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The West

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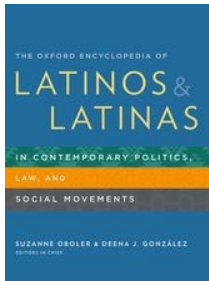


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West, The

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The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in Contemporary Politics, Law, and Social Movements

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West, The.

According to the director of the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana, Larry Swanson, the Western Census Region is defined by thirteen states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. For the purposes of this essay, and because some of these states are reviewed elsewhere in essays on the Southwest and on the Northwest, the focus will fall on California, Nevada, and Utah. It is important to emphasize that for the Western Census Region, or the thirteen states named here, the US Census Bureau finds that nearly one-third of the total population is Hispanic or Latino. In the South the figure is 16 percent, in the Northeast 13 percent, and in the Midwest 7 percent of the total population. More important, in this large western territory, the Latino/a population grew, according to the most recent census data, by 34 percent, or twice the percentage of the West's total population growth.

This means that Latino/as in the region of the western United States have an increasing role to play in US elections. According to the Pew Research Center, Latino/as, who made up just 10 percent of the electorate in 2012, voted for President Barack Obama 71 percent to 27 percent for Mitt Romney.

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, Mexican immigration and in general Latino/a migration to the US West followed at a very slow pace, until 1900 when first civil war and then the Mexican Revolution sent hundreds of thousands of refugees and escapees northward across the borders established by the treaty. Their permanence was always in jeopardy and in the era of the Great Depression well over one-half million Mexicans were deported from the western United States, despite many who were US born (children) and others who had become naturalized. After the shortages induced by World War II, the United States rapidly resumed encouraging laborers, particularly farm laborers, to move northward again; and this stream of migration has ceased only temporarily in the second half of the last century and in the first decade and a half of the current one.

Many social and economic concerns face an immigrant population, despite the fact that over 250,000 residents of the Southwest and West could claim deeper roots in these states than many other immigrants or migrants. Spanish-Mexican residents of Los Angeles extend as far back as the 1780s; as a result of displacement, deportation, and the threats posed by segregation policies, Latino/as in the West continue to have a 50 percent high school graduation rate, with only 12 percent of the current population of Latino/as boasting a college degree. Fewer than 3 percent have a higher-level degree. Of the 11.9 million currently undocumented Latino/as in the United States, the majority reside in the western United States.

These challenges are often overshadowed in favor of focusing on the demographic potential stemming from some

important milestones. In California, in 2014, it was widely reported that Latino/as make up the state's largest racial/ethnic group, comprising over 39 percent of the state's population. When factoring in electoral potential, however, the lack of documentation or authorization is equally striking. In the entire country, just 24 million of the 53 million Latinos are eligible to vote, and fewer than one-half of that group do so. The impact of the voter realities is significant: California has not had a Latino/a governor or a Latino/a US senator. Beginning in 1994 with the Republican governor's support of Proposition 187, an anti-immigrant measure, Latino/a electoral power began to gain strength because anti-Latino/a sentiment was clearly evident in the "promised land," which California had always symbolized.

The Impact of the Rising California Latino Vote for the West

A policy brief describes the impact in this way:

From 2002 to 2010, the Latino vote grew 67.1% (671,510) in absolute numbers, outpacing the 37% growth (2,712,082), in the overall vote during the same period... But disparities in electoral participation still exist for Latinos. Their share of California's vote is not representative compared to their share of the state's overall population, nor is it equal to their share of the state's citizen voting population (CVAP)—those who are eligible to vote. At 19.7%, the 2012 Latino share of California's overall vote remains far below the 26.3% (6,199,264) Latino share of the state's 2012 CVAP and far below the 39% Latino share of the state's total population. From 2008 to 2012, Latino voter registration grew approximately 14% in absolute numbers but without a corresponding increase in the actual number of Latinos voting.

