

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## Issue Brief

### NEW STRATEGIES FOR LATINO VOTER MOBILIZATION: THE NEVADA DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS AS A CASE STUDY<sup>1</sup>

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Latino population rate has been growing in the United States at a dramatic pace over the past several years, and it is accelerating daily. This population increase, the widening realization of the potential for wielding influence within the community, and the activities of voting rights and Latino advocacy organizations mean that Latino voters could be a major force in American politics this election year and beyond. However, that potential can be realized only if Americans of Latino descent participate in numbers commensurate with their presence in the population. Historically, that has not been the case. Indeed, Latinos have long had a lower rate of participation than either whites or African Americans.

Latino voters have been getting media attention in this election cycle the likes of which has never been seen before. The “frontloading” of the primaries meant that states with substantial Latino populations—such as California, Texas, and New Mexico—would hold meaningful nominating contests for the first time in history. All of these states became major public tests of the building Latino political power, with Latino voters holding the balance of the election in their hands.

No place was this more true than in Nevada, a state that the Democratic Party specifically chose to have a contest very early in the process in 2008 because it had a large Latino population.<sup>2</sup> Nevada’s caucus was held before the contests of any other states with big Spanish-speaking populations. At the same time, the party in Nevada had the cards stacked against it in terms of attracting high voter participation. The state had no history of great political involvement; caucuses have proved to be much more difficult to attract voters to than primaries, for a number of reasons; and most voters in the state, particularly those who were relatively new Americans, had no experience voting in nominating contests, let alone taking part in the Byzantine ways of a Saturday caucus.

Knowing the challenges ahead, the state Democratic Party, led by Latino outreach director Andres Ramirez, pursued a number of creative strategies to try to boost the participation of Latino voters throughout the state, and particularly in and around Las Vegas, where the vast majority of Latinos worked and lived. The party’s efforts seem to have paid off: some 20,000 Latinos participated in the caucus, and Latinos comprised a much higher proportion of the electorate than in elections past. As a result, the Latino outreach program of the state party may provide some new ideas for innovative

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types of approaches to Latino political outreach that might be more effective than those that have been traditionally utilized.

This brief is not meant to be an academic, quantitative analysis or scientific assessment of the strategies employed in Nevada in 2008. Rather, it is meant simply to describe the unique nature of the Nevada caucus, what transpired with respect to Latino voters there, and suggest ideas advocates and academics might look at going forward to increase the participation of this historically marginalized group of voters.

## **BACKGROUND ON LATINO VOTERS**

Historically, Latino voter participation rates have been very low. Nationally, less than one-third of Latinos have voted in presidential elections, while less than one-fourth participated in congressional elections.<sup>3</sup> But this has been changing over the past few years.

As of September 2007, there were 18.2 million Latinos eligible to vote in the United States. This was up from 16.1 million in 2004. While this is a large bloc of voters, it is an under-representation of the Latino population. Comprising 15.3 percent of the overall U.S. population, Latinos are the largest minority group in the country, but due to their disproportionately young ages and lack of citizenship, they account for only 8.9 percent of eligible voters—still a sizable constituency.<sup>4</sup> In terms of actual voting, exit polls report that Latinos made up 8 percent of the electorate in the 2006 elections, up from 6 percent in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Latino participation grew from 5.9 million voters in 2000 to 7 million in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

A major hindrance to Latino participation has been low rates of registration—20 percent of Latino citizens were not registered to vote in 2004.<sup>7</sup> However, the number of Latinos registering to vote has been increasing steadily. According to an analysis by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the percentage growth of Latinos registered to vote was three times that of whites and four times that of African Americans between 2000 and 2004.<sup>8</sup>

While demographics play a key role, the history of low Latino participation rates can be attributed partly to the neglect of the two major parties. Studies consistently show that party and campaign outreach efforts have a sizable impact on voter turnout. Because Latinos have had low participation rates in the past, they have found themselves in a catch-22: since candidates and parties tend to focus most on reliable voters, they have usually paid little attention to potential Latino voters.

## **PREVIOUS EFFORTS TO INCREASE LATINO PARTICIPATION**

There have been relatively few up-to-date scholarly works dedicated solely to the subject of strategies for turning out Latino voters, though the ones that are available are enlightening. Ricardo Ramirez, a professor of political science and the University of Southern California, conducted a randomized field experiment of hundreds of thousands of registered Latino voters in an effort to measure the effectiveness of the voter mobilization effort undertaken by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) in 2002. NALEO's "Voces del Pueblo" campaign conducted Latino voter outreach through direct mail, automated phone calls ("robo-calls"), and live phone calls from volunteers. Ramirez found that only live phone calls "produced a

statistically significant increase in voter turnout.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, he also found that the live phone calls worked substantially better than the automated robo-calls, which, he says “underscores the importance of the *quality* of communication with voters”—a point that, as we will later see, the leaders of the Nevada effort intuitively understood. “For every twenty-two contacts made by a live caller, one new vote was produced. This [higher] result suggests that an informal conversation with a committed NALEO caller can help a low-propensity Latino build a bridge to the electoral process.”<sup>10</sup>

