

Opportunities to engage the Dominican American Community



A research study implemented by:

Latino  **Decisions**

The portrait of the Dominican American community in the Northeast is one that is growing, interested in political information, binationally engaged, and eager to participate. However, Dominican Americans have not historically received the same rates of engagement, voter outreach and information by political campaigns and so an information deficit exists. To assess opportunities and obstacles to greater civic engagement, on behalf of *Dominicanos USA*, Latino Decisions implemented a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews, and an 800 respondent telephone survey of Dominican Americans in New York and Rhode Island.

For example, when the non-registered sample was asked what was the main reason for not being registered to vote, 38% simply said “I don’t know” followed closely by 25% who said they don’t know enough about the candidates running for office, and 20% who said they don’t know how or that the registration process is confusing. When offered choices such as politicians don’t really care about me, or voting doesn’t make any difference, only 9% and 8% respectively chose these answers. Simply put, an overwhelming percentage of non-registered Dominicans are not registered due to civic information gaps.

When non-registered Dominicans were asked how closely they read news articles or watch news stories on TV related to current affairs and politics fully 86% said they did so daily, with 24% indicating they accessed five or more such political news stories per day. In fact, the rate of news gathering among the non-registered was statistically the same as that among the registered voters, where 84% said they read/watch news stories daily, and 23% consuming more than five stories per day.

The Issues

We asked about issues in two different ways. First, providing an open-ended question in which respondents could volunteer any issue they felt was important, and second through a series of specific questions about education, housing, and health care issues. At the start of the survey, we asked respondents the following: “What are the most important issues facing the Dominican community here in your city that you think politicians should address” and respondents could name any issue or topic they wanted, and could name two different issues. Overall, the theme of jobs and the economy topped the list with 29% naming that as the top issue, followed by education reform and improving schools at 23%, and housing affordability third with 20%. Rounding out the top five issues were immigration

reform (13%) and access to health care (7%). It is also important to note that 5% mentioned discrimination against Latinos and 4% mentioned police issues as their most important issue of concern.

Most important issues in your city you want politicians to address

1. Create more jobs / improve economy	29%
2. Improving schools / education reform	23%
3. Cost of housing / cost of renting	20%
4. Immigration reform / immigrant rights	13%
5. Access to health care	7%
6. Discrimination against Latinos	5%
7. Lower taxes	5%
8. Issues related to policing	4%

In addition, we also asked respondents a series of specific questions, asking how important it was to address each issue, and respondents could select options from extremely important, to not at all important. Topping the list of concern with 49% of respondents rating it extremely important (and 90% overall saying it was important) was increasing the average wages people get paid at work. Second was the issue of access to affordable and quality health care with 47% saying extremely important (94% overall important). The next two rated issues related to education with 43% saying it was extremely important to improve bilingual education resources in schools (91% overall important) and 42% said it was extremely important to provide greater investment in pre-school education (92% overall important). Finally, 35% said it was extremely important to address the high costs of renting or buying a house (80% overall important).

Barriers to Participation?

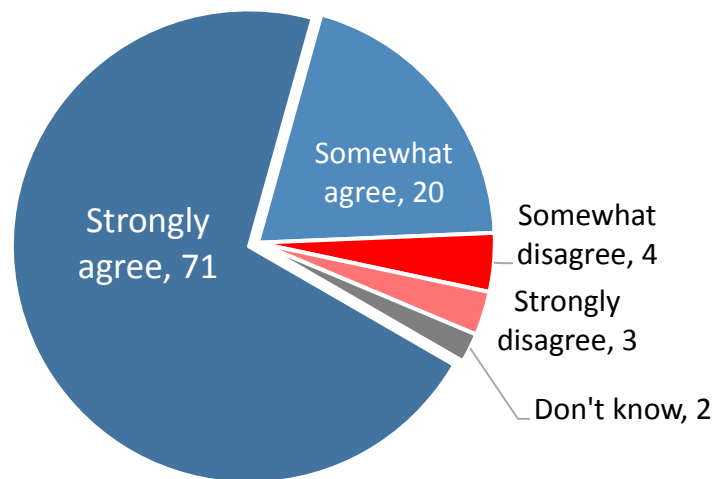
Respondents were asked a series of questions as to different barriers and motivations for becoming a registered voter, or among those already registered, for voting. As with any cross-section of Americans, the survey finds that some people will be much harder to motivate and mobilize. However, they are greatly outnumbered by those who are eager to register and vote at higher rates in the future. When presented with the statement: “Politicians are pretty much the same, it doesn’t matter who you vote for, nothing will really change” we found 25% of Dominican Americans strongly agreed with this sentiment. However, 54% rejected this idea. In this current era of low opinions of Congress, these results suggest a fairly high level of trust in the system among Dominicans in the Northeast. Further, 66% disagreed with the idea “I don’t think I will vote in the next election, it’s just not for me” showing additional evidence that this is a community poised to show greater numbers at the voting booth in the near future.

