

# English Proficiency and Latino Participation in U.S. Elections

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*This article focuses on how the ability to speak and read English affects Latino citizens' participation in U.S. elections, and evaluates the extent to which this language barrier might be overcome by living in a community with a relatively large Latino population and having access to registration materials and ballots in Spanish. Using data primarily from the Pew Hispanic Center, we find that the inability to speak and read English hinders registration and turnout among Latino citizens. While the language barrier to turnout is mitigated by several factors, the barrier to registration is more intractable. These results have implications for researchers and practitioners interested in the political participation of this increasingly prominent group. In particular, understanding the role of English proficiency is a critical first step in thinking about policy prescriptions that will bring into the political process a growing number of Latino citizens, particularly those with limited English skills.*

**Keywords:** Voting Behavior, Public Opinion, Parties, Elections, Voting, Race/Ethnicity, Political Participation, Citizenship, Democracy, Civil Society, Public Policy.

*Este estudio se enfoca en cómo las habilidades de hablar y leer el inglés afectan la participación de ciudadanos latinos en las elecciones estadounidenses, y evalúa la medida en que esta barrera del idioma podría ser superada viviendo en una comunidad con una población latina relativamente grande y teniendo acceso a materiales de registro electoral y boletas en español. Usando datos principalmente del Pew*

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*Hispanic Center, encontramos que la baja habilidad para hablar y leer en inglés obstaculiza el registro y participación entre ciudadanos de origen latino. Mientras que la barrera del lenguaje para ejercer el derecho al voto es mitigada al vivir en una comunidad con una población latina relativamente grande y con acceso a boletas bilingües, la barrera para inscribirse en el registro de electores es más restrictiva. Estos resultados tienen implicaciones para investigadores, practicantes, y legisladores interesados en la participación política de este grupo cada vez más prominente de electores. Entender el papel del dominio de el inglés es, particularmente, un primer paso crítico para pensar recetas de políticas que incorporen en el proceso político un creciente número de ciudadanos latinos, especialmente aquellos con un limitado dominio del idioma inglés.*

Democracy rests, in large part, on the willingness and ability of citizens to participate in elections. Yet it is well known that many Americans do not vote or otherwise play an active role in choosing their leaders. Participation rates differ systematically by socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and other characteristics, contributing to the political marginalization of those who are often already disadvantaged. Latinos, who now constitute the fastest growing segment of the American population (see e.g., Gaouette 2006), are among those with particularly low registration and turnout rates.<sup>1</sup> This means that an increasingly important group is not yet fully incorporated into the political system, raising questions concerning the quality of representation and the factors that might be motivating or obstructing Latino citizens from participating in U.S. elections.

The inability to effectively communicate in English may be one of the factors that keep some Latinos from registering and going to the polls. According to the 2007 American Community Survey, 21.9 million U.S. citizens regularly speak Spanish at home.<sup>2</sup> Roughly 6.3 million of these people (nearly 30 percent) have either no English skills or cannot speak English very well (Shin and Kominski 2010, 4). Thus many Latinos may face an additional barrier to civic engagement due to the English-dominated nature of the U.S. political system.

This article focuses on how the ability to speak and read English affects Latino citizens' participation in U.S. elections (i.e., registration and turnout),

<sup>1</sup> Many studies find that Latino participation lags behind other groups (e.g., Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; Highton and Burris 2002; Leighley 2001; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). However, additional work shows that much of this difference can be explained by socioeconomic factors (Jackson 2003; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989; Verba *et al.* 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Seventeen million of these Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens are native born, while the remaining 4.9 million are naturalized citizens. Shin and Kominski (2010) also report that there are 12.6 million noncitizens living in the United States who regularly speak Spanish at home.

and evaluates the extent to which this language barrier might be overcome by living in a community with a relatively large Latino population and having access to registration materials and ballots printed in Spanish—as required for certain counties by Sections 203 and 4(f)(4) of the Voting Rights Act (VRA).<sup>3</sup> We start the next section with a review of the relevant literature followed by our theoretical predictions. We then describe our data, which come from a Pew Hispanic Center survey and are supplemented with additional information from the U.S. Census and Department of Justice. In the results section, we confirm that, *ceteris paribus*, English proficiency is significantly related to registration and turnout among Latino citizens. While the relationship between English proficiency and registration does not appear to be conditional, further analysis shows that the tendency for non-English speakers to abstain from voting can be offset by living in a community with other Latinos and having access to Spanish-language ballots. We conclude with a discussion of the article’s limitations and the implications our findings have for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers interested in Latino political participation.

### **Latino Participation in U.S. Elections**

Participation in U.S. elections is a two-stage process requiring both registration and turnout. Although obviously related, the decision to register is different from the decision to vote. Timpone (1998, 146) explains, “[n]ot only does one need to register significantly in advance of election day in most states, often at a location less convenient than polling places, but also the nature of the registration act is fundamentally different from casting a ballot” (see also Achen 2008; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Whereas registration is an infrequent bureaucratic act often involving government employees and administrative documents, voting is a more routine behavior conducted with other citizens on a specified day.