Melissa R. Michelson from California State University reviewed four field experiments in Latino participation conducted in a variety of places during a three-year period. She found that, as is the case with other groups, in-person, door-to-door outreach is an effective way to mobilize Latino voters. When the person doing the outreach is of the same ethnicity and/or party, Latinos are even more receptive. “If the messenger somehow is able to establish a common bond with the voter—either through shared ethnicity or through shared partisanship—then the voter is more likely to hear and be affected by the mobilization effort.”<sup>11</sup> Other studies by Michelson confirm this finding.<sup>12</sup>

In another major study that is ongoing, Michelson teamed up with Lisa Garcia Bedolla from the University of California-Irvine and voter-turnout specialist Donald P. Green from Yale to study the outreach approaches of a number of organizations working on turning out the vote in low-income and minority communities in California in 2006. Among the organizations examined was the Central American Resource Center, which conducted voter education to teach voters about the voting process and utilized free media among the Spanish language press. The authors did not find much of an impact from this effort.<sup>13</sup> They also once again reviewed the work of NALEO. Of particular interest, NALEO conducted two sets of targeted phone-banking, with volunteers having live conversations—in one, the script was short, simply reminding voters to vote; the second script was more “information rich,” in which the volunteers talked to the voters about the candidates and the issues. The researchers found the second set of phone calls to be much more effective than the first. Robo-calls were again found to be ineffective.<sup>14</sup> The group also looked at the activities of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, which also did live phone-banking, with some voters being contacted as many as three times in the course of three weeks. Once again, talking on the phone with a live person was found effectual.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the study concluded that best practices include face-to-face canvassing, live phone banks, and having a more “information rich” dialogue on the phone.<sup>16</sup>

A number of Latino organizations have worked on voter mobilization for years, most notably the National Council of La Raza and the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, referenced above. NCLR has a program called the Latino Empowerment and Advocacy Project (LEAP). According to the LEAP training manual, the effort focuses on unregistered, newly registered, and infrequent voters. Two of the aims of the program are to train community-based organizations to conduct outreach and education and to devise the most effective strategies for improving participation. The main components of the program are direct mail, live volunteer phone-banking, and door-to-door canvassing at voters’ homes. The manual says that the phone calls should encourage turnout, provide information about the place and hours for voting, identify voters who need transportation on election day, and recruit volunteers.<sup>17</sup>

In 2006, NCLR teamed up with NALEO, Mi Familia Vota Education Fund, and the largest Spanish-language media companies to create “Ya es Hora, ¡Ve y Vota!” (It’s Time, Go Vote!). While in its first phase the organization focused on citizenship drives, it is now moving more toward voter mobilization. In 2008, the “campaign seeks to increase Latino voter registration and turnout . . . through an unprecedented multi-media campaign that encompasses grassroots, print and broadcast outreach. In particular, the campaign will use aggressive non-partisan field efforts to ensure that Latinos are an important vote in the new Southwestern battleground states.”<sup>18</sup> The effort will employ community-based organizations, and includes a bilingual hotline, 1-888-Ve-Y-Vota, in coordination with the larger voting rights operation Election Protection. Most interestingly, the major Spanish-language media is pitching in to help mobilize the millions of Spanish speaking viewers that watch their television shows, read their newspapers, and listen to their radio programs daily. Even during the primaries, Univision aired public service announcements reminding viewers to vote. Print media such as ImpreMedia put voter registration information in their newspapers.<sup>19</sup>

## BACKGROUND ON THE NEVADA CAUCUS

Nevada has had caucuses since the 1960s, but they have always been held late in the nomination process, and have been low-turnout affairs. Voter turnout in Nevada historically has been very low: less than 1 percent of eligible voters participated in the 2004 caucus. Even in the general election in 2004, Nevada ranked forty-second in voter turnout.

After considering the issue for many months, the Democratic National Committee’s Commission on Presidential Nomination Timing and Scheduling determined to add ethnic and other types of diversity to the early part of the nominating process. After receiving presentations from several states, the commission decided to include Nevada and South Carolina during the early period of the primaries and caucuses. Nevada was chosen primarily because the Democratic Party decided it was time to give Latino voters a stronger voice in the process. The party was also driven by the desire to include a state from the West that also had a strong union presence.

The Nevadans had some compelling arguments for being chosen. The Latino power potential in that state is significant. The total population of Nevada is about 2.5 million, of which 610,000 are Latino, and out of that, 475,000 are Mexican. Nearly one-quarter of Nevadans—24.4 percent—are Latino, compared to 14.8 percent nationally. In Las Vegas itself, 30.6 percent of residents are Latino—174,203 out of a population of 569,753, with about 137,000 of those being Mexican.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it is important not to overstate the case. Only half of Latino Nevadans may be of voting age, and of that 300,000, only half were citizens in 2004. Of those citizens, just 83,000 were registered to vote, accounting for only 12 percent of the eligible voters.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, many in and outside the party were skeptical that Latino voters—or any voters—would show up in large numbers. Senator Harry Reid was practically laughed at when he stated he thought 100,000 voters would participate. More modestly, the Democratic Party of Nevada predicted a turnout four times greater than 2004—36,000 voters.<sup>22</sup>

The Nevada Democratic Party modeled its process directly on the Iowa caucus. Participants had to show up at one of 520 designated caucus locations at 11:30 A.M. on Saturday, January 19, to participate. Under the rules of the voting process, each voter publicly had to stand in groups representing each of the candidates in order to voice his or her preference. Any citizen who was not

registered to vote was able to register as a Democrat at the caucus. Republicans and Independents were able to fill out a registration card, switch parties, and participate.

