



**EXAMINING ATTITUDES
OF SPANISH SPEAKING
COMMUNITIES
ON DEMOCRACY,
REPRESENTATION,
VOTING, AND RANKED
CHOICE VOTING.**

**A DEMOCRACY RISING PROJECT,
IN COLLABORATION WITH COMUNIDADES
UNIDAS (SALT LAKE CITY), AND
COMMUNITY LEADERS IN NEW MEXICO
AND WASHINGTON STATES.**

**WE ARE
DEMOCRACY
RISING** 

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, 36 cities across the country will use ranked choice voting, including New York City, Minneapolis, Las Cruces, and Salt Lake City. Within just these cities there are millions of voters that do not speak English as a first language or are bilingual. Recognizing the importance of reaching these communities, it is essential to provide educational resources to non-English speakers with information about upcoming elections and the democratic process in general. In advance of the June primary in New York City a coalition of organizations (1), which included Democracy Rising, executed a research project to determine ideal messaging for voters in Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Bangla, and Arabic. This research was extremely informative and immediately improved methods of communication with voters from these communities.

In the 36 cities implementing ranked choice voting this year the most commonly spoken language outside of English is Spanish. According to the Pew Research Center, Latinos are the largest voting bloc in the country outside of white voters (1). The 2020 census shows that Latinos account for over 51% of the country's population growth (2). According to the Census Bureau, there are over 41 million people who speak Spanish at home (3). It is essential that jurisdictions, candidates, and community organizations engage this language community in culturally appropriate ways.

In June of 2021 Democracy Rising, in partnership with Abraham Sanchez in Las Cruces, NM and Comunidades Unidas in Salt Lake City, UT launched a project to investigate attitudes of Spanish-speaking communities on issues of democracy, representation, voting, and ranked choice voting, with the purpose of identifying themes and values that can increase civic engagement and voting. This report aims at providing useful information for agencies, organizations, and candidates working on outreach to Spanish speaking communities around issues of voting and democracy.

This project consisted of four focus group discussions (two in Las Cruces, NM; two in Salt Lake City, UT) between September 15 and 29, 2021. In total, there were 25 participants. The focus groups were led by local facilitators, who received training and a comprehensive facilitation guide from Democracy Rising. The focus groups were conducted in Spanish, lasting 2 hours each and were conducted both in person and virtually.

KEY LEARNINGS

1. Participants agreed that representative democracy is a good system of government, as long as there are ways through which communities can hold elected officials to account for what they have done, what they have not done, and why.
2. Participants felt strongly about civic engagement not only around elections, but more importantly outside of elections as the key for democracy to function. Civic participation must be inclusive of those who can vote and those who cannot.
3. Participants felt that they do not have access to places where decisions are made. For example, almost no information about services or public meetings is readily available in Spanish, and meetings where the community has the opportunity to give public comment are almost always scheduled during working hours, when most people cannot attend.
4. A theme of solidarity politics emerged as an important issue for everyone who participated in the focus groups. The emphasis on “we” and not “me”.
5. Participants already had an understanding of the principles behind ranked choice voting, without calling it ranked choice voting. Most shared instances in their daily lives where they use such a system to make decisions.

6. Participants stressed the importance of having elected representatives with experiences similar to theirs, who come from their communities.
7. There is a feeling that the system of government in the United States is less corrupt than the governments in the places of origin. All of the participants expressed their belief that creating change through democratic processes is actually possible in this country.
8. There is a great appreciation for learning. Participants expressed an intense desire for more information on the issues, policies, processes, and candidates.

“Democracy is when there is participation and the people get involved in their interests, inside of a community, in solidarity.”

LAS CRUCES - GROUP 1

“I don’t know much about the system, but maybe it is language that limits my ability to learn. This is how we feel, especially immigrant communities, that we have language working against us”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 2

“We must make account of what they did and what they didn’t do, and then decide if we vote for that person again, or if we vote for someone else.”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 1

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use the relational organizing model for civic education. This includes a neighbor talking to neighbor approach, as well as open-to-all community learning sessions, led by trusted messengers in the community, where local issues and policies are discussed, and where people can learn more about what their elected representatives are or are not doing, as well as what the candidates are promising.
2. Create civic participation guides (digital and/or print) at the hyper-local level, which in very simple terms cover the issues that would be discussed in community learning sessions- the important local issues, what elected officials have been doing or not, information about candidates, and information regarding how community members can get involved. These guides ideally would be created by local community organizations, and updated regularly.
3. Close to election time, develop learning materials with key information that are accessible to all, especially materials that do not require much or any reading. Examples that came up repeatedly were TV ads that are short and catchy, and aired frequently, memes and short videos that can be shared on social media, sample ballots that can be available in print as well as online.
4. Implement “vote for us” campaigns, to create an opportunity for solidarity building between Latinos who cannot vote and those who can.
5. In communities with large Spanish speaking populations, immigration policy is an everyday issue. Name this issue when working with these communities.