Despite these differences, registration and turnout are generally driven by similar factors, most notably socioeconomic status (Highton 2004; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Uhlaner 1989; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), mobilization (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), and a sense of social connectedness developed through things like organizational membership, church attendance, longevity of residence, and/or marital status (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba

<sup>3</sup> The VRA has two separate tests for mandating use of bilingual registration materials and ballots. Under Section 4(f)(4), a county is required to provide bilingual registration forms and ballots if (1) over 5 percent of voting age citizens are members of a language minority, (2) the county uses English-only election materials, and (3) less than 50 percent of voting age citizens are registered to vote. Under Section 203, a county is to be covered if (1) the minority language group is greater than 10,000 or comprises more than 5 percent of voting age citizens, and (2) the illiteracy rate within the group is higher than the national illiteracy rate (for more details, see Tucker and Espino 2007).

1995; Putnam 2000; Timpone 1998; Uslander 1995). These things are thought to establish a psychological motivation for electoral participation and provide resources that drive down the costs of registering and going to the polls (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968).

Latino participation appears to be similarly affected by these same forces.<sup>4</sup> Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee (2000, 339) note, for example, that “[s]tudies using [SES] models report that Latino voting dynamics are generally similar to those of non-Latinos: education, income and life cycle factors (especially age) drive turnout” (see also Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Garcia 1996; Highton and Burris 2002; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Stokes 2003; Verba *et al.* 1993; on registration, see Bass and Casper 2001; de la Garza and DeSipio 1997; DeSipio 1996; Jackson 2003). There is also evidence that Latino participation is similarly affected by mobilization (Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; Garcia 1997a; Hritzuk and Park 2000; Leighley 2001; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000) and a sense of social connectedness from organizational membership (Diaz 1996; Hero 1992; Highton and Burris 2002; Hritzuk and Park 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), homeownership (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Bass and Casper 2001), and marital status (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Bass and Casper 2001; Jackson 2003).

Researchers have also identified some additional factors that are uniquely associated with Latino registration and turnout. These include ethnic heritage, for example, differences between Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Bass and Casper 2001; Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; de la Garza and DeSipio 1997; Garcia 1997a, 1997b; Highton and Burris 2002; Jackson 2003; Stokes 2003), immigration status, notable differences between native-born and naturalized Latino citizens (Bass and Casper 1998, 2001; DeSipio 1996; Highton and Burris 2002; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000; Tam Cho 1999), military service (Leal 1999), time living in the United States (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Bass and Casper 1998, 2001; Highton and Burris 2002), and self-identity and group consciousness (Leighley 2001; Lien 1994; Masuoka 2008; Schildkraut 2005; Stokes 2003; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). Latino voting, in particular, also appears to be affected by social context in that “groups that are concentrated geographically and that have higher levels of interpersonal interaction within the group have higher levels of turnout” (Leighley 2001, 180; see also Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004; Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; Hritzuk and Park 2000; Uhlaner 1989). Finally, some studies find that Spanish-language registration materials and ballots can boost both aspects of participation, although others are less sanguine concerning their

<sup>4</sup> While the variables that determine participation may be similar across groups, their effect is not always exactly the same. For example, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) argue that education facilitates turnout in the general population by providing necessary skills. However, in terms of education’s impact on Latino turnout, Jackson (2003) finds that education helps Anglos more than Latinos, Tam Cho (1999) finds that education must produce a sense of efficacy for it to impact Latino turnout, and Lien (1994) finds that education is more important in determining turnout among Mexican Americans than it is for Asian Americans.

effect (de la Garza and DeSipio 1997; Jones-Correa 2005; Jones-Correa and Waismel-Manor 2007; Ramakrishnan 2005; Tucker and Espino 2007).

Although researchers have uncovered a great deal concerning Latino participation, efforts to understand how English proficiency factors into the equation—both directly and indirectly—have been limited and have produced mixed results. Some studies overlook English skills entirely (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Bass and Casper 2001; Diaz 1996; Highton and Burris 2002; Jackson 2003; Stokes 2003), while others include them largely as a control variable (Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Masuoka 2008; Schildkraut 2005). Of those that do consider them, some find that they have little impact (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), while others contend that “English proficiency has an enormous effect upon Latino participation . . . for Latinos, in addition to the traditional socioeconomic indicators, English proficiency is a crucial determinant of their inclination to vote” (Tam Cho 1999, 1147; see also Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989).

The fact that researchers have yet to clarify and agree on the direct effect that this basic variable has on Latino participation is itself a strong motivation for our article. Additional research with more definitive conclusions can also inform consequential policy debates. For example, finding that English proficiency promotes Latino participation could have the potential to justify investments in publicly funded education and outreach programs, whereas the absence of a relationship would suggest that there are likely more efficient ways to improve registration and turnout within this large but politically underrepresented group. Understanding the role of English proficiency is a critical first step in thinking about policy prescriptions that will bring into the political process a growing number of Latino citizens, particularly those with limited English skills.

Questions also remain concerning how this direct relationship might be conditioned by other factors. Johnson, Stein, and Wrinkle (2003), for example, introduce social context to the study of English skills and Latino turnout. Looking specifically at four majority Latino counties in southern Texas, they find that Spanish-speaking residents were more likely to vote than their English-speaking counterparts. In highlighting the importance of social context, they argue (416) that “the interaction between Spanish speaking and residential tenure [has] a *positive* effect on voter participation for residents of majority-minority communities, mitigating the negative effect Spanish-language use has on voter participation” (see also Brischetto and de la Garza 1983, 30). These studies provide some, albeit limited, evidence that the relationship between language abilities and Latino turnout (if not also registration) may be conditioned by one’s immediate environment.

