-2011	“Old” Leader States	Percent change 2000-2011
South Carolina	154.5	Florida	62.8
Kentucky	132.4	Arizona	50.9
Arkansas	123.0	Texas	47.2
Minnesota	119.9	Illinois	36.1
North Carolina	119.6	California	31.4
South Dakota	116.1	New York	22.5
Louisiana	112.3	New Mexico	28.0

Source: The Author’s own compilation based on S. Motel, E. Patten, *Statistical Portrait of the Hispanic Population in the United States, 2011*, ‘Table 14. Change in the Hispanic Population, by State. 2000-2011’, p. 16, The Pew Hispanic Center, 15 March 2013, at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2013/02/Statistical-Portrait-of-Hispanics-in-the-United-States-2011_FINAL.pdf>, 18 June 2013.

According to the above mentioned report of the Pew Research Center, by 2050 Hispanics, who are already the largest minority group, will more than double their share, and they will comprise 29 per cent of the overall population. The overall data says nothing about geographical distribution of the Hispanic population. Traditionally, Latinos were “chain-migrants”, choosing as their destination points the places with

¹⁶ E.M. Grieco et. al., *The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2010. American Community Survey Reports*, p. 6, U.S. Census Bureau, May 2012, at <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf>>, 17 June 2013.

¹⁷ R. Suro, ‘The Hispanic Family in Flux’, *Center on Children & Families Working Paper*, p. 15, November 2007, at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2007/11/hispanicfamily%20suro/11_hispanicfamily_suro.pdf>, 17 June 2013.

large Hispanic communities.¹⁸ Among the most preferred states were California, New York, Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico. The last two Censuses revealed surprising data showing new trends in Hispanic distribution. Among the states that gained more than others in Hispanic population were South Carolina, Minnesota, North Carolina, Arkansas, Louisiana and South Dakota.

Geographic distribution of the Hispanic population becomes a very important factor during the elections. In 2012, when Americans were about to choose their president, there were many signs proving Latino role in political campaigns and the election process itself. Since 2008, minorities have been considered an important political player. Among all ethnic groups living in American society, Hispanics have been the crucial one. According to data, Latino voters constituted 10 percent of the electorate, which number increased from 9 per cent in 2008, and 8 per cent in 2004.¹⁹ There were many signs of their growing importance, for example, politicians trying to give speeches in Spanish, or mass media debates on the role of Hispanic voters. President Barack Obama even decided to visit Puerto Rico. He was the first American president who has visited the island since the President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's trip in 1961.²⁰ M. Abrajano and R. Alvarez, after analyzing the speeches of the two politicians attempted to answer the question why these speeches were so similar despite the time gap between them.²¹ The research on the question was also conducted by D. Shea and M. Burton.²² Both research teams neglected the notion that Hispanics have changed since that time. All data, given by leading centers, like the Pew Hispanic, The William C. Velazquez Institute, or the United States Census and others, confirmed changes occurring among Latinos. They concluded that *candidate's messages to Hispanics may have remained relatively similar because of the difficulty they have in understanding the political preferences and attitudes of this rapidly growing heterogeneous community. The "American voter" that Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes wrote of forty years ago may not be the same as the American voter of today, as it is likely that this new voter is of Hispanic origin. But, it does not follow that either scholars or politicians have a clear understanding of what the new American voter believes. [...] Understanding Hispanic political behavior is a complex and constantly changing endeavor, so that the commonly held beliefs used to characterize the average.*²³

¹⁸ B.J. Godfrey, 'Barrio under Siege. Latino Sense of Place in San Francisco, California' in D. Arreola (ed.), *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places. Community and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary America*, Austin 2004.

¹⁹ M.H. Lopez, P. Taylor, *Latino Voters in the 2012 Election*, p. 4, The Pew Hispanic Center, 7 November 2012, at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2012/11/2012_Latino_vote_exit_poll_analysis_final_11-09.pdf>, 18 June 2013.