## CAUCUSES: A FLAWED MODEL

It is notoriously difficult to get all but the most committed party activists to participate in a caucus. While this year has been extraordinary in terms of turnout, it is highly anomalous, especially with respect to caucus turnout. For example, the percentage of voters who participated in the 2004 Iowa caucus was about 6 percent of eligible voters.<sup>23</sup> In 2000, when there were wide-open races in both parties, the overall turnout of both parties' contests was almost no better: 6.8 percent. Moreover, Iowa's participation rate is the high-water mark. Voter turnout rates in other states' caucuses are far worse. Most notably, according to the *Las Vegas Sun*, in Nevada, "With the exception of 2004, when about 9,000 voters participated statewide, turnout has often numbered in the hundreds. In 2000 fewer than 1,000 participated."<sup>24</sup>

Why is this? Usually when a voter participates in a primary or a general election, he or she goes to the polling place and votes within a few minutes. People can vote any time of the day from early morning until the evening. In a caucus, participants must be on the registration line or be signed in by the appointed hour on the day or night of the caucus. Anyone who is late cannot participate. Also, participants must expect to spend two hours at the event, sometimes more. Thus, a voter who works or goes to school during the hours of the caucus, has small children that must be cared for, or is elderly and finds it difficult to go out cannot take part. Furthermore, the caucus process is difficult and confusing. There is a complex procession of speeches, physical groupings of voters by candidate preference, realignments of groups and re-votes if one or more of the original candidates falls short of the necessary 15 percent threshold of support, various public announcements, and party elections outside of the voting for the presidential nomination candidates. Finally, for any voter, the caucus system in most states requires a great deal of confidence and a high level of information—not only about the issues and the candidates, but also the caucus process itself. Every participant in the caucus is expected, if not required, to speak publicly, and is required to cast his or her vote publicly, in front of neighbors, friends, and colleagues. He or she must do so in the midst of a process that has all sorts of complicated rules and procedures. Not every citizen is going to be willing to undergo such an ordeal.

Some voters are structurally barred from participating in caucuses. This most notably includes overseas and military voters, since there is no absentee voting. Voters with disabilities may also confront barriers to participating in the caucuses. Finally, and most germane, voters with limited English are likely to have a harder time navigating the caucus process. Non-English speaking voters, who may also very well be first time voters, must not only learn how the relatively simple, but by no means easy process for voting in a polling place in a regular election works—they must now be willing to go to and find a place they may not be familiar with; understand that they must be there at the appointed hour; spend hours of their time; possibly speak and certainly vote publicly in front of people they know, possibly people from their workplaces; and follow complex instructions. This might be a daunting prospect for some who are new to this country and/or not comfortable expressing themselves in English.

## THE NEVADA DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S LATINO MOBILIZATION EFFORT

### *Taking Voting to the People*

In the months before the Nevada caucus, the staff of the Democratic Party responsible mobilizing the Latino vote—which was comprised of just two full-time employees—came up with a unique and creative game plan to ensure the large and growing Latino voting population showed up to participate. The party made a special effort to reach out to new citizens and to Latinos who were voters but were unfamiliar with the caucus process, and to register new Latino voters. The staff was able to recruit a core group of ten volunteers to do outreach in the Spanish-speaking communities.

In a major break from traditional get-out-the-vote strategy, the party did not rely solely on contacting voters at home, but took their efforts to the workplaces of Latinos. The party did not focus only on door-to-door outreach trying, to make contact at times people might be at home—instead they went to where they *work*. They went to Latino businesses, such as construction sites and restaurants, and talked to employees and customers. They posted information in the *mercados* and *supermercados*. They worked with employers to get information to and make contact with the employees.

Staff and volunteers placed 1,657 posters and distributed 8,963 brochures in all types of businesses that were Latino-owned or had a large Latino customer or client base, including taco shops, *tienditas*, beauty salons, and swap meets. But they did not just focus their efforts on the obvious and easily accessible storefront operations—they also delivered materials to the offices of lawyers, insurance agencies, doctors, accountants, and notary publics. They went anywhere they could think of that might have a large Spanish-speaking clientele and worked with the heads of such businesses to get the information out to the community. They then made an effort to build and then maintain relationships with these business owners and employers who might not be the usual political partners, but had influence in the community in other ways.

Moreover, the party even took the voting itself to the worksites of a large number of Latino voters by holding at-large caucuses in the hotels where the party knew many Latinos would be working on a Saturday morning. This took substantial negotiation with the hotels, and as it turned out, Andres Ramirez says hotel management actually responded very positively to these efforts and tried their best to be cooperative, even though it was not necessarily good for business. After all, the party was counting on many of the hotel and casino workers to depart their work duties in large numbers on a Saturday. Nonetheless, the party was able to hold training sessions for management about how the caucuses would work, and employers sent memos to all staff about participating. For instance, Nine Group, a company that owns many of the properties at the Palms, held a mandatory all-staff meeting to learn about the process and to let the employees know that the hotel would stop operating, if necessary, for the period of caucusing on caucus day.

