

**“Latinos in U.S. society” reading questions**

1. Why has it been difficult to categorize Latinos on the U.S. census?
2. What is relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico?
3. Which group of Latinos has the longest history of any Latino group in America?
4. What has the role of LULAC been in the United States?
5. How did Latinos follow a similar path to African Americans in their struggle for civil rights?
6. What was the role of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers of America?
7. Why do you think politicians are paying more attention to Latino Americans?
8. Which U.S. state has the largest Latino population?

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## LATINOS IN U.S. SOCIETY

Both recent immigrants and U.S.-born natives with long-standing histories, people of Latino descent in the United States hail from a variety of backgrounds. They are the fastest growing ethnic population in America and embody significant minority populations in many states. In fact, statisticians estimate that the Latino population in California will become the majority population before the year 2025. Today, they comprise approximately 13% of the entire American population.

Known variously as Hispanics, Latinos, or Chicanos, people of Latino descent are generally defined as having ancestral roots in Mexico or Central or South America. One of the most diverse ethnic populations in the United States, Latinos consist of several subgroups who share a common language and cultural heritage combining Indian, Spanish, and African descent. While many are Catholics, a large number adhere to Protestant faiths, including the Mormon Church.

Because of this complex ethnic heritage, many Latinos are not easily categorized on the U.S. census, prompting census officials to count Latinos differently from other ethnic groups. For example, in the 1990 census, 50.6% of Latinos categorized themselves as white, 46.7 % selected the "other" category (which included Hispanic), and 1.2% categorized themselves as African American. As a result, many population statistics count Latinos twice, first mixed in with the other ethnic groups with which they identify and then as a separate category. This anomaly is why population percentages for the United States frequently add up to more than 100%.

Geographical diversity also defines the Latino population. Centered in selected states, primarily New York, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Illinois, many Latinos are recent immigrants to the United States who migrated to find better socioeconomic opportunities. Some, like Cubans and Guatemalans, are political refugees who have sought safe haven in America. The former fled the Cuban Revolution in 1959 while the latter arrived in the 1980s.

Puerto Ricans embody a unique subgroup of the American Latino population, as Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory. During the Spanish-American War, the United States captured Puerto Rico from Spain and has ruled it as a satellite territory ever since. After two decades of direct colonial administration, the U.S. government allowed Puerto Ricans to declare their island a national commonwealth and rule it themselves, although they remained under U.S. sovereignty. Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship by the passage of the Jones Act in 1917, though they cannot vote in national elections. The overwhelming majority of the 2 million Puerto Ricans in the United States immigrated after World War II, though Puerto Rican workers came to Hawaii in the 19th century as well. Unlike other Latino immigrants, their entrance into the United States after 1900 was relatively unencumbered. Those who came to the United States settled primarily in New York City, establishing barrios in Brooklyn, East "Spanish" Harlem, and the Bronx.

The history of Latinos is as equally diverse as the subgroups that they form. Mexicans possess the longest history of any Latino group in America. Spain and Mexico settled the southwest and western portions of the United States between 1540 and 1848 before Americans claimed the region as the fruits of victory in the Mexican-American War. Mexicans living in this area at the time became American citizens but frequently struggled against rigid class systems in the predominantly white society that relegated them to the bottom rungs of the economic ladder.

Following a surge in agricultural production that created jobs for thousands of Mexican migrant workers during World War I, a postwar crisis in farm production during the early 1920s forced most of them out of work. Many became stranded without enough money to return home after mining firms and farms collapsed, prompting the Mexican government to provide money to bring workers back to the country.

When conditions improved in the mid-1920s, Mexican immigration to the United States increased to unprecedented levels, as thousands of Mexicans crossed the U.S. border in search of employment and higher wages than they could earn in their native land. Such an influx unleashed a nativist backlash, as many Americans felt that people of Mexican descent represented a threat to the racial and cultural integrity of the nation, particularly because of the strength of Catholicism among Mexican immigrants.

Ironically, though, the Immigration Act (1924), which severely restricted immigration to the United States from most parts of the world, excluded the Western Hemisphere on the basis that farmers and mine owners needed the cheap labor provided by Mexican immigrants. Living in poor conditions on farms throughout the Southwest, many Latino families suffered from discrimination and ill-treatment while laboring in the fields. Although the United States offered more opportunity than other countries in the Western Hemisphere, farm labor was one of the lowest-paying professions.

One of the first incidents in which Latinos vocally protested against their second-class status in the United States was the Lemon Grove incident of 1931 in California, which saw Mexican-American parents call a boycott to fight school segregation. Their lawsuit was the first successful legal challenge to school segregation undertaken by Mexican Americans in the history of the United States. Two years earlier, Latinos formed the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to combat discrimination through a more concerted effort. The pioneering civil rights group quickly spread throughout Latino communities across America and labored to defend Latinos against all forms of discrimination.

