

Latinos drive San Bernardino County population growth

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Latinos didn't simply add to, help or boost San Bernardino County's population growth over the past decade. They were the county's population growth.

Without Latinos, the county would have gotten smaller by about 6,000 people. Instead, the county is larger by more than 325,000. Because of that strong growth, Latino leaders say they expect Latinos will gain more political clout in the county.

"There is a transformation occurring that certainly favors Latinos," said Jose Calderon, a professor of sociology and Latino culture at Pitzer College. "It's very clear that, in the long run ... there are going to be some changes in both the state Legislature and in congressional seats."

Latino growth wasn't limited to any single part of San Bernardino County. Rather, it was spread through nearly every city and community.

The Latino population doubled or more than doubled in Adelanto, Apple Valley, Hesperia and Lake Arrowhead. Upland's Latino population grew by 49 percent, Rancho Cucamonga's by 63 percent and Fontana's by 76 percent. Even Ontario, already a majority-Latino city in 2000, saw its Latino population grow by 20 percent.

Countywide, Latinos - not whites - are now the largest single group.

But political clout doesn't come with numbers - it comes with votes, and Latinos aren't voting at the same rate as whites and others.

"Latinos were significantly behind whites and blacks when it came to political participation," said UC Riverside professor Karthick Ramakrishnan, referring to a 2007 study of political participation in the Inland Empire. "It's kind of a Catch-22: If you have a Latino that gets elected to office, past research has shown that participation and interest among Latinos goes up. But to get someone elected, you need interest and participation."

Indeed, Calderon said groups have to make a concerted effort to boost Latino voter registration and participation in San Bernardino County and in Riverside County, which also saw immense growth in its Latino population.

"Although we will be a majority in the Inland Empire, it doesn't mean political power," he said. "You've got the numbers, but you don't necessarily have the plurality of the registered voters. ..."

This will certainly be an impetus for large voter registration and get-out-the-vote and naturalization drives."

Already, Calderon said some efforts are under way and that Latinos had a good turnout in the last few elections.

And Ramakrishnan said more political activism might come naturally as Latinos have children and take an interest in public schools.

"One dynamic you tend to see elsewhere is that, typically, parents tend to get involved in their child's school district," he said. "Then, as their kids get older, they get involved in other local politics."

But, he said, that's a trend "that could take another decade to develop."

Political parties, too, could start to take a greater interest in the county's Latinos as both Democrats and Republicans try to turn the growing group into a potent political force.

"I think you're going to see, in terms of voter mobilization, increased attention not just by Latino organizations, but by the two major parties," Ramakrishnan said. "That will make the region more competitive than it has been in the past. ... That's something that will benefit not just Latinos, but also the community as a whole."

County's demographics shift

San Bernardino County's Latino population grew by nearly 50 percent during the past 10 years, while the white population shrank by nearly 10 percent. Though Latinos are now the largest ethnic group in the county, Latinos lag behind whites in political representation in the county.