There is also reason to believe that the relationship between English abilities and Latino turnout may be conditioned by the availability of Spanish-language ballots. While it is not clear that bilingual ballots have a consistent and direct

effect on Latino turnout (e.g., de la Garza and DeSipio 1997), Hopkins (2009) shows that, particularly with proposition voting, the provision of Spanish-language ballots can increase turnout among Latinos with limited English skills. This suggests that bilingual ballots would reduce the obstacles imposed by not being able to speak or read English fluently. Nevertheless, researchers have yet to determine whether Spanish-language registration materials can have the same moderating effect.

Despite a large body of existing research, uncertainty concerning both the direct and conditional relationship between English proficiency and both aspects of Latino participation persists. Clarifying the nature of these relationships has considerable academic and policy value in that it can help identify the most appropriate actions for improving Latino registration and turnout. This, in turn, could bring us closer to the ideals of American democracy, where every citizen is equally empowered to participate in the selection of his or her leaders and to hold those leaders accountable for their policy decisions. Indeed, without a clear and complete understanding of the issue and its particular dynamics, efforts to give voice to those on the sidelines of American politics may be misguided and ineffective. The end result of this could be the political marginalization of an important segment of the American population. In the conclusion, we offer some thoughts on the implications that our findings have for researchers and policy makers in the fields of voter registration, VRA implementation, and immigration.

### **Theorizing the Relationship between English Skills and Latino Participation**

Although the literature is somewhat mixed on this, we expect to find that English skills are positively associated with Latino registration and turnout, all else being equal. As others have noted, English-speaking Latinos are more likely to follow, discuss, and understand political events, which could motivate their participation (Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; Leighley 2001). In addition, the administrative burdens of registering and, to a lesser extent, casting a vote should be at least marginally easier for English-speaking Latinos because they can more easily understand registration instructions, polling information, and ballot choices. In other words, while Latinos with sufficient English skills might be motivated and prepared to participate, those with limited English proficiency may find it easier to simply forgo their role in the electoral process.

We also expect, as suggested by research on specific communities (Johnson, Stein, and Wrinkle 2003), that the factors driving down registration and turnout among non-English speakers may be offset by their social environment. Non-English-speaking Latinos who live in areas with a significant Latino population ought to find it easier to participate than those who live in areas with relatively few Latinos. This is because “[m]ajority-minority residential Latino communities provide Spanish speakers with the social connections and information flows necessary to effect political engagement” (420). Living in a

community with other Latinos provides a greater sense of group consciousness and a wealth of fellow Spanish speakers who can highlight, in their native language, the benefits of participation—benefits such as inclusion in the American political system, which might result in policy decisions and initiatives that specifically help the Latino community (see e.g., Hritzuk and Park 2000; Leighley 2001). Fellow Spanish speakers can also reduce the perceived costs of participation by helping to find registration and polling locations, answering questions, and generally easing apprehensions that non-English speakers might have concerning participating. Conversely, in communities with relatively few Latinos, those who cannot speak English well may feel isolated from the political system and thus care less about getting involved (Tam Cho 1999).

Finally, we also investigate the effectiveness of Spanish-language registration materials and ballots in overcoming the language barrier to participation. Providing materials in Spanish could have a generally positive effect on Latino engagement as it sends a signal to the entire community that their participation is welcomed and encouraged. However, it may be that Latinos with few English abilities would benefit the most from the provisions set forth in the VRA. For those who are not fully conversant in English, Spanish-language forms and ballots might ease their concern about registering and casting votes in a language with which they are not completely comfortable. In other words, a Spanish document and/or ballot may reduce what would otherwise be an additional cost of participation (Hopkins 2009; Tam Cho 1999).

### **Data and Methods**

To test these predictions, we started with data from the Pew Hispanic Center's 2004 National Survey of Latinos (NSL). The NSL was conducted by telephone, between April and June, among a nationally representative sample of self-identified Latinos, 18 years and older. Given our focus on registration and turnout, we excluded all non-U.S. citizens from the data, resulting in a sample of exactly 1,500 Latinos with U.S. citizenship.

The dependent variable for our first set of tests is an individual-level registration measure based on the survey question: "Some people are registered to vote and others are not. Are you currently registered to vote at your present address?" (Yes, registered; No, not registered). Seventy-seven percent of the sample claimed to be registered to vote which, although a little high, is generally in line with past estimates for Latino citizens. For example, the 2002 NSL also found that 77 percent of respondents were registered (Schildkraut 2005), while Bass and Casper (2001, 115) reported that 63 percent of naturalized Latinos were registered in 1996, and Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet (1989, 216) reported that Latino registration averaged 72 percent among citizens throughout the 1980s (see also Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; de la Garza and DeSipio 1997).

