

Slump disproportionately affects Latino workers

It took a 777-point nosedive of the stock market for many Americans to realize the crisis in the financial sector is the real deal. The multibillion-dollar package to rescue Wall Street got a little more support among taxpayers when they finally understood that as bad as it sounds, not approving it could be much worse. Not to mention that so many people saw thousands of dollars wiped out from their retirement accounts overnight.

Almost everyone in the U.S. -- young or old, rich or poor -- is or has been, in one way or another, affected by the economic crisis facing our nation. But according to a recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center, the economic slump has disproportionately affected Latino workers, who make up 14 percent of the job market in the U.S.

Here's how. In the first quarter of 2008, the unemployment rate for Latino immigrants was 7.5 percent. The high unemployment rate is mostly because of the slump in the construction industry, where 250,000 Hispanics lost their jobs. Some 52 percent of working-age Latinos in the United States are immigrants, the study points out.

In a bad economy, the first jobs to go happen to be the ones held by unskilled immigrant workers. There are cutbacks in the service industry, in restaurants, in hotels and in manufacturing. People cutting corners in their expenses lay off their domestic help or gardening services. Day laborers end up spending the entire day standing on street corners with not a single job opportunity.

This has a domino effect on immigrants' everyday lives. By not having a job or by seeing their salaries reduced, it is more difficult for them to cover their expenses, including the higher costs of food and fuel. Their dire situation is also reflected in

the amount of money they send back home to their families. Remittances from the U.S. are an important source of revenue for most Latin American countries. In the month of August, remittances to Mexico were down 12 percent, according to Mexico's Central Bank, compared with the same month last year. Remittances are the second source of revenue in that country, after the oil industry.

Financial guru Julie Stav also has seen a disproportionate amount of Latinos being hit by the crisis in the housing industry. A study by her firm in Los Angeles found that a high percentage of Latinos were among those who received the now-infamous subprime mortgage loans that are causing so many to lose their homes to foreclosures.

In her study, Stav found that 50 percent of the people who were losing their homes did not go to the bank to try to find a solution. That is because many of them got loans from the same person who sold them their house. "We got into loans we didn't understand and signed them with people who couldn't back them up, and we are not dealing with it by contacting banks," they say.

"Most people we spoke to did not understand the concept of adjustable rate mortgages," says Stav. As a result, they did not know why their payments suddenly went from \$1,500 a month to \$2,300, for example. It is the lack of information on such a complex issue in a language that they can understand that has a lot of Latino families afraid and unaware of how to deal with this financial crisis.

That probably has some bearing on the results of another survey by the Pew Hispanic Center, in which Latinos seemed to be increasingly pessimistic about their situation in the United States. Half of those

It's time for Latinos to reach their voting potential

Elections are a time of accountability, a time when the values of presidential candidates are judged by voters and when incumbents are forced to defend their records and rhetoric against ambitious challengers.

This year, unlike any previous election year, an entire group of voters also will be held accountable: Latinos.

After years of being viewed as the "sleeping giant" — the group whose voter turnout never comes close to matching its voting-age population — the Hispanic vote is expected to be a force this year on Election Day.

Hispanic leadership coalitions, Spanish-language media, and the presidential candidates have spent tens of millions in an unprecedented grassroots effort to mobilize the Latino vote in as many as 13 states, coast to coast and in the Midwest. In four of those states — Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada and Florida — the Latino vote is large enough to determine the outcome of the presidential contest on Nov. 4.

That is, if Latinos vote. "If, in this election, we do not turn out and vote, then we are the dog that's all bark and no bite," warned Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. "If we don't do it now, then my question is, 'When are we going to do it?'"

The foundation has been laid for a record Latino voter turnout of 9.2 million, including 2.6 million Hispanics who will be voting for the first time. In the 2000 presidential election, 5.9 million Latinos voted, and in 2004, there were 7.6 million Latino votes cast.

Despite the rising numbers, this year's Hispanic vote projection is not good enough, Vargas emphasized recently during a meeting with Latino political activists.

"That is an embarrassment, because there are 17 million Latinos who today could vote because they are U.S. citizens at least 18 years of age," the Latino leader said. "Our challenge is to reach the native-born Latino — the Chicano, the Puerto Rican — those of us born here, who do take the right to vote for granted."

In 2004, Hispanic turnout was only 47 percent, compared with 60 percent for African-Americans and 67 percent for non-Hispanic whites.

The backbone of this year's campaign is "Ya es hora. ¡Ve y vota!" ("It's Time. Go Vote!"), which builds on the coalition's 2007 push that produced almost 1.4 million citizenship applications by legal permanent residents. (Not all will become citizens in time to vote because of the federal government's delay in processing the applications.)

