

## *The Mass Media and Latino Politics*

### *Studies of U.S. Media Content, Campaign Strategies and Survey Research: 1984-2004*

Federico A. Subervi-Vélez (Editor, contributor); New York: Routledge. 456 pages, \$39.95; ISBN: 9780805857054

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#### **Summary of Key Findings**

This is a synopsis of some of the key findings discussed in detail in the aforementioned book. The findings are divided into the following topics: • the organizational structure of the DNC & the RNC; • the advertising/propaganda efforts; • the political expenditures on TV; • the Spanish-language newspapers coverage of presidential campaigns; • the Spanish-language television coverage of presidential campaigns; • the English-language newspapers coverage of presidential campaigns 1988-2004; • the English-language television coverage of presidential campaigns; • the media uses and effects. **A final section presents suggestions for improving Latino-oriented political communication efforts.** The last page contains recommended reading list on Latinos, media and politics.

Latinos considering getting involved in political communication strategies, particularly the development and dissemination of political messages during the upcoming electoral campaigns should take into consideration the points highlighted here as these can serve as guideposts for avoiding past oversights and thus improving on the next round of outreach efforts to win Latino votes.

The following quote should also serve as a reminder of the importance of the mass media in all political campaigns:

“...let the Democrats register all the Hispanics they want. The battle for the hearts and minds of Hispanic voters will be fought in the media.” These words, from Mike Martínez’s, *Hispanic Victory initiative ‘84: A proposed strategy for the Reagan-Bush ‘84 Hispanic campaign*, are more relevant today than ever before.

#### **Findings from research about the organizational structure of the DNC & the RNC**

##### *The Democratic Party*

- Has made inconsistent efforts over time to connect with Latinos.
- In its public messages, it calls on its history with Latinos.
- The Democrats’ strategy is presentistic and historical – it is about the current campaign and past policies that have benefited Latinos
- It articulates ethnic, political, and socioeconomic differences between Latinos and other Americans during campaigns.
- What is the Democratic Party’s identity? That is not made explicitly certain in its public messages.
- What is the identity/image of the party intended to be sent to Latinos? Unclear, too.
- The Democratic Party can no longer claim it is the Party of Latinos – in other words, the Democrats cannot take their vote for granted.

##### *The Republican Party*

- As an organization, it is a well-oiled machine.
- In its public messages, it envisions a future in which Latinos are empowered (e.g., achieve the American Dream).
- Its strategy for courting Latinos is goal-oriented, systematic, active, and long-term.
- For more than twenty years, it has been slowly but effectively building and solidifying an infrastructure and human resources across the country for future campaigns.
- It remembers what it did well in past campaigns (since 1980; Sosa & Reagan).
- It codifies and systematically uses its organizational memory.
- Support and resources for the GOP’s Latino outreach are substantial and come from the top of the organization.

- Its Latino-oriented messages and appeals are primarily focused on values.
- With the exception of the 2004 campaign, this has been done via an emotional approach in the advertising/propaganda.
- The GOP avoids highlighting differences between Latinos and other Americans during campaigns.

#### **Findings from research about advertising, propaganda efforts**

##### *The Democratic Party’s Latino-oriented political spots and other advertisements*

- Have been inconsistent and not as effective as they could be in the free or paid media.
- Have predominantly appealed on issues:
  - √ Latinos have/face “X” problem(s), the Democratic Party/its candidate will help solve that.
  - √ The Republicans cause/are responsible for “X” problem(s); the Democratic Party/its candidate will help solve that.
- More than one issue is addressed in an ad, contributing to some confusion or lack of clarity in the message.

##### *The Republican Party’s Latino-oriented political spots and other advertisements*

- Emphasize an emotional approach (with the exception of 2004, when negative attack ads were also prominent)
- Appeal primarily to values, such as family and faith.
- Year after year, in different formats, repeat the empowering message, especially the GOP/candidates and the best conduit for Latinos to achieve the American Dream.
- Most often utilize a narrative structure, highlighting cultural icons and music recognizable by many Latinos.
- Stay on message making sure that key themes presented to Latinos are similar to general market messages.

### **Findings from research about political expenditures on television**

- When the Latino vote is diffused between the parties they (Latinos) may attract greater party expenditures in the subsequent presidential election.
- When exit polls show Latinos voting closer to 50/50 they appear to be rewarded in the next election with enhanced appeals.
- Being perceived as “committed” to the Democrats does not appear to win enhanced propaganda, outreach appeals from either party.

