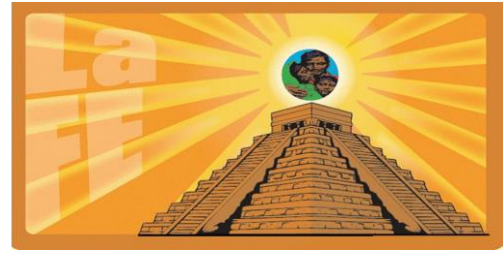




La Fe Policy Research and Education Center



*Promoviendo Bienestar para Familias y Comunidad con Conocimiento, Confianza y Poder
Promoting Family and Community Well-Being through Knowledge, Trust, and Empowerment*

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Latino Think Tank: A Catalyst for Policymaking Power

Texas needs a Latino-focused Think Tank. It is confounding and disconcerting that none currently exist. Preferably, the Think Tank should be an independent non-institutional organization that can contribute to critical policy dialogue and a catalyst to impact public and private policymaking. Structurally and operationally, it would have the capacity to conduct policy research combined with proactive engagement in the policymaking process.

Let's be clear; its primary population focus is Latinos with the **purpose** of engaging in policy analysis, messaging policy perspectives, and promoting civic involvement *and* advocacy for systemic changes. In addition to leadership, perseverance, and financial resources, 'courage' is required to establish such a Think Tank, given the historical and current political realities. In short, political obstacles and naysayers against a Latino Think will be consistently present.

The **values and principles** of the organization should be bound to the cultural concept of *Bienestar*¹ (wellbeing) because it culturally embraces social justice needs for equity in education, economic mobility opportunities, health and human resources, and a myriad of other concerns. The **Mission** is to increase the policymaking influence capacity of Latinos and their involvement in systemic changes. The **Vision** is that Latinos have a level playing field to influence public and private policymaking accountable to their values, decisions, and needs.

Discussion

Context And Rationale

Over 50 years ago (1968), the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights conducted five days of hearings in San Antonio. The Hearing addressed the persistent social determinant inequalities that plagued the *bienestar* of Mexican Americans. The issues were intertwined with the state's history of political oppression and racism, which still exist in new political and policy forms. Today, there are over 10 million Latinos in Texas compared to the 1.8 million in 1968.

Mexican American political organizing, advocacy, and litigation led to significant social justice and economic mobility accomplishments. However, state policymaking is filled with barriers to

¹ *Bienestar* is defined as a perceived quality of life status among individuals, families and communities affected by social, environmental, and systemic factors. It also embodies social justice concerns given the Latino experience with institutionalized racism, and harmful public policies.

engagement, economic mobility opportunities, and good health fifty years later.² Texas continues to present formidable public policy challenges for Latinos in the 21st century, which are likely to worsen if not addressed.

- Poor education, poverty, and health status are affected by decades of inequitable public policies and do not get solved without political power. Social determinant conditions are situated in the political and policymaking process. Texas has spent more than two decades on concerted efforts at voter suppression legislation (e.g., gerrymandering, voter ID laws) to keep Latinos, Blacks, and low-income populations from voting and gaining greater choice in political representation and power. These efforts continue unabated.
- Texas's minimalist approach to policymaking has not significantly changed as it continues to limit human capital investments and create unequal opportunities for many of its citizens. The 'Texas Public Policy Way' is underpinned by the rhetoric of limited government, lower taxes, individual responsibility, and often blames the individual (Latinos) for purported failures to succeed.
- The preceding has resulted in the state performing poorly in a wide range of social determinant policy areas in national ranking reports, e.g., in poverty, education, income inequality, regressive taxation, health, low-income housing, food insecurity, family and child wellbeing,

While Latino-based research has increased across disciplines over the past 2 to 3 decades, it appears to be having limited influence on policymaking. Much of the existing research is based on education, health, and social sciences. Further, most research avoids identifying how existing policy analysis and systemic institutional structures and behaviors contribute to marginalizing populations. A critical question follows: What contributions have Latino-based research made toward improving their *bienestar*?

There are weaknesses in our research capacity and outcomes to influence policy in ways that:

- Challenge, organize, and help develop interested researchers toward direct policy process involved with their research outcomes.
- Closely reflects Latinos' material conditions, *bienestar* needs, and policy priorities statewide and regionally.
- Catalyze both research and policy through political action.
- Contribute to the translational ability of research results to move into policy actions and implementation.