Motivators to Participation

Rather than finding strong evidence of barriers, instead the survey found opportunities for civic participation, especially around the theme of community-based representation for Dominicans. While the number of Dominican voters has been growing rapidly, respondents showed a strong desire to see more Dominican elected officials and Dominican serving community groups to reflect their growing numbers. Overall, 79% of registered said they would be more likely to vote if they had a chance to elect the first ever Dominican American to Congress. This was matched by 78% of non-registered who said

they would be more likely to become registered if given an opportunity to see a Dominican elected to Congress. For non-registered, there was an even stronger desire to see local level representation with 87% indicating they would be more likely to register to vote to elect more Dominican Americans to the city council or office of mayor, with which 74% of registered voters also agreed. Finally, there was a very strong sense that beyond candidates, there is a need for more Dominican-focused and Dominican events to inspire civic participation. An overwhelming 91% of registered, and 94% of non-registered agreed with the statement “we need more local Dominican-focused civic advocacy groups that help raise the voice of Dominican Americans.” Not only was this support widespread by it was strongly felt with 71% of registered voters and 79% of non-registered saying they *strongly agreed* with this sentiment. One possible path towards increased participation might be through Dominican-focused events that bridged respondents desire to stay involved in homeland issues and U.S. issues. For example, we asked respondents whether or not they agreed with the statement: “I would be interested in attending a social event here in my city that focused on issues of importance in the Dominican Republic and also issues important to Dominican Americans.” Overall, we saw widespread support with 83% of registered voters, and 79% of non-registered voters in agreement that Dominican “bridging” event would motivate them to get more involved.

We need more local Dominican-focused civic advocacy groups



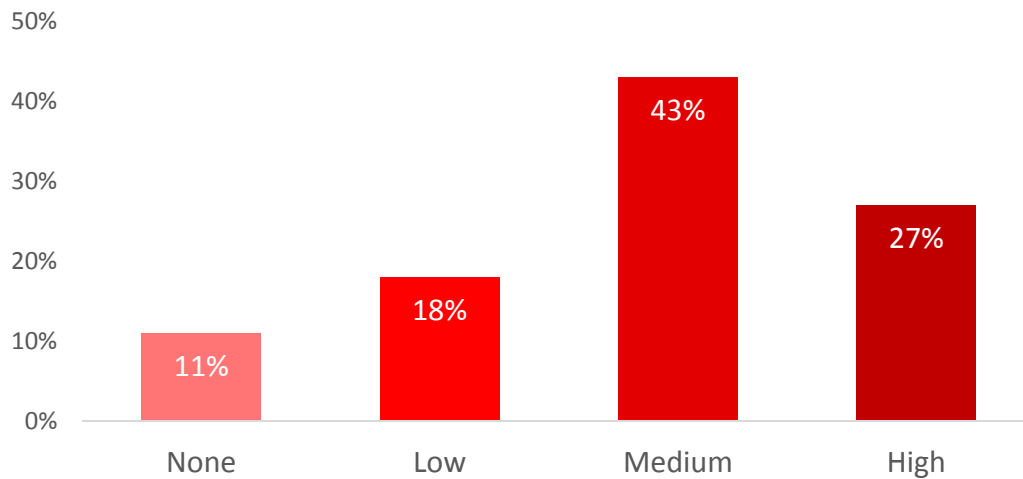
Importance of connections to the Homeland

An important theme in the Dominican American community is binationalism and transnationalism in which Dominican Americans continue to show great pride in their homeland and maintain strong ties to the Dominican Republic, and at the same time embrace and engage the United States. This is well known anecdotally when having a conversation or interacting with Dominican Americans. This survey was able to quantify the extent to which these transnational ties remain as well as to assess how a sense of transnational connection may serve as a bridge to further engagement in politics in America.

