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Voter Registration Efforts Grow In Hispanic Communities

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The battle for the crucial Latino vote is escalating.

Three of the largest Hispanic groups in the nation [have launched countrywide voter registration and education drives](#), but they're facing a new set of powerful obstacles.

"You really see a lot of the voter suppression efforts across the nation. It's really historic in nature. Not since Jim Crow laws were in existence did you see this kind of effort across the country," the Hispanic Federation's interim president, Jose Calderon, told The Huffington Post.

"We're going to push back," he said. "We're going to make sure that this fundamental right, which is so important for us, is accessible to everyone who is an American citizen and is 18."

This week, the Hispanic Federation, the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), [announced a joint project](#) called Movimiento Hispano (Hispanic Movement, in English).

Their goal is to register 2 million more Latino voters before the November election, bringing the total to nearly 12 million, Calderon told HuffPost.

The coalition intends to do this by reaching into Latino communities at the grassroots level in 26 states with large or burgeoning Hispanic populations, including key battleground states where the Latino vote could affect the outcome of the election.

"This is much more than registering Latinos to vote," Calderon said. "This is really a voter education campaign, to engage them at the most basic level to understand the importance of voting, but also in the importance of the issues that confront our

community -- from immigration to education to economic empowerment, jobs obviously, housing, etc.”

The biggest difference between this and past efforts, leaders of the initiative told The Huffington Post, is the unprecedented level of targeted coordination.

“This time we’re looking at the target districts and deciding who's going to do what,” LULAC’s National Executive Director Brent Wilkes told The Huffington Post, “getting right down to the block level.”

But they also face an unprecedented level of legal hurdles, which they contend are aimed at preventing minorities from voting.

“I think that there is no question that what they're trying to do is to discourage minority participation in our democratic process,” Wilkes said.

The spate of new legislation includes [voter ID laws](#), proof of citizenship requirements and [new regulations](#) carrying fines of up to \$1,000 for voter drive participants who don't deliver registration cards to elections offices within 48 hours.

Proponents of the laws, including Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach -- who gained national prominence for his role in helping create Arizona’s SB 1070, a strict undocumented immigrant crackdown law -- [insist such legislation is necessary to combat potential election fraud](#). Their opponents say that’s a manufactured rationale since instances of actual fraud are rare.

The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law reported in a [2007 study](#) that, “It is more likely that an individual will be struck by lightning than that he will impersonate another voter at the polls.”

Hans von Spakovsky, manager of the Heritage Foundation’s Civil Justice Reform Initiative, told The Huffington Post that the rarity of voter fraud is not the issue.

“I’m not claiming that there’s rampant voter fraud, but there are voter fraud cases in this country,” von Spakovsky said. “Voter fraud can make the difference in a close election. Why would you not take basic measures to protect against that?”

But the opponents of the laws, including the Democratic National Committee’s Voters Right Institute, contend that they are deliberate barriers erected by Republican state legislatures and aimed at disenfranchising voters who tend to vote against the GOP.

“They’ve been making this claim since 2006,” von Spakovsky countered, “when the Brennan Center put out its first study on this, and they simply ignore the turnout data from states like Georgia and Indiana that have now had their voter I.D. laws in place for five years. The turnout of African-Americans [did not go down in those states as was predicted](#). In fact, it went up. And it went up significantly in both states.”

Another Brennan Center study, released in October, [found that election laws](#) enacted in 14 states “could make it significantly harder for more than five million eligible voters to cast ballots in 2012.”

“These new restrictions,” the study’s authors wrote, “fall most heavily on young, minority, and low-income voters, as well as on voters with disabilities. This wave of changes may sharply tilt the political terrain for the 2012 election.”

John Samples, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Representative Government, believes the laws will not deter people from voting. “I saw no real strong reason to think that that was likely,” he told The Huffington Post.

Samples' analysis of studies on the subject led him to conclude: “People that are mobilized were likely to vote and the burdens were unlikely to stop them.”

Whatever the impact of the laws on turnout, opponents say there’s an immediate, discriminatory effect.

“All of a sudden,” said Democratic strategist Freddy Balsera, “you show up at a precinct and you don't look like the stereotypical American. Your skin's a little brown or your hair's a little curly, and all of a sudden you're forced to produce documents that you would otherwise not be forced to produce to exercise your right as an American. And you could potentially not be able to cast your vote or, at a minimum, be intimidated from voting. That's definitely voter suppression.”

The three Hispanic groups intend to continue their voter registration efforts and their fight against the newest laws. In the long run, LULAC’s Wilkes said, they know that the growing Hispanic population brings with it an unstoppable tide.

“There is a trend here that no one is going to reverse,” he said. “Every four years, when Americans go to the polls, there will be a lot more Latino voters.”