Our second dependent variable measured turnout among registered citizens with the question: “Do you remember for sure whether you voted in the November 2000 presidential election when George W. Bush ran against Al Gore and Ralph Nader?” (Yes, voted; No, did not vote). Although this question asked respondents to recollect an activity from more than three years before and there is a tendency to over report turnout, especially among minorities (Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000), we still believe that this was a reasonably valid measure. Indeed, many studies have used lagged recall measures (see e.g., Johnson, Stein, and Wrinkle 2003; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Masuoka 2008; Stokes 2003), and the question used here was particularly careful to ask whether respondents “remember *for sure* whether they voted” while also listing the candidates’ names to further assist with accurate recall. Most important, however, is the fact that this measure found that 73.2 percent of registered respondents claimed to have turned out in 2000, which is quite reassuring in that it does not differ dramatically from the 78.6 percent reported by the U.S. Census Bureau for registered Latino turnout in 2000 (Jamieson, Shin, and Day 2002, 3). Nor is it very far from Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee (2000, 341) *verified* estimate of 67 percent turnout among registered Latinos for the 1996 election.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, while admittedly less than ideal, this measure was particularly careful and provides a turnout rate that closely matched those found in other studies.

Our key independent variable measured the respondent’s English abilities by combining their responses to two questions about how well they read and speak English: “Would you say you can carry on a conversation in English, both understanding and speaking?” and “Would you say you can read a newspaper or book in English?” (not at all; just a little; pretty well; or very well) (Cronbach’s alpha of .934). The distribution on both variables was quite similar and produced a combined measure where 66 percent of respondents claimed to read *and* speak English very well. Still, 19.6 percent reported reading and speaking “just a little” or “not at all,” while the remaining 14.4 percent affirmed

<sup>5</sup> On a more technical note, because we are comparing respondents within the same dataset, and have no reason to expect that non-English-speaking Latinos would have different recall rates than English-speaking Latinos, the distance between those rates should be fairly stable, which would enable an accurate test of our hypotheses. In fact, the Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee (2000, 342-4) study of validated turnout shows that English proficiency has no effect on voting recall accuracy. It is also important to note that the lagged recall measure introduces the possibility that some respondents may have moved between 2000 (when they voted) and 2003 (when they answered the survey). This means, for example, that some respondents may have voted in a place with Spanish-language ballots but answered the survey while living in a community without them, or vice versa. While this is certainly a possibility that is theoretically sound, it is not necessarily fatal to our project. To begin with, Schachter (2004, 4) reports that between 2002 and 2003, only 5.2 percent of *all* Latinos in America (including children and noncitizens) moved to a *different* county, suggesting that the intercounty-mobility rate among Latino citizens of voting age was quite limited during this time (see Highton 2000). Also, any intercounty moving where the respondent goes into or comes out of a VRA-covered area is likely to cancel out in the aggregate as moving in both directions is equally likely (Shin and Kominski 2010).

that they can read and speak English “pretty well.”<sup>6</sup> The validity of this measure was supported by the fact that it correlates quite highly with the language spoken at home (.695), spoken at work (.690), and used for watching TV or listening to the radio (.708) ( $p < .05$  for all). In addition, past studies have shown that “self ratings can be reliable and valid measures of communicative language abilities” (Bachman and Palmer 1989, 14; Lutz 2006; Oscarson 1989).

Following past research, our models included available controls for age, education, annual household income, native-born or naturalized citizen, years in the United States for naturalized citizens, church attendance, and family heritage (Bass and Casper 2001; Jackson 2003; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999).<sup>7</sup> Among the U.S. citizens surveyed, the average age was 41 years old, education level was just beyond high school, annual household income was somewhere between \$30,000 and \$50,000, 48 percent were naturalized citizens, the average time in the United States of those who immigrated was twelve years, and church attendance averaged a little less than “once or twice a month.” Forty-seven percent claimed Mexican family heritage, while 20 percent were Puerto Rican, 20 percent were Cuban, and 13 percent were other Central or South American.

We added two measures to the dataset to investigate the conditional relationship between English language skills and our dependent variables. The first captured the size of the Latino community where each respondent lives. We matched the respondent’s Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), as identified in the survey data, with the percentage of Latinos in that MSA as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2000). For example, the Latino population in the Brazoria, TX, MSA was 22 percent of the total population in 2000, compared with 50.5 percent in the Yuma, AZ, MSA. The average respondent in our sample comes from an MSA where 34 percent of the population is Latino. This provided an objective proxy measure for the relative prevalence of Spanish-speaking and possibly Latino group consciousness found in the respondent’s community. The connection to

<sup>6</sup> Calvo and Rosenstone (1989, 23, quoting Moore and Pachon 1985, 119) explain, “[l]anguage difficulty . . . is not only a problem for newcomers, it may affect potential voters as well: four out of five Hispanics who report problems with English are U.S. citizens.”

<sup>7</sup> Age is measured in years. Education is measured as the highest grade attained in school, from less than high school (1) to graduate school (8). Income is the respondent’s annual household income as either “below \$30,000” (1), “between \$30,000 and \$50,000” (2), or “greater than \$50,000” (3). We use a dichotomous variable to measure whether the respondent was born in the United States (0) or naturalized (i.e., immigrated) (1). Naturalized years in the United States record the total number of years since the respondent naturalized (“age” records the number of years in the United States for those who were born in the country). Family heritage is categorized as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Central/South American (e.g., Salvadoran) (other categories, such as Portuguese, Jamaican, African, refused, or don’t know, which make up 5.6 percent of the sample, have been excluded). Finally, church attendance is measured with reverse coding of the following: “Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services? Would you say more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never?”

