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Newsroom: Elorza on R.I.'s Latino Community

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Elorza on R.I.’s Latino Community

RWU Law Professor Jorge Elorza says the rise of Latinos in Rhode Island politics is the culmination of a long tradition of Latino political activism.

From GoLocalProv, "Members of the Latin community weigh in on the role of the Latin community in Rhode Island politics – today and in the future” by Sheyla Rivera, GoLocalProv News Contributor.

PROVIDENCE, Nov, 25, 2010: While the rise of Latinos in politics is seen by many as a new trend, Latinos have always been politically active, according to Jorge Elorza. The Associate Professor of Law and Co-Chairman of the Latino Policy Institute of Roger Williams University says that activism is now transcending ethnic boundaries.

“The Latino community has not represented itself has a select group, but as part of an integrated Rhode Island community. There is an attitude that what is good for Latinos is good for the state. We are seeing a convergence of interests. Candidates have perceived that by investing in the Latino community, they are investing in the state,” he says.

Integration of Latinos
Elorza says the increase of Latinos in politics is a reflection of cultural integration on a neighborhood level: “There are cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic pockets in the city and this reflects in several of its neighborhoods. We can expect an eventual ethnic and cultural mixing of these sectors.”

He singles out Silver Lake as a neighborhood that represents the transformations in the city’s ethnic history. “Silver Lake seems like a microcosm that reflects Providence’s ethnic transitions. At the turn of the 20th century, it was an Irish community, but became an Italian neighborhood over time. Recently, the number of Latino home owners and tenants is increasing.” The Silver Lake sector has a Hispanic population of 47 percent, according to the most recent census information. “When political and ethnic boundaries change, representation also changes. Sabina Matos, a Latino woman, defeated Josephine De Russo as Representative of this sector in the recent elections. This exemplifies the ethnic transformation in the area.”

Diversity within the Latino Community

One issue that arises in discussions about Hispanic identity is the plurality of backgrounds within the community. Members of the community have diverse opinions about living under the general label of Hispanic or Latino. “All of us have been crammed under the umbrella of one word, regardless of the little similarity between, for example, Peruvians and Venezuelans,” says Jose Torrealba, Outreach Coordinator of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Brown University & Executive Director of New England Festival of Ibero-American Cinema (NEFIAC). “First generation Latinos don’t grow up as minorities and many have not experienced life in a multicultural setting. Once out of our countries of origin, we learn how to relate to American society as a whole. In political terms, we may unite under the same motivations as a monolithic group of people. However, in our daily reality we are just figuring out how to live together.”

Torrealba shares his belief in the strength of unity: “I think this internal diversity makes for a very rich cultural identity; not everyone eats the same type of food or listens to the same type of music. It is an enriching experience that we need to embrace as a reality of living outside the borders of our native countries.”

Latinos in Elected Office

Higher Latin representation in the government will have a deep impact in future generations, according to Mayra De La Roca, Program Coordinator for VOCA (Federal Victims of Crime Act) in the Center for Hispanic Policy and Advocacy (CHiSPA). “The fact that Latin people have taken office and are representing the diverse communities in the city is a great achievement. They set an example that our
children can follow. It tells our Latino youth that they don’t have to settle for less; that they can have ambitions and that they have a voice that should be heard,” she says.

Daniel Robles, a Dominican-American college student residing in New York, shares his opinion about the increasing Hispanic presence in the government of Rhode Island. “As a Hispanic living in an American system, I consider this is quite a victory for minorities. The United States is a country founded under principles of equal opportunity. The country’s spirit condenses in its rich mix of the various ethnic groups that have arrived as immigrants throughout history.”

David Cabral, a Dominican college student residing in the Dominican Republic, comments: “It brings me joy that people are embracing change and allowing Latin-American government participation. Latinos are a large percentage of the working class in the United States; it is a social reality.”