The Latino outreach team also went to work in the places where the Latino community went to socialize, and brought voting and politics to those events. These were not places where the most politically engaged citizenry might be, but team members knew they had to reach this population to achieve the participation rates they were aiming for, and this group of potential voters was not going to come to them, or show up at a political event.

For example, early on the party established a soccer team, “Los Democratras,” that played games in a major Latino league. The name itself was picked to prompt a conversation—players and fans might wonder what does “Los Democratras” mean? At games, volunteers wearing team t-shirts engaged in voter education about the caucus, registered voters, and handed out citizenship applications. They were able to engage the community in a nontraditional, very friendly setting, and have dialogues with them that were more in depth than they might have been at some other kind of event, on the street, or even going door to door (most of these people would never have attended an event that specifically was politically oriented). These encounters were in an environment that was fun, not so serious, making discussion of the political process perhaps less daunting.

All told, the party was able to register between 200 and 300 new voters at the games. Perhaps more importantly, however, they used the games to talk to disengaged citizens about why they should participate and to build trusting relationships. Moreover, the soccer team and the party’s efforts at the games attracted a great deal of valuable free media, both print and broadcast, further spreading the word about the need to register and participate to the community.

Party staff and volunteers also went to picnics, Cinco de Mayo festivals, and other Spanish fiestas. They crashed private *quinceaneras* (a girl’s fifteenth birthday party, similar to a sweet sixteen), went to *posadas* (celebrations during the week before Christmas), and made a major effort on a weekly basis at courthouse naturalization ceremonies to encourage new citizens to register and take part in the caucuses. Again, when going to the communities where they lived their lives and earned their livings, the party staff and volunteers did not just hand out flyers, but also talked to people in a two-way dialogue. Frequently, citizens would talk to them about the problems they might be having in navigating an unfamiliar government system, such as getting construction permits and the like. This gave the staff and volunteers the opportunity not only to build trust but also to show the voters how these types of issues of concern to them were connected to their own political participation.

The party held several mock caucuses all over the state, many of which were held in Spanish to teach Latinos about the process and how to participate. In one Spanish mock caucus in a heavily Latino neighborhood, girls and boys performed Hispanic folklore dances and the school’s mariachi band played. In the mock caucus, participants picked their favorite Latino celebrities.<sup>25</sup> At other mock caucuses, participants picked their favorite pizza toppings. In other words, they made politics fun.

The Nevada Democratic Party had a complete Spanish-language Web site up and running for months ahead of the caucus, [www.nuestrocaucus.com](http://www.nuestrocaucus.com). The Web site, like its English counterpart, informed visitors about the caucus process and had continually updated news about the party’s progress in putting the caucus together, mock caucuses for voters to learn about the process first hand and other events, and appearances in the state by the candidates. It featured a video message by popular state legislator Ruben Kihuen. It also had a function that allowed a voter to identify his or her caucus location. The Spanish language Web site received 2,000 unique visitors per month, and 32,162 page views in total.

The party had a Spanish-language hotline up and running in the weeks before the caucus and on voting day. The hotline was contacted by many first-time, Spanish-speaking voters. Many of them were calling from places in the state that were not predominantly Latino. The hotline was also used to conduct translation for voters during the actual caucus proceedings. There was a combination of

622 messages left and outgoing calls on the hotline just in the last two days before the caucus. (It is unknown how many incoming answered calls there were.)

## THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

### *Free Media*

The staff of the Latino outreach operation also was able to develop unique relationships with the Spanish language print and broadcast media. In brief, the staff was able to make the case successfully to media executives that the caucuses were the single most important thing happening in the Latino community. The Democratic Party had its first media training with the Spanish-language media, explaining how the caucus worked and why it was so newsworthy. They built a relationship with the Spanish media that would pay dividends in later coverage.

For example, the Spanish-language cable news station Univision put the staff of the Latino outreach effort on the air at least once a week. Univision reported on the caucus everyday. This prompted viewer questions, and Univision had the outreach staff answer those questions on the air. The staff was also often on the television station Telemundo. *El Tiempo Libre*, the largest Spanish newspaper in the state, had a column in every edition for months leading up to the caucus talking about it, and published a multi-page insert with all the information a voter would need to participate shortly before caucus day.

Broadening and deepening the role of the news media may have had more of an impact on Latino participation than the mainstream media would have on the general population. Studies have indicated that the Spanish-language press has a somewhat different place in the Spanish-speaking community than the English-language press does with its wider audience. According to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center, “an overwhelming majority of all Latinos (78%) say the Spanish-language media is very important to the economic and political development of the Hispanic population. . . . These responses suggest that the Spanish-language media play an esteemed role as spokesmen for the Latino population and they have a significant influence in the formation of Hispanic identities.”<sup>26</sup> The Spanish-language press is particularly important for getting messages to more recent immigrants,<sup>27</sup> who may also be first time voters. In the study, 80 percent of foreign-born Latinos who got their news in Spanish or both English and Spanish thought that “the news media help society to solve its problems.”<sup>28</sup> Radio is a particularly popular news resource for Latinos.<sup>29</sup>

### *Paid Media*

Many believe the paid media was particularly effective in getting the message out. The party used a Hispanic marketing firm, Language Sources, rather than a political consulting firm. The company did not specialize in politics, but rather in taking information, translating it, and most important making it understandable and accessible to the Spanish-speaking audience. Maria Marinch, the head of Language Sources, had a background in translation, marketing, and community outreach, giving her a unique perspective and insight into the needs of the Latino community. Andres Ramirez likes to refer to the approach they took to the paid media campaign as “culturizing” the message. The literature and the print and broadcast ads were not simply translated from the English materials but were actually very different pieces, though with the same overall message. (See Appendix for a sample brochure.) The Web site, mailers, radio, press releases, and billboards were all created with

the Spanish-speaking voter in mind. The firm adapted rather than simply translated materials, for the Spanish voters.