Despite that new movement to recognize the rights of Latinos, the economy during the Great Depression was undermining their economic position in the United States. With thousands of Americans out of work, the U.S. and the Mexican governments encouraged many Mexicans to return to their native lands through a jointly-sponsored repatriation program. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican-descent people returned to Mexico, some of whom were U.S. citizens.

During World War II, however, the United States desperately needed agricultural workers to support the war effort. In response, the federal government introduced the *bracero* program in 1942 to bring Mexicans to work in the agricultural sectors of the United States. Many Latinos of Mexican descent in California date their arrival from this wave of immigration. The war also witnessed a huge surge in Latino participation in all sectors of the armed forces, a trend that continued during the Korean War and the Vietnam War.



Latinos began to agitate more publicly for civil rights in the 1960s. Feeding from the fervor generated from African-American struggles for equality, young Latinos created the Chicano movement in the mid-1960s. A broad-based movement, it enlisted the support of students, adult groups, and others who advocated cultural nationalism, or separation and independence for people of Latino descent. The movement, or *el movimiento*, drew its primary inspiration from a formulation of cultural identity comprising a connection between modern Mexican Americans and Aztlan, the mythical home of the Aztecs in Southwestern America before they migrated south to the Valley of Mexico. Major Latino student leaders during this time included Reies Tijerina, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, and Jose Angel Gutierrez.

Inspired by the Chicano movement, Chicanos throughout the United States formed various local grassroots campaigns in the 1960s to boycott schools that fostered discrimination through the cultural content of courses, teaching methodology, and segregation. Student groups led school walkouts to publicly demonstrate their unhappiness with discrimination in public education. The Brown Berets, a militant wing of the Chicano movement led by students that patterned its actions after the Black Panthers, also led high school protests and demonstrations in urban areas like Los Angeles.



At the same time, activist César Chávez organized Latino farm workers into a formidable union, the United Farm Workers of America. Launching a massive grape boycott and strike in 1965, Chávez forced farmers to negotiate contracts with their field labor, securing better wages and working conditions for thousands of Latinos. Chávez emerged as a national figure of considerable prominence and began acting as the chief spokesman for the Latino community in America. His leadership illustrated the power of concerted action for the Latino community and prompted politicians to begin taking account of this hitherto politically silent group.

Before the 1970s, voter participation among the Latino community was alarmingly low, and most politicians ignored their Latino constituencies. Through natural increase and continued high-levels of immigration, such constituencies are now fairly large in portions of the United States and somewhat unified and politically active as a result of the civil rights struggles in recent decades. In places like Florida, a huge Cuban-American population often swings state elections.

As a result, the Latino community has drawn increasing amounts of attention from politicians in recent years, some of whom even pride themselves on their ability to speak Spanish. The majority of Hispanics have aligned themselves with the Democratic Party, which has proven more receptive to unions and the fight against discrimination. However, the serious issues of language, culture, religion, and history that divide the Latino community prevent Latinos from voting as a single, powerful bloc.

Across the country, levels of Latino participation in politics has grown tremendously. California perhaps serves as an example of things to come. With the largest Latino population in the country, the state legislature is 20% Latino as well. The state government also boasts the highest ranking Mexican American in public office with Cruz Bustamante serving as lieutenant governor. Nationally, though, Latinos' political representation remains far less than their population numbers merit, at least in part because voter participation among Latinos lags behind the national average.

Latinos partly became more politically active in the 1980s and 1990s because of political issues that made headlines in the states with the heaviest concentration of Latinos. California in particular has seen remarkably high levels of Latino political participation as the state's voters have wrestled with questions regarding the success of school programs based on bilingual education, whether to formally declare English as the only official language recognized by the state, how current immigration laws should be both revised and enforced, whether to extend state services to illegal immigrants, and what role affirmative action should continue to play in state-funded programs and institutions of higher education. While these controversial issues have compelled many Latinos to take a more active role in politics, the Latino community is divided in its stance on these questions.

Likewise, Florida's Latino community, which is heavily dominated by Cuban Americans, became highly politicized over U.S.-Cuban relations in the 1990s, particularly the issue of whether to return a six-year-old Cuban refugee named Elian Gonzales to his father in Cuba or allow him to remain with relatives in Miami. With Cuban-American leaders appearing nightly on television news programs, the Cuban-American community in Florida remained somewhat divided in its response to this issue.

On another front, Latinos achieved greater national prominence in the 1990s by emerging as a dominant force in the music industry. Wildly popular singers like Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, and Jennifer Lopez have propelled Latin music to the top of the music charts and spawned a Latino-influenced subculture comprising music, dance, fashion, and language that is affecting mainstream American culture as well. With more and more Americans claiming a Latino heritage, Latinos in the United States are increasingly securing prominent roles in all aspects of society.

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