


# A New Measure of Group Influence in Presidential Elections: Assessing Latino Influence in 2008

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## Abstract

The importance of the Latino electorate has been the subject of both academic inquiry and media discourses. The question of Latino influence is frequently limited by an approach that focuses on single variable considerations (e.g., voter turnout or ethnic-targeted campaign spending) that are often contest-specific idiosyncrasies. Relying on theoretically appropriate concepts, the authors measure Latino political influence as a function of three factors: in-group population traits, electoral volatility, and mobilization. Using the 2008 presidential election, the authors demonstrate the utility of incorporating a multifaceted measure that accounts for the contemporary complexity within the electoral environment. Because this framework is rooted in theoretical concepts, as opposed to discrete group or contest characteristics, it may be applied to any “influence group” in different electoral settings. Data are culled from several publicly available outlets, making it possible for scholars to replicate these measures and further investigate questions associated with group influence in American politics.

## Keywords

2008 election, Latino politics, political influence

In presidential elections it is difficult, if not impossible, for any single group of voters to claim undue influence in deciding the outcome. Despite this difficulty, interest groups, advocates, the media, and scholars alike spend considerable time debating whether one group or another influenced the outcomes. In 2000 it was argued at length that Nader voters “cost” Gore the election and soccer moms influenced a Bush victory (Burden 2006; Kaufmann 2006). In 2004 it was repeatedly said that gains among Hispanics influenced Bush’s reelection and that evangelical “values” voters turned out in great numbers to secure Bush’s second term (Leal et al. 2005; Guth et al. 2006). During the 2008 presidential contest, the Latino vote received more hype than ever; their strong preference for Hillary Clinton during the Democratic primary fed speculation that Latinos had the potential to make or break the election. The Associated Press reported and others agreed that low Latino support for Obama could doom him in key states, whereas large gains in the Latino vote could lead to a Democratic victory in Republican-leaning states such as Florida, Nevada, and Colorado.

Despite constituting the largest minority group in the United States, when it comes to presidential politics Latinos typically receive only superficial attention from candidates and media. The peculiarities of the Electoral College,

a state-level winner-take-all system, has led Latino politics research to focus on explanations for the group’s negligible influence on the outcomes of presidential elections. The political climate changed in 2008 when mainstream media outlets and campaigns, not just advocacy groups, repeatedly described Latinos as the single most important voting bloc in presidential elections. For example, Arturo Vargas, head of the prominent National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, proclaimed colorfully in a 2007 op-ed, “Latino voters will decide the 2008 election. The Latino vote is positioned as the power punch that may deliver the knockout blow in 2008.” On the other hand, noted Latino politics expert, Professor Rodolfo de la Garza of Columbia University, vehemently countered this narrative and related media hype by arguing, “The Latino vote is completely irrelevant. The myth was created by Latino leaders who wanted to convince politicians

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nationally about how important Latinos were” (Yanez 2008). Latinos voters are heavily concentrated in uncompetitive states such as California, Texas, and New York and are too small in number to matter in contested states (de la Garza and DeSipio 1992, 1996, 1999, 2005). The diametrically opposed interpretations from recognized experts leave observers and scholars in an unsatisfying predicament. On one hand, it is true that the Latino electorate cannot meet the empirical threshold necessary to claim they single-handedly *determined* the Obama victory. Framed in this manner, though, very few segments of the electorate could meet such a daunting standard of influence. However, there is more than one way to measure group influence in an election. Postelection tallies are informative but can be too narrow an interpretation of “influence.” We offer an alternative model to examine minority group influence in a presidential election, which can be applied to the 2008 election or any future contest to properly assess the degree of influence.

We argue that a framework incorporating several dimensions of political influence is necessary to advance the research in a manner that is attentive to contemporary dynamics in the electorate. To this end, we identify three dimensions to measure Latino influence in electoral politics: (1) demographics, measured as coethnic group size and growth rate in the state; (2) electoral volatility, specifically changes in registration rates, partisan preference, or turnout compared to prior contests; and (3) mobilization, measured as media coverage and resources devoted to courting Latino votes. Using these three broad categories, we assess a wide array of data, nearly all of them publicly available, to create an overall index of Latino influence in each of the fifty states. This approach moves beyond a zero-sum definition of political clout that neglects these consequential realms of influence. Considering multiple aspects of political influence opens up avenues to investigate the extent to which different groups’ influence in politics is conditioned on the combination and variation in group demographics, voting behavior, and mobilization. Because this framework is rooted in theoretical concepts as opposed to discrete group characteristics, it can be applied to multiple minority or “influence groups” (e.g., African Americans, religious conservatives, working mothers, etc.) in different types of elections. (for a precursor of this model, see Barreto and Ramirez 2004)

In the 2008 presidential contest, fourteen states were clearly identified as swing states that would determine the election outcome, leaving thirty-six states in the “unimportant” category because of lopsided partisan leanings. On election day 120 million total votes were cast; of those, 40 million came from the fourteen battleground states—accounting for 33 percent of all votes. Thus, it should come as no surprise that a majority of all voters, white, black, Latino, Asian, reside in noncompetitive states. Using these new measures of political influence, our analysis shows

Latinos were very influential in seven swing states: Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana. Furthermore, we find evidence of extensive Latino mobilization, though a lesser overall impact in additional states including Arizona, Ohio, California, Texas, Missouri, and Minnesota, perhaps foreshadowing a greater degree of influence in 2012 and beyond.

This study extends the research on racial and ethnic politics in several ways. First, we present a theoretically oriented framework to approach the question of group influence in electoral politics. Second, we provide a substantive application of these conceptual measures with a study of Latino influence in the 2008 election. Our findings provide evidence that adjudicates the debate, with more clarity and nuance, regarding *how* Latinos influence the electoral environment and contributed to the election of Barack Obama.

The article proceeds in the following manner: We begin by presenting our argument in light of previous research and characteristics in the modern political context. Next we specify theoretical expectations for Latino influence across three different venues in the political environment. Third, we describe our methodology, data sources, and metrics employed. Next we present analysis and findings and finally conclude with thoughts on the substantive implications of this study and trajectories for related research.

## Can “Groups” Really Influence Presidential Elections?

The unique structure of presidential elections, from primaries to the general, diminishes mass influence on electoral outcomes. As noted earlier, most voters reside in noncompetitive general election states and very few minorities reside in early primary states (e.g., the white population in both Iowa and New Hampshire exceeds 95 percent) limiting their ability to influence the early stages of presidential politics. The year 2008 was different; Latino influence was palpable well before the first contest of the primary season took place. In 2004 and 2008 George W. Bush received a well-publicized slightly higher than average share of the Latino vote (Leal et al. 2005). The actual change in Latino favor for Republicans was quite small in substantive magnitude but strong enough to motivate the Democratic Party to alter the primary calendar to include a Latino influence state early in the season. Nevada was the third state to host a Democratic nominating contest; including this western state with a growing Latino electorate early in the process was a strategic decision. The party wanted to shore up Latino support they feared was softening and offered more influence in determining the party nominee. Changes to the primary election calendar were the catalyst for larger Latino influence in the general

election as numerous competitive Democratic contests continued to highlight the Latino vote as a key demographic (Barreto, Manzano, and Sanchez 2009; Barreto et al. 2008). When the general election campaign season arrived, both the Obama and McCain camps were keenly aware of the Latino vote because of record turnout in the primaries in addition to their experience with Latino electorates in their home states. While this article does not attend to group influence in the context of the primaries, it is important to note that Latino mobilization and turnout were noticeable features of the lengthy Obama–Clinton primary battle (for more on Latino voters in the primary, see Barreto et al. 2008; Barreto, Garcia-Castañón, and Nuño 2009).