For example, with respect to the Web site, the media team analyzed the original English-language Web site to see what features of it would be of the most interest to the Latino community. Through this analysis, Marinch determined that the caucus was a new concept for the Latino community and that many were unfamiliar with the basics of American democracy. As a result, the team decided to change the focus and emphasis of the information for the Spanish version of the Web site so that it was more about how the caucus process and the American system of democracy worked.

Whereas the English-language versions of both the Web site and the printed materials had information about the delegate selection and allocation process, the Spanish versions only made brief mention of this. The firm decided that a long discussion of delegates would make the message too complex and be a distraction from the introductory information Latino voters really needed. There was, again, more focus on explaining the caucus and the importance of participating. Since a large majority of Nevada Latinos are Mexican, some of the material was even designed to appeal to Mexicans specifically. Certain terms used widely by Mexicans were utilized in the materials. In the radio ads, they used scenarios that would be familiar and resonate with the Mexican population. For example, one had a son telling his mother he was going off to play soccer and the mother replying, no, they were going to caucus.

In addition, Language Sources, in conjunction with the party, created a glossary of Spanish terms regarding the caucus process. This was done primarily for the media so that there would be a consistency in the use of language in their reporting so that the Latino audience would not be confused. The team conducted trainings for the media in using this particular terminology on a consistent basis.

## **THE DAY OF THE CAUCUS**

The actual caucus ended up being a mixed bag, especially for Latinos. Just ten days before the caucus, the heavily Latino and very powerful Culinary Workers Union endorsed Senator Obama. It was widely believed that this endorsement would swing a substantial number of Latinos to Obama, which led to charges from the Clinton campaign of strong-arm tactics by the union and even a lawsuit by another union (supporting Clinton) challenging the way in which delegates were apportioned throughout the state. In particular, the lawsuit alleged that voters in the hotel caucuses—where most of the Culinary Union’s employees worked—were given a disproportionate number of delegates. The judge in the case swiftly dismissed the claim. Both campaigns courted the Latino vote heavily, campaigning in Latino neighborhoods, using Latino surrogates, and putting up paid advertisements in Spanish.

Many potential participants, including Latinos, continued to be confused and put off by the process right up until the end. Where I observed the caucus, at the Luxor Hotel and Casino, and at other hotels, many employees did not know about the caucus, did not think they could participate, or were confused about the process. Many did not understand that they had the right to take the time to go, that their bosses had agreed to this, and they could not be denied the opportunity to participate. Others workers, such as the dealers and the waitresses, did not want to go because so much of their

income depended on tips. While they might not lose out on salary by taking a few hours off, they could not afford to lose the tips on a major weekend day.

There were also reports that many members of the predominantly Latino Culinary Workers Union were afraid to vote publicly in front of union leaders, especially those workers who wanted to vote for Hillary Clinton instead.

On caucus day itself, some caucuses went smoothly, while others definitely did not. There was a lot of chaos in a number of caucus sites. As one newspaper put it, “Counts were inaccurate. Rules were interpreted inconsistently. Doors were shut early in some places. Some precincts lacked a chairperson to run the meeting.”<sup>30</sup> Another said “There were frequent complaints of overcrowded polls, long lines, inability to hear instructions and a process that was far too time consuming.”<sup>31</sup> This confusion likely depressed the final turnout numbers, including in the Latino community. For example, at Rancho High School, located in a heavily Latino area, about one-third of the voters left before the final vote count because it was so disorganized.

Even though there were problems, the results were nonetheless impressive. Overall, Democratic turnout was 117,599, which amounts to about 30 percent of all registered Democrats in Nevada—compared to a turnout of 9,000 four years ago.<sup>32</sup> About 30,000 people registered to vote at the caucuses.<sup>33</sup> Much was made of the fact that Clinton won the Latino vote by a two-to-one margin, and won most of the caucuses held in the hotels, where the Culinary Workers Union’s endorsement of Obama had been expected to be a major influence.

## **LATINO REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT FOR THE CAUCUS**

About 18,000 to 20,000 Latino voters participated in the caucus statewide, and comprised approximately 15 percent of the Democratic electorate. In the 2004 general election, Latinos comprised only 10 percent of the Nevada electorate, and 60 percent of those voters chose John Kerry. In other words, the proportion of Latino voters that voted for the Democratic candidate in the general election was only 6 percent.<sup>34</sup> Therefore it seems clear the Latino vote did go up. The party also registered about 3,000 Latinos in the months leading up to the caucus. Of the 30,000 who registered at the caucuses, 1,519 of them were Latino.

Less encouraging was that only 2,600 Latinos participated in the at-large caucuses, less than expected. It is unclear why this was so. It may have been because some hotel workers participated in their home precincts, especially given the speculation that hotel employees were nervous about voting publicly in front of Culinary Workers Union leaders. Even given the disappointing showing, there is a strong chance that many of the voters would have been simply unable to participate if the workplace voting option had not been available.