²⁰ L. Lopez Torregrosa, 'It's Decision Time for Puerto Rico', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 2011, at <<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/20/opinion/la-oe-lopeztorregrosa-puerto-rico-20110620>>, 27 June 2013.

²¹ M. Abrajano, M.R. Alvarez, *New Faces, New Voices. The Hispanic Electorate in America*, Princeton 2010, p. 2.

²² D.M. Shea, M.J. Burton, *Campaign Craft. The Strategies, Tactics, and Art of Political Campaign Management*, Westport 2006 (*Praeger Series in Political Communication*).

²³ M. Abrajano, M.R. Alvarez, *New Faces, New Voices...*, p. 3.

Although Hispanics were the largest racial or ethnic minority group in nineteen states, during the 2012 election campaign public attention was focused on the so called three “key states” – Nevada, Colorado and Florida. These three units of the American federation became significant because of their growing number of Hispanic population. However, the main reason of public interest was not the number voters of Hispanic origin, but their wavering political support. The electoral system of the United States has the notion of the so-called “swing states”. These are states where political support changes so often that any forecasts of election results are risky. The preference of voters for each of two main parties, Democrats and Republicans, is very unstable. It were the reasons mentioned above, together with the share of Hispanic voters, higher than the national average, have made Nevada, Colorado and Florida so important. Moreover, the case of the Bush election recount in Florida in 2000 made many politicians have second thoughts. On the other hand, Hispanics living in Florida decide to support Republicans than Democrats more often. This is exceptional among Latinos, who usually favor Democrats. Hence, Florida became the biggest challenge for Barack Obama. It was the only state where Mitt Romney had a significant number of Hispanic voters in his Republican primary. But the 2012 elections proved surprising, and even that group of voters divided in their sympathies. According to Florida exit polls, 49 per cent of voters supported Obama and 47 per cent voted for Romney.²⁴

The attention of politicians was focused on Hispanic population mainly because of their overall number and the number of eligible voters of Latino origin. But those promising numbers had to be corrected by the level of political participation. In spite of being numerous, Hispanics have not been very willing to take active part in the election process. Data gathered by M.H. Lopez, A. Gonzalez-Barrera and S. Motel show Hispanics’ attitude more precisely. More than half of registered Latino voters (56 per cent) said that they had given little or no thought to the candidates running for president.²⁵ The William C. Velazquez Institute emphasized, in a report on Hispanic electorate, a significant national decline in Latino voter registration in 2009-2010.²⁶ There were at least a few reasons of that decline. Recession, residential mobility, unemployment and mortgage foreclosures were among them. Not surprisingly, usually the readiness to take part in elections is shaped by the state of the economy as well as the immigration process. When the condition of the American economy is not very good, immigrants lose their motivation to come to the U.S. A similar situation occurs when voters experience difficulties connected with their financial status. They lose their interest in taking part in elections, as they are focused on a fight for a better future. Finding a job becomes their main concern and they for-

²⁴ M.H. Lopez, P. Taylor, *Latino Voters in the 2012 Election...*, p. 5.

²⁵ M.H. Lopez, A. Gonzalez-Barrera, S. Motel, *As Deportations Rise to Record Levels, Most Latinos Oppose Obama's Policy*, The Pew Hispanic Center, 28 December 2011, at <<http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2011/12/Deportations-and-Latinos.pdf>>, 18 June 2013.

²⁶ ‘Recent Trends and Challenges for the Latino Vote’, *The William C. Velázquez Institute Memorandum*, 7 March 2012, at <http://www.wcvi.org/press_room/press_releases/2012/120308_release.pdf>, 18 June 2013.

get about keeping their registration valid. Looking for a job, they migrate across the United States. Residential mobility, so well-known and characteristic for the American society, is usually defined in a positive way as opening new horizons for many of its members. But it also has negative effects – for example, the fact that Americans on the move do not pay much attention to voting rules. One of these rules is the particularly important in that case. According to the voting law, no one is eligible to vote, unless they have registered.