### **Findings from research about Spanish-language newspapers coverage of presidential campaigns**

- During election periods, Latinos who wish to follow in Spanish-language newspapers the developments of a campaign can count on finding ample coverage if they gain access to *La Opinión* and *El Nuevo Herald*. (Research findings from 1984-1996)
- Latinos can also find some campaign coverage, although not as extensively, in *El Diario-La Prensa* and *Diario Las Américas*. (Research findings from 1984-1996)
- No systematic research has been conducted recently on how the other Spanish-language dailies (which now number at least 19) or how the hundreds of weekly Latino-oriented newspapers cover political campaigns, be these national or local elections.
- It is our impression that in most Spanish-language newspapers, be these dailies or weeklies, the news stories, editorials and opinion columns offer very few explicit connections between Latino issues and the political candidates, the political parties and the campaigns in general.
- Most of the coverage is on the campaign trail (where the candidates go to campaign, a snippet of what is stated or done there), the horserace (who is ahead in general, and on occasion among Latinos), and on the presidential candidates’ efforts to get Latino votes (their infrequent stopovers and rallies in Hispanic locations/venues).
- Most of the coverage is not on what the candidates or parties specifically offer to address Latino constituencies or the major issues affecting our diverse Hispanic communities.

### **Findings from research about Spanish-language television coverage of presidential campaigns**

*Findings from research of Univisión and Telemundo’s network news coverage in 1988 and in 2000*

- Overall, Univisión’s and Telemundo’s coverage has been similar to general market English-language election coverage: the focus is on the horserace aspect of the campaign, the imprecise and partial use of polls, and the lack of attention to third parties were all apparent aspects of the coverage that is commonplace in both Spanish-language and English-language coverage.
- However, Univisión and Telemundo also offer specific Latino-oriented characteristics and themes because they

cover the campaign with perspectives that can be interpreted as being particularly relevant for Hispanics.

- The degree to which reporters from these networks try to draw out politicians’ positions and party’s platforms on issues such as Latin America, immigration and education have been notably. The degree to which the candidates and their parties addressed these issues also provides viewers with an understanding of the perceived importance of the Latino voter in American politics.
- During the 2000 campaign the Republican Party made its candidate and its spokespersons highly accessible to the Spanish-language media.
- For most of that campaign, it appeared that Bush and the Republican Party either made themselves more available to the Spanish-language TV news or the networks themselves sought them out more often or some other combination of decision making and stakeholder strategies.
- It also appeared that the Democratic Party came to that strategic decision much later in the race and clearly in hindsight, to its detriment.
- While viewers are unlikely to know the reasons behind such news coverage, the outcome was that the GOP had a greater presence on Spanish-language TV during many of the critical weeks of the 2000 campaign.

*Findings from research of Univisión and Telemundo’s network news coverage in 2004*

- As usual, the networks and the local stations made concerted effort to include a Latino perspective in their election stories.
- Almost four out of ten (38%) of network election stories and just over three in ten (31%) of local election stories included a Latino perspective.
- There are some, but not many differences between how the stations in various cities covered the local elections. The variations may be due to the competitiveness of the races and/or newsroom management styles.

### *Overall*

- With each new election campaign period, more efforts have been made by the Telemundo and Univisión network news departments to inform Latinos about the campaign, the importance of registering and the value of voting.
- Still missing in the norm of news stories is the analysis and meaning that the candidates and their party’s platforms have for diverse Latino populations.
- Critical analysis of campaign propaganda and Latino issues could be much better.

### **Findings from research about English-language newspapers coverage of presidential campaigns**

- During elections, English-language general market newspapers publish very few stories that have anything to do with Latino politics or issues.
- Latino political issues are covered inconsistently and, with important exceptions (e.g., coverage of Cuban Americans, especially in Florida), minimally.
- Only a minor fraction of those stories include news with Latino references in the headlines.

- Latino or non-Latino readers of such newspapers would find it hard to know from just scanning through the headlines that there are news, editorial, or opinion columns pertaining to Latinos in the context of national or local political campaigns.
- The vast majority of the stories with Latino references are placed in the inside pages of their respective papers.
- Only the *Miami Herald* stands out—relative to the other papers—with more frequent page A 1 stories with Latino references in the headlines.
- In that newspaper, and in most of the others studied, Republicans have an edge in the more favorable page A 1 placement of stories that connect them to Latinos.
- Nevertheless, both the *Miami Herald* and the *Los Angeles Times* occasionally did place Latino-referent stories (especially about local elections and Latino candidates) on the first pages of their respective metro or neighborhood sections.
- The headlines' references to Latinos were hardly ever about distinctively "Latino issues" such as immigration, employment, housing, discrimination, affirmative action, or education.
- If in the actual texts of the news these issues were addressed, they were hardly mentioned in any headlines.
- The exceptions again were the less than a handful of stories about Republican presidential candidates' efforts to win Latino (i.e., Cuban) votes in Florida.