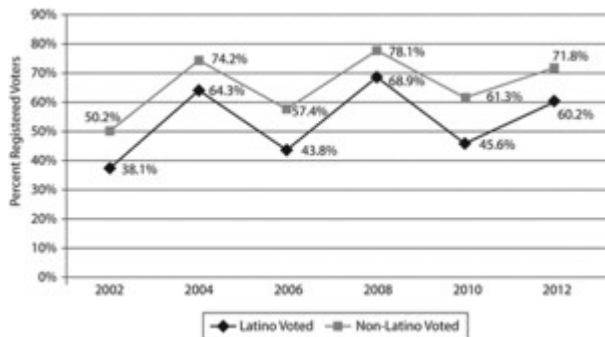
(California Civic Engagement Project, [2013](#))

The 2012 general vote dramatized the point of difference in eligible turnout between Latino/as and non-Latino/as. The brief notes that the "2012 Latino eligible turnout was only 39.4%, while eligible non-Latinos turned out at a rate of 57.3%—an almost 20 percentage point disparity in electoral participation for Latinos. Latino and non-Latino eligible turnout both steadily increased over the decade, until 2012." By 2012, the Latino/a eligible turnout rate declined from 2008's highest mark of 44.9 percent. This is the result of an increase in the number of Latino/a citizens, 800,000 more than in 2008, while the total number of Latino/a voters stayed nearly the same.

The figures below from the University of California, Davis, Center for Regional Change demonstrate the policy implications that tracking voter behavior and electoral participation might have in just one area of the country, albeit one largely ignored by the East Coast media and reporting systems on election nights. Still, between the growing demographic (important to businesses, corporations, and media conglomerates) of Latino/as, their political inclinations, along with their consumer awareness and tastes, institutions previously ignoring this large population are having to follow the California example in an effort to understand the societal impacts such a young, new, and growing demographic will soon achieve.

The other areas of the western United States are far more sparsely populated than California; in Nevada, the rise in the Latino/a population, to 738,000, or 27 percent of the state's population, suggests a significant trend. Although 30 percent of the Latino/a population lives in poverty in Nevada, the median age is twenty-six, meaning that future earnings potential and contributions to Social Security and state pension funds are important. Nearly half of all Latino/as in Nevada are homeowners, another important marker of stability and of presence in the state's tax rolls. Importantly, 47.7 percent of Nevada's Latino/a population is twenty-four years old and younger. According to a Brookings Mountain West briefing (Tuman et al., [2013](#), p. 3), in 2011, "42% of Latino/as in Nevada were foreign-born, but only 29.5% of the state's foreign-born Latino/as were naturalized US citizens. Migration flows from Mexico account for the vast majority (78%) of the total immigrant population in the Latino/a community in the state. Nevada also attracts smaller groups of émigrés from Central America (principally El Salvador and Guatemala) and the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico)."

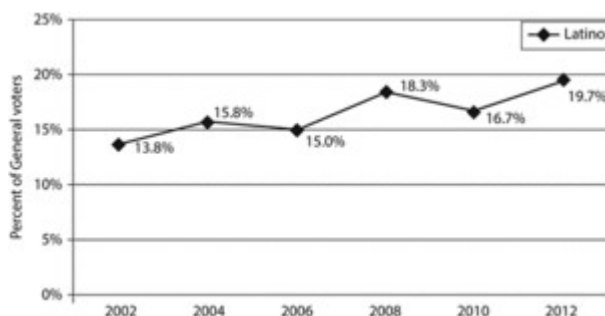
The Brookings Mountain West report on Latinos, drawing as it did from the Latino National Survey conducted in 2006, also traced migration flows from Latin America, noting that they grew dramatically after 1980, largely as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, “trade liberalization,” and the displacement of small farmers, particularly in such countries as Mexico. The report found that 54 percent of Nevada’s Latino/a population reported living in another state (usually California) before making Nevada their destination. Critically, nearly three-fourths of the Mexican-origin respondents residing in Nevada had been there since early childhood, while most Latino/a immigrants were employed in the Las Vegas metropolitan area in construction and food service sectors.



