FINDING COMMON GROUND: UNITY IN DIVERSITY IN THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF U.S. HISPANICS*)

With 4 figures and 2 tables

INES M. MIYARES

Zusammenfassung: Auf dem Weg zur Gemeinsamkeit: Einheit in der Vielfalt bei der politischen Mobilisierung der Hispanics in den USA

Die Mexikaner, Puertoricaner und Kubaner in den Vereinigten Staaten unterscheiden sich deutlich sowohl in ihrer räumlichen Verteilung als auch in der demographischen Zusammensetzung und nach ihrem sozioökonomischen Status. Die Unterschiede sind noch ausgeprägter, wenn die politischen Interessen und Ziele betrachtet werden. Die Festlegung der öffentlichen politischen Prioritäten ist ein entscheidender Teil des politischen Prozesses. Die Forderung nach höherer Priorität in der Politik wird in der Regel durch die Teilnahme an Wahlen unterstrichen. Die Hispanics haben hier von Beginn an einen Nachteil. Weniger als ein Drittel der wahlberechtigten Hispanics im Alter von über 18 Jahren beteiligt sich an den Präsidentschaftswahlen, und sogar weniger als ein Viertel nimmt bei den zwischenzeitlichen Wahlen zum Kongreß teil.

Es existiert jedoch eine wachsende, landesweite Bewegung mit dem Ziel, die wahlberechtigten Hispanics politisch zu mobilisieren und die zahlreichen Probleme und Bedürfnisse bewußt zu machen, die eine politische Antwort erfordern. Die vorliegende Studie untersucht zum einen die verschiedenen politischen Kulturen, die sich unter den Mexikanern, Puertoricanern und Kubanern herausgebildet haben, und prüft zum anderen deren gemeinsame Interessenlage innerhalb der USA, die als Ausgangspunkt für eine einheitliche politische Mobilisierung dienen könnte.

Introduction

Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans in the United States differ significantly in geographic dispersion patterns, demographics, and socioeconomic status. The differences become accentuated when considering policy priorities. How does a lawmaker reconcile the needs of the young, unemployed, Mexican high school dropout in Los Angeles with those of the Puerto Rican single mother trapped in the poverty of the South Bronx or with those of the Cuban senior citizen of Miami?

The determination of public policy priorities is a critical part of the political process. The demand to be among the higher priorities is usually expressed through voting. Hispanics begin at a disadvantage. In 1988, 37 % of Hispanics 18 years of age and older were ineligible to vote because they were not citizens. With few exceptions, Blacks have been able to mobilize increasing numbers of voters in each election. Less than a third of eligible Hispanics 18 years of age and over participate in presidential elections, and a quarter or less in off-year congressional elections (Census Bureau, November 1988: 38–40).

In some states, such as Colorado and New Mexico, the percentage of Hispanics that were eligible, registered and voted paralleled that of non-Hispanic whites. In other states, such as California, where Hispanics eligible to vote compose over a fifth of the population, less than a quarter of those eligible registered and less than a fifth actually voted. As with the general population, it is the older Hispanic voter who seems most likely to vote.

There has been a growing movement nationwide to mobilize Hispanic voters in order to address the many needs demanding policy responses. An underlying assumption by many is that Hispanics have become a national minority despite the differences among the various origin groups. One reason for this is the increased use of the term, "Hispanic", by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and other government agencies, helping popularize the concept of Hispanics as "a homogeneous minority group" (VIGIL 1980: 1–2). This is reinforced by the high number of forms of mass media available nationwide in Spanish. Politicians able to communicate in Spanish will have greater chances of rallying potential voters (VIGIL 1980: 1–2).

In those states where there are the highest percentages of Hispanics, increasing numbers of Hispanics are being elected to state and local offices. Table 1 shows the growing number of Hispanic elected officials through the decade of the 1980s into the 1990s. What is immediately evident is that the greatest growth has occurred at the local level.

