DESIGNING FOR MEANING
Using Behavioral Science to Mobilize the Latino Vote

Why the Latino Vote Matters

For our democracy to live up to the ideal of a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" we must work to mobilize an electorate that is representative of our country as a whole. Latinos are the nation's largest ethnic minority voting bloc in the United States, but they participate in elections at rates that consistently lag behind the national voting average. While Latino voter turnout is a function of a complex range of factors, including deep structural forces, our research also reveals other behavioral barriers keeping Latino voters from feeling that their votes matter. This brief outlines key barriers and recommended solutions for nonprofits, businesses, and governments who do Latino voter outreach to adopt.

Understanding How Latinos Value Their Vote

To understand how Latinos think about the value of their vote, we conducted a two-stage investigation, beginning with desk research and expert consultations, followed by original sentiment analysis of social media, content analysis of mainstream news outlets, and in-depth interviews with Latino voters and nonvoters. Our research reaffirms that Latino voters confront an imposing set of structural barriers keeping them from the polls. Despite the demobilizing effect of these barriers on many in the community, however, we saw an inspiring persistence and solidarity among many Latino voters. This suggests that low rates of voter turnout are the result of a context that causes many Latinos to question their sense of belonging in the U.S. democratic process and, in turn, the value of engaging in it.

We believe that behavioral science can help mobilize Latino voters. By confronting the barriers identified in our research, we can help disrupt the perpetuating cycle that keeps Latinos out of key policy decisions that impact their livelihoods as Americans.

With So Much at Stake, What Keeps Latinos From Feeling Like Their Vote Matters?

Latinos' interaction with the government is often plagued by experiences of discrimination, impacting how they ascribe meaning to their participation in the electoral process. Some are demobilized, while others are energized.

Discrimination against Latinos is pervasisve and can take many forms, from direct experiences of racism within the system to a political climate that uses racially-charged stereotypes and actively targets their community. We saw the effects of discrimination in our interviews and in the way many Latinos express themselves on social media. However, we found that discrimination has different impacts on voting behavior for different people. Some express hopelessness and feeling undervalued, which keeps them from participating in elections. Others see the obstacles they face as a call to action, rallying in solidarity with the Latino community at large and mobilizing to vote.

Notably, when discussing reasons for voting or not voting, nonvoters were more likely to describe direct experiences of racism that made them disillusioned with the electoral process. On the other hand, voters were more likely to cite exclusionary policies like the attempt to overturn Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and ICE raids as examples of the threats facing the Latino community that spur them to cast a ballot.

Research from behavioral science helps explain why experiencing discrimination at the group-level has a demobilizing effect on nonvoters. Latinos frequently feel excluded by the government and society in many ways—whether it is immigration policy, racial profiling, voter suppression tactics, or lack of access to Spanish materials—the underlying effect is feeling like they don't belong to the 'ingroup' and are not invited to participate in the electoral process. Exacerbating ingroup/outgroup dynamics is **stereotype threat**—the risk of an individual conforming to a negative characteristic about their social group.[1] Our research revealed that Latinos are constantly exposed to harmful narratives in the media and are often targeted by the government, deepening their feelings of not belonging. *Interestingly, the stereotype threat manifests differently for voters. Voters who identify as pan-hispanic expressed that solidarity, or a shared identity as a Latino, was a powerful motivator to participate in the elections.*

Latinos can feel like voting is not for them because they do not see themselves or the issues they care about represented in candidates or by campaigns.

While the Latino electorate is not a monolith,[2] the policy context and the issues at stake force Latinos to organize as a voting bloc or risk further invisibility. Latinos are racially diverse, come from very different cultures and ancestry, and have varied immigration experiences. But we also find commonality—Latinos have shared values and face similar challenges. However, even among this large diverse group there's not enough political representation. *And for Latinos, lack of representation matters.* Unsurprisingly, voters and nonvoters noted the lack of Latino candidates (regardless of country of origin) on the ballots was problematic. They reported feeling like most politicians don't understand the struggles the Latino community faces or are indifferent to them. In addition to reducing political power, the lack of representation in electoral politics reinforces Latinos' perception of being undervalued. We know from research on **identity conflict** that when one of a person's many social identities is at risk of being devalued, it impacts behavior in predictable ways.[3] This reinforces the feeling that they don't belong, making Latinos question whether participating matters.