The overall increase in Latino participation is not in doubt. What is less obvious is how to parse out all the reasons that might have taken place—whether it was the efforts of the Nevada Democratic Party, or the mobilization conducted by the highly influential unions (especially the Culinary Workers Union), the excitement around the candidates, the centrality of the immigration issue in the national debate, or some other reason. This is especially true given that Latino turnout was up in primaries throughout the country, most notably in California. Moreover, if the rise in participation was somewhat attributable to the efforts of the party’s Latino outreach effort, what aspects of that

effort were most effective, and which were not worth the time and resources? That is beyond the ability of this brief to discern. Nonetheless, the activities of the Nevada Democratic Party do suggest some new ways of thinking about how to increase the historically low Latino participation rate, and the turnout level for other groups, for both parties and nonpartisan organizations.

## POTENTIAL NEW LATINO OUTREACH MODELS

The most unique new strategy for increasing voter turnout used in Nevada was that of using the voter's workplace as a base for mobilization activities, and even for voting itself. Of course, in many settings this will be impossible. Many companies and institutions, appropriately, will not allow any political activity to occur at the workplace on a number of legitimate grounds. On the other hand, it seems that many business and employers were much more receptive to this kind of activity than one might first think.

The Las Vegas casinos and hotels are an interesting example. To be sure, there certainly were reports of some managers not being supportive of employees leaving to caucus, but at the senior level, support seemed genuine. It is hard to imagine that having the caucus in the hotel was directly beneficial to its bottom line. Whatever tangential public relations or employee goodwill bonus points there were to be gained—and there were some—the fact was that owners risked large numbers of employees simply walking off the job for two to three hours in the middle of a Saturday on a major football weekend. Yet hotel and casino management turned out to be mostly helpful partners.

One vivid example of this partnership was on display at the Luxor. There was a huge banner behind the podium that said “MGM Mirage Supports 2008 Caucus,” and another that said, “Rev Up 2008—MGM Mirage—Register Educate Vote.” When the caucus process continued well after the time it was supposed to end, a number of the participants became visibly nervous about needing to get back to their posts. The caucus manager tried to reassure them that under the agreement the party had with the hotel it was fine if they were a few minutes late. A few moments later, however, the manager announced that Felix Rappaport, the COO of the Luxor, wanted to address the group. Mr. Rappaport got on the microphone and told the audience that what they were doing at the caucus was more important than their day-to-day jobs. He said they were participating in the American political process, engaging in what makes America great. So, he said, “don't worry about being late. Don't worry about anything.” The crowd roared.

In addition to the hotels and casinos, there were all the store fronts and professional offices and the construction sites where the staff was able to engage in voter outreach. The receptivity of the business community was impressive.

It may be that there is something in the lifestyles of members of the Latino community that makes trying to contact them through their workplaces more effective than trying to get them at home. Census data shows that Latinos move more often than other groups. Generally, voters who move more often have lower participation rates than voters with greater residential stability. The complexities of voter registration explain a good deal of this as well as other socio-economic factors, but another reason is that more mobile voters are contacted less frequently by mobilization campaigns. This in part is because they are perceived as less invested in the community, but it is surely also the case that they are harder to pin down for outreach. That there is less campaign outreach to mobile voters has been found to be especially true for the Latino community.<sup>35</sup>

Trying to contact Latinos somewhere other than the home makes sense. In general, the idea of phone and door-to-door canvassing at people's homes has always seemed limited. It is always hit or miss whether the voter will be home and many people become turned off by being bothered in the privacy of their homes. By investing in building relationships with the business community that caters to a largely Latino audience, there may be opportunities in some unexpected places for Latino voter mobilization activists.

Bringing the voting process closer to the workplace has been discussed in other contexts, and the caucuses demonstrated its utility. Although turnout was not as high as hoped for at the hotel voting sites, those were still potentially hundreds or thousands of participants who might have been barred from the process had the option not been made available. Academic studies have found that the commute to the polling site can be a deterrent to participation, especially during a work day.<sup>36</sup> Researchers further have found that putting voting sites in “nontraditional locations” such as supermarkets, convenience stores, and shopping malls may increase voter turnout.<sup>37</sup> There are practical obstacles to such an approach, not the least of which is finding an appropriate space. Another obstacle that might be noted is the problem of reconciling voting away from home with our current system of determining voting location by the precinct in which the voter lives. But as the movement toward “vote centers”—centrally located polling centers where anyone who lives within the county can vote at regardless of precinct—demonstrates, we are already moving away from a precinct based system of voting. In short, these may be obstacles that can be overcome.

Another strategy to consider expanding is that of conducting outreach in nonpolitical environments, as the Nevadans did with the soccer team and by going to a wide range of Latino-oriented community events. Get-out-the-vote workers have long gone to local fairs and parades, stood on street corners, and conducted voter registration at supermarkets. But the Nevada effort was more specifically targeted and was taken to places where the staff and volunteers interacted with people in a setting in which they were enjoying themselves. It was not a passive effort of standing at a booth. It was an act of engagement.

