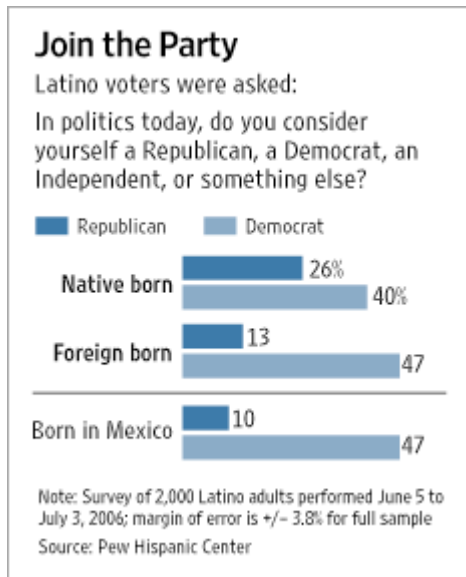


May 10, 2007



Univision Gives Citizenship Drive An Unusual Lift

Broadcaster Uses Clout To Mobilize Latino Vote; Bloc May Alter '08 Race

By MIRIAM JORDAN
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Backed by the largest Spanish-language broadcast network in the U.S., a massive campaign by Latino media and grass-roots groups to spur millions of eligible Hispanic residents to become U.S. citizens is showing results that could influence the agenda and

outcome of the 2008 election.

More than eight million green-card holders -- that is, legal permanent residents -- are eligible to become U.S. citizens, and the majority are immigrants of Latin American origin, according to U.S. government data. Now, **Univision** Communications Inc. is using its considerable clout with the Spanish-speaking community in the U.S. to turn this latent voting bloc into an active and potentially potent force.

The citizenship drive, which is about to go national, could help turn Latinos into a key electoral constituency in several states. A larger bloc of new Latino voters would likely influence the immigration debate that has been dividing the country. In part because of this, Hispanic voters in recent elections have tended to cast ballots mostly for Democrats. For instance, in the 2006 congressional contest, Republican candidates who take a harder line on illegal immigrants than their rivals garnered only 31% of the Latino vote. ([See related article](#)¹.)

Apart from immigration, Hispanics are animated by education and employment policies, so their greater participation could shape candidates' stances on those issues as well. Given past voting patterns, "a surge in naturalizations will benefit Democrats at least twice as much as Republicans," said Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research organization. The impact could be biggest in Southwestern states such as Arizona, but it could reach as far as Florida,

which recently has experienced a large influx of non-Cuban Hispanic immigrants.

It is unusual for a mainstream media company to mount a public-service effort that would seem to benefit such a specific interest group. But Univision is so closely allied with its Spanish-speaking audience that such a campaign is considered core to its mission. "We feel that empowering our audience is good for Hispanics and the country," said Univision President Ray Rodriguez. "It's part of our relationship with viewers."

"This is a totally nonpartisan effort," he adds.

The citizenship drive began in January, when Univision's largest station -- Los Angeles's KMEX 34 -- began bombarding Southern California airwaves with a campaign designed to steer eligible viewers to become U.S. citizens.

The impact was immediate: In Los Angeles and surrounding counties, the number of citizenship applications filed to the U.S. government more than doubled for the three months ended March 2007 compared with the same period last year. It typically takes six or seven months for green-card holders to complete the citizenship process.

Now, the campaign is spreading quickly to big cities including Miami, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and Phoenix. After the yearlong campaign is complete, a second phase is slated for 2008 that will focus on getting the new citizens to register to vote.

"I have never seen anything like it in my career. It's big," said Jane Arellano, a 39-year veteran of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services who is district director in L.A. According to a person close to the situation, the initiative was a factor in the agency's decision to extend the terms of 40 immigration adjudicators in the district whose contracts were due to end in January.

Both major U.S. political parties are acutely aware of the impact that a stinging immigration debate in Congress, set to begin soon, could have on new Hispanic voters. Historically, Latinos have had a lower voter-participation rate than others -- in 2004, 47% of those eligible voted, compared with 67% of whites and 60% of blacks, according to Pew Hispanic Center tabulations. However, Latino immigrants who become citizens report higher rates of political participation than native-born Latinos, according to Pew.

If the citizenship campaign culminates in two million to three million new Hispanic voters, "that could turn the tide in several states," including Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada, says Sergio Bendixen, a pollster who specializes in ethnic markets. In 2004, Republicans won by a small margin in those states.

It is difficult to overstate how much firepower Univision is putting behind the

effort. With a catchy slogan, "*Ya Es Hora*" ("It's About Time"), the campaign in L.A. has been integrated into every local newscast, in addition to being flogged in public-service announcements throughout the day.

Station	Station	Rank	Market	Viewers
Identification Univision's top 10 stations, their rank among all stations in each market and number of viewers captured during prime-time hours in February's Sweeps Week:	KMEX	1	Los Angeles	637,830
	WXTV	5	New York	354,150
	KXLN	4	Houston	218,120
	KUVN	5	Dallas-Fort Worth	157,175
	WLTV	4	Miami-Fort Lauderdale	142,800
	WGBO	6	Chicago	138,765
	KTVW	5	Phoenix (Prescott)	108,552
	KFTV	2	Fresno-Visalia, Calif.	82,250
	KUVS	5	Sacramento-Stockton-Modesto, Calif.	78,519
	KDTV	5	San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose	70,653

Source: Nielsen Station Index via Univision

During news shows, anchors pop questions from the civics test that applicants for citizenship are required to pass, such as "How many stars are on the U.S. flag?" Against a backdrop of stars soaring through the U.S. flag and the Statue of Liberty, a ticker counts down, from a goal of one million for the L.A. area, the number of persons who have applied for citizenship since the campaign started in Southern California. On Saturday mornings, a 30-minute program is devoted to teaching viewers the ABCs of becoming a U.S. citizen.

