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2016 will be a benchmark year for Hispanic voters in the U.S., Stanford expert says.



This is an installment of **Wide Angle: Election 2016**, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

An interview with Stanford history professor **Al Camarillo**

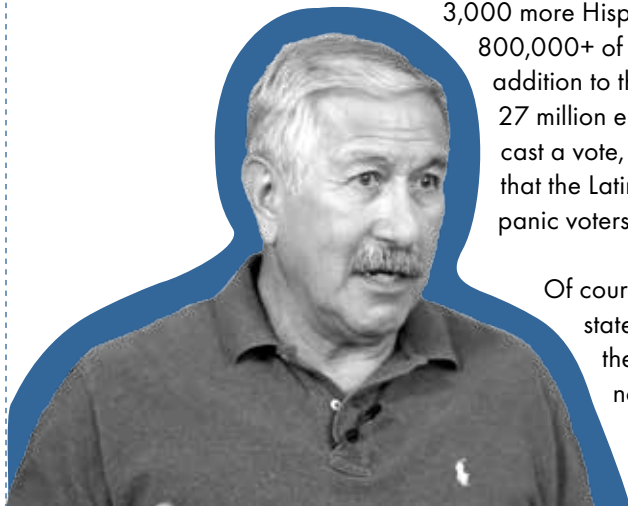
Hispanic voters are poised to have an unprecedented influence on the 2016 election outcome and issues. Stanford history Professor Albert Camarillo describes how a century of immigration has changed the demography and politics of the U.S. forever.

Hispanics are the largest ethnic group in U.S. history, and their concerns will have a major impact on the 2016 election. This profound demographic shift is complex, and furthermore, complicated by myths and misunderstandings. In order to understand the origins and current reality of U.S. Hispanics, Worldview Stanford interviewed Albert Camarillo, a professor of history at Stanford for more than four decades. He is the founding director of Stanford's Center for the Comparative Studies of Race and Ethnicity, and also founder of the Stanford Center for Chicano Research. This interview is part of Wide Angle: Election 2016, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

Hispanic voters are getting unprecedented attention this year from both the candidates and the media. How might they influence the outcome and issues of the 2016 election?

This is a benchmark year for the Hispanic voting population. Between 2012 and 2016, you have 3.2 million more eligible U.S.-born Hispanic voters. Add to that another 1.2 million people who've become citizens since the last general election. If you start doing the math, 3,000 more Hispanics are eligible to vote every day. It's a young population: 800,000+ of native-born eligible voters every year in the last four years, in addition to the new immigrants that are naturalizing. It's unprecedented: over 27 million eligible Hispanic voters! An estimated 13, maybe 14 million will cast a vote, depending on their motivation. That's why people are saying that the Latino vote, especially in the critical battleground states where Hispanic voters constitute substantial voting blocks, will make a huge difference.

Of course, we have the blue and red states, and then that handful of states – maybe 10 or 12 – that are up for grabs. But if you look at the most critical states people are talking about now, they would not have been on the map 20 years ago. Colorado, Arizona—no one would've thought that Arizona would be a state in play, but the demographics of the state and its eligible voters have shifted. Hispanics have contributed significantly to that.



Florida: another hugely important battleground state. Trump and Clinton are going to be vying for the vote in general, but they're both going to go after the Latino vote because whichever way that Latino vote goes in Florida will determine who wins that state. North Carolina with its Hispanic population, it's a factor now. Georgia even 10 years ago would've never entered our discussion about battleground states, which, again, reflects the demographic spread of the Hispanic population and the increasing importance of a voting bloc in these states.

If you look at the national polls that have sampled the Hispanic origin population by national origin group and Hispanics overall, three things have defined their interest: education (a no-brainer); jobs for what's basically a working-class and aspiring middle-class population; and immigration. Those are the defining issues for 2016.