The decade of the 1960s was an important turning point for Hispanics in national politics. Prior to this time, twenty-four Hispanics had served in the House of Representatives. Between 1961 and 1969, six Hispanics were elected, and in doing so, united to address the concerns of the Hispanic community. In 1977, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) was organized. Not all Hispanic representatives choose to be involved. A difference between the CHC and the Congressional Black Caucus is that those who are not Hispanic yet represent districts that are heavily Hispanic, and/or are concerned about the needs of Hispanics, are welcome to become involved as Associate Members. As a result of different cultural

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Table 1: Hispanic public officials, by office, 1984 to 1991
Hispanics in öffentlichen Ämtern 1984 bis 1991

Year (month)	Total[1)]	State executives and legislators	County and municipal officials	Judicial and law enforcement	Education and school boards
1984 (July)	3,063	110	1,276	495	1,173
1985 (September)	3,147	119	1,316	517	1,185
1986 (September)	3,202	122	1,352	530	1,188
1987 (September)	3,317	127	1,412	568	1,199
1988 (September)	3,360	124	1,425	574	1,226
1989 (September)	3,783	133	1,724	575	1,341
1990 (September)	4,004	134	1,819	583	1,458
1991 (September)	4,202	143	1,865	596	1,587

[1)] Includes U.S. Representatives, not shown separately

Source: National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, National Roster of Hispanic Elected Officials, Washington, D.C., 1992

backgrounds and political philosophies, the caucus has historically had difficulty in uniting as a political force.

Those of the various Hispanic national groups have had differing histories, reasons for migrating to their present homes, have developed disparate demographic profiles, and have had differing impacts on the cities in which they reside. Among the three larger groups, the Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans, and the Cubans, three distinct political cultures have also emerged.

Mexican political culture

The Mexican and Mexican American populations in the U.S. are concentrated primarily in the Southwest and in the Chicago metropolitan area in Illinois (Fig. 1). Among Mexicans, two primary political culture models have emerged which are distinguishable by their potential for enfranchisement. These two groups are the Texas Mexicans and the California Mexicans.

Although there are many recent immigrants from Mexico residing in Texas, the majority are native-born American citizens. Thus, they are eligible to vote if registered. These also have strong ties to the local community. There is a growing contingent of Mexicans with socioeconomic power in the area. Thus the three necessary ingredients for potential mobilization, citizenship, registration, and perception of ownership of the community are present.

As is evident from the statistics in Table 2, Texas Mexicans have been successful in attaining increasing political power. On a local level, more and more elected officials are of Mexican descent. The key has been to focus on *local* elections.

Mexicans from South Texas have a long tradition of feeling separated and unable to influence politics on a national level. Thus, they did not actively participate in such elections. However, more recent movements such as the Southwest Voter Registration Project have focused on local elections. Leaders are increasingly successful in convincing residents to claim ownership of their school boards and city councils through the electoral process. As those elected gain recognition outside the Hispanic community, they are able to rise in the level of elected office for which they compete.

South Texas is an area of high Hispanic concentration. It would be difficult to redistrict to dilute the effectiveness of the Hispanic vote. This increases the chances of a Hispanic competing successfully for elected office. For example, in San Antonio in 1990, four city council members and two congressmen were of Mexican descent.

In California, the focus has also been on local elections. However, there is one essential hurdle California Mexicans must overcome before the degree of political mobilization evident in Texas can be realized. This is the issue of citizenship. The question of citizenship takes two forms. First, one must be a citizen to vote, and second, citizenship leads to the perception of ownership. In recent years, the essential features of the first form have become blurred.

The 1990 court ruling, *Garza v. Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors,* which resulted in the designation of a "Hispanic" district (District 1), clouded the factors previously deemed essential to meet these three criteria. In this case, population estimates developed by the County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services Population Estimate and Projection System (PEPS) were utilized to draw boundary lines (Bolton 1991). Much of the population of the new district is

