

1-1-2007

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### Recommended Citation

Teachout, Mark S. Ph.D.; Berndt, Andrea E. Ph.D.; and Hernandez, Andrew C. (2007) "An Examination of Social Justice and U.S Politics Among Mexican Americans: The Role of Education in Political Participation," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol2/iss1/11>

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## **An Examination of Social Justice and U.S Politics Among Mexican Americans: The Role of Education in Political Participation**

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### *Abstract*

*The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and behaviors of Mexican Americans toward social justice issues in a political context, as a function of educational attainment. Based on the premise set forth by Boakari (2006), we expected those with a higher level of educational attainment would reflect both perceptions and behaviors that represent a more socially aware and participative citizen within a political context. Results were significant for all analyses, indicating that participants with a higher level of educational attainment had perceptions and self-reported behaviors more congruent with social justice issues in a political context, compared to participants with a lower level of educational attainment. Results are discussed in terms of the importance of education in shaping the participation of Mexican Americans in issues related to social justice and U.S. politics.*

### **Introduction**

Social justice is an important consideration in U.S. politics because it is often a defining issue for both politicians and voters. For example, Republicans typically advocate that government best serves people by staying out of their lives, while Democrats typically advocate that government should play an important role in assisting those members of our society most in need. Similarly, social justice issues may play a strong role in voter attitudes toward candidates and in their voting behavior for those candidates.

Boakari (2006) provides examples of social justice in a political context in which government officials develop and implement policies that affect social fairness and inclusiveness on issues such as general education, health, housing, immigration, welfare, transportation, food, and diversity. In particular, he makes a persuasive argument that formal education contributes to the understanding of social justice principles. It follows that greater awareness of social justice issues should increase awareness of social responsibility and thus the likelihood that individuals will act in ways to advocate social justice and to work to minimize social injustices. Hence, education should shape both the

perceptions and behaviors of individuals to think and act in ways more congruent with social justice principles.

Minority groups may have a greater stake in social justice issues since, historically, they have been most affected by issues of equity and meeting their basic human needs. Over the last 50 years, the Hispanic population has been the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. In 1950, there were approximately 2.3 million Hispanics in the United States and by 2000 this number had grown to 35.3 million. There was a 54% increase from 1990 to 2000 alone, which far exceeded Census projections (Population Estimates Program, 1990 Resident Population Estimates). The 2000 report from the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that Hispanics are currently the largest minority group in the United States. Census Bureau projects estimate that there will be nearly 100 million Hispanics living in the United States by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In addition, by 2025, about 40 percent of Americans are projected to reside in one of these five states - California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas. Hispanics will comprise the largest population group in two of these states and the second largest population group in the remaining states (Andrade, Hernandez, & Campbell, 1999). Thus, Hispanics are an important and growing portion of the electorate that will have an increasing impact on U.S. politics and issues of social justice.

However, growth in population alone will not guarantee Hispanic participation in the political system and higher education, nor will it guarantee social justice. While over 6 million Hispanics voted in the 2000 presidential election, 83 percent of eligible Hispanic voters did not participate. Their lack of participation has often been tied to demographic characteristics, including education (Arvizu & Garcia, 1996).

According to the United States Census Bureau (2001), almost 66 percent of the Hispanic population in the United States is composed of individuals who are of Mexican origin. Compared to other Hispanic sub-groups, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans are more likely (i.e., about 47 percent) to finish their education with a high school diploma or GED but are least likely (i.e., about 10 percent) to pursue additional education (de la Garza, DeSipio, Garcia, Garcia, & Falcon, 1992).

Given that Mexican Americans comprise the largest segment of the Hispanic community in the United States and that they are important to future elections in the United States, it is important for research to focus on understanding Mexican American perceptions and behaviors related to political and social justice issues. These perceptions and behaviors are likely to affect voting behavior, and thus, impact policies related to social justice issues.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the perceptions and behaviors of Mexican Americans toward social justice issues in a political context as a function of educational attainment. Based on the premise set forth by Bokari (2006), we expected those with a higher level of educational attainment would reflect both perceptions and behaviors that represent a more socially aware and participative citizen within a political context.