language use was verified by significant ( $p \leq .001$ ) and robust correlation coefficients between the size of the Latino community and two key measures of Spanish language use: the language spoken by the respondent's children in school (.918) and the language the respondent uses at work (.871).<sup>8</sup>

We also included a measure of the likelihood that Spanish registration materials and ballots were made available to respondents. We started with information from the Department of Justice (U.S. Department of Justice 2002) on the counties covered by the Spanish language provisions of the VRA during federal elections in 2000. We then estimated each respondent's likelihood of having bilingual materials available to them by summing the number of Latinos living in VRA-covered counties and dividing by the total number of Latinos living in all counties within the MSA (population estimates are from the US Census Bureau 2000 report). Because we only know the respondent's MSA, not their specific county, the probability of access to bilingual election materials was equal to the probability that the respondent lives in a county that provided these materials. For example, the Orlando, FL, MSA included four counties, two with Spanish-language provisions (Orange and Osceola) and two without (Lake and Seminole). We summed the number of Latinos in Orange County (168,361) and Osceola County (50,727) and divided it by the total number of Latinos living in all four counties (271,619) in the MSA to get a probability of .807. This means that respondents from the Orlando MSA had about an 81 percent chance of having Spanish-language materials available to them during the 2000 election. Roughly half of the respondents in our sample came from MSAs where all counties provided bilingual materials (i.e., the probability of having access was 100 percent), while the remaining 48 percent had probabilities ranging from 0 to 97 percent. While there may be some imprecision to this measure, we feel that it captured adequately the relative accessibility of bilingual registration and election materials within the confines of how the dataset was structured (i.e., the MSA is the most precise indicator of respondent location).

We tested our hypotheses with a series of individual logistic regression models where registration and turnout were the dependent variables.<sup>9</sup> Each

<sup>8</sup> We decided to use the Latino population measure over the language use measure for three reasons. First, only 49.2 percent of all respondents were asked the children's language use question, which severely weakens the power of our analyses (93.8 percent were asked the language at work question). Second, the Latino population measure is more objective, whereas the language use questions require respondents to give their impression, the basis of which could differ from respondent to respondent. Third, we reran all of our analyses and found that the language use variables provided less robust but generally similar results to those found with the Latino population measure.

<sup>9</sup> Given the connection between our two dependent variables, we reran all of our tests using bivariate probit and Heckman selection models (see e.g., Timpono 1998). The pattern of results is virtually identical across the three approaches (details available from the authors on request). We elected to present the individual logit results because they are consistent with those found using the two other approaches, they enable easier estimation of predicted probabilities, and they are based on an appropriate methodology for questions of registration and turnout (Achen 2008, 30).

**Table 1. Latino Registration**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
English proficiency	.356** (.129)	.293 (.209)	.477* (.289)
Spanish registration materials	-.084 (.305)	-.089 (.305)	-.415 (1.156)
Latino population	.009* (.005)	-.003 (.017)	.009* (.005)
Age	.029*** (.006)	.030*** (.006)	.030*** (.006)
Education	.098** (.043)	.098** (.043)	.098** (.043)
Income	.311*** (.105)	.311*** (.104)	.313*** (.104)
Naturalized	-.035 (.326)	-.052 (.329)	-.019 (.328)
Naturalized years	.011 (.011)	.011 (.011)	.010 (.011)
Church attendance	.112* (.054)	.111* (.054)	.111* (.054)
Mexican heritage	.184 (.249)	.182 (.249)	.190 (.250)
Puerto Rican heritage	.413 (.270)	.409 (.270)	.422 (.271)
Cuban heritage	.287 (.307)	.304 (.311)	.288 (.307)
English proficiency * Latino population		.001 (.005)	
English proficiency * Spanish registration materials			-.141 (.315)
(Constant)	-3.076*** (.698)	-2.851*** (.911)	-3.508*** (1.192)
Log likelihood	-514.99	-514.91	-514.89
N	1,107	1,107	1,107

*Notes:* The dependent variable is “Registered to Vote.” Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$  (one-tailed).

model included English language skills, the size of the Latino population, the probability of Spanish-language materials (registration or ballots) being available, and a set of standard control variables. We also used *Clarify* to estimate the predicted probabilities of registering and voting under certain circumstances.

## Results

The first column in Table 1 shows that, as expected, the ability to speak and read English is positively associated with registration, all else equal. In fact, the predicted probability of registering to vote for an average Latino citizen with no English skills is .65 (SE, .07) compared with .84 (SE, .01) for the same individual with high fluency in English. Additional results in Model 1 show that the size of the Latino population, but not the provision of bilingual documents, is also a significant predictor of registration—as the size of the Latino community increases, so too, does the probability of registering. The rest of Model 1 shows that Latino registration is also affected by age, education, income, and church attendance, while nativity, the amount of time spent in the United States since naturalization, and ethnic heritage have little discernable effect.

Our second and third models in Table 1 add interaction terms to see if the relationship between English proficiency and registration is conditioned by either the size of the Latino community or the probability of having access to Spanish-language registration materials. In both cases, the interactions are statistically insignificant suggesting that, despite expectations, these two factors do not mitigate the barrier to registration felt by Latino citizens with limited English skills. In other words, living in a predominately Latino community or being able to register in one's native language does little to encourage registration among those who do not speak English well.