Although 10 years ago immigration may have been the third most important issue, today the presidential campaign has elevated that to probably number one, with jobs and education close behind. There's such a concern in the Hispanic population—especially the Mexican origin population—about immigration. There's great fear about what's going to happen to relatives, friends, and neighbors if there's a policy to apprehend and deport those who are undocumented. That's driving the issue of immigration for the Hispanic population. But it's driving a huge part of the domestic issues for the American electorate in general.

As you've noted, immigration has become a big issue for all voters in the 2016 election. Do the concerns and rhetoric reflect what is really happening, especially with respect to immigration from south of our border?

There's a great irony in the 2016 national election. If you were to ask nine out of 10 Americans, "What is one of the most critical issues?" – they're going to say, "It's immigration. It's out of control. Our borders are being overrun." Yet there's an enormous gap between perception and reality. In past decades there were record numbers of immigrants, both legal and undocumented, coming to the U.S., especially from Mexico, but from Central America as well. In the last three to four years, any demographer that works on immigration will tell you that for the most part, immigration from south of the U.S. border has come to an end. The unbroken chain of immigration from Mexico, predominantly, is over.

So if net immigration is zero, how did that happen? There are basically three factors. Beginning with the Clinton administration, the U.S. enacted immigration reform legislation and reinforced the border. In fact, there is a wall. It stretches from San Diego at the Pacific Ocean into Arizona and parts of Texas. The border has also become increasingly militarized, which makes it even harder to get into the country and increasingly expensive to have a smuggler bring you across. Today, it costs \$20,000-\$30,000 per person to hire a smuggler with no guarantee that you'll make it to the United States.

Historically, the chief reason people have come by the millions from Mexico to United States, especially over the last 40 years, is the availability of jobs coupled with a weak Mexican economy. But the great recession and the elimination of so many jobs in the U.S. led to the return migration of hundreds of thousands of Latino immigrants. Even as the economy resuscitated, the number of people trying to re-enter the United States has dropped dramatically.

Post-recession, the U.S. economy has begun to develop jobs again. But the Mexican economy, at the same time, has created more jobs for that demographic that used to seek the U.S. as a safety valve. Now, younger males and females are finding jobs in Mexico and they would rather stay in their home country than risk coming to the U.S., especially as an undocumented person. So the resuscitation of Mexico's economy is a third factor that has reduced immigration to the United States.

If immigration from Mexico, the primary source of legal and undocumented immigration to the U.S., is net zero, why has immigration become such a controversial political issue now, especially given our history as a melting pot?

We talk about America as an immigrant society—it has been forever really. But there's also been an anti-immigrant thread in the American past, beginning with the first immigration law in 1792 that said you must be of the white race to be a naturalized citizen. Race played an important part. Through the 19th century there were restrictions on the Chinese, and Asians in general, on becoming naturalized citizens. Hispanics never had that racial exclusion; they could always be naturalized citizens and American citizens. But if you look at the anti-immigrant thread, going back 100 years ago during the Progressive Era, the groups were different. They were Southern and Eastern Europeans. Over time though, this shifted, because the nature of immigration shifted to North America—to Mexico, primarily—and to Asia.

The discourse today is really about undocumented immigrants, and the largest subset of undocumented immigrants to the United States is Hispanic and mostly of Mexican origin. The question is, how real is this anti-immigrant sentiment? Where is it located? I think there's a reality to it in metropolitan regions and other places that had never had huge populations of immigrants. For example, the Southeast—it was never a region that received large numbers of immigrants, but Hispanics are now changing that. There's been a big reaction.

The critical issue on the policy side: what do you do with 11 or 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States? Over two-thirds of all Hispanics will say this: There has to be some way to allow these people who are here, who are undocumented, and especially their children, a path towards citizenship. Realistically, you can't break up these families and send them all back. What do we do especially with the children of these immigrants who are native born? Their parents may be foreign born and undocumented but their children overwhelmingly are native born. Do you separate families? That becomes a big issue within what's a family-oriented population to begin with. I think that's a driving force for Hispanic consideration of the immigration issue. Can we create a way for these people either to become naturalized or to have regularized status in the United States?

