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Project Animate: Promoting Student Civic Participation through Latino Voter Mobilization - OLLAS Report No. 6

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Project *Animate*:

Promoting Student Civic Participation through Latino Voter Mobilization



Dr. Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado,
University of Nebraska at Omaha

December 15, 2009

OLLAS



OFFICE OF
LATINO/LATIN
AMERICAN STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

animate!
Get Ready! Get Set! Go and Watch The News to Move!


Promoting Student Civic Participation through Latino Voter Mobilization

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Report prepared for the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS)
University of Nebraska, at Omaha
December 15, 2009

Acknowledgments

This research report is dedicated to the dozens of high-school and university student volunteers from the Omaha area who willingly and tirelessly gave of their time to make this entire project become a reality. I had the pleasure of working with these serious and committed individuals who in some respects were “just along for the ride,” but quickly were transformed by their interaction with their fellow citizens, into proponents and guardians of the democratic process for years to come. Their willingness and enthusiasm to engage their community in this most hallowed of our traditions restores my hope for our future and strengthens our collective resolve to advance democracy.



OLLAS (the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies of the Great Plains) is a center of excellence that focuses on the Latino population of the Americas with particular emphasis on U.S. Latino and Latin American transnational communities. It is an interdisciplinary program that enhances our understanding of economic, political, and cultural issues relevant to these communities. In August 2003, OLLAS received a \$1,000,000 award from the Department of Education (Award # P116Z030100). One of the three central objectives funded by this grant is the “development and implementation of a research agenda designed to address the most urgent and neglected aspects associated with the region’s unprecedented Latino population growth and its local, regional and transhemispheric implications. These projects involve collaboration with community agencies, UNO programs and faculty and other governmental and non-governmental associations.” This report represents a clear example of our continued fulfillment of that objective.

For more information on OLLAS contact Dr. Lourdes Gouveia (402-554-3835) or go to the website:

<http://www.unomaha.edu/ollas>

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Project Objectives

This project sought to expand voter outreach and mobilization of new registered and Latino voters through a series of activities to be undertaken in winter of 2007 leading up to the 2008 General Election in the greater Omaha metropolitan area. Following the successful development of a voter mobilization project undertaken in the 2006 election cycle, this project conducted a series of door-to-door canvassing activities utilizing University of Nebraska at Omaha students to distribute non-partisan voter information, and engage in “get out the vote” activities with new Latino registered voters in Ward 4 of Douglas County, Nebraska and among Southeast Omaha’s predominately minority communities. As of 9/1/2008, there were approximately 10,000 newly registered

voters (NRV’s) in Douglas County. We estimated that there may be as many as 3,000 of these new voters in Legislative Districts 5 and 7 (an area approximately from the Missouri River to 72nd Street and from the downtown Omaha area down into Ralston and Bellevue).

From our review of the political science literature on new voter mobilization and turnout, we expected that between 13 and 15 percent of these new registrants would actually make it to the polls. If we engaged in a targeted campaign of door-to-door canvassing of new voters, where we distributed voting day information and directly asked them to “promise” to vote, we expected that the turnout percentage might increase to approximately 20 percent. Originally, we also thought that if we coupled that effort with mailing

¹ A debt of gratitude must be extended to the Office of the Nebraska Secretary of State for under writing this project. In particular, we thank Secretary of State John Gale and Neil Erickson for their advice and support. We are also grateful to Dave Phipps and Lisa Wise of the Douglas County Election Commission for their cooperation in the collection of data for the analysis of voter statistics.

² Funding made possible through a grant with the American Democracy Project at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 2006.

out a “Thank You for Registering” card with two tear-off “vote-by-mail” applications the turnout total starts to rise to near 30 percent. The last get-out-the-vote efforts planned would be two-fold: (1) reminder calls to all voters to either turn in their vote by mail ballots and/or to remind them that election day is approaching and to inform them where their polling place is located; and (2) door-to-door canvassing with polling place information for voters. We were conservative and estimated that total turnout on the whole would increase by 15 to 20 percent (primarily because this was a highly contested national election) but that turnout for new registered voters will be as high as 30 percent (our “pie in the sky” turnout estimate for new registered voters was to surpass 50 percent).

The most dramatic change in the project’s objectives was to scuttle the mail and telephone bank outreach to the new registered voters. While there was no direct partisan affiliation with any aspect of the project, the mere appearance of “targeting”

Latino voters by utilizing “get-out-the-vote” tactics such as these could indirectly implicate the University of Nebraska and the Office of the Nebraska Secretary of State in “campaigning” whether or not such was the case. Moreover, we decided from the outset to leave new voter registration and “early voting promotion” to a whole host of community groups and partisan organizations that were already engaged in those activities, again to avoid the appearance of “campaigning.”