community. The more we talk like this amongst ourselves, the more information will get to more people.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 2

“I would like to learn more. For example, we have local elections coming up... Why local? Why do we have them? Why do other states have so much power? Why is there a Senate? A House of Representatives? Why is there a judge? What happens after the vote?”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 2

on democracy and the video (both materials provided in the focus group conversation) is that it was all put in simple, easy to understand language. My parents did not finish elementary school and there are many words they don't know. If we really want people to understand these things, it has to be put in very simple language.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 1

“Perhaps creating spaces, such as this one. It can start with a neighbor, then invite another neighbor since the relationship is already established. There is trust. We can start in this way.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 1

“What I liked about this declaration

FULL REPORT

METHODOLOGY

Democracy Rising, in collaboration with Comunidades Unidas in Salt Lake City (UT) and Abraham Sanchez in Las Cruces (NM) conducted four focus groups (half in Las Cruces, NM; half in Salt Lake City, UT) between September 15 and 29, 2021.

Comunidades Unidas and Abraham Sanchez were tasked with recruiting participants for this project from the network of individuals who already interface with Latino organizations at the local level. In total, there were 25 focus group participants. The focus groups lasted 2 hours each, and were conducted in Spanish, both in person and virtually.

The facilitation guide for the focus groups was adapted from the project conducted in New York City, with changes to reflect the goal of reaching and engaging Spanish-speaking communities. The guide was drafted in English, and was translated into Spanish by native Spanish speakers within the team. Once available in both languages, the outline was shared with trusted community leaders in Washington and New Mexico for review. The facilitation guide was completed in September 2021, and was divided in 3 sections: 1. Attitudes about democracy and representation; 2. Attitudes about voting; and 3. Ranked choice voting. Participants received the following materials: a brief written description of representative democracy, a short video about ranked choice voting, and a printed mock ranked choice ballot to practice on.

In addition to a facilitator, each focus group had two note takers, and were recorded. Full transcripts of each focus group were compiled and shared with the qualitative analysis team, which consisted of the two facilitators (Las Cruces and Salt Lake City), community partners in NM and WA, and Democracy Rising's co-Director. Qualitative data was analysed using a participatory analysis process. Each member of the team received full transcripts of all focus group conversations, in the original Spanish, and individually organized the content by theme.

At the end of this process, the team met for a three hour session in which the themes were further distilled and organized by the group, key learnings and recommendations were identified, and key quotes were pulled from the transcripts.

FACILITATION

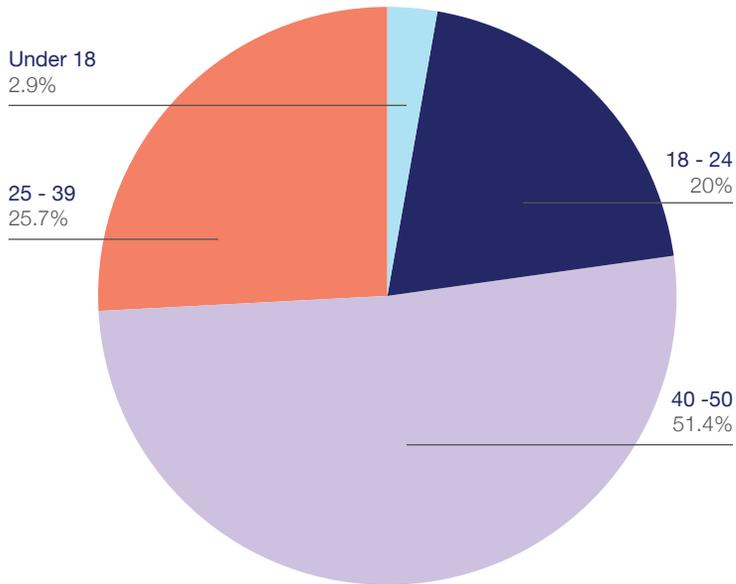
Focus groups were guided by one facilitator in Las Cruces, and another in Salt Lake City. Both facilitators were identified by local partners, and speak Spanish as their native language. The facilitators came into this work having diverse experiences of involvement with community groups, and had experience facilitating group conversations. Democracy Rising led a two-hour individual training with each facilitator to provide the context of the project, goals, best practices for focus group facilitation, and an in-depth review of the facilitation guide. Each training included interactive exercises and ample opportunity to ask questions.

