

# Political assault on Hispanics



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As we begin to observe Hispanic Heritage Month, it is a good time to re-examine the significance of Hispanic-Americans to the United States.

Perhaps the most noteworthy characteristic of the Hispanic population is its projected growth. The Census Bureau conservatively estimates that the number of Hispanic Americans will increase from 27 million today to 51 million by 2020.

In particular, California and Texas are expected to absorb most of the new Hispanics. The current 9.9 million Hispanics in California will increase to 17.5 million, while the current 5.2 million Hispanics in Texas will grow to 10.3 million.

The presence of Hispanics hasn't gone unnoticed by corporate America. With an estimated purchasing power of \$200 billion in 1996, Hispanic consumers have provided a strong stimulus for numerous industries that want their consumer dollars.

Moreover, the 1992 economic census identified 862,605 Hispanic-owned businesses that reported \$76.8 billion in gross sales — a significant contribution to the nation's economy by any standard.

Despite those impressive contributions, critics aroused by the flames of election-year politics have created an unprecedented climate of hostility that threatens the economic well-being of Hispanics in the United States as well as the businesses that depend upon their consumer dollars.

The basis for those hostilities deserves further scrutiny:

- Poor, undereducated Hispanic immigrants hardly are to blame for the displacement of American workers. High technology and other workplace innovations probably account for most of those job displacements.

- English-only legislation, which advocates maintain would "bring America together with one unified language," instead will restrict non-English speakers' access to much-needed public services. Communicating in English, however, is no guarantee of positive intercultural relations. Just ask any African-American living in the United States.

- Hispanic loyalty to the United States has been the subject of much skepticism as observers point to the reluctance of immigrants to become naturalized citizens and the economic dollars that are exported to Latin countries. For the record, Hispanic families have contributed many lives in defense of the United States; their soldiers have been among the most decorated for their valor in battle.

- The majority of Hispanics, whether undocumented or not, pay for the public services they use through their tax dollars. Curiously, as legislators push for laws to limit the distribution of health and education benefits to undocumented and legal immigrants, no one is considering exempting immigrants from paying those taxes.

- Recent changes in the welfare laws undoubtedly will push Hispanic families to their economic limits. Hispanic families are three times as likely as white families to be in poverty and generally have more children to support than white families do.

- Although education long has been considered the antidote to criminal activity, educational institutions have acted to limit, rather than expand, Hispanics' access through an ill-conceived system of testing practices that shuts out Hispanics from the benefits of higher education.

Fortunately, not all Americans have fallen prey to the political winds and are likely to continue appreciating the contributions of Hispanic-Americans in the arts, literature, history, music, sports, theater and other areas.

American voters would be wise to resist the rhetoric of election-year politicians whose only goal is to get elected on a platform of prejudice and distorted information. In practical terms, it seems bad policy to create a climate of hostility toward a group of people that will number 51 million within 24 years.

Given the positive role that Hispanics have played in the development of this nation, we should take the opportunity during Hispanic Heritage Month to re-evaluate our perceptions of Hispanic people. And even more important, we should re-evaluate the statements made about Hispanics by election-year politicians.

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## VIEWPOINTS

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