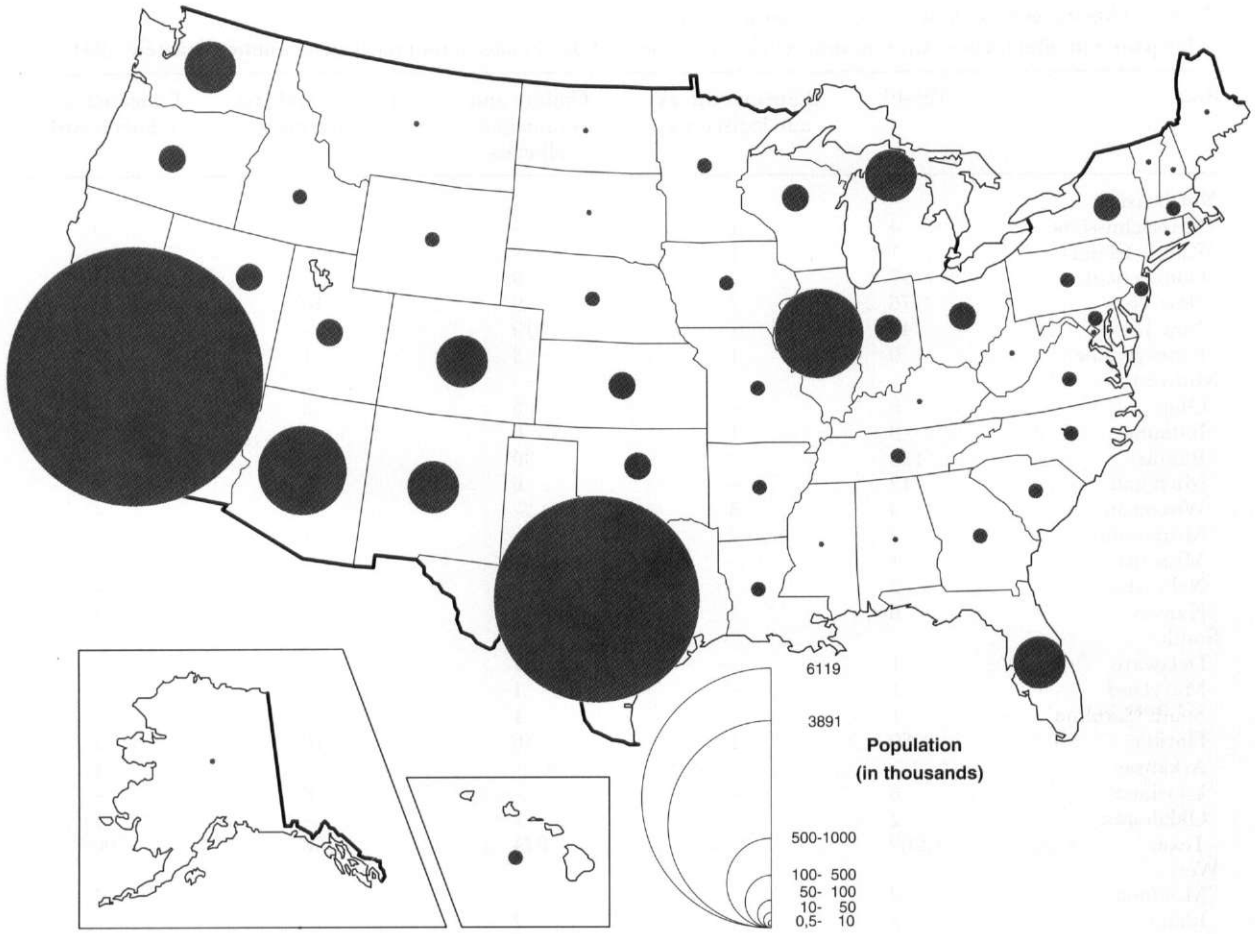

Fig. 1: Mexican population by state, 1990
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Press Release CB91-215
Bevölkerung mexikanischer Herkunft nach Staaten 1990

composed of recent arrivals. These are not yet citizens. Thus, the electoral value of each vote from District 1 is inflated.

Although highly accurate for projections of the county population as a whole, PEPS heavily overestimated the population of what became District 1. The legislators elected from other districts would represent more people than the one from District 1 would, resulting in representative inequality. Less than one-fifth of the population of Los Angeles County, containing 15.9% of the eligible voters in 1990, now hold one of the five county supervisorial seats (Morrison a. Clark 1991).

The one positive effect of this case was the development of a district representing a protected group. The election that followed the court decision resulted in the victory of a Hispanic woman to the County Board of Supervisors. The decision, denied certiorari by the U.S. Supreme Court, opened a "Pandora's Box" in determining future reapportionment cases.

First, estimations developed outside the Census Bureau were utilized to draw the boundary lines. Second, population, and not citizenship or eligible voter totals, was used to attain political empowerment. This case potentially sets a new standard in moving toward political mobilization among Hispanics in California. The direct question of citizenship is no longer a clearly defined inhibitor to political power.