PARTICIPATION

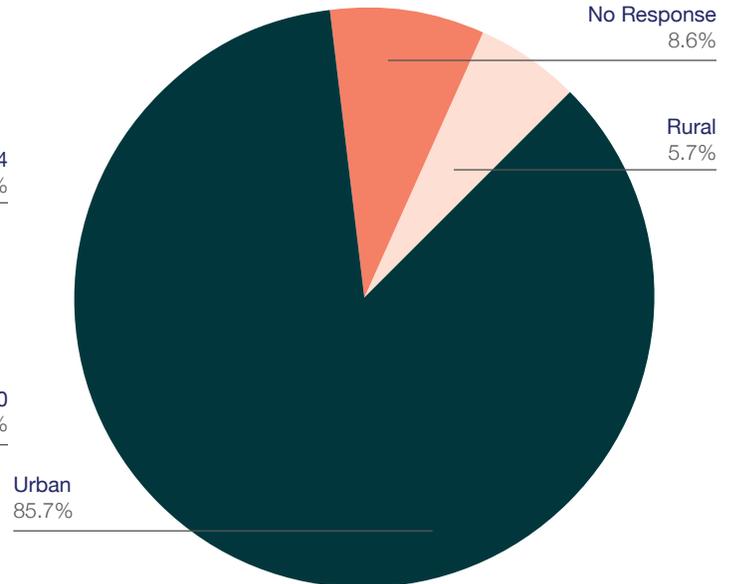
Participants consisted of 25 Spanish-speaking residents from the greater Las Cruces and Salt Lake City areas. Each group had between 5 and 8 participants. Participants were not randomly selected, but rather recruited from networks of individuals already engaged with Latino organizations locally. The vast majority of the participants were women. All of them were fluent in Spanish, 77% of them speaking it as the main language at home. Ages ranged between 15 and 60. We did not ask participants about their level of education, socio-economic or immigration status, but through the conversations we learned participants came from a wide variety of experiences and careers including domestic workers, students, office workers, social workers, non profit workers, agricultural workers, and even an elected official. Some of the participants are able to vote and some of them cannot.