The results in Table 1 suggest that English proficiency plays an important role, beyond other long-term demographic factors, in facilitating Latino registration. Those with a relatively strong command of English appear to be more motivated to participate in the electoral process and less encumbered by the costs associated with registering to vote. Living in a relatively large Latino community also seems to encourage registration, although it does no more for the non-English speakers than it does for those who are fluent—that is, the effect is more general than conditional. Ultimately, the language barrier to Latino registration does not appear to be alleviated by the size of the Latino community nor the provisions of the VRA.

The second part of our analysis focuses on turnout among registered Latinos. We again use a logit model with the same collection of standard independent variables, this time with turnout as the dependent variable.<sup>10</sup> The first model in Table 2 shows that, just as with registration, the ability to speak and read English is positively associated with the probability of voting, all else equal. The predicted probability of voting for a registered Latino with no English skills is .53 (SE, .09) compared with .82 (SE, .02) for the same voter with fluency in English. Additional results in Model 1 show, however, that neither the percentage of Latinos in the respondent's community nor the prevalence of ballots printed in Spanish has a discernable direct impact on Latino turnout. In terms of the control variables, only age, education, being born in the United States (i.e., not naturalizing), and church attendance are significant. The results show that even beyond demographic predictors, community characteristics, and the provision of bilingual ballots, language abilities play an important role in determining whether or not registered Latinos will go to the polls.

<sup>10</sup> The sample of registered voters ( $n = 1,155$ ) is slightly different than the sample of all U.S. citizens used to test the registration hypotheses. The average age among registered voters is 46, education is closer to "some college training," 49 percent are naturalized citizens, average time in the United States for those who immigrated is 13 years, and church attendance is in the "once or twice a month" category. The ethnic distribution is also slightly different with 46 percent Mexican, 20 percent Puerto Rican, 23 percent Cuban, and 11 percent other Central or South American. In addition, 68 percent claim to read and speak English "very well," 14.8 percent claim that they can speak English "pretty well," and 19.2 percent put themselves in the "just a little" or "not at all" categories. Finally, the average registered voter in this subsample lives in a community where Latinos makes up 35 percent of the population, and the probability of having access to bilingual ballots is, again, roughly split between 100 percent and probabilities ranging from 0 to 97 percent.

**Table 2. Turnout among Registered Latinos**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
English proficiency	.467** (.155)	.928*** (.259)	1.404** (.502)
Spanish ballots	.236 (.341)	.269 (.345)	4.183* (2.015)
Latino population	.003 (.005)	.052* (.023)	.002 (.005)
Age	.066*** (.008)	.065*** (.008)	.066*** (.008)
Education	.216*** (.047)	.215*** (.047)	.220*** (.047)
Income	.101 (.116)	.105 (.116)	.110 (.116)
Naturalized	-.646* (.387)	-.548 (.392)	-.572 (.390)
Naturalized years	.020 (.013)	.017 (.013)	.017 (.013)
Church attendance	.193*** (.061)	.196*** (.061)	.182** (.061)
Mexican heritage	.016 (.291)	.018 (.292)	.036 (.292)
Puerto Rican heritage	-.446 (.300)	-.417 (.302)	-.413 (.302)
Cuban heritage	.169 (.352)	.056 (.354)	.142 (.352)
English proficiency * Latino population		-.014* (.006)	
English proficiency * Spanish ballots (Constant)	-5.416*** (.842)	-7.092*** (1.136)	-1.061* (.527)
Log likelihood	-413-34	-410.74	-410.86
N	878	878	878

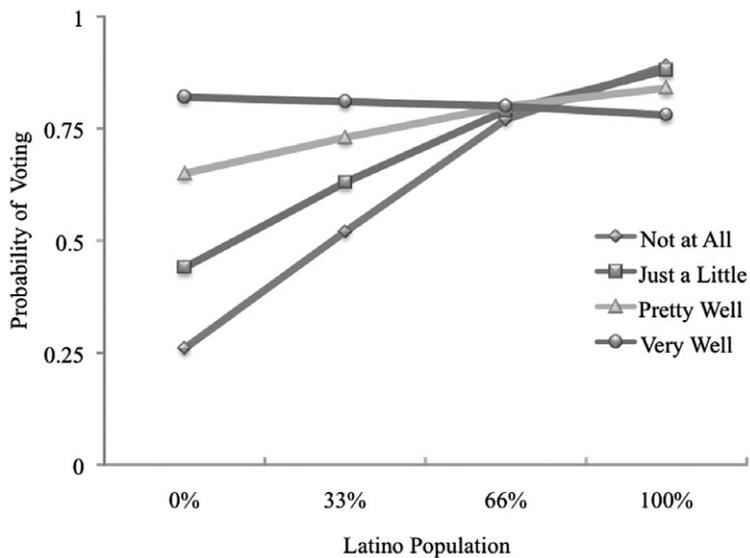
*Notes:* The dependent variable is “Voted in 2000.” Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$  (one-tailed).