Beyond the lack of representation among politicians and candidates, Latinos rarely see the issues that matter to them at the center of campaign messaging or candidates' policy proposals. When they do, it is usually during the last mile of election season, casting doubt about candidates' commitment to change. There are several examples of what some label *'hispandering'* by politicians—candidates who aren't Latino trying to appeal to Latino voters using hollow gestures like switching to Spanish during debates or playing pop music by Latino artists at rallies.[4] In this context of feeling overlooked, Latinos often feel like there's a zero sum game—they can either vote for candidates that might not understand them or disengage from the electoral process altogether. *But we also see that some Latinos recognize the urgent need to organize and mobilize their vote to affect meaningful change.*

Latinos often question whether they deserve to vote because they perceive a high standard for being a "prepared voter."

Our research shows a consistent thread among Latino voters and nonvoters in general: both groups feel like they don't know enough about politics to meaningfully participate in elections. Aligning with our earlier research on low propensity and new voters, Latinos report being afraid of making the wrong decision because they're uninformed about candidates' platforms. We found that Latinos have a common ***mental model*** of who should vote and what qualifies as a prepared voter, but that few of them (and few voters in general) meet that threshold. All of us have mental models that organize prior knowledge into an understanding of how the world around us works.[5] They can often be useful to make sense of new information and can shape our decisions. In this case, however, what we saw from our interviews is that no one sees themselves as a prepared voter, even those who are informed and can cite what issues they care about and how they plan to vote.

Navigating the registration and voting process can be difficult for everyone, but it is especially hard for voters who speak English as a second language and are unfamiliar with the process.[6] *Voters and nonvoters report that one challenge in preparing for elections is that they don't trust the news.* Several individuals mentioned identifying contradictory information about the same story through different channels and feeling like disinformation is so rampant that they can't rely on mainstream media. But news coverage that emphasizes the disproportionately complicated and difficult process that Latinos and other minorities may face at the polls may actually have a backfire effect in exacerbating the concern that Latinos have about being prepared or knowing enough to vote "correctly." *Taken together, the misperception of who a voter should be and the lack of access to reliable voter education makes Latinos less likely to feel like voting is meant for them and to embrace participating in the electoral process as their civic duty.*

Latinos rarely see progress on the issues that matter to their community so it feels like voting does not affect change.

Like all voters, Latinos expect to see candidates follow through on their commitments in exchange for their vote. When this doesn't happen, it makes Latinos question whether candidates care and, in turn, whether voting makes a difference to their community. Importantly, while this may be true for many groups, it has an outsized effect on Latinos and communities of color who already experience lower levels of trust and engagement.

Even voters who haven't experienced these specific disappointments may struggle to connect the consequences of voting to the policy issues they care about in their daily lives. In line with our broader research into nonvoters, we find that ***psychological distance***[7] also plays a role in how Latinos feel about voting. How immediate the consequences of voting feel can determine, in part, the degree to which people picture them in a concrete and specific way. *That is, even when Latinos know elections impact them, without a clear, concrete picture of how, they struggle to form strong connections or intentions.*

Many Latinos do not discuss voting or politics with anyone outside their family or close network, while nonvoters tend to steer clear of these conversations.

Social norms—the rules or standards shared by a group that guide or constrain behavior—exert a powerful influence on whether or not we vote. But our interviews suggest that *Latinos do not typically discuss or share their voting behavior outside of their families and friends, especially if it's unclear to them what is socially desirable.* Many Latinos perceive that discussing politics leads to arguments and prefer to avoid the subject with strangers or casual acquaintances. For nonvoters, discussing politics or voting with anyone can be perceived as high risk—they feel like family and friends will criticize them for not wanting to vote or 'nag' them, so they avoid politics and election talk altogether. Nonvoters' reluctance to speak about voting is also linked to feeling like they do not 'deserve' to complain because they haven't voted in the past, and that not voting also means they are not 'allowed' to talk about politics.

