

THE IMPACT OF PLACE AND LATINO ETHNICITY UPON  
CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR FREE-TRADE  
EXTENSIONS IN THE AMERICAS

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Congressional votes on free-trade bills have historically been characterized by distinct sectionalism. Recent work has determined that this is no longer true, and that place-based factors are of greater salience. The purpose of this article is to consider the congressional vote on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in light of place-based influences. It examines the relevance of a representative's membership in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the presence of large Latino district populations on support for NAFTA. It finds that these influences were important and frequently led members to cross party lines by voting against their party's dominant position. *Key Words: congressional voting, NAFTA, place, Latinos.*

**B**etween January 1993 and the end of 1997, more than 200 trade agreements between the United States and other countries were signed by the Clinton administration (Broder 1997). In late 1997, President Clinton attempted to increase this number by convincing congressional leaders to pass a pending trade bill that included a provision granting him "fast-track" authority to negotiate additional trade agreements (Squitieri 1997b). The fast-track provision allows Congress to vote "yes" or "no" on a presidentially negotiated agreement, but not to amend the legislation. The president is required by the fast-track legislation to keep Congress informed of any and all ongoing negotiations (see Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch 1997). Due to the widespread controversy generated by congressional debate over granting President Clinton fast-track authority,

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the trade bill was withdrawn on November 10, 1997 (UAW 1997).

Governmental officials in other countries favor the concept of fast-track authority because it means that the U.S. Congress does not have the ability to alter the substance and particulars of a trade agreement negotiated with a U.S. president (Squitieri 1997a). The extension of fast-track authority to U.S. presidents has generally been routine in the past—at least until the animosity-laden congressional debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Negotiated during the Bush administration, NAFTA was passed by both houses of Congress, with Clinton's support, in late 1993.

President Clinton's request for fast-track authority has the active support of many of the leaders of Latin American countries. These leaders would like to pursue trade agreements with the U.S., but they do not wish to navigate the concerns raised by any such agreement when all 535 members of Congress are directly or indirectly involved in such negotiations. Most outspoken on the topic have been the leaders of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, who have suggested that little action on trade issues will be forthcoming until the president has fast-track authority (*e.g.*, Lehman 1997). For example, although Clinton invited Chile to join NAFTA in December 1994, little or no progress on the agreement has taken place, due to the president's inability to negotiate a coherent bill without fast-track authority (Squitieri 1997a).

The role of the United States Congress in the success, or lack thereof, of any bilateral or region-wide trade agreement is critical. Congressional reticence in providing the president fast-track authority is but one example of the legislative body's importance to the process of expanding NAFTA. And, as the final authority on all such agreements, examinations of previous congressional action and behavior are invaluable to gauge future possibilities.

Three major pieces of trade legislation have been passed by Congress in the past decade. In 1988, the U.S.–Canada Free Trade Agreement was affirmed with substantial congressional support. In 1993, NAFTA passed with a substantially reduced margin of votes (Merrett 1996, 1997; Box-Steffesmier *et al.* 1997). In November of 1994, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was passed with a somewhat increased margin of support. Previous work on the geo-

graphical pattern of congressional support for these three pieces of legislation indicates that the regionality or sectionalism that has historically characterized congressional voting on free-trade legislation was largely nonexistent. Rather, the character of individual districts appears to have had comparatively increased importance (Merrett and Webster 1997).

These earlier findings lead to questions about the role and relevance of geography to congressional voting on free-trade issues. In short, does geography matter? The purpose of the present study is to further examine the role of geography through an analysis of the impact of selected congressional district characteristics upon support for free-trade legislation. More specifically, this article considers the role of Latinos in influencing support for NAFTA and its extension of free trade across the U.S.–Mexican border. This article limits itself to two questions. First, what position, if any, did the Congressional Hispanic Caucus take on NAFTA? Second, did the presence of large Latino populations in congressional districts influence the votes of representatives, Latino or otherwise?

## **Background and Literature**

Earlier work by the authors on the U.S.–Canada Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, and GATT examined congressional roll-call votes at the state level (Merrett and Webster 1997). Using the proportion of each state's House and Senate delegation supporting each of the three bills as the dependent variable, a series of regression models were developed. Among the independent variables examined were geographic section (*e.g.*, North, South, and West) and more than a dozen social (*e.g.*, race, ethnicity, and urbanization), economic (*e.g.*, income, unionization, and manufacturing employment), and political (*e.g.*, partisan makeup of congressional delegation and voting by party in preceding presidential election) measures. The results produced by the three regression models were very limited, with none yielding a coefficient of determination above 0.35.

