



Discussion: Policy Influence, Money, and Middle-Class Latino Families

The number of low income and poverty-level Latino families is higher now than in the 1960's, and the number of at-risk children in these families has increased 4-fold. Yes, we are helping families address poverty by providing social and health services, fighting for equity in education; and defending “safety-net” programs. However, our efforts more often demonstrate a revolving-door approach that continually ‘serves recurring problems’ with limited attention to their underlying cause and possible solutions.

Consider the following. Overall, Latinos in Texas fare worse than their Latino counterparts in nearly three-fifths of the U.S. states and the District of Columbia, ranking, on average, 30th across 16 social, health and economic variables. While Latinos in Texas rank, on average, 30th, Non-Latino Whites and Blacks rank, on average, 21st, with Non-Latino Whites and Blacks in Texas faring *better* than their racial and ethnic counterparts. Today, 45% (1.556,000) of Texas Latino children continue to be at-risk to not achieve middle-class economic status. Generally, this socio-economic profile is the same across the state's 12 economic regions despite some cost-of-living differences.

Latino and allies must increase their political power influence on local and state policy-making in ways that create progressive ‘economic opportunity’ legislation and ordinances. Legislative and ordinance policies must lead to institutional changes which positively impact the economic mobility and *bienestar*¹ (well-being) of families. To achieve greater influence, three policy influencing areas demand strategic capacity-building attention across the state:

1. Organizing and Electoral Power
2. Policy Development Support
3. Communications and Messaging

First, the gap in income inequality has increased for most working Americans across the country for the past four decades. Second, Texas Latino income inequality has existed much longer and has worsened compared to most non-Latinos. Thirdly, while Latino pioneer activist have significantly contributed to social, health and economic progress, entrenched biased history, political ideology and power continue to drive regressive inequitable policy making. Fourth, family financial instability has

¹ *Bienestar* is defined as a perceived quality of life status among individuals, families and communities affected by social, environmental, and systemic factors – a concept of holistic wellness.

resulted in generations of poorer social, economic and health condition; and perpetuates limited political and policy influence.

A family’s financial status is a proven determinant for child development and future opportunities that lead to wealth (middle-class economic status) accumulation. To most, “wealth” means financial stability, which includes assets for emergencies, an adequately funded retirement plan and having assets to pass down through a family inheritance. Children who grow-up in wealth families are, by far, more likely to achieve higher education, to expand their job opportunities, and to receive higher incomes. They also experience good health, acquire home ownership, have fewer social stressors and make fewer bad social decisions (teen pregnancy, single parenthood, drugs, crime), and more civic engagement.

It begs the question; do we prioritize our local and state policy advocacy and collaborations into putting more money into the pockets of Latino families? Money that will move them toward 300% above the poverty level, e.g., for family of 4 from \$24,600 to \$73,800 (real middle-class). Earned income tax credits, child care support, minimum/living wage, equalizing gender wages, and paid leave have more immediate family income impacts than equalized education funding. **It’s suggested we somehow link them as a strategy to build electoral power and policy changes.**

By comparison, much of private-sector lobbying and advocacy whether local, state, or national is to defend or create financial self-interest opportunities. The private sector’s policy influencing power is reinforced by parallel inequitable policy outcomes exemplified in education, labor, immigration, health, criminal justice, and civic/voter suppression. These policies often put us in expending much of our advocacy efforts in opposing them, including years of litigation.

It’s ironic, we all state, ‘it all about the money’ regardless if the issue is about streets and sidewalks, housing and economic development, health care, education, environment, etc. Yet, we don’t appear to develop our strategies or communicate our advocacy and messaging with economic and financial underpinnings. It doesn’t appear that our strategies, policy priorities and actions are adequately aligned to help break the generational cycles of poverty and low-income status of the 48% (1,040,000) of Latino families.