² "Mexican American Civil Rights in Texas", Edited by Robert Brischetto and J. Richard Avena, Michigan State University Press, 2021.

- Significantly respond to and are positively received by varied Latino communities, and meaningfully impact the social and health conditions targeted.

Think Tank Development

A policy is typically described as a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). The policy process refers to assessing and making important organizational decisions, including identifying different alternatives such as programs or spending priorities and choosing among them based on the impact they will have. Policies can be understood as political, management, financial, and administrative mechanisms, or instruments to reach explicit goals.

The overarching questions with most public policies are the issue being addressed, what populations will be affected, the intended benefits, what will it cost, how will it be paid for, and hopefully, is it fair. The processes in policymaking are invariably also political. This means engagement in politics to garner support through both a constituency of individuals and groups and public representatives.

How effective has the Latino population or select organizational and public leadership influenced policymaking? This is a difficult question to answer given the multitude of public policy arenas and its frequent dependence on what issue or areas are the target concern(s). While progress has been made in education, economic conditions, health, etc., many gaps and inequities demand attention and improvements.

Undoubtedly, 'voting' is an important '1st step' where one hopes that the person voted for wins, and secondly, the person follows through on the values and policy direction they espoused. Unfortunately, many voters, including Latinos, are often disappointed. The reality is that 'power' as reflected by financial resources, networks of support constituencies, and research information all contribute to influencing policymaking.

Texas is an excellent example of Latinos' historical and continued challenges to influence policymaking. The challenges are aggravated by the significant gaps in connecting the purported research in academic institutions with the realities of policymaking and their intended impacts. Simply, an independent Think Tank can be an essential catalyst and bridge between research results and the policymaking processes.

Generally, Think Tanks are associated with academic institutions or as independent non-profit entities. The degree to which Think Tanks may use their research to impact public or private policymaking varies widely. Independent Think Tanks have a larger propensity and flexibility to impact policymaking, particularly if they also retain networks of partners and advocate constituencies to disseminate information and influence policymakers.

An additional important consideration in policymaking is the degree to which ample attention is given to population differences. These may include demographics, economic conditions, employment, education levels, health status, language, and culture. In assessing the Latino population, further subgroup considerations (assuming data is available) are necessary between Mexican American, Cuban, Puerto Rican, South American, or recent immigrants.

Briefly, Latinos represent nearly 40% of the state population, and they account for 50% of all population growth since 2010. They live across geographies (border, urban, rural), varied living environments, and political power realities. Their considerable growth is partly a function of their youth; their median age is 28 (peak women fertility years) compared to the non-Latino White median age of 42, plus one in 2 children under age 18 is Latino. The populations' diversity and growth have contributed significantly to the Texas economy. As exemplified by our labor force participation and direct impact on economic growth.

The current polarized political divides combined with White Supremacy underpinnings underscore the increased need for Latino-based political and policymaking capacity to combat their negative impact on our communities. Unfortunately, the severity of the political divide and White Supremacy often demonstrate little need for research results, i.e., care little about the science.

Understandably, building electoral power is more critical to achieving social change. However, it does not negate the need for Latino-based policy research to contribute our perspectives, needs, and advocacy for change.

SUMMARY

The current political and policy environment raises significant concerns about the potential impact on our family's *bienestar* and our influence to help direct Texas's future. Too often, the policy environment reflects the biased ideology and political rhetoric, which has little to do with objective or sound policy solutions that reflect Latino priorities.

A Think Tank targeting our policy concerns can be a significant contribution to ongoing efforts to increase Latino policy influence.

A Latino Think Tank visualizes that it will be recognized at state and national levels in ten years as an important source of information regarding Latino perspective and systemic change concerns. Concurrently, the organizations' approach to policy analysis, policymaking, and civic engagement directly contribute to positive impacts on Latino *Bienestar*.

The priority for the organizations' policy and program objectives must be Texas. The primary justification is the Latino population's historical experiences, current *bienestar* issues, and policy needs across the state. The collateral implications and impact on responsive national policymaking will also become evident.