Hispanics, as one of the groups most sensitive to the economy's ups and downs in American society, experience problems with keeping their registration valid. Another issue aggravating the problem is the lack of proper documents. Many Hispanics who have regulated their immigration status still don't have an ID – the basic document that is required to prove their right to vote. It is also necessary to remember that Latinos are usually young. About one third of the nation's eligible Hispanic voters is between 18 and 29 years old, and according to different data, that age group is usually uninterested in politics. L. Spiller and J. Bergner claim that the media overestimate the power of young Latino voters. They have analyzed their behavior during 2004 and 2008 elections, and noticed that in 2008, young voters comprised 18 per cent of the electorate and four years earlier – 17 per cent.²⁷

Latinos do not use or are not able to use their power. Their impressive numbers in the American society do not correlate with their political impact. A popular term, “a sleeping giant”, is used in America to describe the Hispanic political activity.²⁸ For many years now, researchers (R. Zieger, G. Gall, C. Reyes)²⁹ have been describing a new process, called “awakening the sleeping giant”. Latino political activists have started educating Hispanics about the potential they possess and ways of using it, to obtain more influence in American politics. There are many organizations among Hispanics that are trying to build pan-ethnic Latino politics,³⁰ among them National Council of La Raza and Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) are the best known. Their goal is to unite different interests of Hispanic groups in the United States into one compact policy. It is not an easy task if we consider the complex character of Hispanic immigration, whose groups differ in their political ideas and interests. Old immigrants who have been living in the United States for a long time are less sensitive to the issues considered most important by newcomers. Usually, new immigrants are looking forward to changes in immigration law and policy. Their predecessors are mostly more interested in changes connected with their everyday life

²⁷ L.D. Spiller, J. Bergner, *Branding the Candidate. Marketing Strategies to Win Your Vote*, Santa Barbara 2011, p. 157 (*Praeger Series in Political Communication*).

²⁸ W.E. Maxwell, E. Crain, A. Santos, *Texas Politics Today, 2009-2010*, Boston 2009.

²⁹ R. Zieger, G. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions. The Twentieth Century*, Baltimore 2002 (*American Moment*); C. Reyes, ‘Awakening the Sleeping Giant: 21st Century Latino Political Mobilization’. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 12 April 2007, at <http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p196303_index.html>, 12 January 2015.

³⁰ L. DeSipio, ‘Latino Civic and Political Participation’ in M. Tienda, F. Mitchell (eds.), *Hispanics and the Future of America*, Washington 2006, p. 455.

in the American society, like jobs, education, healthcare or taxes.³¹ These are people whose immigration status is clear, they are often naturalized citizens. That's why they usually see immigration issues as the second priority, but they do not consider them unimportant. When asked about their opinion on a question, if unauthorized immigrants working in the U.S. should be offered a chance to apply for legal status, over three-quarters (77 per cent) of Hispanic voters said "yes".³² The reason is clear. Latinos are very dedicated to their families and among the members of these families there are always people having problems with immigration law. That's why their opinion on the proposed changes was positive.

During the second term of the Barack Obama's presidency, immigration became a pivotal issue. As the comprehensive immigration reform is being discussed, it also became important for Latinos. An election poll, conducted in 2014 by Latino Decisions, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and other partner organizations, showed that almost half of Hispanic voters chose the immigration law reform as the most important issue for politicians to address. Moreover, 67 per cent of Latino voters described immigration reform as the most important and affecting their midterm elections voting decision.³³ NCLR says that midterm elections usually mobilize different type of voter – the older and the more conservative. The electorate in presidential elections is younger, includes more women, Blacks, Asians and Latinos. It is also predicted that the 2016 election will be a true challenge for Republicans. *If the GOP hopes to win the Presidency in 2016 and retain control of the Senate, the party needs a serious strategy for competing for Latino voters, two thirds of whom think Republicans either don't care about or are hostile to the Hispanic community; and 40 per cent of whom would find it difficult to support Republican candidates in future races, given the GOP's hardline stance on immigration reform.*³⁴ Moreover, M. Barreto in an interview for NBC News, points out that *political parties are missing opportunities at mobilization, especially at the local level, and also on messaging, which could be costly for a long time to come, especially for Republicans.*³⁵

