

# The Hispanic Institute

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## Connected Hispanics & Civic Engagement

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The Hispanic Institute (THI) provides an effective education forum for an informed and empowered Hispanic America. THI's work is focused in the following areas:

- The study of Hispanic and immigrant economic contributions
- Media monitoring
- Consumer fraud protection
- Citizenship education
- Technology, telecommunications, and the Digital Divide
- Financial services
- Energy

THI has produced studies on such topics as Hispanics and Retirement, Calling Card Fraud, Hispanic Broadband Access, Interchange Fees, and Immigration and Labor. In addition, the Institute has developed media education campaigns on crucial issues such as Immigration Reform, Labor and Business, Net Neutrality, The Digital Divide, and Interchange Fees.



[www.thehispanicinstitute.org](http://www.thehispanicinstitute.org)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Few groups have benefitted more from advances in mobile technology than Hispanic Americans, who have become an increasingly dynamic and influential voice in American political and social discourse – or, as we have termed it in this paper, civic engagement. The convergence of greater reliance on handheld wireless devices for Internet access and the “app” culture fits within the Hispanic community’s future for increased civic engagement. It has become a key tool that can help bridge differences among communities in new ways.

As the data and statistics point out, Hispanics are already more invested in mobile devices and mobile access than other groups. As this population continues to grow to become the largest minority group within a few decades, it is important for the Hispanic community and the country to take advantage of this to foster greater civic engagement by Hispanics.

Such advances are critical as the country enters a new civic environment in 2012 with a likely more contentious and precarious political balance and as federal and state governments face major budget crises. The impact of likely budget cuts and program reductions will be felt in more communities. These governments are already moving toward greater use of mobile technology in their efforts to more accurately gauge the priorities of various communities. And though Hispanics are advancing in some areas of Internet access, the digital divide will persist unless the infrastructure is further developed to accommodate the needs of growing communities and accompanying increase in demand for mobile access.

The focus of this paper is on the impact of mobile communications technology on the development of Hispanic civic engagement. With the growing market of mobile devices, including the slew of tablets now entering the market, the need for wireless access will grow exponentially, making the mobile and wireless industries more critical to Hispanics’ and the country’s growth and success.

In addition to tracing the growth and development of mobile civic engagement among Hispanics, this paper proposes key policy points that deserve critical attention, including:

- A competitive environment that allows service and device providers to compete on level playing fields and gives consumers a variety of options to suit their needs;
- A market-based environment that promotes innovation and allows investors to recoup their investment;
- Flexibility of access to allow consumers to decide which access method best works for them;
- Expansion of bandwidth options to help providers and consumers keep up with access speeds comparable to the global environment; and,
- Regulatory relief that limits the fees federal, state and local authorities place on consumers and that could have the effect of deterring greater mobile access;

These issues are critical for the country at large, but it must be emphasized here that any policy that does not take into account the specific needs of Hispanics and their move toward mobile civic engagement will fail a substantial portion of the population. These policies must be pro-active and must be focused on the needs of this community for today and for the next generation.

## INTRODUCTION

Americans have long gathered on front stoops in cities, on rural front porches, at small-town grocery stores, in church basements or in neighbors' living rooms to discuss the news and issues of the day. Freedom to talk, to organize and to take action is central to the American identity. It represents civic engagement at the most fundamental level, and it has been crucial to the nation's development as a strong and vibrant democracy. In fact, freedom of speech and expression led the list – which also included freedom from fear, freedom to worship and freedom from want – in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" speech, delivered as his annual address to Congress in 1941. That speech, of course, inspired the iconic image of an earnest, ordinary American man speaking his mind at a town hall meeting, painted by Norman Rockwell and published by the Saturday Evening Post in 1943.

Regardless of national origin, Americans of all ethnicities have cherished the tradition of freedom of speech and expression, and they have used it to advance their interests and to influence the nation's priorities. And though town hall meetings and chats with neighbors remain essential elements of civic engagement, the introduction of new communications technologies has changed its character and pace. Today, it is faster and more expansive than anything earlier generations might have imagined. The Internet, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and the traditional print, broadcast and cable outlets have enlarged the capacity for large numbers of people to be quickly mobilized. Today, sophisticated communications technology, notably smartphones and other mobile wireless devices, is in the hands of people to whom it was previously unavailable. Formerly isolated and marginalized groups have gained a powerful – and much needed – voice in the civic arena.