Project Activities

1. Project field organizers and student volunteers attended the Mexican Independence Day (September 16th) celebration and distributed voter information cards. There were between 7,000 to 10,000 individuals attending that weekend, and 500 voter information cards were distributed.
2. Project director developed yard sign designs – working with Oxide Design, an Omaha graphic design firm and Clear Communications, an Omaha-based political marketing firm we developed the artwork for the yard signs and utilized their services to develop the precinct walk lists.
3. Recruited student volunteer groups – the project field organizers recruited three student organizations to serve as canvassers. Each of these groups committed to 100 man-hours and in turn received a \$500 stipend paid directly to their organization for purposes of philanthropic fundraising as well as satisfying university community service requirements.
4. Conducted door-to-door canvassing – We conducted four weekends of door-to-door canvassing (Sept 27th, October 11th, 18th, and 25th). We distributed voter information cards (see below) as well as distributing Proyecto Animate yard signs on “blossom day – October 4th).
5. We contacted the Spanish language media (radio stations) and asked them if they would play public service announcements that had been produced and distributed by the National Council of La Raza. These PSAs were highly professional non-partisan testimonials in Spanish aimed at mobilizing Latino voters to participate in the registration and voting processes. Both Radio Lobo and La Preciosa put the PSA’s into their rotation in the month leading up to the November 2008 general election.
6. Organized the participation of 60 campaign workers and students in the 2008 Cinco De Mayo parade. Additionally, student volunteers manned an information booth distributing voter information cards and yard signs.



Yardsign design (translation: Get Registered! Get Informed! Go and Vote! The Time is Now!)

¡animate!

¡Regístrate Ya! ¡Infórmate Ya! ¡Ve Y Vota! ¡Ya Es Hora!

5 cosas que debe saber el Día De Las Elecciones

- 1 Vaya al lugar que le corresponde:** Los lugares de votación pueden cambiar. Ubique su recinto electoral antes de ir a votar, consulte www.votedouglascounty.com o llame a 1-402-444-VOTE (8683). Para información en español consulte www.veyvota.org o llame a 1-888-VE-Y-VOTA.
- 2 Lleve su identificación:** Quizá tenga que presentar un documento de identificación en el recinto electoral. Para evitar contratiempos, lleve su licencia de conducir u otro documento de identificación con foto. Algunos lugares aceptan una cuenta de de servicios públicos actual, cheque de sueldo o documento de figura su nombre y dirección.
- 3 Consigue una boleta:** No se desespere si se ha inscrito para votar pero su nombre no figura en el padrón electoral. Pídale ayuda al encargado de mesa para cerciorarse de que su voto se compute. Le deberán entregar una boleta provisional o indicaciones para ir a otro recinto electoral.
- 4 Busca los carteles en la pared o pida ayuda:** La gente a cargo de las mesas electorales está ahí para prestrle su ayuda. Les mostrarán cómo usar la maquina para votar, o llenar la boleta, o si necesita, le entregarán una boleta provisional. Pregunte o lea a los carteles que se encuentran en su recinto electoral, donde encontrará instrucciones, la list de sus derechos como votar e indicaciones para presentar una queja.
- 5 Espere y vote:** Probablemente no tenga que esperar mucho. Pero, aunque la cola sea larga, no se retire antes de votar. ¡Los resultados de estas elecciones son muy importantes! Verifique que hay accesibilidad al recinto electoral para los ancianos y para personas con inhabilidades. Para mas información consulte www.sos.ne.gov/dyindex.html or llame a 1-402-444-VOTE.

¡Animate! es un proyecto independiente de la Universidad de Nebraska Omaha y la Oficina de Estudios Latino/Latino Americanos para movilizar el proceso de votar. El Secretario de Estado de Nebraska se ha proporcionado el financiamiento del proyecto. Oxide Design Co. es socio del diseño de ¡Animate!

Voter Information Card – “The 5 things You Need to Know on Election Day” (adopted from a League of Women’s Voters flyer and translated into Spanish)

Organizational Structure

This project was funded by the office of the Nebraska Secretary of State to promote voter mobilization in minority communities in Douglas County. The Department of Political Science at UNO served as an on-campus base of operations and allowed the group to use its conference room for meetings. Dr. Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado served as the project manager, Mark Matulka, a graduate student in the Political Science department was the project coordinator and we worked together with the Douglas County Election Commission, Oxide Design, the Omaha Public Schools, Clear Communications Inc., and other entities to obtain information and materials essential to the project.

