

## Idaho Latino Vote 2002:

# Developing the Next Generation of Leaders

In September, when Maria Gonzalez Mabbutt queried the crowd at the Idaho Hispanic Issues Conference, she got the answer she was hoping for. “How many of you are under 30 years old?” she asked. An astounding two-thirds of the audience stood up, fulfilling her personal mission as the Director of Idaho Latino Vote 2002.

Latinos now make up just under 10% of the state’s population. But of 35,000 eligible Latino voters, only 10,000 are registered and only half that many voted in 2000. Based in Caldwell, Latino Vote 2002 works to involve Idaho’s burgeoning Latino communities in the political process and register them to vote.

“More importantly,” says Mabbutt, “we are involving the future of our Latino community: our youth and young adults.” Raising her own teenage daughters showed her that “Getting them a taste of activism early has contributed to their lifelong awareness of the political process.”

Now in her forties, Mabbutt came to Idaho with her farmworker family as a young girl. She started organizing in the 1980s and today is committed to building the next generation of leaders. “We must face it. They have what many of us are lacking – time, passion, energy and a thirst for change. On top of that, they can communicate their concerns to a wider audience: their families and their peers.”

Leo Morales represents Mabbutt’s hopes for the future.

Morales moved to Idaho thirteen years ago with his family, all of whom are employed in farm labor. He grew up in Wilder, a small farming community that is 80% Latino but has yet to elect a Latino City Councilor. As the first in his family to go to college, Morales quickly got involved with the Idaho Progressive Student Alliance (a project of United Vision for Idaho). There he joined the victorious fight to extend the minimum wage to farmworkers.

“Our success last year has me believing in the power of organizing,” Morales says, “and that means starting at the beginning with many people – registering and educating voters on what is going on in their communities and in our state.” Today Morales splits his time between coordinating Latino Vote 2002 activities in the Eastern Idaho communities of Blackfoot, Aberdeen and American Falls, and taking courses at Boise State University.

Sponsored by the Idaho Hispanic Caucus and the Idaho Migrant Council, and supported by local fundraising efforts, the project’s tactics include:

- Non-partisan voter registration, issue education and aggressive Get Out The Vote (GOTV) organizing;
- Paid and public service radio announcements;
- A toll-free hotline to assist new registrants with questions; and
- Recruiting Boise State and high school students for person-to-person outreach efforts.

Gloria Muñoz of United Vision for Idaho coordinates recruitment in high schools in two counties for the Latino Vote Project. She reports, “Students either register 25 families in their neighborhood; work at site registration; register parishioners at Spanish masses; or work election day to get out the vote. Some of the students will be getting credit from government classes, but most will not.”

With its emphasis on leadership development, Latino Vote Project is planning for the long haul. While there are no regressive proposals affecting Latinos in the Idaho November ballot, several are expected in the upcoming legislative session. “Registration and Latino voter participation are just the first steps in influencing the lawmaking process,” Mabbutt says. “After the election, it is clearly our intention to be around.”

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Maria Gonzales Mabbutt leads an organizing meeting.