Moreover, by choosing the sites they did, and in particular by setting up the soccer team and having the games, they achieved the perhaps unlikely merger of politics and fun. There is a body of emerging experimental research showing that holding a community festival outside voting sites can lead to increased participation. As the authors of one such study say, “A century and a half ago, casting a vote was a celebratory experience, as voters at the polls engaged their friends, imbibed free booze, listened to lively entertainment, and generally had a good time. Americans have lost touch with the raucous and engaging elections of the past. . . . Our polling places have been drained of their celebratory elements, and the 90%-plus rates of voter turnout that accompanied them have disappeared from our collective consciousness.”<sup>38</sup>

Another interesting aspect of the Nevada experience was the use of a Hispanic marketing firm rather than a political consulting firm to create original materials uniquely targeted at the Spanish language audience. While it is not unprecedented to use a marketing firm rather than a political consultant to do Latino outreach,<sup>39</sup> it does not seem to be standard procedure. If Latino voters are going to be a priority, it makes sense to utilize tools that will be most effective in reaching that audience, rather than just parroting in Spanish what English-speaking voters are receiving. This goes again to the issue raised by the academic literature in their discussion of the “quality of communication.” It is not enough to say we have reached out to the Latino community; it seems to

be potentially more effective if the communication is culturally adapted in a way that will resonate with Spanish speakers.

Finally, there is also the concept of the mock caucuses to build on. For many, especially voters not born in this country, the voting process is unfamiliar, and this can act as a deterrent to participation. Much political science research has found that increases in information lead to higher levels of engagement. Regardless of whether the process is a caucus or a polling place vote, it might be advantageous to expand upon this idea of going out into neighborhoods and in friendly group settings going through a dress rehearsal, in Spanish, of what the voting day experience will be like. This would not only help voters become more comfortable with the process, but could also serve as a new point of contact for the organizations putting together such exercises and interested members of the community.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

As it is unclear what specific degree of impact the Nevada Democratic Party's strategies produced, this analysis presents several recommendations for further research, by Latino advocacy organizations and academics. Field experiments looking at differences when voter mobilization is conducted where people work versus where people live is one area ready made for academic inquiry. Similar experiments could be tried to see whether engaging in mobilization activities through otherwise purely entertainment venues, such as the soccer team, could be undertaken. Could this be expanded upon to greater effect, for example by having Latino oriented turnout festivals close to Election Day?<sup>40</sup> Given the growing prevalence of "vote centers," testing whether having a poll location near to somewhere a voter works rather than lives could also easily be explored further by the academic community.

There is also this issue of the relationship between the "quality of communication" and how "information-rich" communications are and voter participation. Academic studies referred to earlier are the first steps in looking at whether voter contact that entails more interactive, in-depth dialogue is more effective than more direct, one-way messaging. Researchers need to explore this further, including whether, given how relatively labor intensive such efforts are, it is cost effective. It certainly seemed to make a difference with Nevada Latinos, and it is an effort that may continue to pay dividends in terms of community engagement well into the future.

More research also needs to be conducted on the role of the Spanish-language media in engaging the Spanish-speaking citizenry. The Pew study cited suggests that Spanish-language media may play a different role in the Latino community than the English-language press does in the population at large. Perhaps it is seen by Latino Americans as more of a community resource, a place that brings the culture together, in a way that is not the case for Anglos and other groups. If so, that might suggest ways in which advocacy organizations and the parties could deepen ties with local media, especially Latino media, to boost political engagement.

Finally, this matter of not translating campaign and advocacy materials, but, as Andres Ramirez puts it, "culturizing" the material, needs to be examined further. Is there a quantifiable difference between materials simply translated into Spanish from the English versus materials that have been created uniquely for the Latino voter that utilize messages, language, and images that will resonate more with this community?

## CONCLUSION

Every election season in recent years has seen some pundits declare that it is the year the Latino vote will finally have its voice heard, and every time that optimistic prediction has failed to be borne out. So far, 2008, with increased turnout by the Latino community in the primaries throughout the country, there is more hope that reality will match the optimism this year. Yet there is still much work to be done to ensure that this population achieves its political potential. The Nevada Democratic Party's work was encouraging and should serve as a model for other groups and candidates seeking to reach the Latino voter—if for no other reason than it was uniquely focused on the Spanish-speaking voter and the party's staff used an unusual degree of creativity in their methods. More research is needed to see if the particular strategies utilized by Andres Ramirez and his team can or should be replicated. As the Latino voting bloc continues to increase, such analysis will be of enormous value to all key players in the political process.

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WRITTEN BY TOVA ANDREA WANG, A DEMOCRACY FELLOW AT THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

MARCH 24, 2008

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THE CENTURY FOUNDATION IS PUBLISHING THE ISSUE BRIEF SERIES TO HELP EXPLAIN AND CALL ATTENTION TO PUBLIC POLICY IDEAS THAT ARE WORTHY OF DISCUSSION AND DEBATE. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS SERIES ARE SOLELY THOSE OF THE AUTHORS OF EACH ARTICLE.

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<sup>2</sup> This report focuses on the Democratic contest rather than the Republican for a number of reasons. First, the reason Nevada had an early contest was because the Democratic Party proactively sought to add an early contest where there was a significant Latino population, to balance out the other early events in New Hampshire, Iowa, and now South Carolina, where there is a large African-American population. The Republican Party belatedly decided to follow suit after complaints by Nevada Republicans that ceding the day to the Democratic Party would have negative repercussions for the Republicans' fortunes in November. Moreover, because the Republicans held the South Carolina primary on the same day as the Nevada caucus, most of the Republican candidates paid very little attention to the caucus. The Republican Party further had far fewer caucus sites and did not attempt to court Latino voters in the state.

