

THE 2012 ELECTIONS AND LATINO CIVIC INVOLVEMENT By Yvette Donado

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Princeton, NJ – When Latino organizations open their conference plenaries with the Pledge of Allegiance and “The Star Spangled Banner,” I feel a tug in my heart, and tears well in my eyes.

Does that emotion spring from my own sense of patriotism as a New York-born Puerto Rican? Or is it driven by a fear that some of my compatriots view Latinos as “other” —somehow alien and not fully American? Whenever his colleagues refer to Hispanics as “those people,” my senator, Robert Menéndez (D-NJ), respectfully reminds them that he is one of “those people.”

Educational Testing Service (ETS) recently published a report, Fault Lines in Our Democracy: Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior and Civic Engagement in the United States (<http://www.ets.org/s/research/19386/> or

www.ets.org/faultlines/mobile). When I read it, my eyes zeroed in like lasers on the data on Latinos. I was deeply disappointed.

The report notes that Hispanic voter participation in 2008 was 49.9 percent, far lower than the figures for non-Hispanic Whites (66.1 percent) and Blacks (64.7 percent) and slightly higher than the figures for Asian Americans. Although the Latino numbers increased significantly compared to the 2004 figures, the fact that only half of the eligible Latinos voted troubles me. We have so much at stake, so much to give.

The ETS report notes that higher levels of education and income correlate with higher levels of voter participation. It is possible, therefore, that Latinos with less education and income would vote less. As the product of a working class family myself, I understand the importance of putting food on the table over fully participating in civic life.

In spite of the report’s results, analysts and groups such as the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials forecast that more than 12.2 million Latinos, up 26 percent from 2008, will vote in the 2012 elections. Clearly, with encouragement and facilitation, millions more Latinos could go to the polls.

Civic engagement, however, is not just about voting. A Latino colleague recently recounted a story about attending a National League of Cities workshop where a councilman from Georgia asked: “We are a city of 32,000 and 8,000 are Hispanic. What can we do before it is too late?” His question centered on why the largely new Latino community worked hard and obeyed laws, yet remained on the sidelines — not engaging in civic affairs.

Numerous local and national Hispanic organizations understand the civic engagement imperative. The United States Hispanic Leadership Institute has developed an interactive website to teach civics to young people. The National Council of La Raza, the League of United Latin American Citizens, ASPIRA and many other groups promote civic involvement. And Voto Latino encourages voter registration, along with actually going to the polls to vote!

Each of us can — and must — play a personal role in encouraging all American citizens, including Latinos, to vote and get involved in civic affairs. We should support voter registration drives, identify and assist individuals in our own communities, join local Latino and non-Latino organizations, volunteer and support charities.

As the ETS report concludes, our nation’s success does not merely hinge on our Gross Domestic Product. Studies show that our well-being also depends on the proper teaching of civics in our schools, the awareness of the vital role civics plays in our lives and our active participation in civic life. As a nation, we have much work to do — as the saying goes, “Democracy is not a spectator sport.”

I encourage all of us to add our “granito de arena” (our grain of sand) as we proudly sing the National Anthem and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. All of our contributions to civic life matter and all of our voices should be heard.

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