Lack of citizenship does create a more intangible hurdle, the perception of ownership. Many working in the Mexican communities of California encouraging those *eligible* to apply for citizenship have found that many of these are not convinced they will be remaining in the United States. It is a if "one foot is planted here and one is still in Mexico". Until both feet are "planted" in the U.S., there is no perceived need to apply for citizenship in order to realize political empowerment. It is after one is a citizen that one develops the perception of "ownership" of a

Table 2: Hispanic public officials, by office and for selected states, 1991
Hispanics in öffentlichen Ämtern, differenziert nach der Art der Funktion und nach ausgewählten Staaten, 1991

State	Total[1)]	State executives and legislators	County and municipal officials	Judicial and law enforcement	Education and school boards
Northeast					
Massachussetts	4	1	–	–	3
Rhode Island	1	1	–	–	–
Connecticut	17	3	9	–	5
New York	76	7	9	10	49
New Jersey	42	1	19	–	22
Pennsylvania	9	1	3	1	4
Midwest					
Ohio	8	–	5	2	1
Indiana	9	1	6	1	1
Illinois	139	3	30	3	103
Michigan	12	–	6	2	4
Wisconsin	3	3	–	–	–
Minnesota	3	2	–	1	–
Missouri	1	–	1	–	–
Nebraska	3	–	3	–	–
Kansas	6	4	1	–	1
South					
Delaware	1	–	1	–	–
Maryland	1	–	1	–	–
South Carolina	1	–	1	–	–
Florida	60	11	36	10	2
Arkansas	1	–	–	–	1
Lousiana	8	–	–	8	–
Oklahoma	2	–	1	–	1
Texas	1,969	27	874	358	706
West					
Montana	2	–	–	1	1
Idaho	2	–	2	–	–
Wyoming	5	–	5	–	–
Colorado	213	10	145	9	49
New Mexico	672	47	354	93	177
Arizona	283	11	128	43	100
Utah	3	–	3	–	–
Nevada	4	1	1	1	1
Washington	15	2	6	1	6
Oregon	8	–	5	2	1
California	617	7	208	50	349
Alaska	2	–	2	–	–

[1)] Includes U.S. Representatives, not shown separately

Source: National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, National Roster of Hispanic Elected Officials, Washington D.C., 1992

locale. This dilemma has led to the disparity in the number of elected officials in Texas and California.

In areas where the perception of ownership has been achieved, local electoral power is forthcoming. For example, community college districts in California hold elections that are often seen as insignificant by the general public. However, coalitions composed of local leaders, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the Southwest Voter Registration Project, and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the Latino Issues Forum have been successful in bringing about voluntary redistricting in the San Jose/Evergreen and the Hartnell Community College Districts. This has resulted in the election and appointment of Hispanic officials to the district boards. The Hispanic community took ownership of local elections most other groups tend to ignore (Gobalet a. Lapkoff 1991).

Fig. 2: Cuban population by state, 1990
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Press Release CB91-215
Bevölkerung kubanischer Herkunft nach Staaten 1990

Thus, it is the issue of perceived ownership that seems to be the key of political mobilization. This holds true as a common feature among Cubans and Puerto Ricans, but it manifests itself in different ways.

Cuban political culture

A large proportion of Mexican recent arrivals tend to be economic migrants, immigrating to the U.S. in search of an improved standard of living. In contrast, the majority of Cubans entered the U.S. as political refugees, settling primarily in South Florida (Fig. 2). Most are highly politicized. Like the Mexicans, the dream of a large contingent in the Cuban community is to return to the homeland. However, what has evolved in the Cuban community is a very different political culture and degree of activism.

To an economic migrant, returning home usually entails earning sufficient amounts of money to support one's familiy in a condition better than when one left. Political refugees usually are unable to return home unless the government from which they have sought asylum is removed from power. In the case of the Cuban community, this would mean the deposition of the Castro regime.

The failed attempt to "retake" Cuba through the invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 undertaken by the Kennedy Administration destroyed the potential of the Democratic party to gain long-term favor within the Cuban refugee community. Many Cubans placed blame for the invasion's failure on President Kennedy, a Democrat. He was seen as having abandoned the Cubans involved in the invasion, exposing them to ultimate defeat. Although he took a powerful stance against the Soviet Union the following year during the missile crisis, Kennedy was unable to recover from the damage to his image in Miami.