PARTICIPANTS

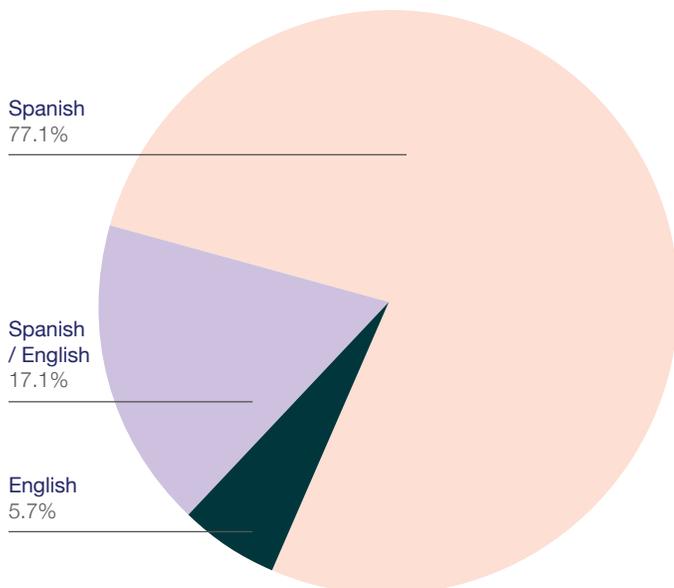
AGES



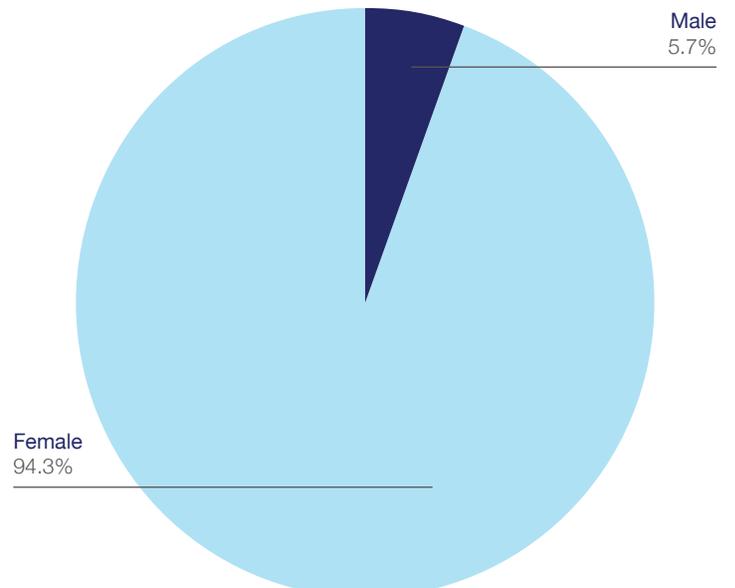
RURAL / URBAN LIVING



LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME



GENDER



ANALYSIS

DEMOCRACY AND REPRESENTATION

Overall the participants felt that democracy is a good system of government and viewed it as a system that, when working properly, is truly by the people and for the people. There was a basic understanding of governmental structure, in that there is always a hyper local authority, then an authority that covers a broader region, and so forth. Participants who live in a community where there is an elected representative with a shared cultural background had a significantly deeper understanding of how government works and tended to be more engaged in advocacy and policy issues in their community. It was also discussed that just because someone has a last name that signals a shared cultural background, this doesn't necessarily mean that values are shared.

LIMITATIONS

Participants identified a number of barriers for the Latino community to participate in the democratic process.

1. Lack of information in Spanish about elections, how to vote, the candidates and their platforms.
2. Lack of education about how government works, important policies at the local level, and what elected officials are or are not doing.
3. A deep sentiment of injustice felt by immigrant communities about not being included or consulted in decisions regarding policy, even though they work hard and sustain their local economies, pay their taxes, and contribute to the social fabric of their communities.
4. The influence of power and money in the electoral process results in Latino candidates who have the support of the community almost never having a chance to win.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Community organizing is a concept and a tactic that emerged organically as the main solution to the problems of lack of information and lack of collective power.
2. The creation of small community groups through churches or neighborhoods, to share information and collectively decide how to try to solve hyper-local problems.
3. The important contribution of community organizations working to help educate and mobilize the community.
4. The profound positive impact that is felt when there is an elected official that comes from the community, who shares similar life experiences as the people.
5. The cultural orientation towards the utilization of community conversations, where people can learn about the issues, policies, elected officials, and candidates.

available to the community. We go to the person who comes from our community, who knows our history and the problems we live with. The person who talks with us and says ok, we have got to do something.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 1

“What is the meaning of democracy, in practice? What does it mean to participate in a democracy? We assume it is participating in elections. But civic engagement is much more broad, outside of elections.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 1

“It is much easier to sympathize with someone who has similar experiences.”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 1

“If someone wants to run for office, we have to find out about them. Where do they come from? How has he lived? What is he about? What does he like? Because if we have no information, how are we going to get to know them? How am I going to give them my vote? Just because he gave me some gum? No, we can't do it like that.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 2

“There are young university students in our communities who know about all these things. They can go and teach us in community conversations.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 2

on lived experiences navigating immigration issues

THE VOTE

All participants agreed that voting is of the utmost importance. The vote is the key to making change, for better or for worse. Participants largely viewed voting as a privilege and a responsibility, not a right. This sentiment was primarily driven by participants' proximity to communities with large immigrant populations. Within these communities the right to vote is not a given and many recognize that immigration policy is either a gateway or a barrier to community power at the ballot box. When asked about the issues that motivated them to be politically engaged, it is no surprise that the overwhelming majority of respondents cited immigration policy as a motivator.

LIMITATIONS

1. There are so many people in the Latino community who cannot vote.
2. The lack of solidarity on the part of the great number of Latinos who can vote, and yet choose not to.
3. There is a deep-seated fear of the system in the Spanish speaking community, which is based largely on lived experiences navigating immigration issues or accessing services, instances where making a mistake can have dire consequences. This fear carries on to voting.
4. The ballot can be very intimidating for people who do not have much information and who do not speak English proficiently.
5. Lack of access to information on how and where one can vote.
6. Lack of candidates who actually resonate with the community.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. The use of trusted messengers to disseminate information and build power in the community.
2. Those who cannot vote can find out about the issues, policies, elections, and candidates, and in turn share that information with members of their

families and social networks who can vote, and persuade them to vote conscientiously.

3. The deep desire of those who cannot vote in one day to be able to exercise that right.

“He who is silent, grants”

LAS CRUCES - GROUP 2

“We can’t allow others to make decisions for us.”