Our second model includes an interaction between English skills and the percentage of Latinos in the respondent’s community. The last line in Model 2 shows that this interaction is significant and negative, which means that the impact that English proficiency has on turnout decreases as the Latino population increases. In other words, the inability to speak English is more of a barrier in predominately English-speaking communities than it is in more heavily Spanish-speaking areas. For example, the probability that someone who is “not at all” fluent in English would vote in a place like Dayton, OH, where there are few Latinos (1.2 percent) is .26 (SE, .13) compared with .88 (SE, .11) for the same voter in a community like Laredo, TX, where the Latino population is much larger (94.3 percent). This disparity disappears, however, for registered Latinos with better English skills. In fact, someone who speaks and reads English “very well” has a predicted probability of voting of .82 (.03) in Dayton, OH, and .79 (SE, .06) in Laredo, TX. In other words, Latinos fluent in English are likely to turn out regardless of the makeup of their community.

Figure 1 charts these predicted probabilities to show how language barriers to participation were mitigated by the percentage of Latinos in one’s community. The “not at all” and “just a little” lines both arc upward, indicating that the probability of voting increases for Latinos with limited English skills as the percentage of Latinos in their communities goes up. The lines for those who speak and read English either “pretty well” or “very well” are much flatter,

**Figure 1.**  
**Probability of Voting by English Language Skills and Latino Population**



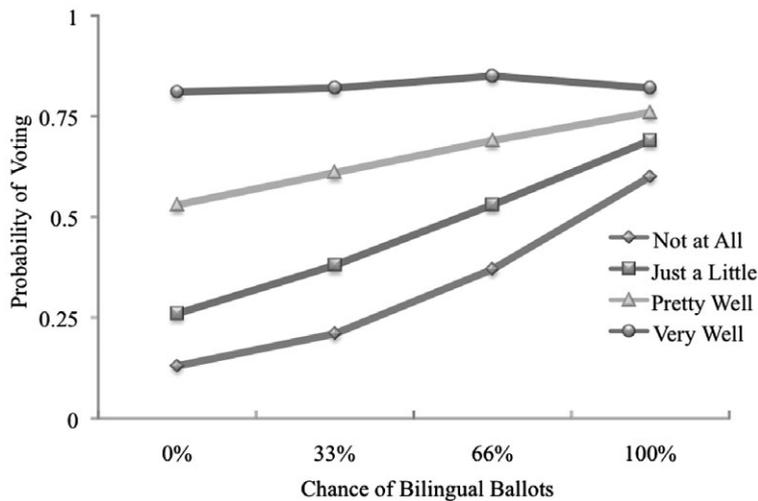
indicating that the percentage of Latinos in one's community had almost no effect on the respondent's likelihood of voting—that is, Latinos with solid English skills were equally likely to vote regardless of their environment. All of these suggest that non-English speakers are more likely to vote when they live in a place where they can presumably talk to others concerning the campaign and follow the race in their native language.

The third model in Table 2 shows that the interaction between English skills and Spanish-language ballots is also significant and in the expected direction (i.e., negative).<sup>11</sup> This confirms that ballots printed in Spanish affect the relationship between English proficiency and Latino turnout. The predicted probability of voting for a Latino who is “not at all” fluent in English is .13 (SE, .14) in a place without bilingual ballots and .60 (SE, .09) for an identical voter in a location that definitely has these ballots (i.e., 100 percent probability). This effect disappears, however, for those fluent in English—they have nearly the exact same probability of voting whether Spanish-language ballots are provided (.81, SE, .05) or not (.82, SE, .02).

These results are illustrated in Figure 2, which shows that the mitigating effect of bilingual ballots increases as proficiency in English decreases. Those

<sup>11</sup> These results are less robust but generally similar when both interactions are entered into a single model. The English proficiency  $\times$  Latino population coefficient is  $-.009$  ( $p = .09$ ) while the English proficiency  $\times$  Spanish-language ballots coefficient is  $-.675$  ( $p = .125$ ).

**Figure 2.**  
**Probability of Voting by English Language Skills and Bilingual Ballots**



Latinos who speak and read English “very well” are consistently likely to turn out regardless of the probability that Spanish-language ballots are available—their line is basically flat. The line starts to bend upward for those who do not speak and read English quite as fluently (those who answered “pretty well” and “just a little”), while the probability of voting clearly rises with the likelihood of bilingual ballot availability for those who do not speak or read English at all. These results tell us that the provision of bilingual ballots helps increase Latino turnout particularly among those with limited English abilities.

Taken together, these results demonstrate the importance of English proficiency in determining Latino political participation in U.S. elections. Latino citizens who struggle with English appear to be less motivated and more constrained by the administrative burdens of registration than those with stronger English skills. Even after registering, English continues to be an important factor in shaping Latino turnout. In fact, registered Latinos with strong English skills are almost 30 points more likely to turn out than their predominately Spanish-speaking counterparts, all else equal (.53 to .82 in predicted probabilities). The inability to easily engage with the campaign and navigate the voting process clearly inhibits turnout.

Still, this language barrier, at least for turnout, can be mitigated. Non-English-speaking Latinos living in communities with large Latino populations are significantly more likely to participate than those living in predominantly English-speaking communities. This demonstrates that Latinos with limited

English skills can more easily overcome language obstacles when they live in communities with large Latino populations that offer the “critical context for socialization, information dissemination and mobilization, thereby providing some requisite resources central to facilitating participation” (Hritzuk and Park 2000, 151; see also Leighley 2001). In addition, the use of ballots printed in Spanish helps address some of the institutional hurdles that may be felt most by those with limited English skills. Providing bilingual ballots makes it easier, particularly for non-English-speaking Latinos, to cast a ballot while also sending a welcoming message concerning the importance of their participation in the political process.