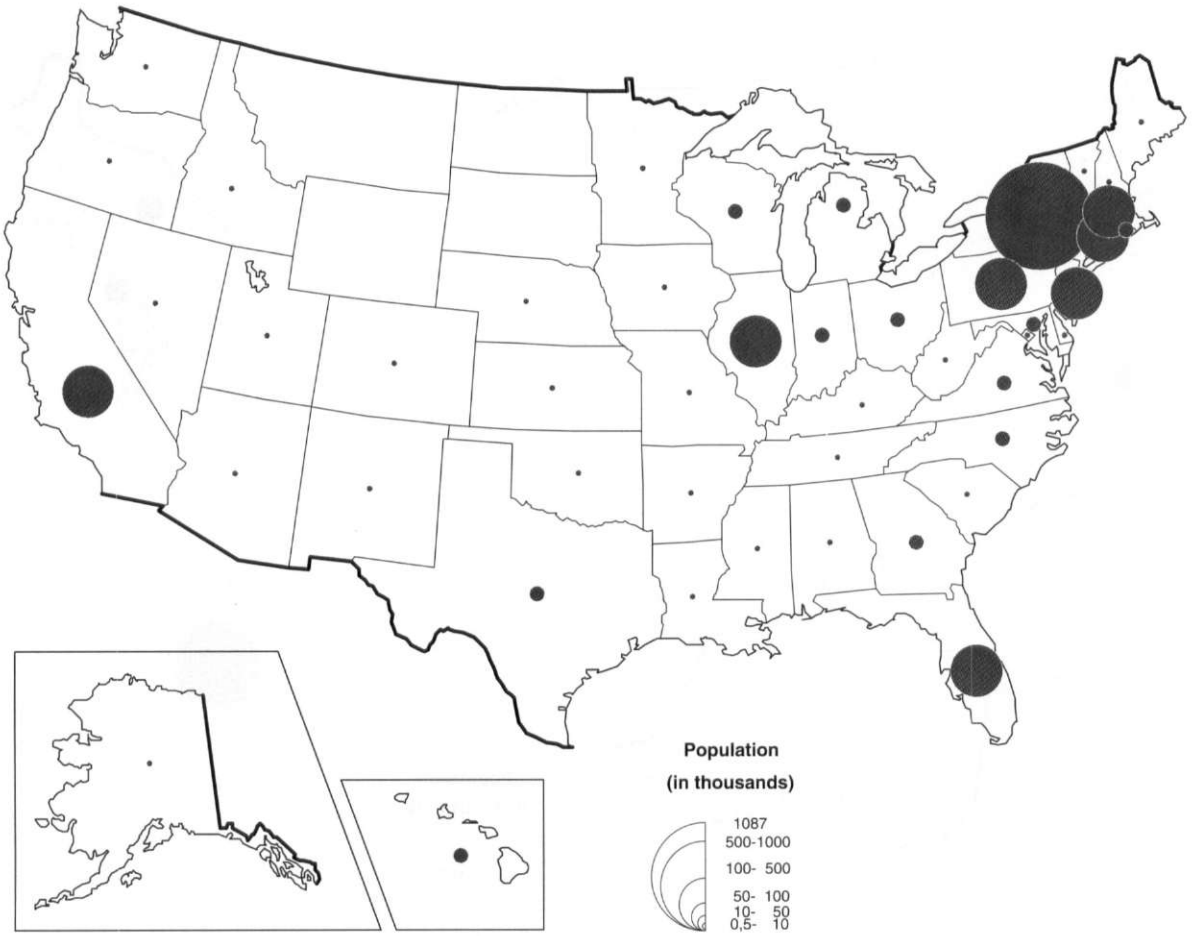

Fig. 3: Puerto Rican population by state, 1990
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Press Release CB91-215
Bevölkerung puertoricanischer Herkunft nach Staaten 1990

When a military invasion failed, the Cuban community turned to political means to depose Castro. Disenchantment with the Democratic party resulted in a strong commitment to the Republicans. The Cubans of Miami compose one of the most conservative factions of the Republican party. Perceived as both a "defender of democracy against communism" and as a "protector of the entrepreneur", the Republican party is seen as a potential political ticket home.