Hispanics have been a growing proportion of the population for decades. Yet they've had the lowest voter registration and turnout rates—and probably a lower political impact—than other ethnic groups. Why is that?

If it's such a booming population, why is Hispanic voter eligibility so low relative to other populations? Part of it is history. One, it's overwhelmingly an immigrant-origin population. The U.S. happens to be next to Mexico, which has been the largest source of immigrants in the last 80 years. Because of this proximity to and strong identity with Mexico, Hispanics have less of a motivation to become registered voters and participate in the political process.

Another interesting phenomenon that most people don't know is that, similar to African Americans in the south, Mexican Americans in southwestern states were gerrymandered and subject to voter suppression. The Voting Rights Act, although originally enacted to protect the constitutional rights of African American voters, now extends to the nation's second largest minority, Mexican Americans, who also had to overcome the historical legacy of political exclusion. In fact, if you look at the most successful voting rights cases from the '80s forward, they're not in the South – they're in California and Texas.

Third, you have to have the motivation and self-interest to register and cast a vote. If politics is not meaningful in your day-to-day life, then you're not going to be an active voter. That gap is going to change over the next 10 to 15 years. One of the recent big stories is the election of Hispanic leaders at the local level, the regional level, the state level, and now, we're beginning to see, at the national level.

The Hispanic community is not homogenous—they differ in national origin and generations. Is it misleading to think of them as a unified political force in this election?

We use these overarching terms, Hispanic or Latino, but we also have to understand, who are these people? Today, 51 million Americans claim Hispanic heritage. It's the largest ethnic-origin population in the history of the U.S. It's primarily a working class population that is driven by immigration. It's substantially Catholic. It's a population that has struggled in education, having suffered from the severe racial segregation of public schools through much of the 20th century. It has one of the lowest college-going rates of any subgroup in the U.S., although that's been increasing recently. It's a group that's trying to catch up. Yet there's a growing and thriving middle class of Hispanics across all national origin groups.

Despite the generalities, to really understand the U.S. Hispanic population, you have to disaggregate it, beginning with national origin and distribution. The largest subset, 63%, is of Mexican origin. Then you have Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and since the 1980s, an increasing percentage of Central Americans.

Especially in terms of the election, you have to look at regional variation. In Florida, for example, Cuban Americans were the large majority of Hispanic voters even 20 years ago. Now Puerto Ricans outnumber Cuban origin voters there. Thirty years ago, probably half a percent were of Mexican origin in Florida; now about 10% of the Latino vote is Mexican. New York is incredibly eclectic: you have Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and now a very substantial Mexican population numbering in the millions. In the center of the country, Chicago actually has the second largest Mexican origin population in the United States. This is all part of the story of the Hispanic demographic explosion across United States that's changed the map.

In sorting out the Hispanic-Latino demographic, you also have to understand the generational effects of immigration. In the last 40-50 years, Mexican and Central American immigrants have constituted the largest immigration ever in American history. You have the children, and now the grandchildren of those immigrants coming of age, and they're native born. Puerto Ricans are American citizens by birthright; Cuban Americans are now second and third generation.



Like their other American counterparts, many young Latinos were Sanders supporters, drifting towards more liberal, progressive politics. The older generations tend to be more moderate and some even conservative. Take Florida again. Thirty years ago, you had the Cuban American majority population of Hispanics that were overwhelmingly Republican. Why? Because they were the post-Cuban revolution refugees. This year, driven by the younger generation, there are more Cuban Americans in the Democratic Party than Republicans. No one would've considered that a possibility 20 years ago.

And of course, you're going to have differences across the generations in their relationship to the homeland, their ability to speak Spanish, or whether they see themselves as, for example, more American or Mexican or Mexican American. 21st century America is a fascinating demographic to watch. By 2050, there will no longer be a majority population in United States. Hispanics will be about 30%. But what will Hispanic mean in 30-40 years? It may not mean what we're talking about today. ✨

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