It is a truism that turnout peaks when elections are decided by a small margin (Franklin 2004). It stands to reason then that political environment should be evaluated *prior* to election day with emphasis on identifying factors that contribute to creating the perceived competitive race. States can be characterized as competitive when certain conditions apply; foremost among these are preelection polls indicating a very close race, media reports framing the contest as close and important to the outcome, and candidates spending millions on advertisements and voter outreach in the state. When these conditions hold, that state and the voters in that state are influential because the political environment is competitive. All of these conditions occur well before a single ballot is cast. Once the votes are tallied, even seemingly competitive contents may yield lopsided margins for a variety of reasons; one party may have stronger outreach effort or a superior get out the vote drive, for example. Despite the election result appearing noncompetitive, the state continued to be important during the actual campaign because significant resources and attention were invested there.

Postelection tallies miss the real impact that a group has on influencing election outcomes during the weeks and months of the campaign; Nevada exemplifies this case in 2008. Exactly two weeks before the election the Politico/Insider Advantage poll put Nevada at 47 percent Obama, 47 percent McCain, and 6 percent undecided. Campaigns spent \$13 million in television advertising alone in the state that was inundated with television and radio ads, candidate appearances and events, and voter outreach efforts (New York Times/TNS Media 2009). Ultimately Obama won Nevada by twelve points with an estimated 76 percent vote from Latinos, up from 60 percent for Kerry in 2004. Was this Latino influence? Our data suggest so and are detailed in the next section.

Voter traits and trends are of course standard measures of influence, but more information is required to evaluate how a given group influences the competitive nature of the political landscape. We contend that the extent to which media and campaigns incorporate Latinos is an appropriate

indicator of political mobilization. Voters, media, and campaigns signal each other with respect to the competitiveness of a given election. Campaigns rely heavily on cues from the electorate, attuned especially to short-term, recent trends in turnout, partisanship, margins of victory, voter registration, and demographic composition. Using this information, they make decisions about resource allocation and mobilization strategy. National and regional media communicate to both voters and campaigns the closeness of the race and the importance of particular issues and groups of voters. Voters are sensitive to media cues regarding campaign competitiveness. There is evidence that turnout and bandwagon effects are partially attributable to news characterizations of the contest (Ceci and Kain 1982; McAllister and Studlar 1991). In this vein, news stories that highlight the importance of the Latino vote are communicating to campaigns and the broader electorate the importance of Latinos in creating statewide competitiveness and winning coalitions. Online media provided an additional unique contribution to assessing and publicizing campaign competitiveness in 2008. Both 538.com and RealClearPolitics.com developed a national following for their regularly updated (weekly and daily intervals), empirically derived predictions of state-by-state election outcomes. National, state, and local news outlets regularly sourced the “RCP average” or the “538 prediction” as an authoritative measure of national- and state-level campaign competitiveness in the weeks leading up to election day, based on the survey and poll results that were posted and analyzed by both Web sites.

Of course voters are also influenced by direct campaign mobilization: television, print and radio advertising, mailers, phone calls, and online mobilization efforts signal to voters that their state is in play (Green and Gerber 2004). Latino voters are no exception. A spate of recent research points to the effectiveness of targeted campaign appeals to Latinos (DeFrancesco Soto and Merolla 2006; Ramírez 2005, 2007; Nuño 2007). The Obama campaign brought peer-level innovation to online mobilization and incorporated this technology with unique Latino outreach strategies already in place (Garcia-Castañón and Collingwood 2009). The campaign Web site facilitated extensive contact in two directions: (1) directly from the campaign to voters and (2) voter to voter. Those who provided contact information to the campaign regularly received text messages and emails encouraging their participation (as voters, contributors, or volunteers) in the primary and general elections that were consistently described as “tight races” and “tough battles.” Individuals were also encouraged to self-identify with multiple online peer groups, (e.g., “Latinos for Obama,” “Ohioans for Obama,” “Obama-mamas”), each with its own Web-based organizational arm. Every one of these organized groups conducted outreach activities aimed exclusively at the particular affinity group in key states.

The extent to which a state is competitive in a presidential election depends on a mix of perception and reality about the political environment. Leading up to election day, voters, campaigns, and the media signal each other regarding the state's competitiveness. Little is known about whether, where, or how Latinos influence the electoral environment prior to election day. The weeks and months before the election are critical; indeed, this is the entirety of the campaign—strategists are devising and revising their tactics while individuals are reaching decisions about whether and for whom to vote. We identify three venues to quantify Latino political influence prior to election day: demographic traits of the electorate, variation in electoral behavior, and mobilization resources devoted to courting their votes.

### **Sí Se Puede? Measures of Latino Influence**

Counting Latino influence after an election is too late in the game to begin keeping score. Heretofore the research has not evaluated Latino influence on creating a competitive political context. We account for this with measures for proportion in the electorate, growth in the electorate, trends in participation and party preference, and targeted campaign mobilization efforts. We evaluate political influence in terms of the specific election and relative to previous elections. The rate at which the Latino population continues to grow is arguably the group's most distinctive and consequential characteristic. Thus, research on Latino influence requires relative demographic data to make claims regarding the extent to which population change alters American politics (Fraga et al. 2006)

We draw from several publicly available data sources to quantify Latino influence in the 2008 election and produce associated measures. The first of these draws attention to trends in the state population and electorate. We consider not only the total Latino population but also their increasing share of the electorate *relative to whites*. This is an important distinction because it highlights existing and looming demographic shifts that can improve long-term forecasting. As noted earlier, sophisticated campaigns take note of these larger trends and devise strategy accordingly. For influence to be felt, there must be at least a minimum Latino "community" that is observable in the state or conversely, if the population is small, one that is rapidly growing to merit attention. We gather data from the U.S. Census Bureau on total population by race/ethnicity, specifically for voter registration by race/ethnicity for all states ranging from 1996 to 2006 (2008 data not available *before* the 2008 election to make forecast).<sup>1</sup>

Turnout and party preference trends are also metrics of Latino influence in elections. We measure the change in

turnout and party share of the Latino vote from different presidential election periods. Latinos have demonstrated that their political allegiances are malleable. Turnout may be higher or lower depending on a variety of contextual factors (Pantoja, Ramírez, and Segura 2001; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000), and partisanship can also waiver. It is true that Latinos favor Democratic presidential candidates, but enthusiasm (turnout) and unity (cohesiveness) are variable (Bowler, Nicholson, and Segura 2006; Nuño 2007; Norrander and Manzano, 2010). This is an important factor in electoral politics because campaigns and parties will make strong overtures only to voting blocs that they believe are "in play." Democrats have played defense with the Latino vote, as noted with their strategic placement of the Nevada Caucus in January. In 2000 and 2004, Republicans played offense with the group, aggressively investing resources to chip away at the Democratic advantage, figuring that even smaller shares of their vote could win some swing states and provide some long-term advantages. To this end, we gathered election data on the estimated share of the electorate that was Latino from 2000–2006 state exit polls and estimated Democratic vote by Latinos and non-Latinos in prior elections in the states.<sup>2</sup> Noticeable increases in turnout and partisan preference over time, especially vis-à-vis the non-Latino population in the state, indicate the group's capacity to influence outcomes. If Latino voters consistently favored one party fifty-five to forty-five in election after election with no measureable variation, it would be difficult to argue they were influential. Thus, two points of comparison are necessary, and we include them in our model: first, how the Latino vote changes from one election to the next and, second, how the Latino vote compares to the non-Latino vote. So if the Latino vote was sixty to forty for the winning candidate and the non-Latino vote was fifty-two to forty-eight against that candidate, the Latino vote is a vital and unique component influencing the outcome. Likewise, if Latinos voted fifty-six to forty-four against Democrats in 2004 and then favored Democrats fifty-seven to forty-two in 2008, that shift is considered important to gauging influence (which was the exact case in Florida). Such estimates of the Latino vote can be derived from exit polls, though those are after the fact, so instead we rely on preelection polls to estimate the Latino and non-Latino vote in 2008 and exit polls for prior years.

