

**“Changing Demographics:
Impact in the Polling Booth and the Classroom”
Mansfield League of Women Voters
February 23, 2013**

I am delighted that Eastern could host this morning’s League of Women Voters breakfast on our campus. If you haven’t been here during the spring, please come back when all the flowers and trees are in bloom. It’s a gorgeous time to be at Eastern. But today is also a good day to be together, as we speak about matters that all of us care deeply about. Again, I am proud to welcome all of you to Eastern, and I am honored to speak to the Mansfield chapter of the League of Women Voters this morning. I want to thank Sondra Astor Stave and other board members for inviting me to speak with you.

The League of Women Voters has historically taken a lead role in our nation in supporting voting rights, in encouraging people to exercise those rights, and in informing our electorate of the critical issues facing our nation, so that voters—women and men—can make informed decisions in the polling booth. In our self-governed democracy, this organization plays a critical role in advancing the cause of freedom and ensuring that we are truly a nation governed of, by, and for the people.

Started in 1920 at the National American Woman Suffrage Association convention just six months before the 19th amendment was passed, the League of Women Voters has always been nonpartisan, yet active in its role in advocating for political participation for women and others who deserve political representation. The League has a fundamental belief that the Great American Democracy can truly be for all citizens.

Today there are 800 state and local League of Women Voters chapters, each promoting voter education, voter participation, and governmental and social reform at the grassroots level.

Here in the Windham and Mansfield area, the Mansfield chapter of the League of Women Voters has been busy promoting democracy since 1941—that’s more than 70 years of service to our communities and the principles of democratic self-governance that we all believe in! (APPLAUSE) The Mansfield chapter serves Ashford, Chaplin, Columbia, Coventry, Eastford, Hampton, Mansfield, Stafford Springs, Willington and Windham. It is committed to providing information to voters and the public through a variety of events, including breakfasts such as the one we are at today, Meet the Candidates Nights in October prior to November elections, and an annual Legislative Breakfast in January.

Through its advocacy and support of the democratic process, the Mansfield chapter has impacted such local issues as Town Planning and Zoning; Public Library Services; Town Ordinances; Full-Day Public Kindergarten; Before- and After-School Programs; environmental stewardship; foreign language skills in the elementary grades; Bicycle and Walking Paths; Assisted Living Housing for the Aging; and many other important social issues. I applaud the members and leadership of this organization for the work you are doing in eastern Connecticut. You are an essential part of the fabric of the community.

My topic today deals with the impact that the changing demographics of our American society is having in the polling booth and in our classrooms. I refer to the growing percentage of our population that is Latino or Hispanic.

Some people use those two terms interchangeably, while you will find that each term also has its own regional popularity. For convenience, I will use the term Latino exclusively to refer to people of Latin American descent whose native language is Spanish. As you may know, there

are more than 20 nations in Latin America, with many different ethnicities, cultures, language dialects, customs, and traditions. “Latino” is a label, not a nation, not an ethnicity, not a race. Forging political consensus among the Latino community, let alone creating a political base necessary to achieve democratic representation, has been a long struggle, even in geographic areas where the majority of Latinos are Puerto Ricans like myself—U.S. citizens with voting rights from birth. But our time has come.

As I share information about the most recent voting outcomes at the national, state, and local levels, you will begin to see that Latinos are finally flexing their political muscle, which has significant implications throughout our political system and our social institutions.

NATIONALLY

Let’s talk a little bit about the national stage. Reflecting the changing demographics of the United States, the growing Latino voting bloc has finally emerged as a political force at the national level. Consider these outcomes of the 2012 elections:

