

Spanish-language media help shape public policy

February 23 2012, By Bettye Miller

Spanish-language media in the United States play a critical role in shaping perceptions of public opinion among Latino voters and public officials of every ethnicity across the country. They also play a far greater advocacy role for the communities they serve than do their English-language counterparts, according to a University of California, Riverside researcher.

Spanish-language media gather news, do investigative reporting and report on news from state capitals, just as [mainstream media](#) do,” said D. Xavier Medina Vidal, a Ph.D. candidate in political science who will graduate from UCR in June. “They also keep their readers informed about how the political system works and cover issues that are important to their readers that English-language media are not covering. They also have a better sense of Latino [public opinion](#) and help shape public policy on issues that are important to Latinos.”

His dissertation, “Voces del Capitolio: Spanish-Language Media in the Statehouse,” examines the influence of Spanish-language media on the development of Latino policy agendas at the state level. His research was funded by UC MEXUS (University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States) and involved spatial analysis (GIS), in-depth interviews with Latino and non-Latino state legislators, and data from an original national survey of state legislators.

A former fiscal analyst for the New Mexico Legislature, the 33-year-old graduate student said he is fascinated by the power of institutions, by the

role of language in the political arena, and how Latino politicians and policymakers determine Latino policy issues. He focused on California and New Mexico, which has the largest proportion of Latino lawmakers of any state in the U.S., but also surveyed Latino legislators throughout the country, including Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts, New York and Texas.

Medina Vidal discovered that “legislators depend on the media a great deal because they believe the media are representative of public opinion. For the Latino community in the U.S., Spanish-language media play a critical role in shaping perceptions of public opinion and link Latino constituents and their political representatives, much more so than English-language media. They speak to Latino public opinion and identity, and Latino perceptions of the political system in ways that English-language do not.”

For example, English-only laws are of particular interest to the Latino community, as are policies regarding education and housing. “For a lot of Hispanic communities in California’s Central Valley, water policy is closely linked to livelihood,” a perspective that is not often reflected in English-language media, he said.

Just how influential Spanish-language media have become was apparent in the 2006 immigration reform debate of 2006 when a Los Angeles radio personality, supported by other Spanish-language media, mobilized millions of immigrants across the country to protest HR 4437, which would have increased penalties for illegal immigration, Medina Vidal observed. The bill passed the House, but not the Senate.

“English-language media and politicians had no idea how much of an issue that was in the Latino community, and knew nothing about the rallies until they took place,” he said. “Many Spanish-language media had been reporting on the bill for months. The protests changed the

debate, and Spanish-language media were at the heart of that.”

Non-Latino legislators also view Spanish-language media as an important resource for serving their Latino constituents’ needs, Medina Vidal’s research found.

“It goes beyond Spanish-language ads in political campaigns,” he said. “These legislators say they gain a better sense of Latino public opinion, and that improves the quality of representation for Latino issues. With the growth of the Latino population and its increasing influence in American politics, politicians are paying more attention and the way they’re doing that is through Spanish-language [media](#).”

Provided by University of California, Riverside

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