

Polling practices muting Latinos

The importance of the Latino vote is hitting the headlines again as the presidential campaign gains momentum.

The desirability of the Latino vote lies in the group's growing concentration in key electoral states and in its potential for tipping the scales in close elections.

But many political pundits are quick to point to factors that traditionally have diminished Latino political strength — such as the group's overall youthful age, a high proportion of noncitizens, and lower voter registration and turnout rates.

Indeed, judging by the pundits' tone, one even might think Latinos lack the essential DNA to become politically engaged.

Political strength also can be shaped by the many public opinion polls conducted each year on such diverse topics as health care, Social Security and war. And, unfortunately, the Latino voice in those influential polls has been muted by practices that sometimes minimize, distort or even eliminate Latinos' views on key issues.

As a result, decision makers are misled into thinking that Latinos don't care about specific issues or candidates or, worse yet, that the Latino vote is inconsequential.

Once disseminated through the media, the poll results take on an undeserved credibility that further discourages Latino voter participation.

Curiously, the notion that "Latinos don't poll well" has emerged as the rationale for the polling industry's difficulty in measuring Latino voter sentiments. But before accepting that conclusion, it may be useful to reflect on a number of practices that also negatively impact Latino participation in polls:



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English-only

Polling organizations often use English-only interviewers to conduct their interviews while sometimes using Spanish-language interviewers as "backups" when needed. That produces interviews primarily with English speakers, especially Latinos with white-collar jobs and higher incomes, and it systematically excludes Spanish speakers with lower incomes.

In our past 30 years of polling experience, 60 percent to 70 percent of U.S. Latinos have preferred to be interviewed in Spanish when given the choice, while 30 percent to 40 percent have preferred an English-language interview. Given that, a monolingual polling strategy hardly can be expected to yield accurate results.

Lower cooperation

Under the right circumstances, Latinos actually are more cooperative in public opinion polls than other racial and ethnic groups and are eager to share their views on a range of topics. But a lower cooperation rate can result when Latinos are required to respond in only one language or when untrained interviewers fail to remind Latinos about the importance of their political views.

Biased samples

Even pollsters with bilingual interviewers often bias a Latino sample by selecting ZIP codes with higher concentrations of Latino residents. Latinos living in such high-density ZIP codes typically are more Spanish-dominant, recent immigrants, blue-collar workers and have lower incomes.

Moreover, such biased samples are more likely to exclude the "acculturated" Latino who is English-speaking, native born, white collar and has a higher income. Ironically, the acculturated Latino also is more likely to vote in elections.

Small samples

Pollsters typically report the total number of respondents they interviewed and the corresponding sample accuracy or "margin of error." But pollsters or news reports rarely provide information about the actual number of Latinos included in a poll, which typically is very small and less accurate for predictive purposes.

For example, a poll that includes only 100 Latinos would have a sample accuracy of plus or minus 10 percent — meaning that the polling results could be 10 percent more or 10 percent less than the actual number.

Certainly, many problems can influence the accuracy of a public opinion poll. But when properly designed, accurate polling results are possible with Latinos.

For example, the Latino Poll 2000 sponsored by the Consortium of Public Broadcasters before the 2000 election predicted that 33 percent of Latinos would vote for George W. Bush — a finding that was strikingly similar to the 35 percent of Latino votes for Mr. Bush reported by the CNN/ABC exit poll.

Such polling accuracy is no accident. It stems from special sampling and interviewing strategies that allow a more accurate snapshot of the Latino voter.

Although Latinos may pose more challenges for traditional pollsters, it simply is incorrect to assume that Latinos have an innate distaste for the political process. The increasing number of Latinos registering and turning out to vote, as well as the growing number of Latino elected officials, clearly shows that Latinos are concerned about the political life of this country.

Polling organizations can play a significant part in unleashing the political strength of Latinos in the next presidential election by simply ensuring that Latinos are properly represented and reported in the many polls they are planning.

Dr. Edward T. Rincon, president of the Dallas-based Rincon & Associates, specializes in ethnic consumer research. He has taught university courses on survey methodology and Hispanic marketing. His e-mail address is ed@rinco-nassoc.com.