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From Pipeline to Power: Expanding Latino Political Representation in Congress Through Strategic Leadership Development and Targeted Investment

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Executive Summary:

Despite comprising approximately 20% of the U.S. population, Latinos hold only about 2% of elected offices nationwide, underscoring a significant representation gap that limits their influence on federal policies affecting immigration, education, healthcare, and the economy.[1] Structural barriers—such as gerrymandering, limited campaign resources, and voter suppression—further weaken Latino political power, particularly in states like California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Texas.[2] Although progress has been made, Latino political representation has not kept pace with population growth and is projected to lag even further. Strengthening Latino representation is critical to ensuring policies reflect the needs and priorities of Latino communities. To address this issue, policymakers should prioritize investment in targeted leadership development programs and pursue structural reforms that promote equitable representation. Policy reform efforts should include fair redistricting practices and enhanced campaign finance support for underrepresented candidates. They should also expand mentorship networks for emerging Latino leaders and increase access to civic education in Latino communities. Together, these steps broaden the pipeline for running for office and diversify federal governance.

Background:

Latino underrepresentation in the U.S. Congress is rooted in a persistent history of discriminatory practices, structural exclusion, and socioeconomic barriers that date back to the 19th century. Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), when the U.S. annexed large parts of Mexican territories—now California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico—thousands of Mexican citizens became U.S. citizens overnight.[3] However, even with the promise of an American dream rooted in civil rights, their citizenship status could not hide their Latinidad. As a result, they still faced discrimination, voter suppression, economic marginalization, and language barriers. These obstacles effectively excluded them from meaningful sociopolitical representation.[4] Nonetheless, the Latino population in the U.S. began to take root in distinct ways due to political events, migration, and labor demand across the Americas. By the mid-20th century, Latino migration diversified beyond the Southwest. Large diasporas moved to New York, Miami, Houston, and Los Angeles. These flows were driven by political conflicts and by U.S. intervention and counterinsurgency.[5]

Interventions such as the "Good Neighbor Policy," which reframed U.S. influence in Latin America through diplomatic and economic leverage, and the Bracero labor program reshaped the region.[6] These successive migrations built the foundation of today's large and diverse Latino population, and, consequently, the community's lack of representation in the nation's democracy.

Following World War II, representation began to grow, marked by a period of grassroots activism and growing awareness of civil rights goals. Most notably, the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 prohibited discriminatory voting practices and addressed fairer redistricting—measures that in practice opened new avenues for Latino representation.[7] However, post-VRA minority representation continued to lag. This was true even after the expansion of the 1975 VRA's language-assistance provisions. These provisions were designed to ensure that language minority citizens—such as Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—could effectively participate in elections. They sought to achieve this through avenues such as providing translated election materials and access to bilingual election officials.[8] However, these provisions did not automatically translate into greater Latino political power. Implementation relied on the cooperation of local election authorities, which had its flaws.[9] Compliance was uneven, and enforcement was often inconsistent, leaving many communities without meaningful access to the protections intended by the law.[10] Thus, despite subsequent expansions, Latinos' political infrastructure to support equitable representation lagged behind.[11]

For decades, Latino political visibility was limited to local and state policy, with only a few exceptions, such as Octaviano Larrazolo, the first Latino U.S. Senator (1928), and Dennis Chávez, the first Hispanic elected to a full term in the Senate (1935).[12] The 1970s were formative for Latinos in Congress. Five Latino members founded the Congressional Hispanic Caucus in 1976.[13] They aimed to elevate Latino issues on the national stage despite the small number of Latino representatives.[14] Landmark legislation like the Voting Rights Act Reauthorization of 1982 and Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 shaped Latino political engagement and influenced narratives on what Latino citizenship looked like in the U.S.[15] Notably, the 1982 amendments adopted a "results" test—a new way for Congress to challenge electoral systems, such as at-large elections or discriminatory district maps—based not on discriminatory intent, but on discriminatory effect.[16] The country gained a legal tool to fight vote dilution. Over time, these amendments helped dismantle structural barriers to representation and opened political space for communities of color to elect candidates of their choice. By the end of the 20th century, Latinos were the fastest-growing minority group in the United States. This set the stage for a 21st-century push toward greater political representation.[17]

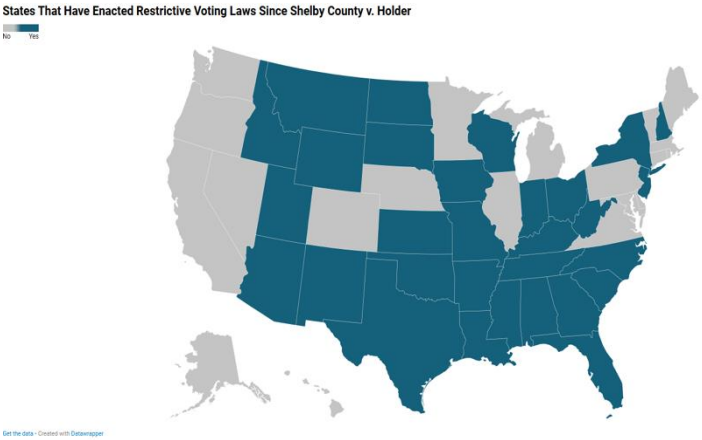
Latino Constituency Size vs. Latino Congressional Delegation in the 119th Congress

