

ARCHITECTS OF OUR OWN DESTINY

Op Ed 2012-05-27 22:35:27

Denver, CO - Our country is at a crossroads in terms of diversity, culture and our leadership in the global community. The Hispanic community will play a vital role in our country's future, but the extent of that role is up to us. In order to ensure our positive impact on America's future we need to promote and enhance the value system that made the United States great, namely Freedom - both individual and economic freedom.

In assessing the current state of the Hispanic community, one could argue that the following facts suggest the community is an economic and political "powerhouse" in the U.S.

- There is an estimated 50 million Hispanics living in the U.S. with the U.S. Census projecting 132 million by 2050.
- Fifty thousand Hispanics turn 18 every month.
- The Hispanic community is a young community with an average age of 27.4 vs. 36.8 for the U.S. population as a whole. Census figures also indicate there are 12 million Hispanics between the ages of 18-34.
- According to an analysis by industry researcher IBISWorld, U.S. Hispanic buying power is projected to grow 48.1 percent to \$1.6 trillion between 2011 and 2016.
- There is an estimated 27 million small businesses in the U.S. and HispanTelligence estimates there are close to 4 million Hispanic owned businesses.
- A study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects Hispanics will account for 74 percent of the growth in the nation's labor force over the next ten years.

Despite these facts, the Hispanic community has not achieved true economic prosperity nor does it hold political power commensurate with its population and spending power. One has to ask why? Much of it stems from the fact that the Hispanic community's involvement in the political process lags behind other groups. As such, we shift our responsibility to address issues important to Hispanics to others in the political process.

Even more surprising is the Hispanic community's growing reliance on government to make our lives better. In a 2005 Gallup poll, 65% of Hispanics opined that the government should have a major role in "trying to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minority groups in this country." Twenty-one percent felt the government should play only a minor role, and 9% thought it should not have any role at all. This stands in sharp contrast to the 38% of all Americans that felt government should play a major role. A larger proportion of the U.S. population (44%) felt the government should play only a minor role, and 16% thought it should not have any role at all. Within the Hispanic community itself, 82% of those born outside the U.S thought government should play a major role vs. 50% of those born in the U.S.

Since this 2005 Gallup poll, the country has seen federal and local government grow at an alarming rate. There has been an explosion of government regulations, government spending, taxes and a growing culture of entitlement. This growth and over reliance on government has failed to improve the economic condition of the Hispanic community and in many ways has left it worse off.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (PHC), the year 2010 saw 6.1 million Latino children living in poverty. This accounted for 37.3% of all impoverished U.S. children marking the first time in U.S. history that the single largest group of poor children is not white. In a separate report the PHC found that median household wealth among Hispanics fell from \$18,359 in 2005 to \$6,325 in 2009. The percentage drop—66%—was the largest among all racial and ethnic groups.

When it comes to education, 41% of Hispanics ages 20 and older in the United States do not have a regular high school diploma, versus 23% of comparably aged blacks and 14% of whites. The PHC goes on to report that only 1 in 10 of those who did not obtain a high school degree go on to earn their GED. Among Hispanics, there are significant differences between the foreign born and the native born in high school diploma attainment rates and GED credentialing rates. Some 52% of foreign-born Latino adults are high school dropouts, compared with 25% of the native born. And among Hispanic dropouts, some 21% of the native born have a GED, compared with just 5% of the foreign born.

Additionally, the population and spending numbers have not translated into corresponding national political power or jobs. Hispanics now account for 16% of the total U.S. population; however, there are only 30 Hispanics in the House of Representatives (less than 7% of House representation) and only 2 Senators (2% of Senate representation). Congressional representation isn't the only area where Hispanic employment suffers. Today, the Hispanic community suffers some of the country's worst unemployment as the rate stubbornly hovers at close 11%. Hispanic businesses are also facing challenges. Rising energy prices, the lack of credit, the explosion of state and federal regulations and the uncertainty of the impending Health care bill are making it more and more difficult for companies to prosper and hire more employees.