Few groups have benefitted more from these technological advances than Hispanic Americans, who have become an increasingly dynamic and influential voice in American political and social discourse – or, as we have termed it in this paper, civic engagement. The bases for Hispanic information-sharing and civic engagement are not new. Indeed, their roots can be found in the great plazas of cities and towns throughout Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and South America. Those grand spaces have long been where people of all ages and social standing meet and mingle in the evening or on a Sunday afternoon. They are places to socialize, to discuss big ideas or simply to observe. The plazas provide a space to build a sense of community and to establish connections that traveled with immigrants to the United States. And though the great plazas have been left behind, the cultural impulse to connect has remained, and – as this report will show – it has been amplified by increasingly sophisticated use of mobile technology.

## HISPANICS IN THE DIGITAL ARENA

Although the more than 48 million Hispanics in the United States were initially slow to jump into the digital arena, that situation is rapidly changing. From 2004 to 2008, Hispanic Internet users with home broadband connections grew from 28% to 68%, while overall U.S. Internet users with home broadband connections grew from 31% to 71% (Scarborough Research, 2009). By February 2009, the Hispanic online presence had grown to its highest level, at 20.3 million visitors, comprising 11% of the total U.S. online market (based on numbers of website visitors, time spent online and pages

visited) – an impressive statistic considering that Hispanics represent 15% of the U. S. population (comScore, 2009).

The important story for Hispanics, however, is in their embrace of mobile online technology. By the beginning of the millennium, they had already emerged as the most avid users of wireless services (Lebo, 2003). More than 87% of English-speaking Hispanics now own a cell phone, compared to 80% of Whites (Smith, 2010). Hispanics use their cell phones more frequently and use more features than the general population; they make more calls on their cell phones and send more text messages than Whites (Lenhard, 2010). More than 14% of Hispanic cell phone owners make and receive more than 30 calls on a typical day, compared to just 4% of White cell phone owners, and Hispanics send or receive an average of 10 texts a day, compared to just five texts a day for Whites (Lenhard, 2010). Additionally, Hispanics lead other groups in the use of mobile devices to access the Internet – 53% of Hispanics vs. 33% of Whites (Horrigan, 2009).

Hispanics have also made the transition to Web 2.0, focusing on social and information networking. The use of social networking sites by Hispanics in the U. S. has outpaced that of other groups (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). English-preferring Hispanics were most likely (36%) to visit social-networking sites at least two to three times a month, compared to 34% for Asians, 27% for Spanish-preferring Hispanics, 26% for African Americans and 18% for non-Hispanic Whites – a trend that is reflected across all ages groups of the population (Smith, et al.). Hispanics' heavy use of social media mirrors the culture's dependence on strong, extensive social relationships.

## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT VIA MOBILE TECHNOLOGY**

The significance of the Hispanic acceptance of mobile technology cannot be overstated in the context of civic engagement. The use of cell phones builds upon the cultural affinity for close connections and opens the way for organized political and social action. Three areas in particular demonstrate the power of mobile technology in the Hispanic community: immigration, education and voter registration/mobilization.

### ***Immigration***

Few issues more aptly demonstrate the power of civic engagement than immigration, fueled by the use of social media, accessed by mobile technology. The issue resonates for Hispanics nationally, regardless of age, geography or country of origin. For example, thousands flocked to Facebook to support legislative action on the DREAM act, which would have provided a path to citizenship for children of undocumented residents. A casual search on Facebook lists several hundred sites in support of the DREAM Act, including many for specific states, regions and cities across the country. And, though the bill failed in the U.S. Senate by a 55-41 vote in the lame duck session of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress in December 2010, Facebook pages in support of the legislation remain active.

Significant use of mobile devices and social networking for Hispanic civic engagement on immigration policy can be traced back to 2006, even though social media were still relatively new at the time. Rallies were being organized around the country in March 2006 to protest the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, an exceptionally harsh anti-

immigration bill. It failed in the U.S. Senate, but its introduction sparked rallies to oppose it. In Dallas, a group of 4,000 Hispanic high school students used MySpace, e-mails and cell phone texting to organize a walkout in protest (Harris, 2006). The students' success served as an inspiration for a subsequent major demonstration in April 2006 in Dallas with 350,000 participants (Bada, Fox, Donnelly, & Selee, 2010).