Are our energies focused primarily on surface issues, as opposed, to contributing political structures and policies? What if we more closely positioned our policy strategies, research support, advocacy, and messaging to ‘Latino family economic mobility and their achievement of middle-class status’? Further, can we prioritize and measure our legislative and local ordinance success by how much and how quickly Latino families gain additional income and improved economic mobility pathway?

Latina’s in Texas are paid 44 cents for every dollar paid to a Non-Latino White male. The negative impact on economic mobility is obvious. Consider a few questions regarding the wealth building policy areas noted in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Wealth Building Policy Opportunities	
Taxes	Education
Gender Pay	Economic Development
Wages and Benefits	Immigrants
Labor	Health and Human Services
Affordable Housing	Local/State Budgets

Do current local and/or state laws and policies support or obstruct economic mobility opportunities for Latino families? In which areas are we most engaged, and what are our legislative/policy proposals

and advocacy priorities? What wins/changes have we had? What immediate or longer-term economic impacts have been achieved?

To be sure, we must be mindful and careful how we design our strategies, actions, and messaging less they be misunderstood and misused. Latino advocates and allies are already challenged daily with pressing issues while also working to maintain their existing coalitions and/or organizations. The reality remains, new and creative means must be developed to acquire time, resources, and collaborative opportunities to increase our capacity for ‘pro-active versus ‘defensive’ political and policy actions.

The preceding will require difficult discussions, more daring leadership, increased local-statewide collaboration focused on political power building, and compromise among our respective efforts and priorities. Understandably, just beginning the process toward capacity-building and an economic mobility collaborative agenda will be difficult.

The alternative is to continue nibbling at surface problems, reacting to crisis issues, and accepting ‘wins’ that ‘help’, but contribute little to substantive long-term change. We know the state is growing into a Latino majority population with major social and economic (public and private sector) implications. Latino family growth between 2010 and 2016 was 57% compared to Non-Latino Whites at 4%.

As such, do we have an agenda to increase our local and state policy-making influence whether in 1, 5, 10 or 20 years? Notwithstanding the social justice issues that we are passionately engaged in addressing, will our policy influence going forward demonstrate inroads in improving the marginalizing of Latino families resulting from policies that have significantly contributed to:

- High poverty and low-income status
- Low aggregate household, per capita, and median family incomes
- Structural income inequalities impeding economic middle class² achievement
- Highest labor force participation rate with employment representation in low paying occupations
- Growing home ownership with disproportionate higher costs and lower asset values
- Wealth limiting opportunities resulting from sparse employment benefits, and high debts
- Over-reliance on safety-net programs with eligibility requirements and benefits that are often counter-productive in supporting opportunities for economic mobility.
- Jeopardize the state’s economic growth given the current and projected contributions that Latino wealth can have on the Texas economy

Summary

The level of Latino influence on local and state policy making is insufficient given the extent to which many are marginalized whether politically or in terms of social, education, health and economic status. Latinos and allies are engaged in addressing a multitude of issues including efforts to build political

² Families determined to be ‘middle class’ economically was based on incomes between 67% and 200% of the states’ median family income of \$62,742.

power. We must reflect on our efforts and the degree to which they are directed at improving the economic mobility of Latino families.

There's no lack of documentation on the direct impact that poverty and low-income households has on marginalizing families and population groups. Increasing the economic status of Latino families improves their well-being across issues, as well, as provide greater opportunities to build political power and policy influence.

To improve economic mobility also requires greater capacity building attention to influence policy making outcomes driven by Latino concerns. More strategic capacity building efforts that target organizing and electoral power, policy development support, and communications and messaging are needed.

Finally, living in poverty is sustenance survival and living at 200% above poverty (low-income) barely pays the bills; both limit opportunities for economic mobility and perpetuates marginalization. It is, therefore, imperative that we prioritize our efforts to put money into the pockets of Latino families. Because money and power are connected, we must organize our communities to engage politics to build wealth. It will require policy research information and creative messaging that supports organizing, that informs, and that motivates expanding Latino political involvement statewide.

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