Additional metrics generated to test Latino influence on creating a competitive political environment address the role of media and campaigns, which has been shown to be important (DeFrancesco Soto and Merolla 2006). First, we account for campaign expenditures on Spanish-language advertising in each state as one proxy for outreach. These data were gathered from Spanish-language television stations Univision and Telemundo, sorted by candidate



and media market and then retabulated at the state level.<sup>3</sup> Print media coverage of the Latino vote is also tabulated across the states. Reporting on the Latino vote was usually presented in two ways: First were stories on their general importance as a voting bloc given their prior political behavior. Second were specific stories about ethnic targeted campaign events and outreach, which of course highlight our point regarding Latino influence on campaign decisions regarding resource allocation. Both types of stories signal Latino influence on the political environment. A ratio of print news stories devoted to the “Latino vote” in each state for 2004 and 2008 was created to compare how much attention Latino voters received. LexisNexis was used to code news stories reported sixty days before the election featuring Latino themes in specific newspapers in the states (for software to conduct automated content analysis, see Collingwood 2010). We counted the total number of articles related to the Latino vote,<sup>4</sup> divided by the total number of articles about the presidential election.<sup>5</sup> The news coverage index reflects a real-world measure of the visibility of the Latino vote within a state. Segments in the electorate need to be visibly recognized as distinctive and salient to have influence, and news stories and campaign expenditures on Spanish-language TV provide considerable insight into these evaluations.

Finally, we account for mobilization efforts using the Obama campaign Web site to track Latino specific group mobilization across the states. Ideally, we would track this information for both candidates; however, the McCain campaign Web site did not provide state-level data on “Latinos for McCain” groups, membership, or fund-raising. It does not appear that McCain’s Web site facilitated such specific peer-to-peer mobilization networks, thus limiting their outreach and attempts to measure it. That said, we anticipate future campaigns for both parties will increase their online sophistication to mobilize, track, and organize supporters and affinity groups by state.

At this juncture we were able to gather two important data points related to Obama’s Latino mobilization by state, which shed insight on how influential Latinos were to his campaign strategy in each state. First, the Obama Web site provided end users with the ability to set up interest groups within their state and then invite others to join or become members. We counted the total number of members in “Latinos for Obama” groups across all fifty states,<sup>6</sup> and then we normalized that by the Latino registered voter population in each state.<sup>7</sup> Second, the campaign Web site tallied the total amount of money raised by each of these Latinos for Obama state groups, and we normalized this as a percentage of the total money raised by Obama in each state. To make the argument that Latinos had influence in Indiana in Obama’s victory, we would have to present evidence that numerous Latinos for Obama groups existed in Indiana and were active participants in his grassroots

campaign. These data illustrate mobilization and incorporation by the campaign across all fifty states.

## ¡Sí Se Pudo! How Latinos Did Influence the Election

On election night, and in the aftermath of the landslide Obama win, many efforts were made to assess the relevance of the Latino vote. Using strictly postelection tallies to count whether or not a Latino vote caused a state to be won or lost, Latino influence appeared weak. Obama won many states by a wider margin than expected, making it difficult to find the math that allowed for Latinos to cast *the* deciding ballot. We argue that this perspective is misguided because electoral influence can be found in the months and weeks leading up to election day, not necessarily the day after in election returns. Across our three key areas, group size, electoral patterns, and mobilization, we find strong and consistent evidence that Latinos in key states did influence the 2008 election. Furthermore, our data may help foreshadow which states pundits may want to pay attention to down the road as the Latino influence metrics show growth in new region and new states (e.g., Montana, Georgia).

We begin our analysis with an assessment of the more traditional post hoc election result tally. This is one of the measures of influence cited by de la Garza and DeSipio in their quadrennial analysis of the Latino vote in presidential elections, though they aptly dismiss it as being too unrealistic (de la Garza and DeSipio 1992, 1996, 1999, 2005). Latinos may have influenced the election if the margin Latinos provided for the winner is larger than the overall margin of victory—that is, if no Latinos had voted, the candidate would not have won.

Looking to Table 1, we find three instances in which the overall state victory margin for Barack Obama was smaller than the vote margin provided to him by Latinos alone. By this crude measure, it is possible to argue that Latinos directly influenced the election results in North Carolina, Indiana, and New Mexico. However, this measure dismisses other likely influence states such as Nevada, Florida, and Colorado because the overall victory margin was too great for Latinos alone to have mattered. This type of analysis is problematic for several reasons. First, it is atheoretical, offering no leverage in predictive research questions concerned with conditions prior to election day and which states will matter because it is based solely on election result tallies. Second, it ignores states where influence may have indeed occurred during the campaign through outreach, advertising, and mobilization, yet the election results do not back this up. Third, it may artificially include states as “influence” states just because the overall margin was razor thin. As we have noted, states may be perceived as close contents, but after votes are counted they are

**Table 1.** Did Latino Vote Provide Margin of Victory in 2008 Election?

	Latino vote %			Real election vote counts			Latino votes cast		
	BO	JM	%	BO votes	JM votes	Margin	For BO	For JM	Latino margin
<b>No. Carolina<sup>a</sup></b>	72	25	3	2,142,651	2,128,474	<b>14,177</b>	92,256	32,033	<b>60,223</b>
<b>Indiana</b>	77	23	4	1,374,039	1,345,648	<b>28,391</b>	83,766	25,021	<b>58,745</b>
<b>New Mexico</b>	69	30	41	472,422	346,832	<b>125,590</b>	231,767	100,768	<b>130,999</b>
Nevada	76	22	15	533,736	412,827	120,909	107,908	31,237	76,672
Florida	57	42	14	4,282,074	4,045,624	236,450	664,550	489,669	174,882
Colorado	61	38	13	1,288,576	1,073,589	214,987	187,320	116,691	70,629
Ohio <sup>a</sup>	72	25	4	2,933,388	2,674,491	258,897	161,507	56,079	105,428
Virginia	65	34	5	1,959,532	1,725,005	234,527	119,747	62,637	57,110
New Jersey	78	21	9	2,215,422	1,613,207	602,215	268,770	72,361	196,409
Pennsylvania	72	28	4	3,276,363	2,655,885	620,478	170,849	66,441	104,408
Michigan	64	33	3	2,872,579	2,048,639	823,940	94,487	48,720	45,767
California	74	23	18	8,274,473	5,011,781	3,262,692	1,769,729	550,051	1,219,678

BO = Barack Obama; JM = John McCain. Bold indicates Latino margin alone enough to change election outcome.

a. State poll not available; national average from Latino Decisions poll substituted.