I hired Christopher Chevront and Roger Garcia (both UNO undergraduate students) to serve as field organizers – they were responsible for the recruitment and management of student-volunteer groups for the door-to-door canvassing, phone calling and yard sign placement.

The field organizers recruited three student organizations and over 50 student volunteers to come to South Omaha and walk precincts for four of the six weekends leading up to the November 2008 general election.

Project results: Voter turnout detail

Table 1: 2004/2008 Ward 4 Turnout Comparison

Year	Total Registered	Total Voted	% Total Voted
2004	30,422	18,064	59.38
2008	26,665	17,010	63.8
Gain/Loss	(3,757)	(1,054)	+3.7
% Difference	(12.4%)	(5.4%)	7.0%

(Source: Douglas County Election Commission, 2004, 2008)

Strikingly, there was a significant loss of total registered voters in Ward 4 (the South Omaha area) between 2004 and 2008. The loss of nearly 4,000 registered voters (12.4 percent) was a result of a purging of voters who were deceased or no longer lived in the ward. Ironically, the influx of new Latino immigrants (estimated at nearly 45,000 or 11.6 percent, as of the 2008 Census report) has had little impact commensurate with its growing presence in South Omaha, even though they represent as much as 50 percent of the population in some precincts in Ward 4. Statewide, Omaha's Latino population is 60 percent of the state's Latino population. This lack of voter presence owes largely to two factors. First, the vast majority of Latinos in Omaha are relatively young (well over 50 percent are 21 and younger). Second, less than half of the Latino adult population (47 percent) is actually eligible to vote, of that total 36.8 percent is registered to vote. In Douglas County this accounts for only 2 to 3 percent of the registered

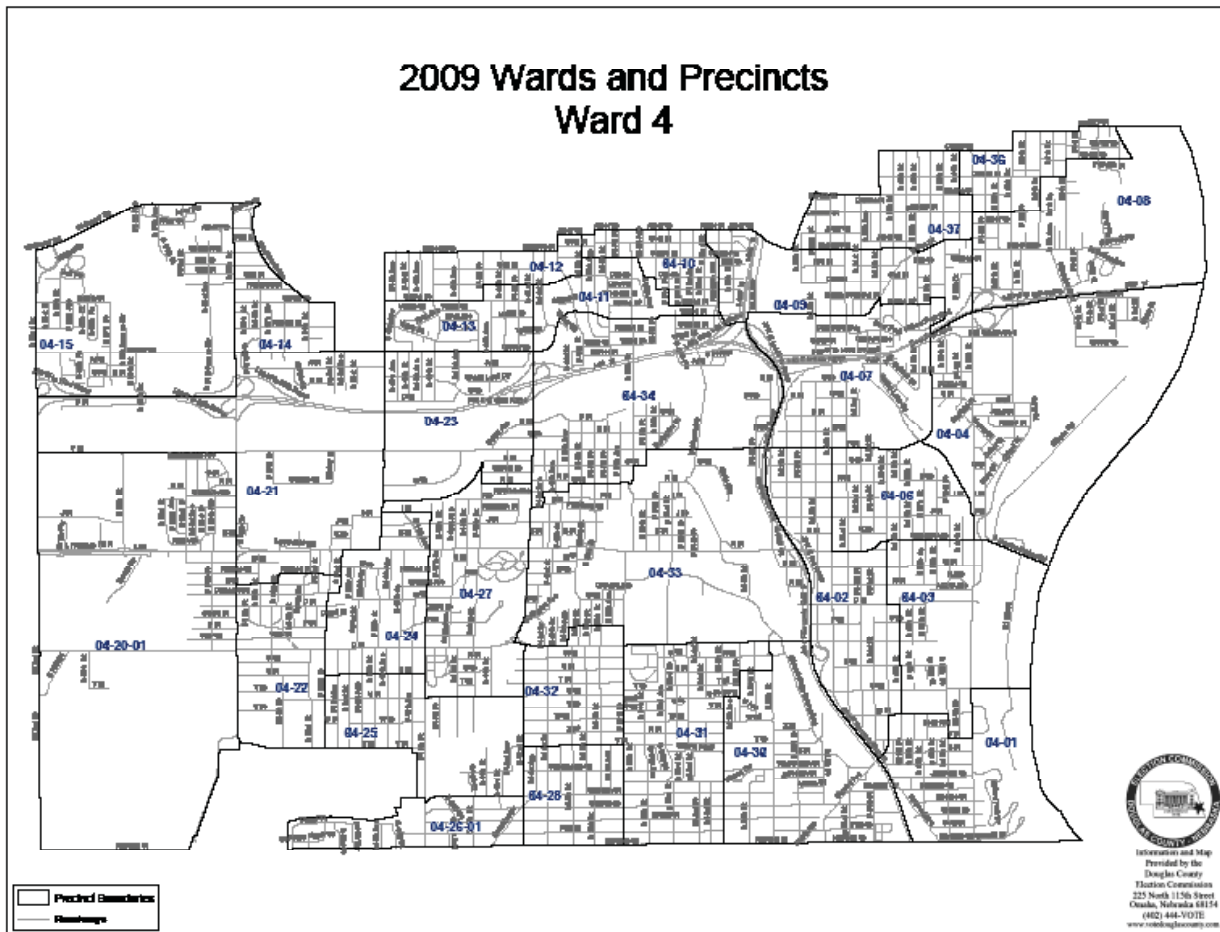
voting population. In spite of these factors that serve to underscore the lower rates of Latino voter participation in Omaha and across the state, the Latino turnout statewide in the 2008 was estimated to be 85 percent, and it is estimated that the turnout of Latinos in South Omaha was similarly as high. This is indicative of a highly motivated voting population that is energized and possesses the potential of serving a swing vote in a close election should they vote as a block. The extent to which the percentage of Latino registered voters is increased through voter registration campaigns will determine the size and voting potential of this group. All indications are that because of: A) a youth bubble in the Latino population coming of age; B) a steady growth in the number of Latinos becoming citizens; and C) broader efforts to reach all potential Latino voters for registration, that this potential will be realized. Previous reports on Latino political participation estimated that this figure could reach 10 percent as soon as 2015.