The mobile communications-driven civic engagement lessons learned from the 2006 self-organizing students could also be detected in the 2009 coalition that included high school and college youth united to stop the deportation of Rigo Padilla, a then 21-year old Mexican-born student attending the University of Illinois at Chicago. Padilla's undocumented status was discovered when he was arrested for driving under the influence in January 2009. He had lived in the United States since the age of 6, when he was brought to the U.S. by his parents. The students' efforts on Padilla's behalf included online petitions to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency using Facebook and other sites (Bada, et al.). The intense activity from this coalition eventually led to a temporary halt to the proceeding in December 2009.

Also in 2009, two organizations, Reform Immigration FOR America and the Fair Immigration Reform Movement coalition, developed an effective civic engagement campaign built on text-messaging to promote immigration related issues. The groups focused on providing simple alerts to send out key information, calls to action, quick responses to breaking news and soliciting feedback as a way of building a cohesive community. According to organizers, this resulted in increased numbers of people attending a number of rallies and hearings in 2009 compared to previous rallies in 2008 (Heatwole, 2010).

Mobile technology has allowed groups to make their voices heard directly by the larger community. For example, Mobile Voices, a joint project of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California and a nonprofit, the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California, has produced VozMob, which allows immigrant workers in the Los Angeles area to use their cell phones to record voice or video stories about their experiences to be posted online. The stories are then used to provide a more complete view of the immigrant community and their experience during a time of extreme tensions between immigrants and anti-immigrant activists (Vozmob.net, 2010).

## **Education**

Use of mobile technology for education purposes is a rapidly advancing concept. As a recent Fast Company article pointed out:

“The U.S. Department of Education has earmarked \$5 billion in competitive school-reform grants to scale up pilot programs and evaluate best practices of all kinds. Major foundations are specifically zeroing in on handhelds for preschool and the primary grades. ‘Young kids and multisensor-touch computing are a huge area of innovation,’ says Phoenix Wang, the head of a startup philanthropic venture fund called Startl -- funded by the Gates, MacArthur, and Hewlett foundations -- that's entirely focused on educational investing. Google, Nokia, Palm, and Sony have all supplied handheld devices for teaching. Thousands of new mobiles -- not just smartphones but also ever-shrinking computers -- have come into use at schools in the United States and around the world just in the past year.” (Kamenetz, 2010)

This is especially important in the Hispanic community, where mobile access to broadband Internet service is popular, not only for children in school but also for adults. Austin, Texas-based software company *ediotoma* offers English-language mini-courses on cell phones to first-generation Hispanics. The lessons are tailored to meet specific needs, such as banking or retail shopping. This is just one example of how customizable, user-controlled content can be offered and consumed in short chunks in a small format. The mini-courses are entertaining and easily used (Kuchera, 2009). These types of short informational bursts can help provide Hispanics with information about a wealth of other topics and skills, including civic issues. It also points to Hispanics as willing consumers of such information when it is presented in a manner that fits within their cultural and lifestyle environments.

### ***Voter Registration and Mobilization***

Recent political campaigns have powerfully demonstrated the power of the Internet and social media to drive civic engagement results. One of the best examples of how this phenomenon has played out in the Hispanic community is a voter registration project conducted by The Hispanic Institute in Nevada in 2009:

The project primarily targeted Hispanic residents but included all residents within the target areas. The voter registration drive coincided with a series of immigration reform rallies organized by a number of community-based organizations, which allowed the THI team to take advantage of the convergence of events to utilize mobile technology to amplify their reach.

The project had both a voter registration and a Get-Out-The-Vote component. In addition to more than 134,000 individual contacts at homes, supermarkets and other public gatherings, THI staff and volunteers collected key data and registered eligible voters. Additionally, organizers collected cell phone numbers for all contacts, whether they were signed up as voters or not.

The THI voter registration project met its goal to register 10,000 new voters. Mobile communications technology drove the civic engagement effort. Once individuals were registered to vote, they were sent numerous text messages to remind them about early voting, voting site locations, availability of transportation to the voting sites, updates about ballot initiatives, and other information. Additionally, voters were given contact information and a central location for in-person contacts. This two-way mobile network allowed voters to access information when it was most convenient to them.