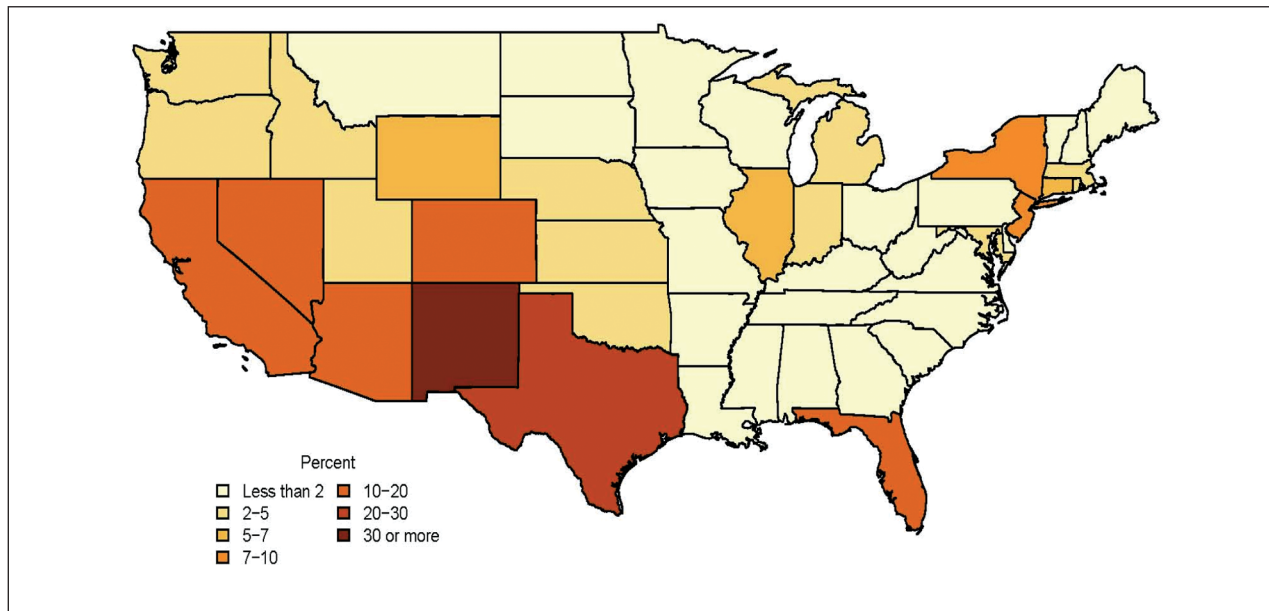
deemed noncompetitive after all. Missing from this analysis are other factors such as group size, growth in registration, voting patterns, and resources attention. Moving beyond the analysis in Table 1, which we believe to be too narrow and unrealistic, we focus our attention on the three components of group influence outlined above.<sup>8</sup>

## Group Size and Growth

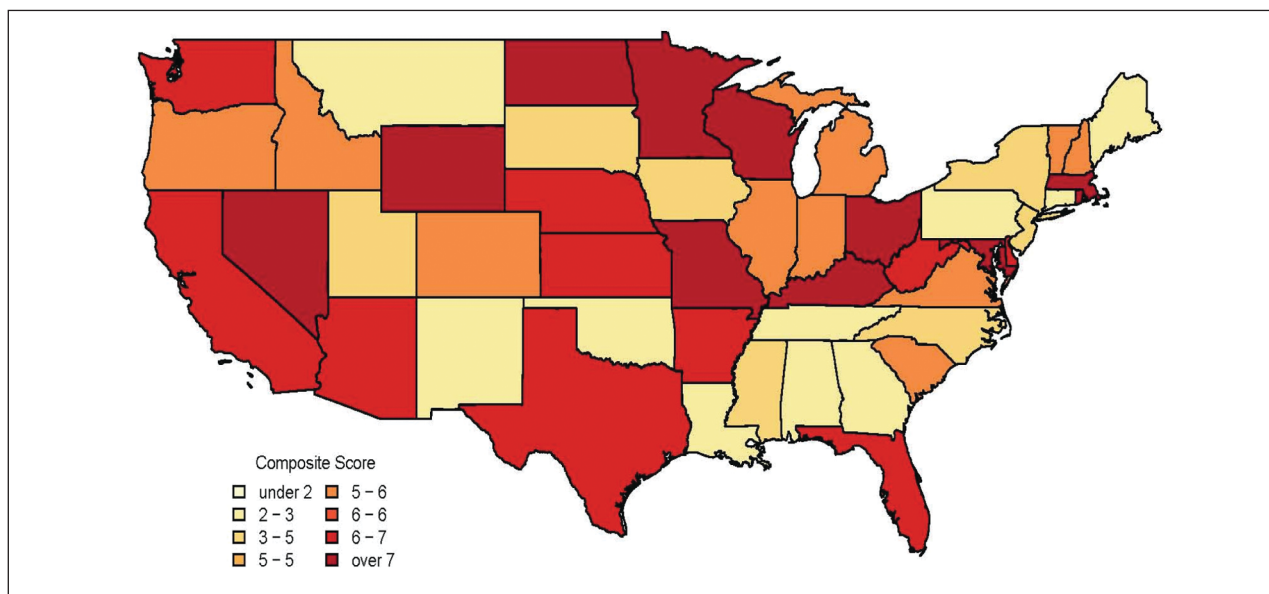
A prerequisite for group influence is a minimum group size, and preferably one that is cohesive or mobilized. If the presidential election in Maine or North Dakota is very close, it is impossible that Latinos influenced that context because their group size is too small, and not growing at a rapid pace. Thus, a simple starting point for any analysis of minority group influence is to assess the share of all registered voters that a particular group represents, in this case Latinos. Data from the 2006 Current Population Survey (CPS) provide the best estimate for the percentage of Latinos among registered voters for all fifty states. This ranges from a low of 0.1 percent in Maine to a high of 30.4 percent in New Mexico (see appendix for details on data). In particular, states that are less than 2 percent Latino among registered voters will find it very difficult to ever witness Latino influence in a statewide election. According to the 2006 CPS data, twenty-five states are 2 percent or less Latino among those registered to vote. The patterns depicted in Figure 1 are predictable and consistent with Latino population figures that are now well known. States in the Southwest and the Mountain West have significant Latino registered voter populations, as do Florida and states in the Northeast.

In addition to group size, the growth rate among registered voters is particularly important to influence. Figure 2

reports the change in the Latino to white voter registration share over an eight-year period, 1998–2006. This estimate gives us a sense of the absolute gains in Latino voter presence vis-à-vis the largest group in the state, whites. States depicted in yellow or beige reported little to no change in the Latino to white comparison. That is, if Latinos were 10 percent of all registered voters in 1998, they were still about 10 percent of registered voters in 2006. In contrast, states in shades of red experienced accelerated Latino registration growth. For example, in 1998 the Nevada electorate was 86 percent white and 5 percent Latino; by 2006 that changed to 75 percent white and 10 percent Latino, resulting in an eleven-point difference for whites and a positive five-point change for Latinos, yielding a net increase of plus sixteen. Other states such as Wyoming, Missouri, Ohio, Maryland, and Massachusetts also witnessed a net increase of over 7 percent. It is remarkable that these sizeable shifts in ethnic composition within the electorate occurred in less than a decade's time—a clear indicator of the potential Latino political influence. Of course one would expect Latinos to exert some influential where they compose a sizable share of the population. It may also be the case that Latino influence is found in states where they are relatively small in number but have a rapidly increasing share in the electorate, signaling the demography of the future voting public. Growth measures alone may miss the influence of Latino voters in places where there is a large and relatively stable share of Latinos in the electorate. New Mexico, where Latinos are potentially influential as they represent about 30 percent of all registered voters during the eight-year period examined here, is a case in point. Thus, we include both population size and growth rate to more realistically capture the opportunity for influence in a state election.