One of the partners, We Are America Alliance, says it is on track to register a half-million new Latino, Asian and other immigrant voters by the end of this week, with a goal of mobilizing 1 million voters in the November election.

During the last weekend of September, another partner, Spanish-language publisher ImpreMedia, inserted 990,500 voter registration forms into its publications in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New York and Texas. Media giants Univision and Entravision also are running television and radio spots. Celebrities are being enlisted. State Farm Insurance Cos. recently sponsored a media tour featuring baseball All-Star David Ortiz, who became a citizen last June. Rock the Vote features pop singer Christina Aguilera in a television spot.

The "Ya es hora" drive also is telephoning Latino households, targeting about 150,000 Latinos who have been registered to vote but tend not to show up.

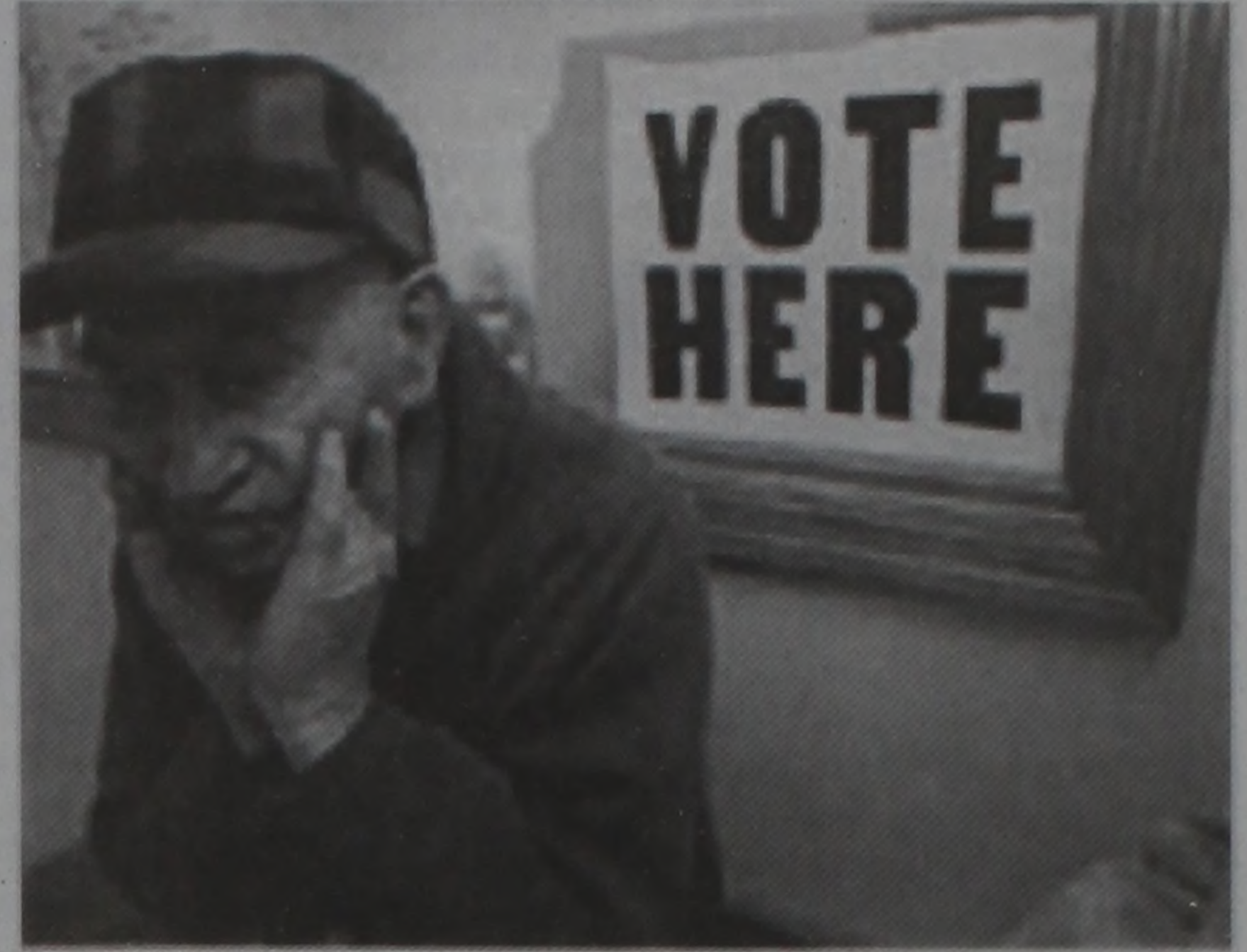
Separately, the New Policy Institute, a progressive group affiliated with NDN, has paid for Spanish-language radio ads in Colorado, Nevada and the Washington metropolitan area that includes Northern Virginia. The "Adelante" ("Moving Forward") drive is aimed at first-time Hispanic voters.