California Latino Registered Turnout: 2002–2012, General Elections.

statewide database / uc davis center for regional change - ccep

Of the 373,000 Latinos in Utah, or 13 percent of the state’s population, over 52 percent are homeowners. The suggestion these statistics raise, that the Latino/a presence can be documented in a variety of ways, through voting, through growing percentages of an otherwise sparsely populated region, or by homeownership or roots, offers a far more complex portrait of Latino/a presence in the US West. Writing about the reported Latino/a population surge in Utah, the *Salt Lake City Tribune*’s Lee Davidson traced areas of Latino/a presence (Salt Lake City had a 22 percent Latino/a population) and noted that nearly one-quarter of all of Utah’s children were minorities, including 17 percent Latino/a. While Latino/a growth existed between 1990 and 2000, it was the periods from 2000 to 2010 that witnessed a 138 percent increase. Such a swell has led Utah lawmakers to propose legislation, over seventeen bills in one legislative session alone (2011), to control what was perceived as illegal immigration, including “stop-and-frisk” policies, public school student residency requirements, and voter registration identification cards.



California Latino Share of the Vote: 2002–2012, General Elections.

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As far north as Alaska, often labeled the last “western” outpost, Latino/a migration has had a significant impact since the mid-1990s. The population of about forty thousand includes ten thousand or more registered voters, and among Latino/as in Alaska homeownership is at 50 percent, a significant indicator that their median income of \$57,328 is important to their permanence. Alaska’s immigrant population has risen steadily each decade, and of nearly fifty thousand immigrants, about one-fifth were born in Latin America. A study by the Perryman Group (Perryman, 2008) found that if the nearly 5,657 undocumented Alaskans were removed, the impact on the economy would amount to a \$484.6 million loss in economic activity and a loss of 1,980 jobs.

By contrast, Hawaii boasts approximately 121,000 Latino/as, including 11 percent who are foreign-born and a total

of 96.1 percent who are either native or naturalized Latino/a-origin citizens. Far younger than the 44.5 median age for white Hawaiians, over one-third of Latino/as living in Hawaii either held an associate's degree or had some college attendance. Although the median income of Latino/as in Hawaii is nearly \$20,000 a year less than that of white households, Latino/a households held an owner-occupied residence nearly equal to that of whites. Latino/as in Hawaii face some particular challenges when considering that Hawaii, along with over twenty other US states, has passed immigration-related laws pertaining to health insurance, employment, and identification and driver's licenses. The impact of this political climate on Latino/as in Hawaii, given its population of about twenty-five thousand undocumented immigrants, awaits discussion, especially if considered against the potential of a \$2.0 billion loss in economic activity should undocumented immigrants be deported.

The trends in the western United States, whether demographic or electoral, suggest that the challenges Latino/a immigrants, migrants, and citizens encounter increase with population growth, but so does their economic activity and potential job losses should the undocumented be deported. The western states are often hailed as a region of greater acceptance or tolerance, but the inhumane responses in 2014 in Murrietta, California, to the children and mothers at the border who were sent off on buses when detention centers became too crowded in Texas or Arizona received far more media attention than the Catholic charities and other groups welcoming the temporary, if undocumented, migrants. The heartlessness on display and the rhetoric about borders being "overrun" indicate as well that the country is increasingly intolerant of a federal government's inability to deal with either refugees or the kind of trade agreements that played a role in displacing so many Latin Americans from their home countries to begin with. No region of the country seems capable, on its own, of dealing with the staggering numbers of migrating individuals, even those with decades-long histories, like California's, built on Latino/a immigration.

See also [Midwest, The](#); [Northeast, The](#); [Northwest, The](#); [South, The](#); [Southeast, The](#); and [Southwest, The](#).

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