It is highly significant to this study that our earlier results found no association between the variously defined regional variables and congressional voting on the three major recent free-trade bills. Historically, free-trade-related congressional votes have exhibited a distinct regional pattern of support (Smith and Hart 1955;

Wade and Gates 1990). In general, agrarian areas such as the South have been supportive of free-trade bills, while more industrialized regions, including the Northeast and Midwest, have generally been reluctant to support such legislation (Bensel 1984). Our earlier effort concluded that sectionalism has declined in importance as an influence upon congressional support for free trade. This change arguably reflects declining economic regionalism and more uniform patterns of urbanization and industrialization across the country (Bensel 1984; Merrett and Webster 1997).

Our earlier study also found that class and district-scale contextual influences provided the only significant explanatory contributions to our models. These influences, though minimal, included the level of unionization, mean income from manufacturing employment, state trade or exporting strength, race, and levels of urbanization. The lack of sectionalism and the relative increase in class and contextual influences suggest that examinations of congressional support for free trade need to consider district-specific influences more than traditional sectional alignments. These findings are very much in line with Agnew's (*e.g.*, 1987) work, which suggests that place-based geographic influences remain critical factors in the formation of political landscapes, in spite of the decline of sectionalism. In the present case, House members appear to be increasingly subject to the more localized politics of their respective districts. Hence, geography may well be of continued importance, but more due to "place" than to region (Merrett and Webster 1997).

Also germane to this study is the fact that our earlier work did not identify any statistically significant association between the Latino proportion of each state's population and their congressional delegation's voting on the three free-trade-related bills (Merrett and Webster 1997). While the Latino population of the United States is indeed diverse, issues pertaining to the countries of Latin America are clearly of great interest. The Cuban American community, for example, is very politically active and has exerted substantial influence over U.S. policy to maintain an embargo against Cuba (Fournier 1996; Marquis 1998). Puerto Rican Americans were among those U.S. citizens most interested in the recent congressional debate over the admittance of Puerto Rico as the fifty-first state of the United

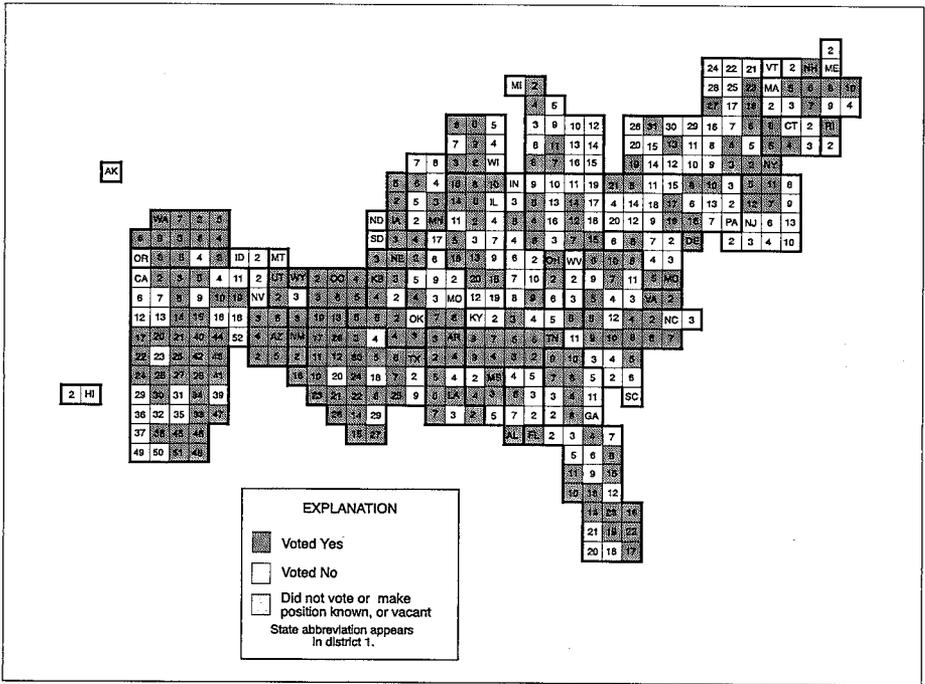
States. New York Representative Jose Serrano unsuccessfully attempted to pass legislation allowing Puerto Ricans living in the United States to vote in any upcoming plebiscite on statehood to be held on the island (Associated Press 1998). Mexican Americans have similarly paid great attention to congressional debates over U.S. immigration policy as well as more localized issues such as California's Proposition 187, which denied medical, educational, and social services to illegal immigrants (Huntington 1996; Gugliotta 1998).