In the weeks leading up to the start of early voting and Election Day, THI staff were able use text messaging to gauge how many of the newly registered voters had taken part in early voting or were likely to wait until Nov. 2. With this real-time data, THI staff were able to then target particular neighborhoods, and even specific addresses, for additional in-person follow up. THI was able to provide quality, cost-effective research-based polling, real-time analysis and communications advice to drive messaging, registration efforts and get-out-the-vote activities.

The THI project also mobilized most of the newly registered voters, along with the larger population of registered Hispanic voters, to cast their ballots. In Nevada, 12% of all of the registered voters are Hispanic, but they comprised 16% of all voters taking part in the 2010 mid-term elections. In all, more than 104,000 Hispanics cast votes on Nov. 2 in Nevada. According to some exit polling

results, the massive Hispanic voter turnout played a key role in Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's come from behind win (Berzon & Audi, 2010).

At the immigration reform rallies, participants were asked to send a text to a central site so that they could be added to the contact lists. These were used to register new voters as well as establish a contact list to address immigration issues. Rally organizers were able to provide participants with information about immigration issues, legislative actions, requests for letters or phone calls to legislators, immigration related activities or other immigration related topics.

Although the immigration reform rallies and voter registration drive were independent efforts, the two projects were able to take advantage of having targeted an overlapping population and taking advantage of the population's propensity for cell phones. According to THI project director Cuauhtemoc "Temo" Figueroa (C. Figueroa, personal communication, November 18, 2010), the target population rarely used email due to a lack of computers, but almost everyone had a cell phone, allowing the organizers of both groups to develop cell phone networks. This mobile-based network allowed organizers and participants to react quickly to any late-breaking issues. The network expanded as participants included their families and friends in the group texts and contacts.

The success of The Hispanic Institute's voter registration/mobilization drive clearly demonstrates that the population's use of mobile communications technology has pushed civic engagement to a new level that can benefit the entire nation.

## THE FUTURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT - THE "APP"

If Web 2.0 was about the rise of social networks and sharing, the next phase in the use of mobile communications technology is likely to be about direct engagement through "apps" – applications that allow users to access a variety of services or information on their handheld wireless devices. Just as they have shown a propensity to utilize mobile technology, Hispanics have also moved quickly to utilization of apps. Research shows that Hispanics are more likely than Whites to access video sharing/downloading sites on their mobile devices on a daily basis – 24%, compared to only 12% for Whites. Hispanics are also the leading users of banking/finance apps, with 32% of Hispanics having used one within the previous month, compared to 27% of Whites (Purcell, Entner & Henderson, 2010).

This has important implications for Hispanic civic engagement, including more involvement in local, state or national civic issues, ranging from simply keeping informed to taking active roles in changing laws and policies. For example, Verafirma, a California-based company, has developed an app that allows users to sign a ballot initiative using a smartphone. This allows citizens to develop ballot initiatives and spread them more quickly and easily than traditional methods (Davy, 2010). In the Padilla case mentioned elsewhere in this paper, an electronic petition was used to seek support for blocking his deportation using petitiononline.com.

Political apps have been utilized by a number of political campaigns to mobilize their supporters – in many cases, developed for specific candidates. The apps help users to forward information to their cell phone contacts, receive information about campaign events, access information on candidate

issue positions, donate money and access volunteer opportunities. The apps streamline the ways in which candidates connect to supporters, volunteers, donors, media and others. They also can be used to encourage voters to attend campaign events or to take part in rallies, voter registration drives or get-out-the-vote efforts on behalf of particular candidates or issues (Davy, 2010)

All apps that aid civic engagement need not be political in nature, however. Smart apps also promote other kinds of interactions between residents and local government. CitySourced, for example, is a service that provides residents with an easy to use online tool that allows them to identify and report public concerns (crime, safety, environmental or quality of life) to their local city for action. At the same time, participating local governments can receive real-time information on problem areas. The tool can be accessed with mobile devices.

Although there are no concrete data yet on how extensively Hispanics, specifically, are using apps for civic engagement, the following examples of how other groups are developing and using apps for general civic engagement point to the opportunities they present for Hispanic civic engagement.

One app developed in 2010, *Walking Edge* by Republican Web Development, has already been successfully used in recent elections to provide political organizers and volunteers a smartphone app and database of addresses for undecided voters and candidate-supporters. Using geo-location tools and Google Maps, the app allowed organizers to reach out to those voters and update data files in real time, giving campaign organizers a more accurate count of which voters had been contacted and their likely voting patterns (Davy, 2010).