Last Friday, anchor Raúl Peimbert broadcast live three times during the 6 p.m. news from a square in downtown Los Angeles, where hundreds of Hispanics had been lining up since dawn to fill out an N-400 -- the naturalization form for green-card holders seeking to become U.S. citizens.

"We congratulate you on taking this important step," Mr. Peimbert told an 80-year-old woman in the crowd. "Young and old, everybody should [apply for citizenship] as soon as possible to have a say over the future of this country," he said on the air. For those who didn't make it, Univision flashed the hotline number where volunteers are on hand daily to help fill out applications over the phone.

The citizenship drive is the brainchild of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, a nonpartisan outreach group known as Naleo. Last year, Naleo officials gathered representatives from Univision, Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinion*, Spanish-language radio, unions and dozens of community groups to hatch a plan for drawing more Hispanics into the U.S. political process.

The result is the largest campaign ever to convert eligible Hispanics into citizens and, ultimately, voters. "This is about increasing the participation of Latino immigrants in U.S. civic life," says Marcelo Gaete, a senior director of Naleo. "They can change the political landscape."

The citizen-application hotline, operated by bilingual volunteers at the headquarters of the Naleo Educational Fund in Los Angeles, receive hundreds of calls each day from California, Texas and Arizona. Callers who require special legal assistance are referred to immigration lawyers who have partnered in the effort. In the field, Hispanic community-based organizations are providing "citizenship packages" partly prepared by unions, including the Service Employees International Union, or SEIU. Meanwhile, the Web sites for Univision stations in L.A. and other cities, as well as Naleo's site, feature a wealth of information to guide applicants.

In Los Angeles, the 123% jump in citizenship applications contrasts with a 59% increase in the U.S. overall for the first three months of the year. The success in L.A. emboldened Naleo and Univision to take the campaign elsewhere: A campaign in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut area is to kick off in the next few weeks, organizers say.

The initiative illustrates the influence Spanish-language media have over their audience.

"Our job is not to just deliver the news; we are dealing with immigrants who need to be taught about their rights," said Pedro Rojas, executive editor of La Opinion, a large Spanish-language daily in Los Angeles. Used to fielding calls from viewers about immigration raids, police violence and community concerns, Mr. Rojas sees the paper's attempt to nudge viewers to become citizens -- and then to vote -- as one more manifestation of its continuing commitment to empower the Hispanic community.

Officials at Univision, which claims it averages four million viewers on a given day, say their citizenship campaign has become a topic at water coolers and bus stops. Mr. Rodriguez, the president, said the campaign would go national at the network level in the next few weeks.

The campaign's timing is crucial, he said, because the government is expected to raise the cost of applying for citizenship, and to introduce a new civics test that may be more difficult, later this year.

Despite commanding 80% of all Spanish-language TV viewers in the U.S., Univision doesn't normally attract political-advertising dollars commensurate to the size of its audience because it is perceived by advertisers as having the eyeballs of undocumented immigrants or non-English speakers alienated from the U.S. political process.

But positive results from the "Ya Es Hora" campaign, which is slated to last all year, could help the network attract unprecedented political-campaign money. "One of the side benefits of this initiative is the hope that more citizens watching the network could translate into more political-ad dollars," said a person who discussed the campaign with a senior Univision executive.

Mr. Rodriguez doesn't deny his network could pocket more campaign dollars down the road, but insisted this isn't what motivated the campaign.

Univision, which has more viewers than do English-language networks in many U.S. markets, is still under the radar in some corners. But it wields enormous sway with its audience. Polls have found it commands as much trust as the Roman Catholic Church among Hispanics in the U.S.

Univision's clout was on display at the citizenship drive in the Hispanic section of downtown L.A. Virtually every person questioned about their decision said they were answering a call from Univision TV or radio.

"Univision is waking us up," said Clementina Bonilla, 60, standing in a line that snaked around the block at La Placita Square. "We kept saying 'mañana, mañana' about our citizenship. It's time for Latinos to have a voice."

For \$25, green-card holders could get help filling out the form from an army of 50 volunteers, get their pictures taken and leave with an envelope containing all the paperwork ready to be mailed to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The previous week, a similar scene unfolded in the city of Santa Ana in Orange County, Calif., after Univision publicized it.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is providing forms and other materials, such as a deck of flash cards with sample questions to prepare for the civics test. The agency says it is impossible to measure the exact impact the "Ya Es Hora" campaign is having, since other factors are driving green-card holders to apply for citizenship.

For example, many at the citizenship fair said they had heard the government intends to soon raise the current \$400 fee for becoming a naturalized citizen; a proposed increase is indeed in the pipeline. Others said they were spurred by the heated debate over how to deal with 12 million illegal immigrants, most of them Hispanic.

"We're not illegal, but we have family members who are," said Marina Gonzalez, who has been a legal permanent resident for 20 years. Once she gets her citizenship, Mrs. Gonzalez said, she plans to vote: "We want to have a say in these matters."

Even legal residents feel vulnerable these days. "You never know what law could

change and make it harder for us to stay here," said Mayolo Lucas, a 47-year-old Mexican vegetable seller and a green-card holder for 15 years, who had been waiting four hours for help with his application.

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