Why haven't Latinos voted more often? Hispanic leaders maintain that one of the biggest blocks to Latino voting is the misinformation given by election officials and poll workers. Organizers are combating that problem by urging Latinos to vote absentee or to call a toll-free telephone bank to get instructions and learn their voting rights.

Certainly, there are plenty of

reasons to vote. Like other voters, Hispanics are worried about the economy, jobs, health care, education and the Iraq

to spend \$20 million to court the Hispanic vote. The McCain campaign will not say how much it is spending but argues Obama needs



war. Unlike other voters, they are disproportionately affected on all of these fronts. They have not forgotten that the first U.S. soldier killed in the Iraq war was an immigrant who had illegally entered the country as a child.

There also is an underlying current of fear shared by Hispanics, regardless of citizenship status, because of the anti-immigrant sentiment that has spread across the country in recent years, according to polls. Like other voters, they want a sensible solution.

The presidential candidates, Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama, are begging for Latino support.

They have saturated the Spanish-language media with advertising and dispatched volunteers to cultural festivals and citizenship ceremonies from California to Florida to enlist voters.

"If you have any doubt about whether you can make a difference, just remember how, back in 2004, 40,000 registered Latino voters in New Mexico didn't turn out on Election Day. Sen. [John F.] Kerry lost that state by fewer than 6,000 votes," Obama often reminds Latino audiences.

The Obama campaign pledged

to spend more because he is not as well-known as McCain in the Latino community, according to McCain spokeswoman Hessa Fernandez.

McCain won 70 percent of Arizona's Latino vote during his last Senate reelection effort, but in his presidential campaign, he has been severely criticized by Latino leaders for backing away from his own immigration bill that would have offered illegal immigrants a path to citizenship.

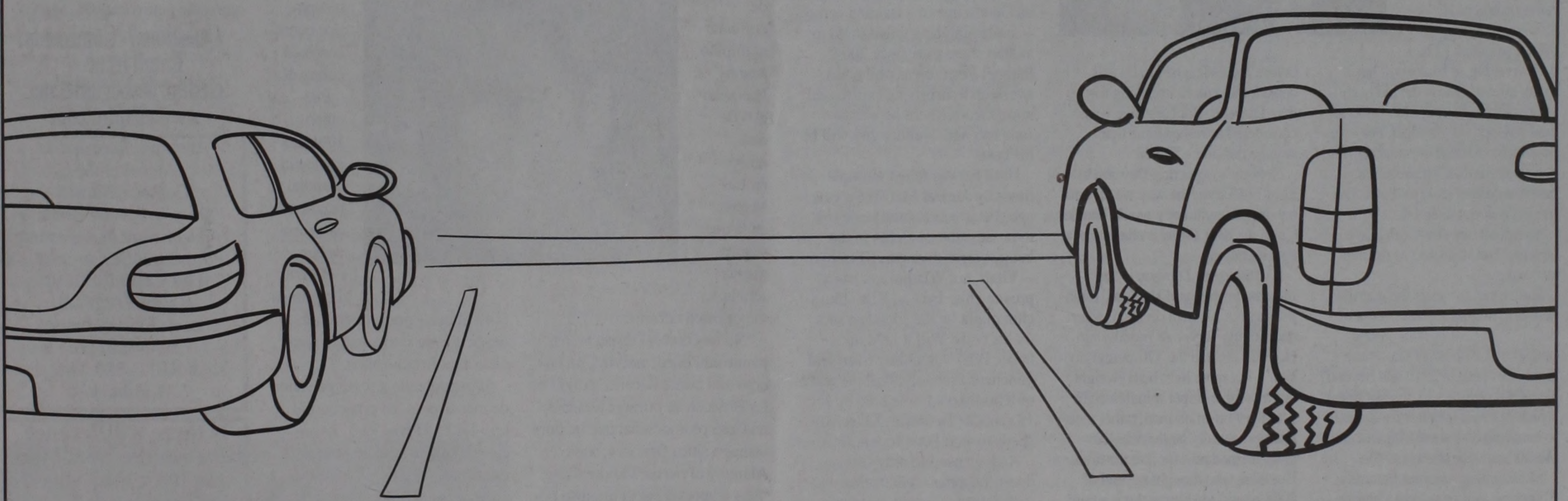
Whether McCain can garner the same level of Latino support in his home state is unknown, Fernandez conceded, but "John McCain is going to work for it" there and everywhere else.

Besides the presidential race, the Latino vote could affect other major contests, such as Senate races in Colorado, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Texas and Virginia.

What if the Hispanic vote does not reach the expected 9.4 million mark?

"It would be a setback to the Hispanic community," said Andres Ramirez of NDN. But after a better-than-usual performance during the presidential primaries, Ramirez is optimistic. "This is a community that's engaged and is already voting in very high numbers."

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