#### **Findings from research about English-language television coverage of presidential campaigns**

- During the 1988, 1992 & 1996 campaigns, the number of Latino-related reports appearing on the networks' evening news programs diminished with each presidential election year.
- While the decline occurred in all categories, it was most pronounced in two: stories regarding the potential size and impact of the Latino vote, and presidential candidates' efforts to reach Latino voters
- During the 2000 presidential campaign, when voters and the two main presidential candidates considered education a very important issue, as did Latinos regardless of their national background, the network news during the final stretch of the campaign, September 4 through November 7 failed to focus on Latinos.
- The focus on Latinos was also notably absent in the brief mentions of and discussions about education during the presidential and vice-presidential debates.
- Overall, the typical "Latino" coverage in network news during elections focuses on the presidential candidates' efforts to get Latino votes (i.e., their infrequent stopovers and rallies in Hispanic locations/venues).
- Major issues affecting Latinos, and how the parties or candidates plan to address these are at best mentioned only in passing; in-depth stories on such matters are scarce, if at all present in such news outlets.

#### **Findings from research about media uses and effects**

- Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans undoubtedly use the news media for political news and public affairs.
- Even though the first choice in language for such media is English, it is also true that many Latinos also seek Spanish-language news media and value these for political information.
- Either directly or indirectly, exposure to the press is a significant contributor to Latinos knowledge about American politics and to their participation in electoral matters.
- There are significant differences in how Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans use the media and are affected by the media—be these in Spanish or in English—and how those media affect their political knowledge and participation.
- There is no "one model" on media uses and effects that explains which media are best for all Latinos; that varies by region and by the media available to the different Latino communities.
- While still not proven statistically, it is probable that Spanish-language television news media contribute to the political agenda setting among Latino audiences.
- The findings from all the studies suggest that Spanish-language print and television have the potential to connect with and significantly influence their viewers about the US elections.
- However, the research is not conclusive as to if and how Latino voters are influenced by Spanish-language media regarding whether or not to vote and for which candidate or party.

#### **Suggestions for improving Latino-oriented political communication efforts**

- The Democratic Party must become more familiar to Latinos again; it should reintroduce the party to Latinos.
- Those efforts to reconnect with Latinos should be social, at the level of the masses so that rank and file citizens can imagine themselves as part of party organizations. (This approach was an effective directive of GOP strategists at the 2002 RNC meetings.)
- The redefinition is essential to counter the negative framing that has been hammered by GOP strategists via multiple media messages.
- The DNC should consider developing appeals that focus on values and issues, also with an emotional approach.
- Latinos highly involved in politics engage in central information processing – they are more likely to respond to issue appeals.
- Latinos who are not involved with party politics engage in peripheral processing – they are more likely to pay attention to value appeals (Elaboration Likelihood Model).
- Stay on message, and make sure the message to Latinos have ideological connections with the messages created for general market and other audiences
- Reach out to and connect with Latinos via general market media, not just Spanish-language media because many Latinos—especially those most likely to vote—speak English.
- Grassroots connections should be built at multiple levels: local & state.

- It is imperative that connections be made with Latino youth – “new voters”
- It is imperative that connections be made with new immigrants – “new voters”; these should not be the sole domain of the GOP.
- Develop and bring to the spotlight national Latino spokespersons (e.g., Cisneros & Peña in 1996).
- Develop young Latinos as party leaders
- Exponentially increase the free and earned media time for the candidate to be seen with Latinos—be these Latinos community leaders or “persons on the street.”
- Remember Latinos in traditionally red states—even those where Latinos have traditionally been characterized as inclined to vote Democratic (e.g., Texas, Arizona).
- Abandoning them during election campaigns because their vote is “secure” can be detrimental on the long run

especially if Latinos are repeatedly exposed primarily to the GOP’s perspective on politics via paid and free media. This one-sided advertising/propaganda can be persuasive, particularly over time.

- Last but not least, the DNC should engage in systematic media research of its own to critically and objectively assess its messages, their strengths and weaknesses, their appeals or lack thereof.
- That research should include studies of the content of Spanish-language and English language print and broadcast media starting at the beginning of the campaign periods through its conclusion.
- The DNC should keep records such research as well as of its past messages, their strengths and weaknesses.
- This research should be required reading and discussion for all current and future communication strategists.

### **Recommended reading list on Latinos, media and politics**

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