Hispanic Americans were clearly interested in the congressional debate over NAFTA due to the bill's inclusion of Mexico in the free-trade pact. Our lack of substantiation for a statistical pattern is arguably the result of a complex mosaic of social, political, economic, and geographical forces that rendered our linear regression models of limited value. Thus, an examination of the dynamics of specific districts should prove invaluable to addressing the importance of geography to the resulting pattern of congressional votes on passage of NAFTA.

### **NAFTA Vote Pattern and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus**

The NAFTA implementation bill passed in the House of Representatives 234 to 200, or 54 percent "yes" and 46 percent "no" (Figure 1). Republicans were far more supportive of the bill than were Democrats. Of the 175 Republicans in the House in 1993, 132 (or 75 percent) voted in favor of NAFTA. In spite of President Clinton's support for the bill, only 102 (39 percent) of the 258 Democrats in the House cast votes in favor of NAFTA (Clark 1994). The president's greatest opposition in his own party came from House members representing heavily unionized districts, with lower mean incomes and large African American populations. The leadership of the Congressional Black Caucus, for example, opposed NAFTA, and its membership followed suit by rejecting passage by a four-to-one margin (Webster 1994).

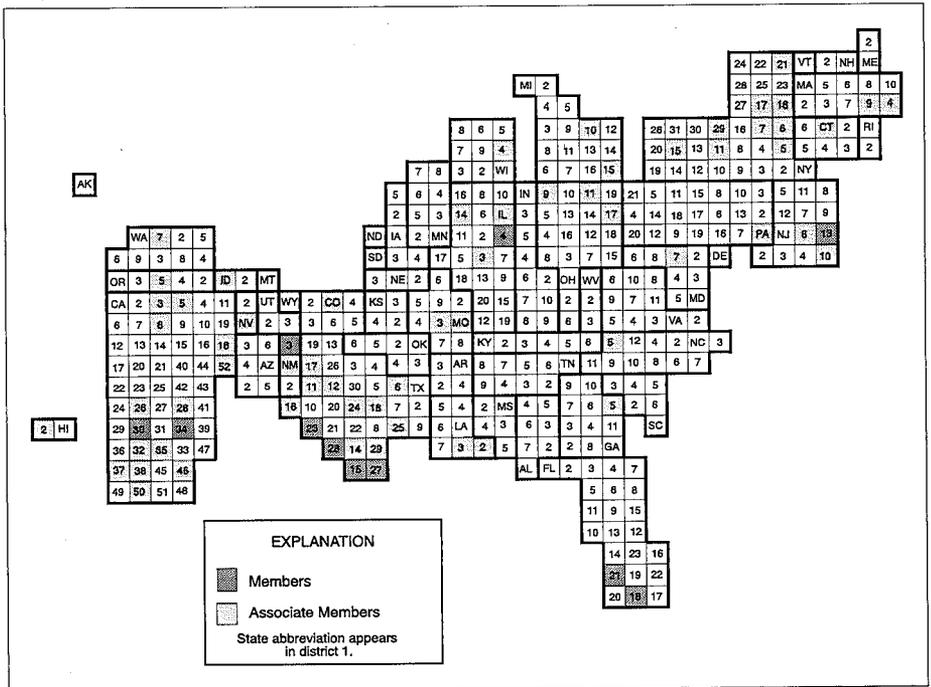
The NAFTA vote occurred after redistricting in 1991–92, the process having created an increased number of substantially Hispanic congressional districts. Partially as a result, the membership of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus rose from twelve in 1992 to eighteen in 1993—a 50 percent increase. Of this number, fifteen members had full voting rights, with the remaining three representing Puerto



**Figure 1.** House vote on the North American Free Trade Agreement, 27 November 1993, by congressional district.

Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands (Monitor Leadership Directories 1994).