³ This estimate is based on tally of Latino surname registered voters in 5 precincts in Ward 4.

⁴ Estimates drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008, Internet Released Data (February 2009). The figures for the total percent registered and percent voted of the 18+ Latino population in Nebraska had significant margins of error of 16.9, and 16.3 percent respectively.

⁵ Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado Latino Political Participation in Nebraska: The Challenge of Enhancing Voter Mobilization and Representation, OLLAS Report No. 3, October 2006

Diagram 1: Ward 4, Omaha, Nebraska



Source: Douglas County Election Commission, 2009.

Table 2: 2004/2008 Douglas County Turnout Comparison

Year	Total Registered	Total Voted	% Total Voted
2004	318,347	208,450	65.48
2008	315,185	228,916	72.6
Gain/Loss	(3,162)	20,466	+7.12
% Difference	(1.01%)	9.1%	9.9%

(Source: Douglas County Election Commission, 2004, 2008)

Insofar as the 12 percent drop in registered voters in was significant, the increase in turnout of 3.7 percent for the 2008 election all but erased the impact of that loss. While the “Obama effect” was discernable in the ward, we cannot underestimate the non-partisan role that Proyecto Animate 2008 had in mobilizing newly registered and Latino voters.

To accomplish this objective these voters were identified and targeted through a comprehensive door-to-door voter education campaign. The PA2008 recruited three UNO campus organizations (the Pi Kappa Alpha and Sigma Lambda Beta fraternities, and the UNO Chapter of the National Council of Negro Women) as well as non-associated student volunteers from UNO and Omaha South High School responding to public service announcements. All told, this group of 62 student volunteers in 360 man/hours, canvassed 32 precincts in South Omaha, going door-to-door to the homes of 2,213 new and Latino registered voters and speaking directly with over 300 individuals. More than half of

the student volunteers spoke Spanish and were matched with English only speaking students to ensure that the canvassers would be able to communicate effectively with any and all potential voters that they came into contact with. The walk lists were a cross-listing of new registered and Latino voters regardless of party affiliation. In all cases, non-partisan voter information was left at all homes, and yards signs were distributed to over 200 homeowners. The number of new registered voters in 2008 in Ward 4 was 2,086. This includes 1,118 registered as Democrats, 613 registered as non-partisan, and 350 registered as Republicans. The turnout among this group was a phenomenal 66.3 percent.

⁶Information on voter turnout for Douglas County and at the precinct level in Ward 4 was obtained from the Douglas County Election Commission via the internet - <http://www.votedouglascounty.com>. See Douglas County Election Commission, November 4, 2008 – Official Results.