To measure transnational engagement we asked three specific questions about connections to the Dominican Republic and measures the intensity of these connections as well. The result is a very transnationally engaged community that could seek to leverage this transnationalism into even further

civic engagement in the U.S. When asked if they had read or watched a news story about current events in the Dominican Republic 66% said yes, including 31% who said they had done so five or more times. Even more, the community continues to visit the Dominican Republic with 44% saying they had taken at least one trip to the DR within the past 12 months. Finally, we asked if they regularly talk about issues in the Dominican Republic with friends or family here in the U.S. and 77% said yes, with 40% saying they had done so five or more times. Across all three measures of transnational engagement, we find 89% of respondents have done at least one type of transnational engagement. Further, we can classify Dominican Americans as having low, medium or high levels of transnational engagement by looking at their combined answers across all three measures. Overall, 11% register as having no engagement at all, and 18% as having a low level of transnational engagement. However we find most Dominican Americans are in fact actively engaged with issues in the Dominican Republic with 43% having a medium level of engagement and 27% having a very high level of engagement.

Degree of engagement with the Dominican Republic



What’s perhaps most interesting is that we can observe a pattern of higher levels of interest and engagement in politics in the U.S. among those with the higher levels of engagement with homeland issues.

To start, those with higher levels of transnational engagement have higher levels of following politics in the U.S. Among those with higher DR-engagement, 45% say they read/watch 4 or more news stories about issues and politics in the U.S. compared to just 26% who read/watch 4 or more in the lower DR-engagement category. Those with high transnationalism are also much more likely to reject cynical view that “voting is just not for me” with 79% of those with high DR-ties rejecting that view compared to 57% among those with low DR-ties. Respondents with higher DR-engagement are more likely to be persuaded by a chance to elect more Dominican Americans to office, and not surprisingly, they are very likely to be motivated by Dominican advocacy groups and events that stress both Dominican Republic and Dominican American issues. Fully 91% of those with high DR-ties said they would be interested in participating in such transnational events in their city. However, we should note that even among those

with lower DR-ties, the survey still finds that 71% are interested in participating in such transnational events, suggesting that even for those who may not be as actively engaged with homeland issues, there remains a powerful draw for transnational and homeland politics, especially if it is coupled with a focus on Dominican American issues.

Conclusion

This survey represents one of the first studies ever of Dominican American political engagement. In particular, is unique in probing the barriers and motivators to further increase civic engagement in the community. The findings reveal that the Dominican American community in the Northeast is poised to grow their footprint in the political arena, however information and outreach are much needed. Dominican Americans see a definite need to further develop and support Dominican-focused civic and advocacy groups that do outreach to their community. A strong sense of transnational ties and continued relevance of homeland issues remain, and could be the key to unlocking the next wave of Dominican registration and voting across New York and Rhode Island.

About the survey

Latino Decisions fielded a survey of Dominican Americans in New York and Rhode Island to assess the most important issues in the community and what messages and themes might encourage Dominican Americans to increase their civic engagement in the U.S. The survey included 800 total respondents for a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent, and a sample that was distributed between New York (n=380) and Rhode Island (n=420) and each state sample has a margin of error of 4.9%. Calls were made between June 8-16, 2015 using bilingual live telephone interviewers, allowing respondents to take the survey in either English or Spanish at their discretion. Respondents were contacted on a representative mix of cell phones and landlines, and the survey averaged 14 minutes in average length. Finally, the respondent pool is based on a sample of citizen adult, eligible voters, and includes a mix of currently registered as well as un-registered voters. Sample were drawn from the Catalist Dominican model score database for New York and Rhode Island and all respondents were screened and self-reported that they were adult citizens, eligible to vote and of Dominican ancestry or heritage. Overall, 53.5% of all subjects reached on the phone met the criteria and were eligible to participate in the study.

Focus Group Findings

Two focus groups were carried with unregistered and registered Dominicans in Washington Heights New York City on May 18, 2015. The unregistered sample was conducted in Spanish with 10 participants (3 male, 7 female), the registered sample was carried out in English with 10 participants (4 male, 6 female).

Two additional focus groups were carried out with unregistered and registered Dominicans in the Bronx New York City on June 16, 2015. The Spanish-speaking sample had 12 participants (6 male and 6 female). The English-speaking group also had 12 participants (5 men and 7 women).

In addition to the focus groups, Latino Decisions carried out 8 in-depth interviews with Dominicans (6 men and 2 women) from Providence Rhode Island.

The following bullet points highlight some of the most compelling findings from the four focus groups and in-depth interviews.