Specifically, those with a higher level of educational attainment were expected to have perceptions and exhibit behaviors more congruent with social justice issues in a political context. Perceptions included: (1) greater awareness of issues of discrimination; (2)

greater optimism in attaining goals; and (3) higher self-determination and belief in ability to influence social justice issues. Behaviors included a greater participation in political activities such as: (1) frequency of following government public affairs; (2) registration to vote; and (3) intent to vote.

## Method

### Participants and Instruments

Two separate research samples were combined to conduct this research. Sub-samples were selected from each of these samples that included responses to questions that were common to both samples and relevant to this research. The first sub-sample ( $n = 1538$ ) was selected from a total of 2,662 Latino adults in a national sample using a random telephone-dial survey methodology. Data were collected in 1999 via a collaborative effort between the National Community on Latino Leadership (NCLL) and the National Catholic Council on Hispanic Ministry (NCCHM). The telephone survey consisted of demographic questions such as gender, ethnic heritage, work status, education, citizenship, and religion. Another section asked participants to list the qualities they believed were most necessary for leadership and to indicate their attitudes about aspects of United States politics and social justice issues. Finally, participants were asked if they were registered to vote, how often they voted, and the degree to which they participated in various organizations such as neighborhood groups and political interest groups.

The majority of these respondents identified themselves as Mexican-American ( $n = 1538$ , 58%), followed by Cuban ( $n = 343$ , 13%), and Puerto Rican ( $n = 316$ , 12%). Consistent with the current research questions, only Mexican American participants were selected for analyses. Fifty-seven percent of Mexican American participants were female ( $n = 874$ ), 56% were employed ( $n = 853$ ), and 50% were registered to vote ( $n = 730$ ). Approximately 20% of this sample was between the ages of 18 to 24 ( $n = 296$ ), 29% were between the age of 25-34 ( $n = 441$ ), 22% were between the age of 35-44 ( $n = 341$ ), 14% were between the age of 45-54 ( $n = 207$ ), and the remaining 15% were 55 or older ( $n = 253$ ). Most participants had a high school education or less ( $n = 1130$ , 73%), although 27% had attended college, completed a bachelor's degree, or had attended graduate school ( $n = 408$ ). Almost all of the participants identified themselves as Catholic ( $n = 1251$ , 94%).

The second sub-sample was selected from a student sample ( $N = 328$ ) composed of undergraduate students attending a private, Catholic, medium-sized, liberal arts university in the Southwest. These participants responded to all of the questions from the NCLL telephone survey during the same data collection period. This sample was added to the NCLL sample to provide additional statistical power to examine differences in perceptions and behaviors as a function of educational attainment. Consistent with the NCLL sample, participants in the student sample were included if they classified themselves as Mexican-American ( $n = 187$ , 61%). The majority of these students were female ( $n = 131$ , 70%), Catholic ( $n = 155$ , 84%), employed

(n = 121, 65%), and registered to vote (n = 167, 90%). Almost all of the students ranged in age between 18 to 24 years (n = 173, 95%).

## **Procedures**

Several data collection procedures were used to obtain the samples. For the NCLL sample, data were gathered through telephone interviews (see Davis, Hernandez, & Lampe, 2002). Interviews were conducted between October 1999 and February 2000 by trained researchers from the William C. Velasquez Institute in San Antonio, Texas. Participants in the NCLL sample were given the option of conducting the interview in Spanish or English. Most interviews were completed in 30 to 40 minutes.

The student sample was obtained during two consecutive semesters, Spring 2000 and Fall 2000. Students were surveyed across eight undergraduate courses and were given the option to participate in the study for extra credit points. Prospective student participants were told that the purpose of the survey was to examine perceptions of leadership characteristics and behaviors and attitudes about future prospects for United States residents. If students indicated interest in completing the survey, informed consent was obtained.

To examine the current research questions, a single database was created that merged the student and NCLL responses of participants identified as Mexican-Americans, using common questions across the samples.