Cubans knew from the start that political power in the United States was exercised primarily at the ballot box and that a prerequisite of voting was citizenship. Thus, most applied for citizenship at the earliest possible date. Among Hispanics, Cubans are the most likely to vote. Within one generation, they have taken possession of many of the elected offices of South Florida at a local, state, and federal level. In addition, there are Cubans in high-level appointed positions.

Among younger Cubans in Miami, Cuba is a "mythical" place many would like to see, but the dream of returning to stay is not as prevalent. The majority are content to remain in the United States, seeking both economic and political power for the future. The perception of ownership is strong in Miami as is the degree of political involvement.

The conservative nature of Miami's politics is not representative of all Cubans, especially those who settled in the northeastern U.S. Many of these ascribed to forms of liberation theology prior to the Communist Revolution, desiring to bring about change on the island through social reform. When these efforts failed, they too were forced to become political refugees. This contingent, though, forms one of the more liberal factions of the Democratic party.

Common among these Cubans is an activist political culture that champions the needs of the poor and oppressed through both political and social reform. Traditionally, there has been a feeling of animosity between Cubans and Puerto Ricans that is reinforced by the disparity in educational and economic attainment between the two island peoples.

Many northeastern Cubans have set this historical "wall" between themselves and the Puerto Rican community aside and have become politically active to seek the betterment of Puerto Ricans. The result has been the construction of a new wall, this time between themselves and the Cubans of Miami.

Puerto Rican political culture

Among Puerto Ricans, the issue of the perception of ownership has taken a very different form. Puerto Ricans are American citizens by birth, free to travel between the island and the mainland. On the mainland, the person elected to represent congressional districts whith high concentrations of Puerto Ricans has more power than the representative from the island. The latter does not have a vote in the House. Thus, it could be assumed that Puerto Ricans would see residence on the mainland as a more powerful political tool. However, this is not the case.

The long history as a victim of conquest has resulted in a political culture characterized by both docile submission and failed revolt. Puerto Ricans *feel* disenfranchised and thus do not participate in the political system. In their eyes, their voice has never counted in the past, and it is unlikely to count now.

As with Mexicans and Cubans, many Puerto Ricans have "one foot planted on the mainland and one on the island". It should not matter among Puerto Ricans as they are citizens in both places, yet this attitude seems to create the greatest hurdle in attempting to mobilize this group politically. There is a prevalant sense of apathy toward a system that is seen to be indifferent toward their needs, resulting in the disenfranchisement of the Puerto Rican community.

The results are evident throughout several aspects of current Puerto Rican mainland culture. Among Hispanics, mainland Puerto Ricans are the least likely to participate in the labor market, the most likely to be in poverty, the least likely to participate politically, and the least likely to perceive ownership, even on a local level. Intrinsically, these have the greatest potential for change. The first and greatest hurdle that must be overcome is the development of the belief that change can happen.

Those who are working to bring about change are doing so as parts of coalitions with those of other Hispanic national backgrounds. In New York State, home to the majority of mainland Puerto Ricans (Fig. 3), annual "Somos Uno" ("We Are One") conferences bring together leaders from within the Puerto Rican community as well as from the Cuban and Mexican communities of the state to attempt to address the issues common to them all. Other groups, such as the New York State Assembly Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force at the state level, and P.R.A.C.A. (the Puerto Rican American Community Association) in Buffalo at the local level are striving toward this same goal. These groups have found that, although some factions have agenda items unique to their perspective, change will only come through cooperation.

Many leaders in the Puerto Rican community are discovering that political empowerment will not come from within, but will be a result of the development of coalitions of like-minded groups. On a national level, organizations such as LULAC, the League of Latin American Citizens, have been attempting this for decades. Can common ground be found without demanding the homogenization of unlike peoples? Historically, demographically, culturally, socially, the various Hispanic national groups have had diverse experiences within the United States. Each has mobilized politically in different ways, to different degrees, and around different issues. Is it feasible to either assume or demand that common ground be found?

