

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

May 1 Immigration Protests

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Q1: What is prompting the mass Latino protest demonstrations in cities across the United States?

A1: Much of the Hispanic population is embittered by the lack of comprehensive federal immigration legislation dealing with regularization of the roughly 12 million undocumented immigrants because this puts many of their compatriots in a state of limbo. This is aggravated by the recent uptick in raids by units of the Department of Homeland Security at workplaces of companies believed to employ undocumented immigrants, the arrest and deportation of these workers, and the lack of official concern over what this does to the care of their children, many of whom are U.S. citizens. The U.S. decision to erect a fence along the border is deplored because this would separate many families whose members live in sister cities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Beyond that, many U.S. states and cities are enacting punitive legislation directed at undocumented immigrants that prevent schooling for their children, unannounced inspection of their documents by local police for purposes of detention and deportation, and actions in these localities prohibiting gathering places for job seekers. The majority of Latinos believe that without the work of the immigrants, documented or otherwise, many activities in the United States would suffer, such as harvesting crops, keeping prices reasonable in restaurants and hotels, and construction. This issue is emphasized by the question: what would happen to the U.S. economy without Hispanic workers? It is this work-related connection that led to the choice of May 1, the traditional Labor Day in much of the world, for the day of protest.

Q2: How effective is this mobilization of Hispanics in securing their goals?

A2: The May 1 protests in past years have not had a decisive impact on enacting comprehensive federal immigration legislation or in preventing the punitive legislation in many states and localities. However, the influence of the Hispanic mobilization differs from place to place. Those states and localities that rely heavily on Hispanic workers pay more attention to the mass gatherings than those places that have only modest Latino populations. A recent report by the Census Bureau states that there are now 45.5 million Hispanics in the United States (up from 35.7 million in 2000) and that they comprise 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, which surely increases the political heft of this population. The Census Bureau said that the growth of Hispanics represented half of U.S. population gains between 2000 and 2007. About 62 percent of this growth came from births of Hispanics already in the United States and not from immigration. Hispanics who migrated to the United States are increasingly seeking citizenship, and Hispanic organizations are encouraging them to register to vote. The Hispanic vote will be important in the upcoming presidential election and increasingly so in subsequent elections. Consequently, their mobilization will give them ever-greater influence in the years to come.

Q3: How much influence do Hispanics have in U.S. policy toward Latin America?

A3: The current influence of Hispanics living in the United States on U.S. policy toward Latin America is modest. Hispanic groups in the United States vary in their attitudes and thus do not constitute a unified bloc on most foreign policy issues—nor do they on domestic issues. However, the tendency is clear to favor Democratic Party positions, especially on immigration, over those of the Republican Party, and this will stimulate soul-searching over policies in both parties. Even though the majority of Hispanics in the United States are of Mexican origin, they have been unable to prevent erection of the fence separating the two countries. However, just as Hispanic political influence in domestic affairs will grow as more of them vote and attain public office, so too is their influence likely to increase in the foreign policy arena.

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