Hispanic political participation is lower than the same factor for non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks. To activate Latino power, civic organizations have been working at the lowest levels, as well as on the top one. The lowest level of building Hispanic political awareness includes different charitable, organizational or school-based activities. A higher level of political engagement, such as protesting, lobbying, making

³¹ L. Saad, 'Hispanic Voters Put Other Issues Before Immigration', Gallup, 25 June 2012, at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/155327/Hispanic-Voters-Put-Issues-Immigration.aspx>>, 22 June 2013.

³² M.H. Lopez, P. Taylor, *Latino Voters in the 2012 Election...*, p. 6.

³³ 'Both Parties Must Act on Immigration, or Pay Price With Latino Voters'. *The Huffington Post Blog Latino Voices*, 7 January 2015, at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nclr-action-fund/both-parties-must-act-on_b_6121868.html>, 15 January 2015.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ S. Lilley, "Latino America's" Matt Barreto: Politicos are Missing the Boat', NBC News, 27 September 2014, at <<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latino-americas-matt-barreto-politicos-are-missing-boat-n212476>>, 17 January 2015.

contributions to, or working for political campaigns, is an action undertaken by only a few per cent of the Hispanic population. On the other hand, that level of political participation cannot be neglected, as the numbers, in some cases, might be impressive. During the 2012 presidential campaign, political activists, as well as other players in an American political theatre, have closely watched the emergence and activity of the Futuro Fund.³⁶ It was founded by Henry Muñoz III (a son of the well-known Latino activist from the 1960s, Cesar Chavez) – a wealthy Texan businessman, Andrés W. López – a lawyer with two Harvard degrees, and Eva Longoria – a famous Hollywood Latina actress.³⁷ The Fund raised \$32 million for Obama's campaign. Thanks to its activity, H. Muñoz III acquired the title of the finance chairman of the Democratic National Committee. The effects of such activities have a more strategic dimension. Thanks to huge donations, such groups have won a "seat at the table" when a discussion engages Hispanic interests, especially now when the immigration reform debates are pending.³⁸

The highest level of Hispanic political participation consists in reaching for offices. Organizations such as the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), work on facilitating the full participation of Latinos in the American political process. They also publish a Directory of Latino Elected Officials and proudly announce every seat taken by Hispanics, both at the federal and state level. During the last election, Latinos achieved a great success as their representation in Congress reached 31 people. NALEO also stressed a record number of 49 Hispanic candidates that were running for seats in congressional House from California.³⁹ Among other successful steps on the way to full participation in American politics, such representatives of the community as Ted Cruz – the first Hispanic U.S. senator from Texas, Susana Martinez from New Mexico – the first ever elected Latina governor or Brian Sandoval – the first Hispanic governor in Nevada must be named. They were all elected in 2010. At the federal level, Sonia Sotomayor has served on the Supreme Court of the United States as the only Latina among the judges.

Hispanic activists strongly advocate appointing Hispanics to official seats in the American administration. A coalition of thirty such groups, at the beginning of 2013 sent a letter to President Barack Obama. It contained a list of recommended Latino candidates. The National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, a leader of the coalition, called

³⁶ K. Tumulty, 'Hispanic Campaign Donors Look for New Ways to Flex Their Political Muscle', *The Washington Times*, 5 December 2012, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hispanic-campaign-donors-look-for-new-ways-to-flex-their-political-muscle/2012/12/05/0e0d63ea-3e2e-11e2-a2d9-822f58ac9fd5_story.html>, 11 January 2015.

³⁷ S.G. Stolberg, 'Latinos Gain Political Muscle, and Fund-Raisers Show How', *The New York Times*, 7 March 2013, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/08/us/politics/3-fund-raisers-show-latinos-rising-clout.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>, 23 June 2013.