There are a large number of congressional caucuses, varying in size, topical focus, and degree of political influence. Among these are the Congressional Hellenic Caucus, the Congressional Arts Caucus, the Congressional Biotechnology Caucus, and the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus. Congressional caucuses are technically “informal” organizations without the highly formalized structures of the major political parties. Some of the larger caucuses, however, have been very effective in influencing legislative deliberations. For example, the forty-member Congressional Black Caucus wielded substantial power in the 103rd Congress, in 1993–94 (Bositis 1994). This legislative influence was largely due to their success in maintaining a high degree of member consensus of opinion, as well as being almost exclusively members of the majority party—the Democrats—in the 103rd Congress (Webster 1998).



**Figure 2.** Membership of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, 1993-94, by congressional district.

To become a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), a representative must be of Hispanic descent. The CHC has had more limited success than the Congressional Black Caucus due to their smaller numbers and more limited level of legislative consensus (Figure 2). In 1993, the voting members of the CHC included twelve Democrats and three Republicans. While ten of the districts represented by CHC members were largely Mexican or Mexican American, two were dominated by Cuban Americans, two by Puerto Ricans, and one by a diverse mixture of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans (Duncan 1993). In addition to the core membership of the CHC, the caucus also has sixty-one associate members, including seven Republicans and fifty-four Democrats. To become an associate member of the CHC, a representative's district must have a significant Hispanic population. Also of note is the fact that twelve associate members of the CHC are also members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

The positions of predominantly Hispanic organizations were divided on NAFTA in advance of the vote in Congress. These divisions, no doubt, reflected mixed opinions in Latino populations in general. A major concern by many groups was the possibility of workers losing their jobs upon the implementation of NAFTA. For example, some Latino garment workers in California, many of whom were in-migrants from Mexico, feared that their U.S. jobs would be relocated to Mexico due to the agreement. As stated by Bragg (1993: B4), "For some Latino families in California, who came over the border in desperation and did work no one wanted just to be here, the irony that they may lose their livelihoods to Mexico is a cruel joke."

Such concerns led to the formation of the Latino Consensus, an umbrella organization for more than a hundred Latino community organizations and prominent elected officials in the United States (Latino Consensus 1993). Arguably, the most significant of those groups participating were the Southwest Voter Research Institute (SVRI), the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—all largely Mexican American in membership and in issue focus. With substantial lobbying efforts, the Latino Consensus was successful in pressuring the Clinton administration to negotiate "side agreements to NAFTA that promised to address the problems of dislocated workers, environmental degradation and unequal working conditions and wages on both sides of the border" (Yzaguirre 1993). Included in these side agreements were the North American Development Bank and a NAFTA-specific worker retraining program.

Citing these changes, Andrew Hernandez, president of the SVRI, drafted a press release entitled "SVRI Endorses NAFTA, Calls Upon All Latino Members of Congress to Follow Suit" on November 3, 1993 (SVRI 1993). The SVRI also stated that they would "conduct a grassroots educational campaign directed to Latino leadership in key congressional districts where Latinos are a significant proportion of the population." The SVRI release further suggested that "[b]illions of dollars and tens of thousands of jobs will flow into the Latino community if NAFTA is passed."

The National Council of La Raza issued a similar press release the same day,

entitled "NCLR Endorses NAFTA—Cites Key Clinton Administration Commitments on Development Bank and Worker Retraining" (NCLR 1993). The NCLR's President, Raul Yzaguirre, stated:

We have always taken the position that our support for NAFTA was conditional. I am pleased to announce today that our key conditions have been met. On behalf of the National Council of La Raza, I can now enthusiastically endorse the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Yzaguirre further noted that "two-thirds of Hispanics support NAFTA." Additional statements of support were added in the days preceding the vote by Maria Nieto Senour (vice-mayor of San Jose, California, and an elected official member of the Latino Consensus), the Arizona Hispanic Community Forum (which included several Hispanic members of the Arizona State Legislature), Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina, and Representative Esteban Torres of California's 4th congressional district (Molina 1993; Arizona Hispanic Community 1993).