- The unregistered and registered sample is more alike than different when it comes to many of the answers they gave to the moderator. Thus, the points below apply to both groups
- Both groups were engaged by the topic. Every participant voiced an opinion on the questions, though, as expected some spoke more often than others.
- Receiving news through television and the internet was common among all respondents. Many maintained connections with family and friends in the Dominican Republic through social media sites. Many respondents also followed events and news from the Dominican Republic through television and the internet. Regardless of whether respondents were English or Spanish-dominant, to varying degrees Spanish-language media play is important source of information and entertainment.
- While majorities in both groups noted an interest in “global” affairs, many of their policy concerns could be classified as “domestically oriented.” For example, issues such as education, equitable wages, poverty, discrimination and access to health care were frequently placed in the context of Washington Heights. Among respondents from the Bronx, the issue of security was paramount in the minds of many participants. Nonetheless, many also noted the importance of economic issues, poverty, education, access to affordable housing and racial profiling.
- Both groups have highly developed transnational networks. Majorities noted that their families were equally divided between the Dominican Republic and the United States. Almost everyone

travels to the Dominican Republic annually and maintain daily contacts with family abroad. Among respondents in Providence all of them had transnational connections with the Dominican Republic.

- The issue of racism and police brutality was noted as important by the Washington Heights sample. This issue has not been observed before in previous focus groups carried out among other Latino groups by Latino Decisions. It may be that recent events have brought this issue to the forefront or that Dominicans face higher levels of discrimination or police surveillance than other Latinos. There is a wealth of data documenting higher levels of residential segregation and social outcomes among Dominicans that are comparable to those of African Americans. About one month later, the issue of racism and police brutality was on the minds of some of the Bronx respondents, but not to the degree that it was among those in Washington Heights. This suggests that this particular issue was salient in the month of May and became less so by mid-June.
- While there are some policy issues that are constant across all of the groups; by the time of the June focus groups, some respondents noted that they were aware of the contentious issue surrounding the possible expulsion of Haitian-ancestry groups from the Dominican Republic.
- Most of the respondents displayed a high degree of political sophistication. When asked about who or what government agency has the power to address the social issues they listed, most respondents identified the President of the United States as being in a position to fix these issues. However, many were quick to note that the Republican controlled U.S. Congress has prevented many of Obama's ideas from being realized. The lack of policy change may be contributing to feelings of political alienation and powerlessness. Respondents often noted, that politicians make promises, but are unable to fulfill them or don't care about fulfilling them once they are in office. Any mobilization effort needs to overcome this general feeling of powerlessness Dominicans feel toward the political system.
- Almost all of the respondents have a strong preference for the Democratic Party and believe it is the only party that cares about Hispanics. Strength of partisanship is one of the strongest predictors of voting. Yet since these respondents remain outside of the political process, we can surmise that they are leaners rather than strong partisans. Many were enthusiastic about Hilary Clinton's run for the presidency; though it was not clear if 2016 campaign will generate a type of enthusiasm that would bring unregistered or non-voting Dominicans to the polls.
- The greatest source of political disengagement comes from generalized feelings of political alienation and powerlessness. A number of respondents expressed the belief that their vote doesn't count. Specifically, they felt that regardless of who was in power, it was not going to make much of a difference in their community.
- Majorities in all of the groups and interviews are open to the possibility of voting. Not surprisingly, Dominicans, like other Latinos are under-mobilized. While many note that voter registration forms are readily available in the post office, DMV, or outdoor tables, none stated that a candidate, a political party, or community organization personally targeted them. In short,

few of the respondents appear to be the recipients of direct voter registration drives or GOTV messages.

- In a number of studies carried out by Latino Decisions, have documented that anti-immigrant attacks in California in the mid 1990s caused Latinos to pursue citizenship, voter registration and turnout in record numbers. New York City has not been an epicenter of anti-immigrant sentiment during the last few decades. Thus, the pursuit of citizenship among Dominicans seems to have been done for instrumental reasons rather than out of a sense of civic duty or to become engaged in politics (e.g., defend against political attacks). Similarly, voter registration occurred during a visit to the DMV or in a setting or context where becoming registered to vote was not a primary motive.
- The challenge facing community organizations seeking to expand the size of the Dominican electorate is to overcome their general feelings of alienation from the political process. The knowledge of politics that is displayed, typically takes on a pessimistic tone whereby President Obama or an elected official was unable or unwilling to improve the lives of minorities. A mobilizing message that offers a counter-narrative could prove fruitful in overcoming their lack of estrangement. Feelings of estrangement could very well be driven by a lack of political information (see the survey results). In other words, while Dominicans display some knowledge about the workings of politics (executive-congressional relations); their knowledge is informed by the recent failures of that interaction. Political information that highlights policy success could be used as a politically motivating factor, by increasing political efficacy and political information.
- Finally, Dominicans are under-mobilized. Most respondents noted that they have not received a GOTV message. When they are contacted it has been over phone. Field experiments show that face-to-face contacts by a co-ethnic are very effective in turning out Latino voters. Phone calls, especially Robo-calls are some of the least effective ways of mobilizing Latino voters.

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