**Figure 1.** Percentage Latino among registered voters, 2006. All maps created in R using specifically the RColorBrewer, SP, maps, maptools, spdep, and rgdal packages.

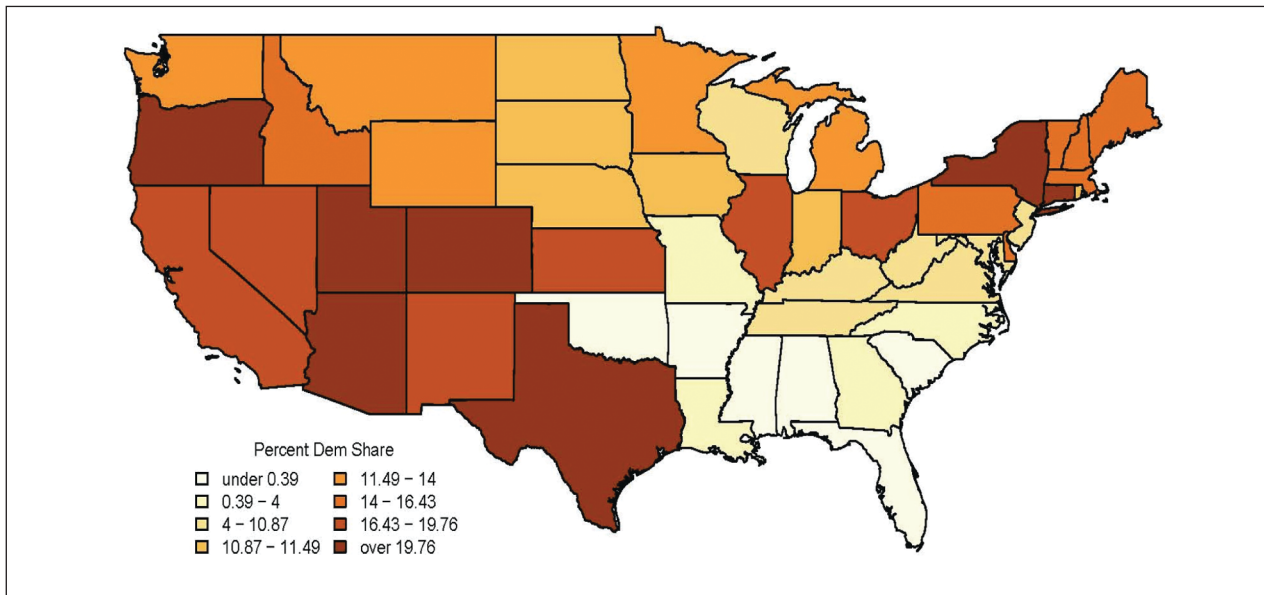


**Figure 2.** Growth in Latino registration relative to white registration, 1998–2006.

## Electoral Patterns and Volatility

For a group to demonstrate electoral influence, electoral factors are of obvious importance. Two specific electoral factors are used in our calculus of Latino influence. The first is the degree of voting cohesiveness among Latinos, and the second is the degree of expected competitiveness of the state election. Voting cohesiveness is measured as

the average Democratic vote among Latinos 2000 to 2006 minus the average Democratic vote among non-Latinos. For Latinos to influence the election, they ought to demonstrate somewhat different voting patterns than non-Latinos in the state. Using the National Exit Poll state polls for the 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006 elections, we create a measure for average Democratic vote for Latinos and non-Latinos by state (see appendix for details on data). Figure 3



**Figure 3.** Latino democratic vote relative to non-Latino democratic vote, 2000–2006.

shows the Latino Democratic vote differential for all states. States shaded dark brown are those where Latinos vote much more consistently Democratic than do non-Latinos in the state, while states shaded lighter are those where Latinos and non-Latinos witness very similar partisan vote preference. Latinos tend to vote more Democratic than non-Latinos throughout the United States, but this is most pronounced in the Southwest and Mountain West, where four states—Texas, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah—have a Latino population that is about twenty points more Democratic. Throughout the entire West there is a notable pattern of Democratic vote cohesion among Latinos.

The second important piece of electoral information is the expected competitiveness in the state election. This is one of the most important pieces of information that scholars can collect to assess group influence. Without a doubt, it is much more difficult—though not impossible—to influence the election in a state that is completely uncompetitive. However, the traditional measure of looking to postelection results misses the mark on competitiveness. The point in time in which a group has influence is during the active campaign, most likely in the last thirty days, in this case during October. We take the average poll rating one month before the election from RealClearPolitics's state poll average.

The map depicted in Figure 4 is familiar to most readers and shows the degree of anticipated closeness of the presidential election. All states shaded in dark brown are those with very close preelection poll averages, while those in beige or light brown were not expected to be close at all. Given the preceding data reported in Figure 3, it is possible to sort out states with more or less Latino influence. For

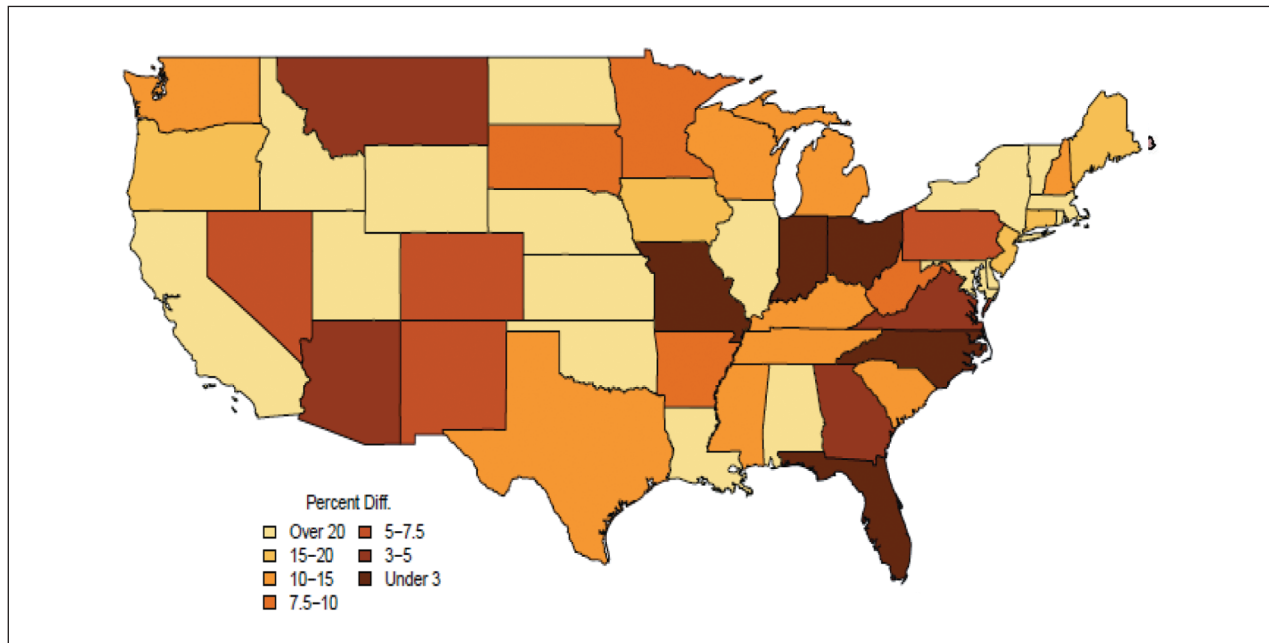
example, a state such as Ohio is expected to be very competitive and has a Latino electorate that votes considerably more Democratic. As we add in additional factors, such as those collected in Figures 1 and 2, the overall influence story begins to take shape. We next turn to components of mobilization as the last piece of this puzzle.

