



Promoting Diversity on the Hill, Congress Falls Short

By Mickey Ibarra - 03/11/10 03:28 PM ET

America is becoming more diverse each year. According to the most recent Census data from 2000, the numbers of Latinos and Asians in the United States will triple over the next half-century. By the close of 2010, it is estimated that minorities will number more than 110 million out of a total population of 309 million. Latinos represent an estimated 15% of the American population.

Corporate America has begun to recognize that diversity in America's board rooms makes good business sense. Increasingly, Latinos, African Americans and women are cracking the glass ceiling and companies are seeing a positive impact on their bottom line as a result. A 2009 study commissioned by the California Public Employees' Retirement System's (CalPERS) found that companies with diverse boards perform better than boards composed of directors with similar profiles in terms of ethnicity, gender, and skills sets. The report — Board Diversification Strategy: Realizing Competitive Advantage and Shareowner Value — found that companies without minorities were at a competitive disadvantage and that those with a high ratio of diverse board seats exceeded the average returns of the Dow Jones and NASDAQ indices over a five-year period.

The benefits of diversity should be equally embraced in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives, particularly since the policies they produce equally impact the one in three Americans who are minorities. Sadly, that has not been the case. In a report released last month by the Congressional Hispanic Staff Association (CHSA), they found a strikingly low representation of minority groups in leadership positions on the Hill. The report was released as part of the first annual "State of Diversity on the Hill Address" hosted by CHSA and the Congressional Black Associates, Congressional Asian Pacific American Staff Association, and the Congressional Muslim Staff Association.

The report found that Latinos are significantly underrepresented at all levels in the House of Representatives, particularly in key staff positions. Only 2.7% of Chief of Staff positions are filled by Latinos and only 2.1% of legislative directors, according to data from the 2009 House Employment Survey. Of the 4,100 employees in the U.S. Senate, only 6% are people of color, according to a 2006 DiversityInc investigation. . Among senior-level staff, the number drops to 1.9%. CHSA's 2010 investigation found that, out of the top 280 Senate staff positions, only 1.1% were held by Latinos.

There is a silver lining, however. The Latino Leaders Network™ released its 2nd Latino Leaders Network™ Honor Roll last week, which recognizes Congressional leaders who employ at least one Latino staff member in their Washington, D.C. office. They found a 37% increase in members of Congress who employ Latino staffers since 2008. A total of 156 members made the Honor Roll, compared to 114 in 2008 when the Honor Roll was first released. The U.S. Senate had 39 Senators and the U.S. House of Representatives had 117 members who made the Honor Roll. In addition to the members identified, seven leadership offices and 27 committees are represented on the 2010 Honor Roll.

While we can be pleased with the progress made in promoting diversity on Capitol Hill and in our government, there is no reason to be satisfied. Until Latinos and other minorities are equally represented in positions of leadership throughout the halls of Congress, America's policy agenda will not fully reflect the interests of the American people.

One solution supported by CHSA and other organizations is patterned after the NFL's "Rooney Rule," which makes it mandatory for teams to interview at least one minority candidate for top jobs including coaching positions. This rule has led to a significant rise in the number of NFL minority coaches and general managers who have demonstrated as much success as non-minority coaches in reaching the playoffs and winning Super Bowls.

It's important to note that Latinos care deeply about a broad range of issues, from the economy to health care to the environment. Latinos contribute more than \$418 billion annually to the U.S. economy and lead the growth in new small businesses among all U.S. demographic groups. In short, Latinos have become a vital component in every sector of this nation's economic, social and cultural life.

It's time we recognize that contribution by giving all Americans a seat at the table in determining the policies that impact our nation and our lives. Our government should look like America.

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