Businesses aren't the only ones affected by rising energy prices. The overall Hispanic economic condition has been made even worse by rising energy prices as gas now costs close to \$5 a gallon in California and close to \$4 throughout the rest of nation. As such, it costs more for employees to go to work, take their children to school, visit their parents or drive to many places we take for granted. Moreover, it will ultimately cost more for food and other basic needs. Add these rising prices to the decreased wealth the Hispanic community is experiencing and it just makes it that much harder to prosper. One would think that this worsening economic situation would prompt a "call to arms" of involvement in the political process. Unfortunately the opposite appears to be true.

When it comes to being involved in the political process, many people were excited that approximately 9 million Hispanics voted in the 2008 election. Others were even more proud by the "upswing" in the 2010 midterm elections when 6.6 million Hispanics voted, the most ever in a midterm. However, Hispanic voter turnout among eligible voters was only 31.2 percent of the then eligible 21.3 million Hispanic voters. By comparison, 48.6 percent of eligible white voters turned out, as well as 44 percent of black eligible voters. Moreover, in a recent report by the National Journal, the William C. Velasquez Institute (WCVI), an organization that tracks Latino voter trends, found that actual Hispanic voter registration dropped from 11.6 million to 10.9 million in 2010. Additionally, officials at WCVI were concerned that "previous predictions of between 11 and 12 million Hispanic citizens voting in 2012 might be overly optimistic" and that without a "major investment in registration, turnout, or both" there may only be 10.5 million votes cast".

It is believed that the registration numbers are down due to the immigration debate as Hispanics are discouraged by increased deportations, President Obama's broken promise to pass comprehensive reform and the harsh rhetoric by some Republican candidates. While the Hispanic community has a right to be disappointed in both parties when it comes to the immigration debate, the community **CANNOT allow immigration to be our only issue!** Moreover, disappointment on any one issue should spur more, not less involvement. There are too many other issues that deserve our passion, our attention and our responsibility to hold others accountable. In other words, we just can't pick up our marbles and leave the game. By becoming less involved we are just passing responsibility off to others and letting them make the rules. And can we really blame them if we don't become involved?

If the Hispanic community wants to continue to be major player in setting the policies of this country we have a responsibility to be better educated and involved on issues that are important to the entire country- issues that will inevitably affect our daily lives and the future of our children. Issues that are just as if not more important than immigration include jobs, education, personal wealth, energy costs, entrepreneurship, government spending, government debt, increased regulation, increased taxes, increased reliance on government and the overall intrusion of

government in our everyday lives.

Involvement means becoming educated on the issues and not letting someone else like a friend, relative, newscaster, movie star or actor tell us how to think or how to vote. The Hispanic community needs to register and then do what it takes to actually vote. In order to succeed we need to raise the “bar on our expectations”. Additionally, if a majority of Hispanics continue to feel government needs to play a major role in our prosperity, we must then have a “revolution of thought”. If we don’t think differently, we risk losing our economic and individual freedoms. Many of our parents and grandparents left their loved ones in Latin America due to lack of opportunity created by the growth of government, the growing gap between the rich and poor and the rampant cronyism between government officials who favor their friends over good policy. We cannot allow that to happen here.

In closing, the Hispanic community cannot let any one issue define us nor can we rely on others to take care of us. This is a recipe for victimhood and it results in a transfer of power to those we rely on, for example government. However, if we become involved in all aspects of the national debate on issues that affect our country the issues most important to the Hispanic community will not be ignored. This is self-reliance at its best and how we become architects of our own destiny.

WHAT : ARCHITECTS OF OUR OWN DESTINY

WHEN : 2012-05-27 22:35:27

WHERE :

CONTACT:

Michael L. Barrera, an attorney, is the Western States Regional Director for The LIBRE Initiative and formerly served as President & CEO of the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and as the National Ombudsman for the U.S. Small Business Administration.