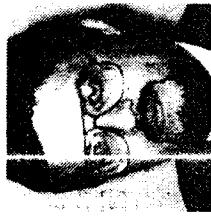


VIEWPOINTS

Measuring Hispanic community sentiments



ED RINCON

The 1990 census tells us that Hispanics in Dallas County now number 315,630, and previous growth trends indicate that this number will grow to 600,000 by the year 2000. Yet we know precious little about the sentiments of this growing segment of our population.

Indeed, when it comes to the question of what Hispanics think about important local and national issues, one finds a curious vacuum of objective information. Without objective knowledge about what Hispanics think and feel, policy-makers become increasingly dependent upon stereotypes, assumptions and guesses: work.

When attempts are made to measure Hispanic community sentiments, the viewpoints of Hispanics can be potentially misrepresented in three ways.

First, when pollsters or other researchers select respondents from a community for a specific survey, very few Hispanics will likely be selected — sometimes as few as 50 to 100. Despite the small numbers of Hispanics selected and the inaccuracies associated with percentages based on small samples, conclusions are frequently made about the sentiments of the Hispanic community as a whole.

Percentages with a broad range of inaccuracy have little use in understanding a community, and are better left unreported from a statistical and practical point of view.

The second type of mistake occurs when pollsters choose to take the easy way out. Rather than selecting a sample of Hispanics who are representative of their communities, these pollsters select re-

spondents from neighborhoods with high concentrations of Hispanics.

By using this biased procedure, the pollster measures only the behavior of the "barrio Hispanic," who tends to be lower income, Spanish-dominant and with briefer residency in the United States. The opinions of Hispanics who tend to be professionals, white-collar workers and English-dominant are systematically excluded. The implications of such biased sampling can be very serious.

For example, a recent survey of an urban community by a major news organization measured attitudes towards law enforcement officials. The survey sponsors reported that black and Hispanic attitudes toward the police were decidedly more negative than white attitudes. However, an inquiry about the survey methodology revealed that black and Hispanic survey respondents were selected from neighborhoods with high concentrations of blacks and Hispanics. Blacks and Hispanics living in such "high density" areas have more negative contact with the police than blacks and Hispanics living in other areas — which could explain the more negative attitudes.

The conclusion that minorities felt more negatively toward the police than whites was not totally surprising, but the extent of the difference may have been unnecessarily inflated.

And last, faced with little objective information about Hispanic community sentiments, media representatives are often pressed to get some reading from select Hispanic individuals. Exactly why these individuals are oftentimes labeled as "Hispanic leaders" by the media seems odd since one rarely refers to "white leaders" in similar contexts.

By ascribing the status of "leader" to these indi-

viduals, the media community elevates their perspectives on key issues. How representative the opinions of these "leaders" are of the broader Hispanic community is rarely a point of discussion.

As Hispanics become a more prominent part of the Dallas community, it is critical that decision makers exercise more responsibility when dealing with issues that affect Hispanics.

In particular, demands should be made of pollsters to (a) make Hispanics the specific focus of polls to ensure community input, (b) represent all segments of the Hispanic community, not just the easily identifiable ones, and (c) include larger samples of Hispanics in surveys to improve the accuracy of reported percentages. Further, the media community should not attribute more importance to the opinions of Hispanic individuals by referring to them as "Hispanic leaders" unless the constituency they lead is clearly defined.

Hispanics are increasingly eager to become a significant part of the political process. Pollsters, the media community and decision makers can play a significant role in determining the degree to which Hispanics are involved in this process by improving the manner in which Hispanic community sentiments are measured and reported. For unless decisions are based on objective information, the logical conclusion is that the views of 315,630 Hispanics in Dallas County will continue to be based on stereotypes, assumptions, guesswork and the opinions of select individuals.

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