<sup>3</sup> Melissa R. Michelson, "Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 601, no. 1 (2005): 85.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Taylor and Richard Fry, "Hispanics and the 2008 Election: A Swing Vote?" Pew Hispanic Center, December 6, 2007, p. i.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Daniels and Clarissa Martinez De Castro, "The Latino Electorate: Profile and Trends," National Council of La Raza, 2007, p. 5.

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- <sup>7</sup> Daniels and De Castro, “The Latino Electorate,” p. 14.
- <sup>8</sup> <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Ricardo Ramirez, “Giving Voice to Latino Voters: A Field Experiment of a National Nonpartisan Mobilization Effort,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 601, no. 1 (2005): 66.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 80.
- <sup>11</sup> Michelson, “Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization,” pp. 98–99.
- <sup>12</sup> See Melissa R. Michelson, “Getting out the Latino Vote: How Door to Door Canvassing Influences Voter Turnout in Rural Central California,” *Political Behavior* 25, no. 3 (September 2003): 247–63; Melissa R. Michelson, “Mobilizing the Latino Youth Vote: Some Experimental Results,” *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 5 (2006): 1188–1206.
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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 25.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 34–35.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 38.
- <sup>17</sup> LEAP Get-Out-the-Vote Training Manual, April 26, 2006 available online at <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/download/38874>.
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- <sup>19</sup> Della de Lafuente, “Hispanic Marketing Report: Poll Vaulting,” *Marketing y Medios*, January 14, 2008.
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- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
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Primero, participe en el caucus del recinto electoral que le corresponde e invite a sus vecinos a hacer lo mismo. Una vez ahí, puede ayudar a la comunidad postulándose como delegado o delegado alterno para representar a sus vecinos en la convención del condado.

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destino de  
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y nación en  
este momento  
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En el 2008  
tendremos la  
oportunidad de  
elegir al próximo  
presidente de los  
Estados Unidos.  
Pero antes los  
partidos deben  
escoger al  
candidato que  
los representará  
en las elecciones  
generales. El  
proceso de  
elección de  
los candidatos  
presidenciales  
comienza en  
su vecindario  
en un proceso  
llamado **caucus**  
del recinto  
electoral.

El sábado  
19 de enero  
de 2008

usted podrá  
participar y  
hacer oír la  
voz de los  
hispanos.

## ¿Qué cosa es un caucus



El **caucus**, como se le conoce en inglés, es una reunión de vecinos donde las personas registradas en un partido político se juntan para elegir al candidato de su preferencia. El 19 de enero de 2008 Nevada seleccionará a los candidatos presidenciales a través de este proceso. Los participantes del **caucus** no votan jalando una palanca o llenando una boleta electoral. Ellos expresarán su apoyo en una reunión abierta para todos los Demócratas inscritos en su recinto electoral.

Durante el **caucus**, los Demócratas se unirán en el recinto electoral para expresar su apoyo a su candidato presidencial favorito. Los **caucuses** se llevarán a cabo en una escuela, una biblioteca, centros comunitarios, una iglesia o en algún otro edificio público.

## ¿Por qué es importante mi participación



Hacer oír su voz eligiendo al candidato de su preferencia es muy importante. Ya que la persona que sea elegida como presidente tomará decisiones que le afectarán a usted y a su familia. Aunque el participar en el **caucus** no tiene un costo monetario para usted, el no hacerlo puede costarle caro ya que las decisiones que se tomen en cuanto a salud, inmigración, empleos, impuestos y otros asuntos importantes, serán tomadas por la persona que sea elegida como presidente. Si no participa, su voz no será tomada en cuenta.

## ¿Quién puede participar



Todos los Demócratas inscritos para votar pueden participar en el **caucus**, incluso los jóvenes de 17 años que tendrán 18 años el día de la Elección General el 4 de noviembre de 2008 pueden hacerlo. Cualquiera puede asistir y observar, pero sólo aquellos inscritos como Demócratas pueden participar en el proceso de elección del candidato. Si usted no está inscrito como Demócrata o no está inscrito para votar, podrá hacerlo ahí el mismo día del **caucus**.

## ¿A dónde tengo que ir para participar



Antes de la fecha del **caucus**, se le informará a todos los Demócratas registrados adonde se llevará a cabo el **caucus** de su recinto electoral. Los **caucuses** se realizarán en escuelas, bibliotecas, centros comunitarios, iglesias u otros edificios públicos. El lugar que le corresponde estará cerca de su casa y no tendrá que ir muy lejos para participar. Usted puede averiguar cuál es su recinto electoral llamando al (702) 448-7443

¿Qué  
pasa  
el 19 de  
enero  
de 2008



El 19 de enero de 2008 las puertas de los recintos electorales se abrirán y el registro comenzará a las 11 de la mañana en punto. Durante el **caucus**, los Demócratas expresarán su apoyo al candidato de su preferencia y ahí también asignarán delegados a los candidatos. Este proceso dura aproximadamente 45 minutos.

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