SALT LAKE CITY - GROUP 1

“For a long time, I couldn’t vote. I felt so much frustration with those who could vote, but didn’t, because I felt I had no voice. It was very upsetting because I felt they had my life in their hands, and were doing nothing.”

SALT LAKE CITY - GROUP 1

“It is important to vote, because that is how we can make changes in our communities. We can make changes for many people. Voting is how we can come together to achieve changes for all of us.”

LAS CRUCES - GROUP 1

RANKED CHOICE VOTING

All of the participants understood how ranked choice voting works after watching the short didactic video that was shared with them. They understood the concept of identifying preferences and why, as well as how the votes are counted. The concept of obtaining a majority of support for a decision, through a process of elimination of the least popular options is something that all the participants mentioned as a common practice in their daily lives, be it with their families, in their churches, at their jobs, or with their friends.

The only confusion regarding how to fill the ballot arose from the fact that some of the participants did not know all the candidates on the practice ballot they were given, and therefore felt they did not have enough information to properly rank their preferences on their ballot. The vast majority of the participants expressed that this voting system seems very fair. They appreciated that their vote counts, even if their first preference is not chosen. Participants discussed this system in community terms, that is, an opportunity to vote en bloc, taking into account the preferences of the community at large.

Participants offered a number of ways to explain how the system works, based on how they use this type of system to make everyday decisions. However, it was much more difficult for them to explain the process of how the votes are counted, and all the participants agreed that the use of a short didactic video, like the one they watched, is the best way to explain the system. They all found the video very easy to understand.

LIMITATIONS

1. Lack of information about all of the candidates makes it difficult for people to properly rank the candidates on their ballot.
2. The lack of information about the new voting system accessible for people of all ages and levels of education.

3. The lack of Spanish language information.
4. The difficulty in explaining in conversation how the votes are counted and how a winner is declared.
5. Confusion about whether it is required to rank all the options on the ballot, even if you don't like some of the candidates.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. The organic understanding that with this system your vote is not wasted even if the candidate you like the most can't get elected.
2. Inherent understanding that having more options is a good thing, because there will almost always be two or more options that could be good.
3. The fact that the Spanish speaking community, culturally, bases group decision-making through a process of considering options, comparing them, ranking preferences, and reaching a consensus on the preference that has majority support.

“I think we use this type of voting all the time. Whenever we have to make a group decision it is done my majority. And we respect other people’s decisions.”

SALT LAKE CITY - GROUP 2

“In this life we always need a plan b, and a plan c, and even a plan d. And we must know why we are classifying them in that order. We have to compare and then decide which option is best, and which comes after that.”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 2

“I liked it because your vote doesn’t just end up in the trash. It actually counts.”

LAS CRUCES - GROUP 1

“The greatest advantage is that when you choose your first option, in case that option was to fail, your second option is right there already.”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 1

“I like this. As a matter of fact, I do the exact same thing to manage my family.”

SALT LAKE CITY - GROUP 2

“Using this system is going to make us learn more about each candidate.”

LAS CRUCES- GROUP 2

“I use this method to be a mom. I do it to make decisions, by preference. That way if something doesn’t work out, I have a plan b in place.”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 1

“I like it, because sometimes I think wow, this would be an ideal representative! But this other one also is good. Which one is the best? Well I like this one more, then that one. We don’t have to put all of our eggs in one basket.”

SALT LAKE CITY- GROUP 1

KEY LEARNINGS

1. Participants agreed that representative democracy is a good system of government, as long as there are ways through which communities can hold elected officials to account for what they have done, what they have not done, and why.
2. Participants felt strongly about civic engagement not only around elections, but more importantly outside of elections as the key for democracy to function. Civic participation must be inclusive of those who can vote and those who cannot.
3. Participants felt that they do not have access to places where decisions are made. For example, almost no information about services or public meetings is readily available in Spanish, and meetings where the community has the opportunity to give public comment are almost always scheduled during working hours, when most people cannot attend.
4. A theme of solidarity politics emerged as an important issue for everyone who participated in the focus groups. The emphasis on “we” and not “me”.
5. Participants already had an understanding of the principles behind ranked choice voting, without calling it ranked choice voting. Most shared instances in their daily lives where they use such a system to make decisions.
6. Participants stressed the importance of having elected representatives with experiences similar to theirs, who come from their communities.
7. There is a feeling that the system of government in the United States is less corrupt than the governments in the places of origin. All of the participants expressed their belief that creating change through democratic processes is actually possible in this country.
8. There is a great appreciation for learning. Participants expressed an intense desire for more information on the issues, policies, processes,