Comparing 2006 and 2008 Turnout in Ward 4.

General Election 2006 Ward 4 Registered Voters	-27,911
General Election 2008 Ward 4 Registered Voters	-26,512
Net Gain/Loss	- 1,399
Number of registered voters in Ward 4 who were not registered in Ward prior to General 2006 but were registered prior to General 2008	- 6,452
Number of those new or reregistered voters that voted in 2008	- 4,278
Turnout of new or re-registered voters	- 66.3 percent

(Source: Douglas County Election Commission, 2009)

The PA2008 field workers also distributed 250 window and yard campaign signs to businesses in the South Omaha district to publicize the campaign. Moreover, a group of 60 individuals (UNO and Omaha Public Schools students) marched in the 2008 Cinco de Mayo parade distributing non-partisan voter information to the over 25,000 people along the parade route in advance of the primary and general election cycles. The students carried signage and wore t-shirts promoting the PA2008 campaign.

Impact on the Student Workers

It is sometimes difficult to measure the impact that election campaigns have on individuals.

In some cases there is significant “campaign fatigue” at the end of an all-consuming and arduous process. We were keenly aware of this as we embarked on the campaign and were attentive to the fact that not only were we hoping to mobilize voters, but we were also seeking to deepen the political socialization of the student volunteers by not only raising their awareness of what non-partisan campaign canvassing involves but to also expose them to opportunities for public service. As a direct consequence of their participation in PA 2008 two of the student workers have assumed full-time jobs in public service.

⁷ Data was provided by Lisa Wise at the Douglas County Election Commission regarding a comparative analysis of registration and turnout between 2006 and 2008. These numbers came from *voterfile* which is the most accurate pre-election registration information that they have. These numbers vary slightly from the turnout provided on their website as those numbers come from the post election registrations which include registrations that may have been updated using the provisional ballot.

Project Coordinator Mark Matulka completed his graduate program of study in Political Science and is now a Policy Analyst in the Nebraska Governor's Policy Research Office, and Field Organizer Roger Garcia is now the Community Liaison to south Omaha community for the City of Omaha with the Office of the Mayor. Many of the students expressed that the process of engaging registered voters and encouraging them to go to the polls had the impact of transforming their view of the political process and has given them confidence to engage the public regarding voting and civic participation on a more active basis. Many turned their attention to local mayoral and city council races in Omaha in the spring of 2009. In this regard the project can be viewed as a credible vehicle for the political socialization of young people with diverse backgrounds and political persuasions to work together for a common cause – the engagement and sustainability of the electoral processes that serve as the foundation of our democratic system of governance.

Concluding Remarks

Political scientists, election officials, political party operatives and pundits have all wondered out loud what could be the impact of the growing Latino population on the American political system, especially in terms of voting participation and elections. This project was undertaken largely because of a growing body of evidence suggesting that partisan efforts to mobilize Latino voters in Omaha, Nebraska did not resonate with this group. A comprehensive review in the political science literature of efforts to “get-out-the-vote”(GOTV) suggested that the traditional methods of GOTV – mailings, phone calls (live and robo-calls), and campaign advertising were not effective methods of reaching this growing population. Because of demographic trends pointing to Latinos comprising 25 percent of the U.S. population by 2025, the lack of Latino political participation represents a challenge to the American democracy because it perhaps portends a future where a significant proportion of the population is not critically engaged in the political process and subsequently may be under-represented.

⁸ Ibid., Benjamin-Alvarado, 2006.

These factors compelled the project to assiduously pursue a face-to-face, door-to-door canvassing approach of outreach and information dissemination that was linguistically and culturally appropriate for the target population. While initially more difficult because of the necessity of preparing all materials, scripts and messaging in two languages, it ultimately facilitated the delivery and efficiency of the voter information. The increases in turnout were especially pleasing and were positive proof of the efficacy of the endeavor. We originally estimated that total turnout on the whole would increase by 15 to 20 percent . The actual gain was only 7 percent, but the turnout for new registered voters was 70 percent. This far exceeded our “best guess” estimates at the outset on perhaps 50 percent.

We were pleased by the overwhelming sense of support from the community at large for undertaking this non-partisan effort, especially with the support of elected representatives at the local, state and federal levels. This set the table for an undertaking that was well-received and ultimately successful. In this regard, all outside observers were especially taken with the role that the student volunteers assumed in providing information and education the target group to enlighten and empower them sufficiently enough to approach the ballot box with confidence in the process and their particular role in making the electoral process work. This was positively reflected in the media, press and throughout the community.

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