³⁸ M. Gold, 'With DNC Post, Top Latino Fundraiser Gets "Seat at the Table"', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 2013, at <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/25/news/la-pn-dnc-post-top-latino-fundraiser-20130124>>, 11 January 2015.

³⁹ N. Terrero, 'Record Number of Latinos in Congress', NBC Latino, 7 November 2012, at <<http://nblatino.com/2012/11/07/race-recap-2012-latino-congressional-winners-and-losers/>>, 23 June 2013.

on the president to appoint at least three Latinos to his cabinet. They told the media their goal was to make sure that Obama had a diverse cabinet that included Latinos.⁴⁰ That decision was influenced by departures of two officials: Hilda Solis, the Labor Secretary and Ken Salazar, the Interior Secretary. After their departures the Hispanic representation in the cabinet will be at zero level. The coalition pushed for, at least, three Latinos in the cabinet. They argued that there were 23 cabinet and cabinet-rank posts and the Latino population in the USA was almost 17 per cent, so proportionally there should be 3.91 Hispanics in the cabinet. In the meantime, president Obama, completing his second-term cabinet, nominated only one Latino, Tom Perez, who replaced Hilda Solis. There was still a chance for another Hispanic nomination, and Latino leaders hoped that president Obama remembered that he had a debt to pay. The votes of ethnic minorities' helped him win the presidential race in 2008 and were important four years later. President Obama turned out to be unflappable and his second term cabinet gained only one Latino member.⁴¹

One might say Hispanics were privileged from the second part of the 20th century. In 1975, the Voting Rights Act was extended.⁴² That reform has given a special and specific protection to language minorities. Hispanics, Asian Americans, American Indians and Alaskan Natives were given bilingual election materials and from that time they can vote using forms in their native languages or ask for the help of an interpreter. In 2006, when the date of the extension was about to expire, some congressional politicians, mostly from the South (among them Rep. Steve King from Iowa), began to advocate for abolishing that provision. They argued that immigrants should learn English and use it, because it would let them assimilate to the American mainstream faster and more easily. Keeping that law in power, in their opinion, meant creating a problem of increasing the number of people who could not fully participate in American life.⁴³ The response of minority activists was immediate and straightforward. Hispanic organizations were one of the most active in this respect. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) as well as The National Council of La Raza and others, started different forms of activities aiming to change legislators' attitudes in favor of the extension. The power of their influence was strong enough to build sufficient support for the idea of equal

⁴⁰ G. Nevarez, 'Latinos Recommended for Obama Cabinet, as Administration Criticized for Lack of Diversity', *The Huffington Post*, 22 January 2013, at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/22/latinos-recommended-for-obama-cabinet_n_2525462.html>, 17 June 2013.

⁴¹ 'Obama's Only Hispanic Cabinet Appointee Expected to be Confirmed as Labor Secretary', *Fox News Latino*, 18 July 2013, at <<http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2013/07/18/obama-only-hispanic-cabinet-member-to-be-confirmed-as-labor-secretary/>>, 13 January 2014.

⁴² G.P. Laney, *The Voting Rights Act of 1965. Historical Background and Current Issues*, New York 2003, p. 26.

⁴³ C. Babington, 'GOP Rebellion Stops Voting Rights Act', *The Washington Post*, 22 June 2006, at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/21/AR2006062101910.html>>, 27 June 2013.

voting rights for minorities, and they won the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act for next 25 years.⁴⁴

The most notable phenomenon is that Hispanic political and electoral power is not used by American parties. Researchers like M. Wattenberg claim that contemporary parties in the United States do little to mobilize new voters.⁴⁵ They rely mostly on their faithful voters and those whose support is not so obvious become important only in the so-called “swing” states. That is why Hispanic voters became so important during the 2012 elections in Nevada, Colorado and Florida. That situation has been generated by the American bipartisan system, where states are divided into three main groups according to their political sympathies: the group that usually and traditionally supports Democrats, the group that almost always favors Republicans and the “swing” group that often changes its support. From the party’s point of view, the support of the third group is most interesting, but also the most difficult to win. Hispanics are interesting for politicians because of their overall number and potential influence. An important factor that weakens their importance in the American political system is voter turnout. Still, too few Latinos go to the ballots, to consider them an important political power. That is why many different ethnic civic organizations take diverse activities to mobilize minority voters. Such projects are expensive. They need to implement many different ideas to reach the voters’ attention but it does not guarantee the desired effectiveness.⁴⁶