### Mobilization and Resources

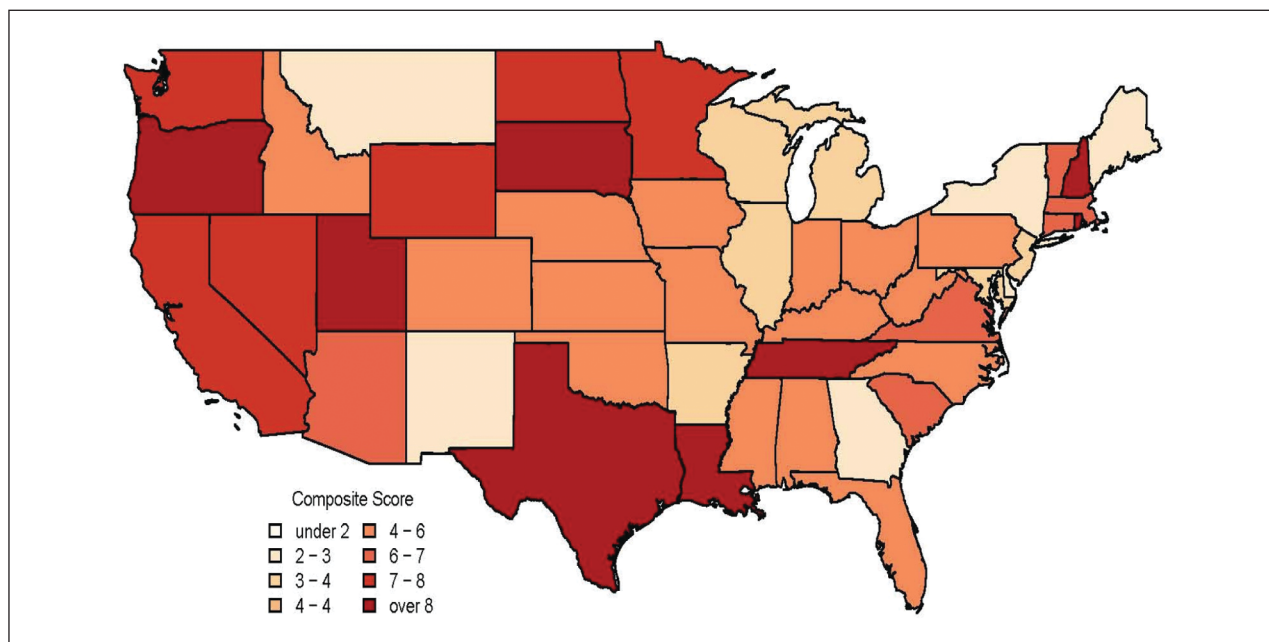
The final set of criteria that we believe to be important is how the campaign itself engaged or failed to engage the Latino community—or the specific group of interest. While other data might point to suspected influence, we argue that the campaign itself must have taken note of the group as a potential influence group. That is, the candidate campaigns and the media must have paid attention to the Latino vote as a crucial bloc. We assess this through three factors: change in media coverage of the Latino vote, campaign ad buys targeting Latinos, and campaign ethnic mobilization. LexisNexis contains data on the Latino vote and presidential elections for 2004 and 2008. We amassed data on both the rate of news stories on the Latino vote and also the change in this rate from 2004 (see appendix for details on data). These data are normalized and combined in Figure 5. States that are pink or dark red are those with increases in coverage of Latino voters, and as the map shows almost every state saw a steady increase in coverage of the Latino vote during the months of the presidential campaign.

The next two components are related to the use of candidate resources to court the Latino vote. Spanish-language television ads are an easy proxy to collect on outreach to the Latino community. TV ads are important because they





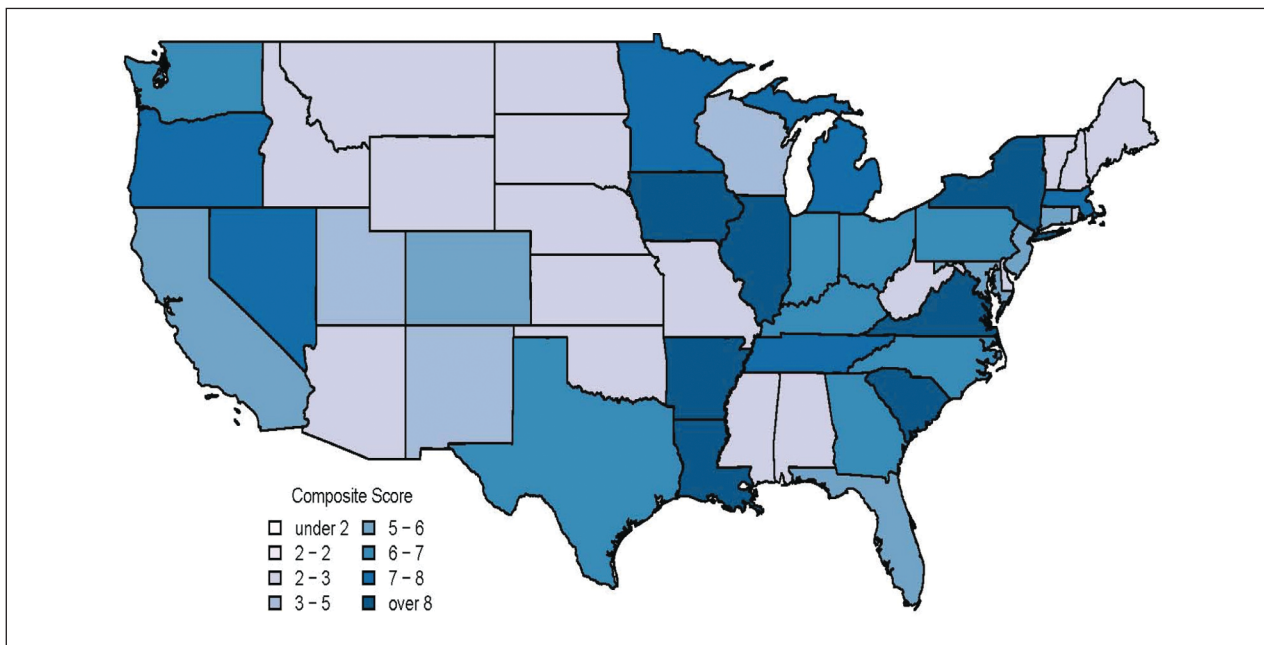
**Figure 4.** RealClearPolitics average competitiveness level, October 2008.