- Women and ethnic minorities now make up the majority of the U.S. House of Representatives Democratic Caucus.
- There are 28 Latinos in the House—25 Democrats and 3 Republicans.
- There are three Latinos in the Senate—two Republicans and a Democrat. Interestingly, despite the fact most Latinos in the United States are Mexican-Americans, followed by Puerto Ricans, these three U.S. senators are all Cuban-Americans.
- In addition to Florida, New Mexico, Colorado, and Nevada, all of which have seen the role of Latino voters increase to the point where they are now steadily “blue” states, it is projected that Arizona, Texas, and even Georgia will move into the “blue” or Democratic column in the next presidential election. This speaks volumes regarding the future of the Republican Party based on its current policy views, both in terms of the Presidency as well as congressional and statewide elections in those states. For instance, in Colorado, five new Latino state representatives were elected, not all from exclusively Latino districts.
- At the national level, the key legislative initiative for Latinos is immigration reform. The group Politico found that 62% of Americans support immigration reform. There are 11-12 million undocumented Latinos in the United States. Most of them work and contribute to the U.S. economy. Economists project that giving these people legal residency would generate \$1.5 trillion for the Gross Domestic Product over the next 10 years. Whether seen as a moral issue or an economic one, it is expected immigration reform in some form will have enough Democratic and Republican support to be passed in the new Congressional session.
- Another critical issue for Latinos is English literacy, and education for adults whose children are bilingual but who cannot afford to go back to school. Texas Congressman Larry Gonzales is introducing federal legislation to support schools in enrolling parents/adult students in high schools to complete their education.
- Other issues that Latinos care about and share with the mainstream include education, jobs and the economy, the budget deficit and health care.

Despite the progress in political representation that I have described, Latinos in our nation still need to be more involved in the political process. I think immigration reform will be a major factor in getting more Latinos to gain citizenship status, voting status, and an interest in the electoral process. But the fact is, even current Latino voters are not voting at levels they could be. In 2008, only 50 percent of eligible Latino voters actually went to the polls. In 2012,

that figure was calculated in the 44-53% range based on each state, below the overall figure of 58 percent of all U.S. eligible voters.

In Puerto Rico, voter turnout is typically in the 80-90 percent range, perhaps the highest among all countries that hold elections. Elections in Puerto Rico are once every four years—it is a time for celebration and festivities, a proud moment for all Puerto Ricans. The culture is cohesive, people understand the issues and are familiar with the candidates, and they feel that their vote counts.

In the United States, while they are citizens and have voting rights, Puerto Ricans have not “voted their weight,” for a number of reasons. The American political system—with elections every year, sometimes several in a year—can be complex and confusing. Elections occur for federal, state, and local offices, for boards, commissions, and councils, and other groups, as well as for referenda on selected issues. The political process—how to become engaged, how to stay informed—is usually not communicated in both English and Spanish.

The lack of English literacy and education are also a factor. Most importantly, many Puerto Ricans and other Latinos do not feel the mainstream political structure and apparatus care about issues of interest to the Latino community—immigration, literacy, housing, and educational equity. This lack of attention is seen as a sign of disrespect. When the Latino community isn’t able to field candidates who have a chance of winning elections, as one local political activist explained, “Every day is a struggle, and at some point, you lose faith in the process.”

As Tip O’Neil used to say, “All politics are local.” In a moment, I will speak to politics in Willimantic, and how we can increase political awareness and involvement at the local level.

CONNECTICUT

But first, let us talk about how national trends are reflected across the state of Connecticut.

In our state, Latinos are also beginning to see results from a growing Latino voting population and the emergence of Latino political figures. For the first time, Latinos are represented in the State Senate. In fact, we now have two Latino state senators and 11 Latino state representatives, an all-time high.

Even so, with 5.5 percent of the State Senate, and 7.2 percent of the House, Connecticut Latinos are still underrepresented, considering that they constitute 13-14 percent of the state population. In addition, Latinos make up only 8 percent of registered voters in Connecticut. While we saw a 16 percent increase in the number of registered Latino voters from 2008 to 2012, only half the Latinos in Connecticut are eligible to vote, and only two-thirds who are eligible actually register.

After immigration reform at the national level occurs, it must be followed by aggressive citizenship education and voter registration campaigns if we are to change these numbers, especially in towns like Willimantic, with its large Latino community. The good news is that we do have free citizenship instruction locally through EASTCONN; I think in the coming years, it will be the job of the people in this room to encourage and promote citizenship to undocumented residents, and to support voter registration for all new citizens.