## **Results**

### **Data Analyses**

Analyses were conducted across perceptions and behaviors related to social justice and U.S. politics. Perceptions included: (1) perceptions of personal discrimination; (2) optimism in attaining goals; and (3) self-determination and ability to influence social justice issues. Behaviors included a greater participation in political activities such as: (1) frequency of following government public affairs; (2) registration to vote; and (3) intent to vote. Levels of educational attainment were classified as: (1) High School education or less (lower level of educational attainment); and (2) Some College or more (higher level of educational attainment). Those with a higher level of educational attainment were expected to have perceptions and exhibit behaviors more congruent with social justice issues in a political context.

### *Differences in Perceptions and Behaviors Related to Social Justice and United States Politics*

To determine if perceptions about social justice issues and United States politics differed as a function of educational attainment, separate chi-square analyses and independent t-test analyses were performed.

To examine if the frequency of having experienced discrimination differed as a function of educational attainment, an independent t-test analysis was performed. The

frequency of reported discrimination was scored on a scale that ranged from 0 (have never experienced discriminatory behavior) to 5 (have experienced discriminatory behavior based on my ethnicity, age, religion, sex, and income). Results indicated that participants with greater educational attainment were significantly more likely ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) to report that they had experienced discriminatory behavior than were participants with lower educational attainment ( $M = .85$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(1691) = -16.79$ ,  $p < .001$ .

To examine if perceptions regarding participants' optimism and self-determination differed as a function of educational attainment, a series of chi-square analyses were performed. Results indicated significant differences in optimism regarding whether the American dream was attainable for the average Latino,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1610) = 6.21$ ,  $p < .05$ , and whether the American dream was attainable for Latino children,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1610) = 10.61$ ,  $p < .01$ . Participants with lower educational attainment were significantly less likely to agree that the American dream was attainable for the average Latino ( $n = 820$ , 79%) and less likely for Latino children ( $n = 683$ , 82%). In contrast, participants with greater educational attainment were more likely to agree that the American dream was attainable for the average Latino ( $n = 486$ , 85%) and for Latino children ( $n = 385$ , 92%).

Results indicated significant differences in self-determination regarding whether the participant has no say in government,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1590) = 64.36$ ,  $p < .001$ , whether success is determined by outside forces,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1550) = 105.36$ ,  $p < .001$ , and whether hard work does not guarantee success,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1609) = 108.69$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants with lower educational attainment were significantly more likely to endorse that they had no say in government ( $n = 584$ , 57%) than were those with greater educational attainment ( $n = 172$ , 32%). Moreover, participants with lower educational attainment were significantly more likely to endorse that hard work does not guarantee success ( $n = 523$ , 50%) and that success is determined by outside forces ( $n = 584$ , 57%). In contrast, those with greater educational attainment were significantly less likely to endorse that hard work does not guarantee success ( $n = 134$ , 26%) and that success is determined by outside forces ( $n = 172$ , 32%).

To examine whether participant registration and likelihood of following government affairs differed as a function of educational attainment, chi-square analyses were performed. Results indicated significant differences in behavior related to United States politics regarding whether the participant was registered to vote,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1630) = 238.39$ ,  $p < .000$ , and how often the participant followed government/public affairs,  $\chi^2(2, N = 1632) = 32.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, participants with lower educational attainment were proportionally less likely to be registered to vote ( $n = 422$ , 40%) than were participants with greater educational attainment ( $n = 466$ , 80%). Similarly, participants with lower educational attainment were less likely to follow government or public affairs most or some of the time ( $n = 570$ , 55%) than were those with greater educational attainment ( $n = 407$ , 69%).