There are issues that are unique to each group. Among Mexicans, immigration reform is a key focus, yet not critical among Puerto Ricans who are citizens by birth or among Cubans who enter as political refugees. Among Cubans, the deposition of Castro is of prime concern, yet this does not directly affect either of the other two national groups. There are three factions among Puerto Ricans disputing the future status of the island – those supporting statehood, those promoting independence, and those desiring that the island's status remain as it is. None of these three options directly impacts Mexicans or Cubans. Thus, the three national groups do not share a common "foreign policy" agenda.

However, when one turns to the domestic front, the potential for common ground changes. Although disparate in many ways, these three national groups do share one critical common experience – urban life.

Neighborhoods in which the various Hispanic groups have settled appear to be different, but they share one common characteristic. They are within cities. Whether in small cities experiencing growth, or in major metropolises in the process of decline, Hispanics tend to reside in urban ethnic enclaves, often resulting in isolation and disenfranchisement from the mainstream culture and polity.

Although Cubans have risen economically in Miami and Mexicans are on the rise in many cities, all entered at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Even Cubans with professional degrees worked as laborers upon entering the U.S. Today, those who have achieved the economic stature to be the employers are hiring many of the recent arrivals from Central America and Mexico.

All are struggling to succeed in a culture and economy different than their own while trying to in-