LOCAL POLITICS

Now let me talk about Latino politics in Willimantic. It is truly a unique community, representing 40-50 percent of the total population—more than three times the state average. Windham County’s Latino population has a history going back 55 years.

As early as 1958, the Hartford Poultry Company was flying Puerto Ricans back to Willimantic to work in their chicken processing plant. A few years later, the American Thread Company was doing the same. For the workers, it was an opportunity to live in the United States, have a job when they arrived in town, and work at higher wages than any they would find in Puerto Rico. For the companies, the arrangement represented a steady supply of low-skilled workers who nonetheless worked hard and had no visa issues to deal with. Puerto Ricans continued to move into Willimantic throughout the 1960s and 1970s, establishing themselves, bringing family and friends with them, and attempting to keep their heritage alive while also gaining acceptance in town.

Even with a growing population—U.S. citizens like other town residents—Puerto Ricans in Willimantic have found that political clout has been hard to come by. In this country, anyone can talk about politics; in fact, our Constitution protects our right to say almost anything on our mind. But forming political coalitions, creating consensus around policy, and moving those discussions to a vote requires professional skills, education, and English language skills that most Latino immigrants arriving in Willimantic have lacked.

In addition, even now, with a sizable minority population, Latino politicians in Willimantic cannot get elected unless they champion issues of interest to the general population, not just Latinos. Over time, Puerto Ricans have been elected to the town council, school board, and other elected positions based chiefly on their leadership skills, persistence, and ability to demonstrate that they can represent the broad community.

I refer to people like Eladio Soto-Perez, who founded the Puerto Rican Organization Program—a major grassroots support system in Willimantic for Puerto Ricans in the 1970s and 1980s—and was later on the School Board. And Luis Diaz, who was the first Latino on a local board, serving on the Board of Finance from 1983-1993. Yolanda Négron was the first Latina on the Town Council, followed in later years by people like James Flores, Lourdes Montalvo—a current member of the Connecticut Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission—and now Arnaldo Rivera. Luz Osuba is now on the school board.

Other Puerto Rican political activists over the years in Willimantic have included Juan Perez, also a former Latino/Puerto Rican Affairs Commissioner, and Jose Vasquez, who was the president of PROP from 1976-1981 and local NAACP president.

We have certainly come a long way since 1983, when there were only 465 registered Puerto Rican voters in Willimantic.

Despite the courage, commitment, and perseverance of these activists and pioneers, and even though Latinos make up more than 40 percent of the population of Willimantic today, current political representation does not reflect the population. There is only one Latino on the town council out of 11 positions, and one on the school board out of nine members.

If you talk with local political activists from the Latino community, they will describe a number of factors that impact the level of political activism and involvement by their constituents.

- As I mentioned earlier, while Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, the political process in the United States, in Connecticut, and here in Willimantic is different from their native island. There, elections occur once every four years, and are festive, celebratory events. The notion of having boards, committees, commissions, and frequent elections for various offices as well as referenda at the national, state and local levels is something they must become familiar with. We need to do a better job of explaining the democratic and elective process to our Latino community, both in English and in Spanish. Perhaps this is something the

League of Women Voters can take a leadership role in, if you aren't already pursuing this strategy.

- Even though Puerto Ricans have citizenship and voting rights, other Latinos—Mexicans, Guatemalans, Dominicans—must establish legal residency first, something that has been a huge barrier for many. If you aren't legal, you can't become a citizen, if you aren't a citizen, you can't vote, and if you can't vote, you certainly can't hold political office. Not only is it very easy for undocumented residents to turn their back on politics at the national and state levels, getting actively involved at the local level places them in a vulnerable position, even if they can speak English well enough to be part of the discussion.
- We must demonstrate to the Latino population that our political process can and will address the social and economic issues they care about, or they won't participate in the political process even with citizenship and voting rights.
- The issues that are of most concern to Latinos are immigration, literacy and education. Immigration is an issue being addressed at the national/federal level. Literacy, on the other hand, is a state policy issue that is ultimately implemented at the local level. And literacy is tied to education, perhaps the most important issue facing our country as a whole, and the Latino sector of our population.