0 15,754,499

State	Latino Population	Latino % of State	House Seats	Latino House Reps	Latino Senators	Latino Total Congress	Delegation Size	Percent of Delegation Latino
California	15,754,499	40%	52	14	1	15	54	28%
Texas	12,042,362	40%	38	8	1	9	40	23%
Florida	5,869,990	27%	28	6	1	7	30	23%
New York	3,810,731	20%	26	5	0	5	28	18%
New Jersey	2,030,000	22%	12	2	0	2	14	14%

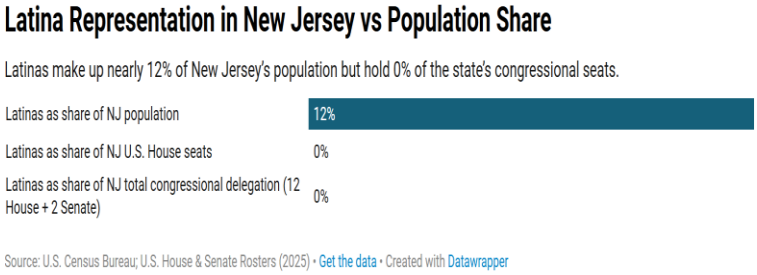
Despite progress, Latino underrepresentation persists into the 119th Congress due to enduring structural and political challenges.[18] Similarly, Latinos across generations and ethnic groups face cultural and language barriers, restrictive voter ID laws, and limited outreach. These factors suppress turnout, especially among first-generation and low-income populations.[19] Since the Supreme Court's weakening of the Voting Rights Act a decade ago, nearly 29 states have enacted close to 100 restrictive voting laws. Many of these measures disproportionately affect states with large Latino populations—such as Florida, Texas, New York, and New Jersey—further suppressing turnout and limiting the community's political influence.[20] About 1.4 million Hispanics become eligible to vote each year. Yet socioeconomic inequalities, including disparities in education, wealth, and access to civic resources depress participation. Latinos remain among the racial groups with the lowest voter registration.[21] While Latino representation in Congress has grown steadily, reaching a record number of 61 members in the 118th Congress (2023–2025) and currently 56 in the 119th Congress (2025–2026), it still falls short of the Latino share of the U.S. population (about 20%).[22] Both the historical legacies of exclusion and modern systemic inequities highlight

that Latino underrepresentation is not accidental, but rather a byproduct of ongoing institutional and political barriers that continue to shape American democracy.



Problem Analysis:

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that over one in four Americans will be Latino by 2060, yet Latinos currently hold only 11% of House seats and 6% of Senate seats—a stark gap between population and political power.[23] This underrepresentation stems from barriers such as gerrymandering, limited leadership and campaign development, and uneven voter participation. However, Latinos are not a monolith—and neither is this issue. States like California and Texas illustrate how fragmented districts weaken Latino influence, while disparities in citizenship and political incorporation drive gaps in Florida and New York.[24] For example, mixed-status families—households with at least one unauthorized immigrant—are less likely to register or participate. Fear of government intrusion and risk of deportation suppress engagement. These households are most common in CA, NY, FL, and TX.[25] This suggests that cultural and identity-related factors can suppress political engagement if they are not properly addressed or channeled.[26] In New Jersey, the absence of any Latina in Congress underscores ongoing institutional barriers.[27] Together, these states reveal both shared structural challenges and localized inequities shaping Latino underrepresentation nationwide.



Addressing this challenge requires a multidisciplinary, cross-sector approach—among community organizations, government, financial power (such as Latino Chambers of Commerce), and political parties to expand Latino leadership pipelines and dismantle systemic obstacles. Equitable representation can also be traced to the federal level, with the U.S. Census Bureau and the Federal Election Commission shaping conditions through campaign finance regulation and redistricting data.[28] Ultimately, the exclusion of Latino voices from national decision-making processes perpetuates a policy feedback loop that is not culturally relevant and reinforces systemic underrepresentation.

Across these five states—California, Texas, Florida, New York, and New Jersey—this issue manifests in distinct ways. This case study examines how Latino underrepresentation weakens political power in precisely the places where Latinos make up large portions of the population but remain underrepresented in elected office and policymaking roles. One of the major contributing factors to underrepresentation is gerrymandering, a practice through which district boundaries are drawn within states in ways that dilute Latino constituents' voting power. This practice often occurs through two primary avenues: "cracking," where Latino communities are divided across multiple districts, or "packing," in which Latinos are concentrated within a limited number of districts. Both strategies aim to restrict the community's broader Latino electoral influence.[29] This dynamic manifests in both California and Texas; these states continue to show discrepancies between Latino population share and political representation. These gaps are largely linked to inequitable boundary configurations and uneven voter participation.[30]