### Conclusion

As the size of the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to understand their assimilation into the political system. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have taken interest in the factors that motivate or impede Latino participation, yet relatively little attention has focused on the role played by English language skills. This article provides, for the first time, some insights on both the direct and conditional relationship between English proficiency and the two stages of electoral participation: registration and turnout. Our findings show that this often-overlooked characteristic can, under certain circumstances, keep Latino citizens from realizing the ideal of full and equal participation in the electoral process. As such, they highlight the importance of continued academic and policy attention to the complex role that basic characteristics can play in determining political participation.

There are, however, certain limitations to this article. First, it is not clear how generalizable our findings are beyond the 2000 election. Additional research is needed to confirm that these relationships hold in different election years, under different political circumstances. Second, our research focuses on the Latino community, so we hesitate to suggest that the same dynamics are at work with other language minorities in the United States. The extent to which these findings apply to other groups is another area for future research. Third, some potentially important variables were not included in the 2004 NSL, such as whether or not Latino candidates were on the ballot or the mobilization efforts by volunteers and political parties. These omitted variables deserve attention; unfortunately, their exploration is beyond the scope of this article. Still, we believe that these results, such as they are, have some intriguing implications for our understanding of Latino participation in U.S. elections.

To begin with, this article contributes to the literature by showing that English proficiency is, indeed, an important determinant of Latino registration and turnout. The implication is that increasing familiarity with English can pay

dividends by making it easier for Latinos to engage with and participate in the election process.

Our results also show that there are some interesting differences between Latino registration and turnout. We find that VRA-mandated bilingual election materials are an insufficient remedy for barriers to registration experienced by citizens with weak English skills, although further research is necessary to determine exactly why the barriers to registration appear to be more intractable than those to voting. We can speculate that the registration process is simply more daunting than voting for those with limited English skills such that assistance and encouragement from fellow Spanish speakers or the provision of bilingual documents are not enough to overcome the registration hurdle. It could also be that, because registration requirements vary between states, mobilization activities are more likely to be locally organized and perhaps less effective than the national “Get Out the Vote” efforts on election day, or that those who manage to overcome the registration barrier are more motivated to participate and therefore more likely to vote when encouraged or able to do so in their native language. In any case, determining the cause of the registration barrier is of great importance, as no amount of mobilization or language facilitation will enable an unregistered person to vote on election day.

There are also implications for the fact that the VRA appears to have been effective in facilitating turnout among certain parts of the Latino population. The conditional nature of the impact of bilingual ballot availability on Latino turnout suggests that access to these ballots increases turnout primarily among those with limited English skills and no other means to overcome the language barrier. Importantly, the VRA requires provision of bilingual ballots in communities where there is a critical mass of language-minority members (i.e., when the adult citizens of a language minority group constitute more than 5 percent of the voting-age population or 10,000 people, and the illiteracy rate within the group is higher than the national illiteracy rate). Our tests show, however, that these ballots may have been particularly useful precisely when they are least likely to be available: for non-English speaking Latinos who are isolated in predominately English-speaking communities. In fact, a registered Latino who does not speak English has a .14 (SE, .14) predicted probability of turning out when they live in a community where only 14 percent of the population is Latino (i.e., 1 standard deviation below the mean) and there are no bilingual ballots. However, this probability jumps to .45 (SE, .14) when, in the exact same environment, the voter is given an opportunity to cast a ballot in his or her native language. Thus the implementation of bilingual ballot requirements since 1965 may not have been as effective as it could have been because the communities targeted by the VRA did not have an urgent need for these ballots—the community itself could compensate for individuals’ limited English skills. Those who, in fact, might have benefited a great deal from these ballots were those

without a language community nearby, and thus were not covered by the legislation.

The fact that non-English-speaking Latinos are more likely to participate when they live in areas heavily populated by other Latinos suggests that those with limited English skills who live outside these areas may remain outside the political process. This could, in turn, result in a situation where Latino voters are taken more seriously in certain areas, while their needs are overlooked in places where they constitute a smaller minority. This is of particular concern in light of recent changes in immigration patterns, which have increasingly seen immigrants settling in “new destinations”—cities and suburbs with little history of immigration and smaller existing Latino communities—instead of the traditional gateway cities of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago (Shin and Kominski 2010). The results of this article show that extra effort is particularly necessary to ensure participation where Latino populations are smallest, and suggests that as the “new destination” populations naturalize, local and state governments can facilitate the incorporation of immigrants greatly by providing affordable and accessible opportunities to learn English, as well as publishing official documents in all major languages used in the jurisdiction. Although the majoritarian nature of the U.S. political system makes small and economically disadvantaged groups unlikely to be influential in politics, encouraging and facilitating participation among those populations is nonetheless vital to maintaining a healthy democracy.

As the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, Spanish speakers are becoming more and more a critical part of the American electorate, and it becomes even more important that we understand the factors that keep some in this community from participating in elections. Clearly, language matters, although there is reason to believe that those with limited English proficiency can still be incorporated into the electoral system. This is an important goal as it helps to ensure that the Latino community will have an appropriate voice in American politics.

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