Let me share information with you about the impact the changing demographics of our society is having on our educational system, particularly at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

- Perhaps as many as 2/3rds of the school-aged children in Willimantic are Latino.
- 2/3rds of the students at Hartford Public High School are Latino.
- Latinos and African American students in our inner cities are stuck in a generational cycle of poverty that has been going on for generations, and is caused by a long list of social issues ranging from education to employment, housing, teenage pregnancy, and nutrition.
- A Latino child who enters first grade without grade-appropriate English language proficiency is at least one year behind the day they walk into school.
- By grade four, Latino children in Hartford, Bridgeport, Willimantic, and other Connecticut cities are performing as much as two grade levels behind their more affluent, white counterparts in our wealthier townships. The gap in Connecticut is the largest in the nation, and gets worse as kids continue through school.
- Latinos have higher drop-out rates, higher poverty rates, and lower college attendance and graduation rates than the overall population.
- Our state's bilingual education law provides for bilingual education for 30 months, followed by transitional services until Spanish language students are mainstreamed. Educators in Hartford and Willimantic have told us this is not long enough. Students need to learn how to read and write in English for all other academic subjects, including math and science. Bilingual instruction for four to five years is being recommended by members of the Latino educational community.
- In addition to the issue of language instruction for school-aged children, as I noted at the outset in describing an initiative by Texas Congressman Larry Gonzales, providing English literacy and educational opportunities to adult Latinos is critical, not only for their own career and employment success, but to reinforce instruction their children receive.

Just as I know that the League of Women Voters will be right in the middle of the discussion of citizenship instruction and voting rights advocacy in the coming years, Eastern Connecticut State University is committed to supporting the educational needs of a growing Latino population. We are making progress, and I want to briefly describe how we are achieving results. The Education Trust, a national education advocacy group, announced last fall that Eastern ranked number one in a national study of the improvement of six-year graduation rates of Latino students among public universities and colleges. For the class of full-time, first-time students entering in fall 1998, the six-year graduation rate was barely 20 percent for Latino students at Eastern. However, for those Latino students entering in 2004, the proportion who had graduated by 2010 was 57.8 percent, the largest improvement among the 228 public institutions in The Education Trust study.

How have we done this? First of all, we have increased access. We have two summer programs that help low-income students with test scores and other measures below our entrance standards to demonstrate that, with additional support, they can succeed at Eastern. Our Dual Enrollment Program, now in its fifth year, has enrolled more than 50 students from Hartford and Manchester High Schools—students who had no plan nor the test scores to go to college—and is showing what you can do when you combine opportunity and support. Almost all of these students, by the way, are Latino or African-American.

Secondly, we have improved support services for all students, with additional advising staff; a revised, four-tiered advising system; faculty mentors; and a one-stop Academic Services Center that provides tutoring, math and writing instructional support for more than 10,000 student visitors a year.

Thirdly, we recognize the importance of providing role models for Latinos and other minority students. Eastern has the largest percentage of minority faculty of any college or university in Connecticut, including UCONN, Wesleyan, and Yale.

I have shared this brief story about Eastern to make the point that we can provide educational access to a growing Latino population, and they can be successful when we use the right resources and interventions.

CONCLUSION

The changing demographics in our country have placed a spotlight on our Latino community. But the issue of educating our people and giving people from other lands the chance to achieve the American Dream is not about race or ethnicity, or whether you live in the city or in a small town.

It is about economic and social class, about breaking the poverty cycle that is blind to color and national origin. As we move into a new social order where more than 11 million undocumented aliens can achieve resident status, where we will add to the rolls of citizens in this great nation, where we can register these new citizens as voters and give them reasons to vote, and where we can bring the promise of a college education to more students from all walks of life, I hope that the League of Women Voters, Eastern Connecticut State University, and other local leaders can work together to expand political dialog and encourage political representation for the entire community.

An educated citizenry is the key to our democracy, and we have an unprecedented opportunity to expand that political voice. I look forward to working with you and other community leaders on this important task. Again, thank you for allowing me to speak with you this morning.