Recent examples of gerrymandering in California and Texas highlight how both major parties are engaging in mid-decade congressional redistricting to gain an advantage in the 2026 U.S. House elections.[31] These redistricting choices directly affect representation; they can open pathways for Latino candidates to gain seats or constrain their ability to win competitive districts. In turn, they shape how effectively Latino interests are voiced in Congress.[32]

Limited access to political networks, linguistic and educational barriers, disparities in Latino campaign financing, and ultimately inconsistent voter mobilization hinder the ability of Latinos to mount competitive campaigns in comparison to other racial groups.[33] Financial constraints limit candidates' capacity to invest in experienced campaign infrastructure or sustain long-term visibility in competitive districts. Socioeconomic and structural barriers also deepen Latino underrepresentation in elected office.[34]

Latino candidates, specifically Latina women (for example, in New Jersey) often lack institutional support from existing political parties and political action committees (PACs), which often serve as critical sources of early funding and strategic guidance.[35] People of Color (POC) make up a far smaller share of congressional candidates than their share of the population, and they rely more heavily on small-donor contributions to fund their campaigns.[36] In fact, POC had a 67% greater share of their funds from small donors than their white opponents with higher shares of Political Action Committee contributions.[37] Insufficient financial backing trickles down to campaign struggles in critical components such as grassroots organizing, advertising, and voter data analysis.[38] This resource gap perpetuates a cycle of failed movement traction, lack of electability, and it deters future investment following unsuccessful elections.[39]

Beyond institutional barriers, Latino identity and political behavior are multidimensional. Florida and New Jersey illustrate how ethnic heterogeneity complicates mobilization. Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Central American communities often mobilize differently. This fragmentation makes a unified voting bloc harder to build.[40] In New York, entrenched party structures and machine politics—institutions that distributed support and rewards in exchange for political loyalty, such as Tammany Hall in New York City—have often marginalized emerging Latino political actors, despite the community's strong traditions of activism and civic engagement.[41]

Together, these state-level dynamics reveal a broader national pattern: Latino underrepresentation is not the result of isolated incidents, but the consequence of intersecting structural, institutional, and social barriers that span regions and across the local, state, and federal levels. Persisting through entrenched party hierarchies, financial inequities, gerrymandered districts, and/or fragmented identities, Latino electoral candidates face systemic obstacles to achieving equity and proportional representation in Congress. Yet the persistence of grassroots activism, civic engagement, and developing leadership initiatives demonstrates the urgency for change. This case study underscores a clear point: to bridge the gap between Latinos and equitable political representation, intentional and targeted reforms must prioritize the root causes of underrepresentation. The following section explores steps toward meaningful inclusion.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

Leaning on the findings of this case study, Latino underrepresentation in U.S. political institutions, like Congress, is a reflection of historical exclusion and uneven access to political capital. Addressing these disparities requires targeted reforms that operate across electoral, institutional, and civic domains. The following policy recommendations outline strategies for cross-sector actors—policymakers, advocacy groups, and civic institutions—to advance Latino representation in Congress and consequently at the local, state, and federal levels:

1. **Structural and Electoral Reforms:** Policymakers must strengthen the integrity of electoral systems through transparent and fair redistricting practices by doing the following:

a. Establish independent redistricting commissions to reduce partisan manipulation that dilutes Latino voting strength.[42]
b. Enforce and expand the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to develop an oversight taskforce in states with demonstrated patterns of discrimination and voter suppression.[43]

2. **Campaign Finance and Institutional Support:** Equitable representation depends on campaign finance reform that levels the playing field for Latino underrepresented candidates.
    a. States and municipalities can implement public financing systems or matching fund models that amplify small donations and reduce reliance on elite donor networks that are inaccessible to most first-time candidates.[44]

3. **Leadership Development and Civic Education:** Investment in Latino Leadership pipelines is essential to sustaining long-term political representation.
    a. The federal government should partner with advocacy organizations and nonprofits—such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI), UnidosUS, and the Cisneros Institute—to build mentorship networks and create leveling development programs that prepare emerging Latino leaders as public servants.[45]
    b. Parallel efforts should include enhancing civic education and political literacy in schools and community centers to foster political participation and accountability.

4. **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Finally, advancing Latino representation requires cross-sector collaboration among the private sector, community organizations, and government institutions.
    a. Partnerships with Latino chambers of commerce and civic organizations should strengthen their networks to merge political leadership with economic and social capital.[46]

In sum, Latino underrepresentation is not an isolated occurrence, but a condition sustained by inequities in political access, financing, and institutional support. A multidimensional approach that is rooted in reform, leadership development, and civic empowerment offers the most effective path toward achieving equitable Latino representation. Implementing these recommendations would not only strengthen and empower Latino political participation, as the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S., but would also reinforce the democratic legitimacy of the country. The complex and multidimensional nature of Latino identity can no longer be overlooked in Congress, as it will continue to shape the nation's political, social, economic, and cultural landscape for decades to come. Latinos already sustain the nation's industries, drive its economy, and support its communities. They also enrich its cultures. They, too, must be recognized and elected as officials shaping its democracy.

Endnotes

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[38] Daniel Weiner, "A Changing Campaign Finance Landscape," Brennan Center for Justice, 2024, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/changing-campaign-finance-landscape.

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