It is not easy to foresee the direction of the growth of the Hispanic community as a political power. There are many factors weakening their position on American political scene. They have made progress since the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its extension in 1975, but it is still too little to become an important and influential political actor. K. Uradnik, L. Johnson and S. Hower admit that low voter turnout and political participation among Hispanics is a problem. It is an effect of low levels of political mobilization, combined with low rates of voter registration and low citizenship rates. That is why many researchers stress the responsible role that Hispanic organizations and interest groups in the United States have to play. Their task is to awake and keep the “sleeping giant” awoken. Among many different organizations working among Hispanic population in the USA, two most distinguishable – the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). As they have significant membership and are decades old and they are considered to be a Latino voice nationwide. However, their views on different issues vary, and this factor makes them incapable to represent the interests of the whole Hispanic population in the United States.⁴⁷ B. Marquez⁴⁸ describes national-level organizations, such as the

⁴⁴ A. Terkel, ‘Voting Rights Act: Congress Rejected Major Changes to Section 5 in 2006 – But Not Without a Fight’, *The Huffington Post*, 11 March 2013, at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/11/voting-rights-act-congress_n_2829246.html>, 27 June 2013.

⁴⁵ M.P. Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2002, p. 12.

⁴⁶ D.P. Green, A.S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*, Washington 2008, p. 168.

⁴⁷ D. Martínez, *Who Speaks for Hispanics. Hispanic Interest Groups in Washington*, Albany 2009, p. 30.

⁴⁸ B. Marquez, *LULAC. The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization*, Austin 1993, p. 74.

two above-mentioned (but also the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and others), as dependent on corporate support, elite driven, devoting much of their energy to continuity, survival and institutional concerns. These qualities weaken their position and widespread support among Hispanic residents in the USA. On the other hand, thanks to the organizations' activities, there are almost 6,000 Latinos currently serving in elected offices nationwide, in all levels of government.⁴⁹ It is an impressive result, but having in mind the Hispanic share in the U.S. population, it still makes them underrepresented. It is not easy to answer the question of the future of Hispanic political participation. A. Camarillo and F. Bonilla argue that *greater political participation of Hispanics in electoral politics may take a long time, and may be difficult to achieve. One must raise the question of whether Hispanics will follow the political path of other ethnic and racial minorities – Eastern and Southern European immigrants and their children in the earlier decades of the twentieth century and Blacks since the Civil Rights era – toward ever-increasing inclusion in the American political system.*⁵⁰

Moreover, K. Uradnik, L. Johnson and S. Hower, also stress another important factor.⁵¹ Hispanics do not constitute a voting block: *In order to measure the voting strength, it is important to distinguish between Hispanic voters, or voters of Mexican origin, and Latino voters, meaning voters with national origins from Central or South America or the Caribbean. Some pollsters consider all of these various groups together when sampling public opinion, but they have different voting patterns. For example, Cuban Americans often vote Republican, while Mexican Americans lean toward the Democratic Party and Puerto Ricans tend to overwhelmingly vote Democratic.*⁵²

Considering the future role of Hispanics in American political theatre, one should remember about a few more factors that influence the political activity of any group – their well-being and the level of education. The profile of Latino groups living in the USA does not provide optimistic data on that subject. Latinos tend to be uneducated members of the poor working class. They are also divided in their political interests. This makes any attempts of uniting Hispanics as one electoral block very difficult. Looking at only three biggest Hispanic groups: Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, it is clear that their interests are different. Mexicans, whose presence in the United States is marked by problems with illegal immigration and border issues, tend to focus on immigration issues in the American politics. Cubans are very sensitive to U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba and the Castro regime. Puerto Ricans are the only Hispanic group in the United States whose members are American citizens, but with limited citizenship. They do not have the right to vote for American president. Their first concern is economy. The overall situation on the island is very demanding and Puerto Ricans

⁴⁹ '2011 Directory of Latino Elected Officials', NALEO Educational Fund, at <<http://www.naleo.org/directory.html>>, 29 June 2013.