In 2010, the official White House app was released. It delivers news from the White House's blog and newsroom, featuring videos and photos and live video streaming of White House events. With the Obama administration taking the lead by developing the White House app, other federal entities are also developing apps to allow staff to stay in contact with citizens and to create outreach efforts on upcoming issues, regulatory changes, product recalls and a host of other matters (Davy, 2010). For example, two websites, apps.gov and apps.usa.gov, provide access to a number of apps that allow users to access a number of government services. Following are four examples of many of the different types of apps available on these websites:

- UserVoice offers a free Government Civic Engagement Plan for government agencies to create citizen engagement sites (<http://uservoice.com/>).
- Google Moderator lets citizens submit and prioritize ideas, questions and feedback in a transparent, democratic way (<http://www.google.com/moderator/#0>).
- Dialogue App allows users to crowd-source ideas and policies online and to share, rate and discuss ideas to improve decision-making (<http://www.dialogue-app.com/info/>).
- MixedInk is a democratic, collaborative writing tool that lets groups of all sizes put their ideas and opinions into a collective text (<http://www.mixedink.com/main.php>).

The apps listed above represent merely the leading edge of opportunities that mobile technology offers to Hispanics as their civic engagement activities thrust them deeper into the mainstream of American political and social life.

## CONCLUSION

The convergence of greater reliance on handheld wireless devices for Internet access and app development fits within the Hispanic community's future for increased civic engagement. It has become a key tool that can help bridge differences among communities in new ways. As Hispanics work to take advantage of apps, and even develop apps designed for their own needs, they will be able to foster their own civic involvement in new and more effective ways.

THI's Nevada voter registration project, discussed earlier in this paper, provides a clear example of how mobile technology can make a significant difference in civic engagement. Further expansion of the technology to individual voters, a process that already appears to be underway, will make future projects more efficient and effective. As the data and statistics point out, Hispanics are already more invested in mobile devices and mobile access than other groups. As this population continues to grow to become the largest minority group within a few decades, it is important for nonprofit organizations to take advantage of this. Concurrently, THI will seek to expand its use of mobile devices and software as it prepares to launch a similar project in 2011 in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Nevada and New Mexico.

Such advances are critical as the country enters a new civic environment in 2012 with a likely more contentious and precarious political balance and as federal and state governments face major budget crises. The impact of likely budget cuts and program reductions will be felt in more communities. These governments are already moving toward greater use of mobile technology in their efforts to more accurately gauge the priorities of various communities. And though Hispanics are advancing in some areas of Internet access, the digital divide will persist unless the infrastructure is further developed to accommodate the needs of growing communities and accompanying increase in demand for mobile access (Shapiro & Hassett, 2010).

While the focus of this paper is on the impact of mobile communications technology on the development of Hispanic civic engagement, it should be noted that overall, the percentage of American homes accessing broadband service increased 25% for the 24 months through October 2009, and that the increase in demand for more bandwidth is leapfrogging the ability of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to develop new infrastructure (Shapiro & Hassett, 2010).

To date, the mobile and wireless industries have been very successful in dealing with the current challenges of limited spectrum options in innovative ways that allow all users to access the content they want and need at the time they need it. This has helped in closing the digital divide for the Hispanic community and other groups. However, federal policies need to continue be pro-investment, pro-innovation that help deliver new and evolving services to consumers. With the growing market of mobile devices, including the slew of tablets now entering the market, the need for wireless access will grow exponentially, making the mobile and wireless industries more critical to the country's growth and success.

Specifically, future policy must include:

- A competitive environment that allows service and device providers to compete on level playing fields and gives consumers a variety of options to suit their needs;

- A market-based environment that promotes innovation and allows investors to recoup their investment;
- Flexibility of access to allow consumers to decide which access method best works for them;
- Expansion of bandwidth options to help providers and consumers keep up with access speeds comparable to the global environment; and,
- Regulatory relief that limits the fees federal, state and local authorities place on consumers and that could have the effect of deterring greater mobile access;

These issues are critical for the country at large, but it must be emphasized here that any policy that does not take into account the specific needs of Hispanics and their move toward mobile civic engagement will fail a substantial portion of the population. These policies must be pro-active and must be focused on the needs of this community for today and for the next generation.

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