**Figure 5.** Change in news coverage of "Latino vote," 2004–8.

are costly, thus involving an important campaign calculus in deciding to spend finite resources on the Latino community. However, we recognize that Spanish-language ads are not the only manner in which campaigns target Latino voters. Unfortunately, data on the content of English language ads, collected by the CMAG (Campaign Media Analysis Group) project, are not available until two years

after the election. In contrast, Spanish ad data are available in real time from the public disclosures on campaign spending. We do not include a figure on Spanish TV ad expenditures because only four states ran both Obama and McCain campaign ads: Florida, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico. All other states had no such ads. This puts significant weight on these four states because



**Figure 6.** Rate of Latinos for Obama membership and money raised, 2008.

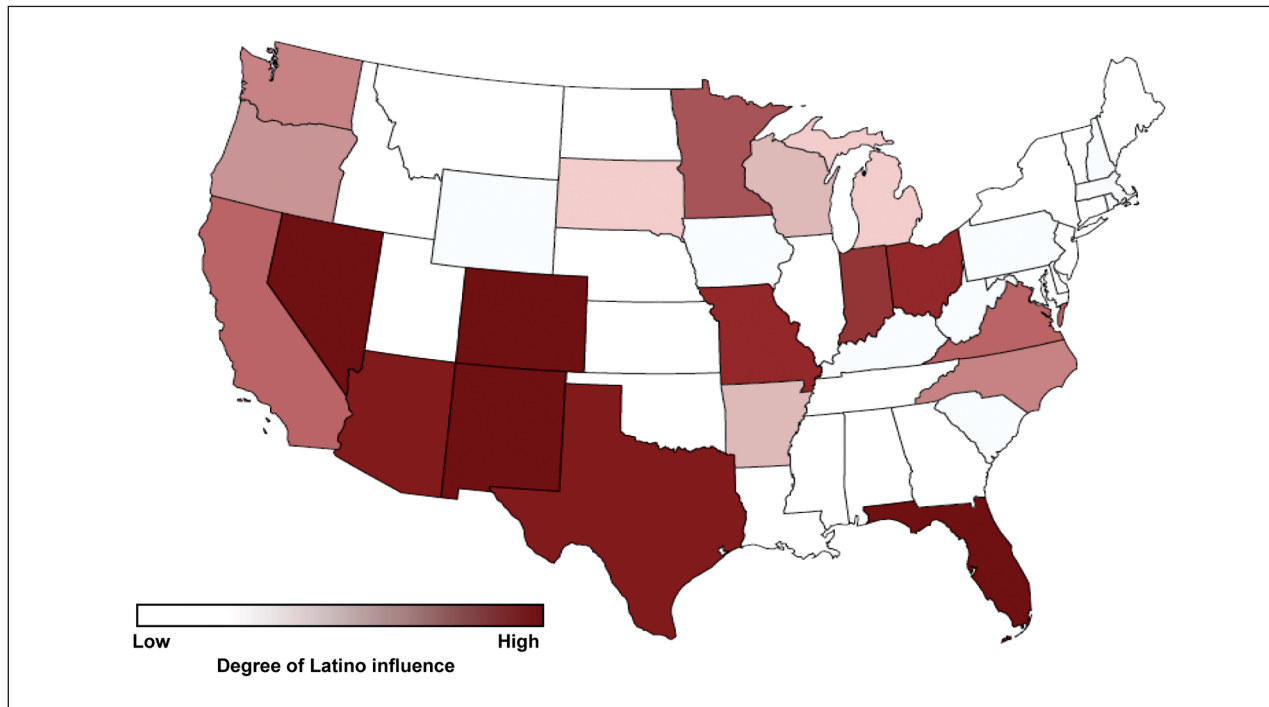
both candidates were spending millions of dollars on Spanish-language ads, creating a significant influence on how the campaign unfolded in each state. In addition to the TV ad spending, we gathered data on Latino group mobilization by the presidential campaigns. As explained above, data were available only from the Obama campaign; however, the data were very rich. Again, for each state we collected the number of members of Latinos for Obama groups in each state and also the amount of money raised by these groups, both normalized over the state's total Latino registered voter population. In Figure 6 we map mobilization by the Obama campaign. Before we can accept or dismiss the claim that Latinos had influence in a particular state, we should assess the degree to which Latinos were mobilized. For example, Figure 6 shows that states such as Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, and Nevada had fairly strong rates of Latino mobilization by Obama. At the same time, it shows that in 2008 Latinos in Missouri and Arizona—two states that he narrowly lost and may have won with stronger Latino mobilization—were less likely to be mobilized by Obama. It is worth noting Latino activity was brisk in non-competitive states such as Illinois, New York, and Texas. Their online participation and monetary contributions especially were likely noticed by political elites, no matter the degree of electoral competition in the state.

Finally, we can combine the above data points into a single model to understand Latino influence. Drawing on these three categories we include group size and growth, electoral volatility, and mobilization to predict Latino influence in the 2008 election (see appendix for details on data). Figure 7 displays the final Latino influence map, which

combines all prior metrics. Darker grey states have higher Latino influence composite scores, while states that are white had practically no Latino influence. Theoretically, a state with the absolute strongest Latino political influence meets the following conditions: large Latino population, rapid growth in Latino voter registration, record increased rates in partisan cohesiveness compared to non-Latinos, competitive electoral environment, media focus on the Latino vote, and extensive campaign outreach and mobilization of Latinos. The darkest grey states on the map anecdotally seemed to have had the greatest Latino influence: Florida, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico. Texas and Arizona also score high because on a number of metrics they demonstrate considerable Latino influence; however, they did lack a key element in 2008, namely, competitiveness and/or campaign outreach. Other states that are shaded grey match our expectations: Virginia, Indiana, and Ohio all demonstrate high Latino influence in 2008. Missouri, Minnesota, California, and Washington are also influence states but do not score consistently high across all dimensions.

## Conclusions

Analysis across three dimensions of influence paints a more complete and accurate picture of contemporary electoral context than previous research has considered. Our innovative approach to measuring Latino influence identifies where Latinos matter (in geographic space), the specific mechanisms where their influence is exerted, and of course the magnitude of their political impact. We attempted to theorize and gather data that are objective, publicly available,



**Figure 7.** Combined index of Latino influence in 2008 election.

accessible over time, and at the state level. Because these data are both comprehensive and accessible, this approach can facilitate additional analysis and replication in prior and future contests, with focus on different constituencies in the electorate. This novel approach offers theoretical leverage in conceptualizing political influence and empirical solutions to test and model group impact in American politics.

There are of course additional factors that one might consider including in work that replicates or builds up on the measures we have outlined here. First, it would be ideal to have ethnic and state-level mobilization data from both major party candidates. In this case, the Latino online mobilization data were not available from the McCain camp, but this should not discourage others from pursuing such data in other contests that should be increasingly likely to have such information. It may be the case that particular U.S. House, Senate, and statewide offices may be ripe for future data collection. In terms of mobilization, we have set aside the question of anti-Latino rhetoric that characterizes some political advertising and rhetoric particularly framed in terms of immigration and language issues. Studies that investigate Latinos and campaign mobilization may want to expand our measure to account for Latinos as the intended voter (as we do) as well as Latinos as political scapegoats particularly framed around immigration and national culture claims.

Our findings indicate that the Vargas and de la Garza claims (mentioned at the outset of this article) on Latino

voter influence in 2008 are overstated. The Latino vote did not deliver *the* power punch in what became a landslide victory for Obama, but it was far from irrelevant. Latino influence was greatest in Nevada and Florida, two of the most hyped battleground states that flipped from Republican to Democrat from 2004 to 2008. No matter the metric, our analyses demonstrate that like that of any other group, Latino influence is not absolute but rather tempered by a combination of factors. Latinos alone cannot be credited for the Obama victory, or the two prior Bush wins for that matter. At the same time, discounting the entire Latino electorate as categorically irrelevant to the outcome is a misguided generality that overlooks measureable influence that was critical to constructing a winning coalition in specific states.

