

Hispanics become area's largest minority group

By Daniel Rome Levine
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(Crain's) — Fueled by high birth rates and immigration, Hispanics have overtaken blacks for the first time as the largest minority group in the Chicago metro area, according to a Brookings Institution study released this month.

Brookings' analysis of 2004 Census Bureau data found that Hispanics now account for 18.4% of the metro area's population, compared to 18% for blacks. As recently as 2000, blacks were the largest minority group, accounting for 18.4% of the population vs. 16.5 % for Hispanics.

The study's author, William H. Frey, calls Chicago a "prototype" in that it has been able to attract new immigrants at the same time its white and black populations are dwindling.

"Other cities, particularly in the Midwest, are Chicago wanna-be's in that they're losing whites and blacks and want to bring in more new immigrant groups," says Mr. Frey. "Chicago's been doing that for quite awhile."

Hispanics have been the main source of Chicago's immigrant boom, accounting for 80 percent of the city's overall population growth in the first four years of this decade. While the growth rate of Hispanic immigration to the city has cooled in recent years, many observers are still amazed by the speed at which Hispanics have overtaken blacks.

"Projections have always said that Latinos would be the largest minority group in the metro area by 2015 or 2020," says 22nd Ward Alderman Ricardo Munoz. "What is surprising is that it has happened so soon."

Mr. Munoz says this is just the beginning. "The median age of the Latino community in Chicago is 24. Everyone else is 33 or 34," he says. "We're much younger, we're having more babies and we're going to be here longer than everybody else."

The demographic shift and continuing Hispanic immigration are sure to change the face of the city in many ways. "There's a lot of implications for the whole metropolitan area," says Loyola University demographer Kenneth Johnson. One of the most fascinating changes, says Mr. Johnson, is the impact it could have on the city's political scene.

An increasing Hispanic population does not automatically translate into greater political clout, says Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-Ill., who has represented the 4th Congressional District, an area just west of the Loop, since 1992 -- and is considering a mayoral run next year. "Growing numbers do not mean growing power unless you organize," he says.

One of Mr. Gutierrez's top priorities has been running so-called citizenship campaigns to naturalize Hispanic immigrants and get them registered to vote.

Mark Thomas, information services manager of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, a regional growth management agency, is not surprised by the area's Hispanic growth rate. He believes these new immigrants could be a strong political force in coming decades.

The Planning Commission estimates that Hispanics will make up one-third of the region's total population by 2030.

"That's a significant voting bloc provided Hispanics register and actually come out to vote," says Mr. Thomas. "At some point, the Hispanic community is going to be able to throw its weight around, and it should eventually be able to turn to the polls to get candidates elected that support the community's initiatives."

As the city's Hispanic population grows and the number of blacks declines, political power will also shift. One direct result of the region's booming immigrant population is the likelihood of greater Hispanic political representation at all levels of government.

For instance, Chicago now has three predominantly black congressional districts represented by Jesse Jackson, Jr., Danny Davis and Bobby Rush. Mr. Gutierrez is the city's only Hispanic congressman, and the only one in the entire state.

That is likely to change, say experts, when large Hispanic population gains in the city are reflected in the next Census Bureau report, which is out in 2010. Chicago is expected to gain two new congressional districts on the northwest and southwest sides of the city that are heavily populated by Hispanics.

This redrawing of the city's congressional map would give Hispanics added political clout at a time that constituents in districts represented by the city's three black representatives are continuing their exodus from the city.

Hispanic political influence will be felt not just in Chicago, but in its suburbs, as well. One of the major findings of the Brookings survey is that Hispanic immigrants are spreading out from city centers into suburban areas like Aurora and Joliet. "When I go to Great America in Waukegan I might as well be in Little Village," says Rep. Gutierrez.

Mr. Johnson, the Loyola University demographer, says there are now more Hispanics living in Chicago's suburbs than in the city and this could alter the suburban political landscape. "These areas that are traditionally heavily Republican are now facing a more mixed constituency and it could be a significant factor," he says.

A good indication of the political clout of Chicago's growing Hispanic community should come in next year's mayoral election if Rep. Gutierrez decides to run. He likes to talk about what happened in Los Angeles last year with the election of the city's first Hispanic mayor, Antonio R. Villaraigosa, as a parallel to what could happen here.

In L.A., Mr. Villaraigosa's election was preceded by a wave of Hispanics being elected to a variety of local offices in surrounding Orange County.

Rep. Gutierrez sees the same phenomenon happening here and is confident that the political power of Chicago's Hispanics is only going to rise in coming years. "In Stone Park, Berwyn, Cicero, all of these areas immediately adjacent to the city of Chicago, you're going to see new mayors, council members, state senators and state representatives" he says. "Those voices are going to be organized and heard. It's going to be an interesting 20 years."

Below is the link to the full study by William H. Frey

http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20060307_frey.htm