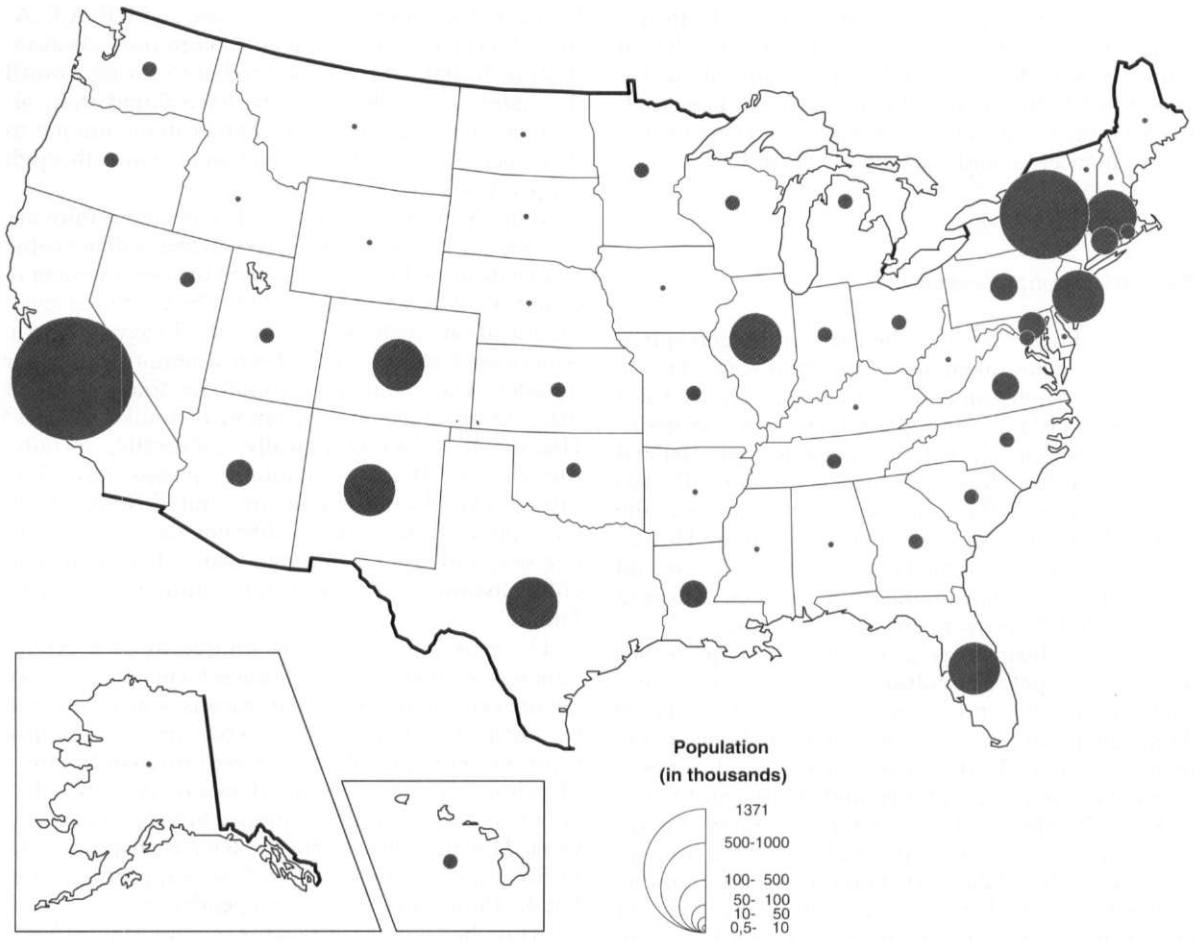

Fig. 4: Other Hispanic population by state, 1990
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Press Release CB91-215
Sonstige Hispanics nach Staaten 1990

still in their children pride in their native heritage. Many attempt to maintain the use of Spanish in the home yet struggle with the language arts in school. Members of transitional generations rebel against old-world customs in order to "fit in", though accents and other aspects of their heritages betray them.

Patterns of residential succession are common to most immigrant groups. The quality of housing in the neighborhoods that become the initial ports-of-entry is often substandard. Low-cost, rundown urban housing is not a respecter of persons, whether economic migrant or political refugee.

Whether a senior citizen on a fixed income, or an impoverished young mother struggling to care for her family, affordable quality health care is becoming increasingly difficult to access. Though the specific needs may be different, the concern is the same. The concern is magnified by the language and cultural barriers inherent in immigrant communites.

Finding common ground

Is there a common agenda on which all Hispanic national groups agree? The answer is a definite yes! In interviews with leaders in the Hispanic community, regardless of national background or level of government, the same four issues were cited as the key concerns needing political action. First and foremost is the need for improved and equalized education. All groups argue that the first step in improving the condition of any Hispanic is through education, both bilingual and "English also". Leaders in Miami acknowledge that the key to early success in the Cuban community was the availability of bilingual education. None of the groups support education in English only. The differences come in determining the point at which a child completes the transition into a classroom environment in which English is the dominant language utilized.

The improvement of the education of the younger generation should result in better job opportunities and incomes in the future. However, the second agenda item common to all groups is the need for improved job opportunities and situations for today's adults. Suggestions for implementation differ among the groups, but the differences tend to be more as a result of disparate local economies than of different priorities.

The third concern cited is that of health care. This takes two forms as the median ages of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans differ so greatly from the median age of Cubans, yet both are of equal importance. The first two groups are primarily concerned with the health care needs of families with young children, while secondarily addressing the needs of the growing number of senior adults on fixed incomes. Cubans, though, among whom half the population is over 40, see the need for the care of senior adults as a critical priority as there are decreasing numbers of Cuban families with young children.

The fourth concern cited by all interviewed is the need for improved housing. Residential succession is common among most immigrant groups. However, in several cities, the Hispanic community becomes "trapped" in a neighborhood, lacking the resources to either move or renovate. The community block grants initiated by the Nixon Administration were cited as having improved the residential quality of certain neighborhoods. However, vast amounts of money are seen as necessary to bring about long-term change.

"Standard" gentrification programs, such as the complete redevelopment of downtown Buffalo, New York done in the 1980s, are not seen as the answer. In Buffalo, the image, business, and shopping opportunities increased greatly. However, many poor families were displaced in the process. Instead, what are needed are programs that provide grants and low-cost loans to renovate existing housing without displacing residents.

There are two common elements to this four-point agenda. First, these are issues that are of concern to most Americans. These are not unique to the Hispanic community. On a domestic level, there does not seem to be a "Hispanic agenda", but an agenda addressing needs common among Hispanics.

The second common factor of this agenda is that, although it addresses issues present throughout the entire nation, these are *local* issues. Even when supported by federal funds, programs of education, employment, health care, and housing are implemented on a local level.

Successful political mobilization has occurred on a local level by addressing these local issues. One obstacle, then, in attempting to mobilize Hispanics as a national movement is to do it as a national movement. Possibly, future generations of Hispanics will be more homogeneous with either each other or mainstream American culture. The Hispanics of today, though, are not the same, nor should they be treated as such. Within the diversity there does exist common ground. Those seeking to mobilize Hispanics politically should maximize the possibilities by recognizing the uniqueness of each group and addressing local concerns, claiming ownership of local politics through the electoral process and the implementation of recent decisions in the courts.

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