As the Latino share in the electorate expands, it will be useful for political scientists to employ meaningful metrics to account for associated political influence. Thinking about political influence in broad terms allows us to understand more about racial and ethnic dynamics at the mass and elite levels and highlights relevant trends that address substantive questions regarding the role of Latinos in presidential politics. Importantly, the approach we outline and demonstrate here may be applied in different types of elections and to other segments in the electorate. This framework attends to factors that are theoretically relevant for the increasingly diverse electorate and will have long-term utility in developing the racial and ethnic politics research.

## Appendix

### Variable Documentation

#### Group Size and Growth

*Latino voter registration (latreg.share)*. Using the 2006 Current Population Survey (CPS) estimates, this variable simply measures the percentage Latino registration of the total number of registered voters.

*Change Latino and white voter registration (lw.reg)*. Measures Latino registration growth or decline relative to white registration growth or decline between 1998 and 2006. Data are taken from census estimates from the 1998 and 2006 CPS. Specifically, this variable subtracts the percentage change in registration between 1998 and 2006 white from the percentage change in registration Hispanic.

*Relative change Latino voter registration (plw.reg)*. Using the same data as lw.reg, this variable takes into account the rate of change of relative Hispanic registration growth. First, the percentage change in registration is calculated (nationally 1.29 increase in Hispanic); then this figure is divided by the 1998 registration count, which gives us the amount of Hispanic change. The same is calculated for whites, which is then subtracted from the rate of change for Hispanics.<sup>9</sup>

*Composite registration (Nlw.reg)*. This variable is a normalized composite score of lw.reg and plw.reg. Weights are applied equally to both variables. This normalized variable takes into account both the size of the Latino registered voter population and how fast registration is growing within the state.

#### Electoral Influence

*Democratic vote (dem.non)*. This variable measures the average Democratic vote among Latinos from 1998 to 2004 minus the average Democratic vote among non-Latinos using National Exit Poll state polls for 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004

*Competitiveness (rcp\_value2)*. This variable classifies state competitiveness using RealClearPolitics competitiveness ratings a month before election day. Because we eventually collapse all variables together for a final prediction model, we scale this variable from 0 to 100, where 100 is the most competitive and 0 not at all competitive. Any state less than 3 points between Obama and McCain is given 100, 3 to 5 points is given 90, 5 to 7.5 points is given 80, 7.5 to 10 points is given 70, 10 to 15 points is given 50, 15 to 20 points is given 40, and anything over 20 is given 0.

#### Mobilization and Resources

*Increase media Latino vote (Diff\_08\_04)*. This variable is calculated as the percentage difference between 2008 and 2004 of the number of articles mentioning Latinos out of the total number of articles. The formula is (total number of articles mention Latino 2008) / (total number of articles 2008) – (total number of articles mention Latino 2004) / (total number of articles 2004).

## Appendix (continued)

*Rate of Change Latino Coverage (pdiff\_08\_04)*. This variable measures the rate of change between 2008 and 2004 of the percentage of articles mentioning Latinos. The formula is (% total number of Latino articles 2008) – (% total number of Latino articles 2004) / (% total number of Latino articles 2004).

*Composite media (normdiff)*. This variable is an equally weighted summation of Diff\_08\_04 and pdiff\_08\_04.

*Spanish ads (ad\_proxy)*. Both campaigns targeted four states for advertised Spanish-language television. The data we obtained are imperfect because we were unable to gather advertising data for the Miami media market, and given this is an important area where both campaigns spent heavily, it is inappropriate to impute for the missing data. Although the data are not equal across the states, they are not extremely different. Therefore, we create a dummy variable to separate these states from the other states, with 100 given to states with television advertising.

State	Obama (\$)	McCain (\$)
Nevada	634,660	434,390
New Mexico	539,999	415,160
Colorado	390,092	354,419
Florida	409,855	104,115

*Latino Obama contribution (money.cvap)*. This variable is taken from the 2008 Obama campaign Web site. To put this variable in context, for each state we divide the total amount of money raised for Latino groups by the total number of Latino registered voters.

*Latino Obama membership (membs.cvap)*. This variable is the total number of people that are members of a "Latinos for Obama" group within a state divided by the total number of Latino registered voters in that state.

*Composite Latino Obama mobilization (monmemcomb)*. This variable combines money.cvap with membs.cvap.

#### Composite Measure

Because of the final modeling procedures and scaling issue, we dummied at 100 as opposed to 1. Each variable was again normalized ( $\text{var} - \text{mean}(\text{var}) / \text{sd}(\text{var})$ ) and added together. Because variables have different levels in importance in terms of Latino influence, we weight them accordingly:

Variable	Weight
Change in media coverage	0.75
Obama Web site outreach	0.75
Spanish television ads	2.0
Size of Latino registered voter population	3.0
Latino registration growth	2.5
State competitiveness	4.0
Democratic volatility	1.0



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## Notes

1. Data were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS) November supplement on voting and registration. Data on Latinos and registration by state can be found in Table 4a each year, online at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/index.html>.
2. Data we employ for this measure are based on the state-level samples produced by the National Exit Poll conducted by Edison-Mitofsky Research, in which a consistent methodology is applied each year and across each state. While the point estimates for Latinos may be somewhat off in a given individual election, comparing across time reveals broad trends and patterns within a consistent data set. Poll results are archived and available by ethnicity within each state on Web sites such as CNN.com and many others (e.g., <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/president/>).
3. One important note is that we categorized advertising expenditures in the El Paso, Texas, media market as those directed to New Mexico. The reason is that El Paso borders Las Cruces, New Mexico, and residents of Las Cruces and the adjacent small towns are able to receive both Las Cruces and El Paso TV signals. Furthermore, content analysis of El Paso market ads indicated that they were directed toward New Mexico and not Texas.
4. Search terms for the Latino vote were (Latino or Hispanic) vote and (Obama or McCain or president!) with candidate names changed for each year (2004 = Kerry, Bush).
5. Search terms for the total articles were (Obama or McCain) and president! with candidate names changed for each year (2004 = Kerry, Bush).
6. The group names varied by state, and we counted all Latino- or Hispanic-related state groups and excluded any national groups. Examples of group names are California Latinos for Obama, Hispanos for Obama (New Mexico), Colorado Mexican-Americans for Obama, and so on.
7. For example, if there were 5,000 members in a Hispanics for Obama group in New Mexico, we divided that by the total Hispanic voter registration in New Mexico (289,000), for a score of 0.0173. In contrast, if there were 10,000 members of a similar group in Texas but larger Hispanic registration (2,160,000), the score would be 0.0046. Thus, we normalized the raw number of "group" members by state, given the total Hispanic registration in 2006.
8. The final database from which we generate the maps presented here is available in the online version of *Political Research Quarterly* on the journal's Web site, and a full data set is available for download at <http://www.latinodecisions.com> under Research Papers and Data Archive.
9. These calculations can be done by hand, or alternatively using the Gigli Fixed Effects Bayesian Ratio Calculator, for Windows95 (S.P. Nicholson 2003), which we recommend consulting before undertaking these ratio estimates.

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