⁵⁰ A.M. Camarillo, F. Bonilla, 'Hispanics in a Multicultural Society...', p. 118.

⁵¹ K. Uradnik, L.A. Johnson, S.B. Hower (eds.), *Battleground. Government and Politics*, Vol. 1, Santa Barbara 2011, p. 280 (*Battleground Series*).

⁵² Ibid.

are looking for help to the USA. But their problems, experienced on the island, usually do not end after coming to America.

Considering Hispanics' role in American politics, especially in elections, it seems it should be evaluated not in a general context, but in reference to the relations with two leading parties. Latinos traditionally identify themselves with Democrats. Their support is rather predictable. The only question is how many of them will go to the polls. Although the immigration issue matters, it does not have significant influence on Latino voters' choice. In 1996, President Bill Clinton (of the Democratic Party) signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act. The act was designed to deal with illegal immigration by providing harsh regulations, mostly on illegal border crossers and visa overstayers. Hispanic voters did not backtrack on Democrats, but a decline in the Republican share of the Latino vote could be observed instead. In 1986, the team, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush (of the Republican Party), gave immigrants the most awaited gift – amnesty. About three million people received the status of permanent residents in the USA. But when competing for the presidency, George H.W. Bush received no gratitude for that deed. In fact, he received lesser support from Hispanics than Ronald Reagan before announcing amnesty. Some other cases show that whatever Republicans say about immigration, the support of Hispanics is relatively the same. In 2008, John McCain, the author of the prospective amnesty bill, received an average per cent of Hispanic votes (32 per cent).⁵³ Four years later, Mitt Romney, openly opposing amnesty, received 28 per cent of Latino votes.⁵⁴ Comparing those facts with data provided by the Pew Research Center, it is clear that immigration is not the issue decisive to Hispanic support. According to the data released in 2012 immigration was “extremely important” for 33 per cent of Hispanic registered voters and 34 per cent of all Latinos. Jobs, education, and healthcare, were their three top priorities.⁵⁵ This contradicts the common belief that the road to Hispanic support leads through favoring immigration issues. Moreover, conclusions which could be reached after the 2012 election seem to be that Latino voters are not crucial for Republicans in their 2016 race for presidency. Their number, however impressive, is not large enough to grant or deny the presidency to Republicans.⁵⁶

As discussed above, there are many factors defining the level of Hispanic influence on the American political system. Most of them, however, show the weaknesses of La-

⁵³ J.G. Gimpel, *Latino Voting in the 2008 Election: Part of a Broader Electoral Movement*, Center for Immigration Studies, January 2009, at <<http://www.cis.org/sites/cis.org/files/articles/2009/back109.pdf>>, 19 January 2015.

⁵⁴ Ch. Cillizza, ‘The Republican Problem with Hispanic Voters’, *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2013, at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/03/18/the-republican-problem-with-hispanic-voters-in-7-charts/>>, 19 January 2015.

⁵⁵ M. Suh, ‘2011 National Survey of Latinos’, The Pew Hispanic Center, 25 September 2013, at <<http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/09/25/2011-national-survey-of-latinos/>>, 19 January 2015.

⁵⁶ N. Cohn, ‘Hispanic Voters Are Important for Republicans but Not Indispensable’, *The New York Times*, 20 November 2014, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/upshot/hispanic-voters-are-important-for-republicans-but-not-indispensable.html?_r=0&abt=0002&abg=0>, 18 January 2015.

tino position in this respect. It is clear Latinos have the potential to become an active player, but they also have a long way to go to achieve that goal.

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