This behavior perpetuates a cycle of disengagement: *For low propensity voters, unclear signals about social norms are especially impactful. Media stories of low Latino turnout can have an outsized influence on their behavior if they aren't discussing voting with friends or family.* Research shows that hearing about others behavior, in this instance not voting, can lead people to align with this norm.[8,9] Media stories about low Latino turnout could make it seem like not voting is the group norm. Given the frequency of these stories, Latinos might also be more likely to remember low turnout figures even if they live in communities with higher turnout rates. That's because we often use the *availability heuristic*—the tendency to rely on how easily examples of a behavior come to mind—when judging the probability of events.[10] *Our research suggests that while the intention of citing low turnout may be an effort to encourage Latinos to turn out and challenge the status quo, its effects can backfire and demobilize Latinos by highlighting an undesirable norm.*

Designing to Promote Value in the Latino Vote

Drawing from our research, we developed design principles that leverage behavioral science to mobilize the Latino vote. Keeping in mind the diversity of the Latino community, we recommend tailoring these solutions for specific groups. Below, we describe the design principle that addresses one or several of the barriers outlined in our research, an illustrative example of what a design might look like in the field, and the recommended messenger and channel.

Design Principle #1
Shift Latinos' mental model of what 'preparedness' means by using simple heuristics to present information about what is needed to be a prepared voter.

Design Concept	Channel(s)
Prepared Voter Snapshot: Use photos or videos of everyday Latino community members or influential Latinos paired with a checklist that defines what it means to be a prepared voter. The checklist would serve as a simple heuristic that summarizes what individuals need to do to be 'prepared' and reduces hassles by providing links and information for how to complete checklist items: ☐ Register to vote (linked here) ☐ Make a plan for when and where you will vote (template here) ☐ Spend 2-3 minutes reviewing a sample ballot (linked here)	» Postcard, flyers, mailers sent by government, trusted local CBOs, nonprofits » Social media posts (Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat), traditional media by influential Latino celebrities » Digital ads, corporate communications

Design Principle #2
Reduce the psychological distance between the impact of voting and Latino community outcomes by making progress salient.

Design Concept	Channel(s)
Community Progress Visual: The community progress visual shows the disparate impact that voting can have on community issues. It would showcase how Latino turnout rates can directly affect community issues like level of policing, funding, and education through a map or social media graphic of adjacent districts by zip code. The graphic would include statistics around turnout rates, levels of funding for public services, and crime rates. The communication would also include a message motivating people to vote to drive better outcomes for their community with links to voting resources.	» Shareable graphic to spread on social media (Instagram, Facebook) » Digital ads (especially on community or voting-related websites, corporate communications » Shareable graphic on trusted NGO websites that serve Latino community » Shareable graphic or link on social service/ benefits site like SNAP

Design Principle #3
Remove hassles to learning about candidate platforms by providing access to curated, trustworthy, and easy to understand information about candidate positions on issues that matter to Latino voters.

Design Concept	Channel(s)
Interactive Ballot Scorecard: A clear and easy method of determining where politicians on your ballot stand on issues that Latinos care about. This design would take the form of a short online quiz, first prompting people to determine who is on their ballot with their address, and then asking questions about key issues like climate policy, criminal justice, abortion, etc. Next, it would display where politicians on the ballot stands on each issue, using scorecards that have already been developed by NGOs to make a 'match'. Finally, people can click on politicians they want to choose for each position on their ballot.	» Shareable link to quiz to spread on social media (Instagram, tik tok, snapchat, Facebook), with options to share results of your "match" » Digital ads (especially on voting websites like vote.org), corporate communications, traditional media » Shareable link on trusted nonprofit or CBO websites that serve Latino community
Customizable Templates for Nonprofits and Community Spaces: Local community-based organizations (CBOs) are some of the most meaningful messengers since they help communicate social norms, but they sometimes lack the resources to create original materials. Templates can include information on aspects of the voting process, key information and links on preparing, and messages to combat voter suppression.	» Shareable templates for 1-pagers, FAQs, flyers, mailers, postcards that can be customized for each specific CBO disseminated over email and on websites for download by GOTV orgs, governments, and NGOs.

Design Principle #4
Empower Latino identity by leveraging trusted and influential Latino messengers from different countries of origin to address the unique barriers they face as an electorate.

Design Concept	Channel(s)
Relational organizing by trusted members of the Latino community: The design would include trusted community leaders or well-known Latino public figures sharing resources about voting. Local residents can also be encouraged to share messages with 2-3 friends or family members.	» Scripted cell voicemails, customizable e-mail or SMS from friends, family, trusted community leaders or influential Latinos

Endnotes

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