Finally, to examine whether the overall frequency of participation in activities related to political and like organizations differed as a function of educational attainment, an independent t-test analysis was performed. Participation was defined as being a member, holding an office, volunteering, attending meetings, and/or contributing money to a civic

group, political group, or Latino issues group. This yielded a single composite score that ranged from 0 (no participation in any group) to 15 (participation in a civic group, political group, AND Latino issues group as a member, holding office, volunteer, attending members, and financial contribution). Results indicated that participants with greater educational attainment were significantly more likely to participate ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ) than were those with lower educational attainment ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ),  $t(528) = -4.55$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the perceptions and self-reported behaviors of Mexican Americans toward social justice issues in a political context as a function of educational attainment. Based on the premise set forth by Boakari (2006), we expected those with a higher level of educational attainment would reflect both perceptions and self-reported behaviors that are consistent with a more socially aware citizen. Results were significant for all analyses, indicating that participants with a higher level of educational attainment had perceptions and self-reported behaviors more congruent with social justice issues in a political context, compared to participants with a lower level of educational attainment.

Participants with a higher level of educational attainment reported experiencing discriminatory behavior significantly more compared to those with a lower level of educational attainment. Those with higher education should be more likely to report experiencing discriminatory behavior because education provides formal exposure to these concepts at local, regional, national and international levels. Students are more likely to learn or be taught that such discrimination leads to and perpetuates circumstances of social injustice. This heightened awareness increases the likelihood that students will see injustice in their own lives and the lives of others.

Ideally, such awareness will lead to behavior designed to minimize or eradicate the presence of social injustice in their community and the world at large. Unfortunately, while participants were asked to report whether they had experienced discriminatory behavior, a limitation of the present research is that participants were not asked to indicate if they had observed discriminatory behavior towards others. Future research should investigate this question, as a key purpose of social justice education is to inspire students to understand and to reflect on the reasons and causes of these injustices, and to act upon them.

Participants with greater educational attainment had a higher level of optimism, as they were more likely to agree that the American dream was attainable for the average Latino and for their children, relative to those with a lower level of educational attainment. As one acquires more knowledge and skills, perceptions of one's capabilities as well as confidence or self-efficacy increases (Bandura, 1977). Hence, those with greater educational attainment should be more optimistic about their future and the future of their children. Similarly, participants with a higher level of educational attainment perceived a greater sense of self-determination, since they did not agree that they had no say in government, that their success was determined by outside forces, and that hard

work does not guarantee success, relative to those with lower educational attainment. Results for both optimism and self-determination indicate that those with a greater level of educational attainment believe that they have more control in shaping their own destiny and more influence in the political process.

Participants with a higher level of educational attainment were more likely to follow government affairs and more likely to be registered to vote, relative to those with lower educational attainment. Participants with a higher level of educational attainment had greater participation in activities related to political and like organizations (i.e., being a member, holding an office, volunteering, attending meetings, and/or contributing money to a civic group, political group, or Latino issues group), compared to those with lower educational attainment. Higher education is often based on the premise that those who are educated have a responsibility to shape their community, to create a better future, and to ensure that educational opportunities will exist in the future. This responsibility leads to an expectation of active behavior among individuals and can be a key message for political platforms and the need for political participation. Following government affairs, participating in political organizations, and registering to vote are direct manifestations of these expected behaviors. Arvizu and Garcia (1996) postulated that the lack of political participation among Hispanics could be tied to lack of education. The current findings support their argument and demonstrated that voter registration was twice as high among those with greater educational attainment compared to those with lower educational attainment.

## Limitations and Future Research

This exploratory study was able to use existing data to identify perceptions of social justice and self-reported behaviors related to political participation among Mexican Americans. Future research would benefit from systematically tying initiatives intended to educate Mexican Americans for the purpose of changing perceptions and behaviors related to social justice and political participation. This more systematic approach would increase our understanding of the relative contribution of specific programs intended to change both perceptions and behavior.

## Conclusion

The current findings suggest that higher education is a key to developing awareness of social injustices and accepting responsibility to change these circumstances. Given the increase of Mexican Americans in the United States and their potential strength as a voting block in future elections, more educated Mexican Americans are positioned to exert a substantial influence on the perception of less educated Mexican Americans. Finally, the current findings clearly indicate that higher levels of educational attainment make a difference in both the perceptions and behaviors of Mexican Americans related to social justice in the political arena. Advocates of social justice as well as political parties would be well-served to promote educational opportunities among Mexican Americans.



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