In spite of the lobbying by the Latino Consensus on NAFTA, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus could not reach any degree of unanimity and took no official position. CHC members seem to have been less attuned to the positions of their political parties than to the local attitudes of voters in their districts. An excellent example of these local impacts is provided by the discussion of NAFTA in southern Florida, where better trade relations with Mexico were not necessarily viewed positively. Mexico has long had substantial trade with Cuba, and this relationship has been viewed as aiding Fidel Castro's efforts to remain in power. Mexico, for example, is a primary source of tourists to Cuba (Webster 1992). The strong reservations within the Cuban American community in southern Florida led both U.S. and Mexican governmental leaders to make efforts to reassure the community that Castro's Cuba would not benefit from the agreement (Bussey 1993). These efforts do not appear to have resulted in any great degree of success.

Southern Florida's Cuban American representatives also noted reservations about NAFTA pertaining to potential job losses. However, economic issues appear to have been more salient in the decision-making of the members of the CHC who represented districts in northern states (*New York Times* 1993). Also, the

greater strength of union organizations and their threats to oppose the subsequent reelection campaign of any representative voting “yes” on NAFTA clearly had a chilling impact upon support among CHC members from more unionized northern states (Kilborn 1993; see also UAW 1997).

As previously noted, there are fifteen voting members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (Table 1). Of this number, ten represent districts in which Mexican Americans are the primary Latino group. Of these ten, nine are in the states of Arizona, California, and Texas—all of which are states that share a border with Mexico. All nine of these representatives voted for passage of NAFTA. This is notable because eight of the nine are Democrats who voted against the majority within their party. The only representative of a largely Mexican American congressional district who did not support passage of NAFTA was Luis Gutierrez, a Puerto Rican American from the 4th district of Illinois. Other than ethnicity, his district fit the profile of most other Democratic-leaning districts whose representatives voted against NAFTA.

The remaining five members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus hail from districts with largely non-Mexican Latino populations. Florida’s 18th and 21st districts are predominantly Cuban American, while New York’s 12th and 16th districts are largely Puerto Rican in heritage. The remaining member of the CHC represents New Jersey’s 13th district, which includes Hispanic populations from no fewer than twenty different countries, with the largest groups hailing from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic (Duncan 1993). All five of the representatives from these districts voted against NAFTA. Notably, four of the five are Republicans; they therefore voted against their party’s majority sentiment. Of additional interest is the fact that the chair of the CHC, Representative Jose Serrano of New York’s 16th district, voted against NAFTA, while the caucus’s vice-chair from Arizona and secretary-treasurer from California supported passage.

These findings are interesting on a number of accounts. First, most members of the CHC voted against the majority positions within their own parties. Second, there was regionality in congressional voting behavior, with representatives from northern states generally voting against passage, and representatives from states

**Table 1.** Members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus

State/District	Representative	Party	% Hispanic	Largest Group	NAFTA
Arizona/2nd	Ed Pastor <sup>1</sup>	D	50.5	Mexican	Y
California/30th	Xavier Becerra	D	61.5	Mexican	Y
California/33rd	Lucille Roybal-Allard <sup>2</sup>	D	83.7	Mexican	Y
California/34th	Esteban E. Torres	D	62.3	Mexican	Y
Florida/18th	Ileana Ros-Lehtinen	R	66.7	Cuban	N
Florida/21st	Lincoln Diaz-Balart	R	69.6	Cuban	N
Illinois/4th	Luis Gutierrez	D	65.0	Mexican	N
New Jersey/13th	Robert Menendez	D	41.5	Cub./P.R./D.R.	N
New Mexico/3rd	Bill Richardson	D	34.6	Mexican	Y
New York/12th	Nydia Velazquez	D	57.9	Puerto Rican	N
New York/16th	Jose Serrano <sup>3</sup>	D	60.2	Puerto Rican	N
Texas/15th	"Kika" de la Garza	D	74.5	Mexican	Y
Texas/23rd	Henry Bonilla	R	63.7	Mexican	Y
Texas/27th	Solomon Ortiz	D	66.2	Mexican	Y
Texas/28th	Frank Tejeda	D	60.4	Mexican	Y
Totals		12 D/3 R		9 Y/6 N	

<sup>1</sup>Secretary-Treasurer; <sup>2</sup>Vice-Chair; <sup>3</sup>Chair.

Source: Duncan 1993 and U.S. Census.

bordering Mexico supporting passage. Finally, representatives hailing from districts with large Mexican American populations generally supported passage, while those representing non-Mexican Latino populations universally voted against passage.

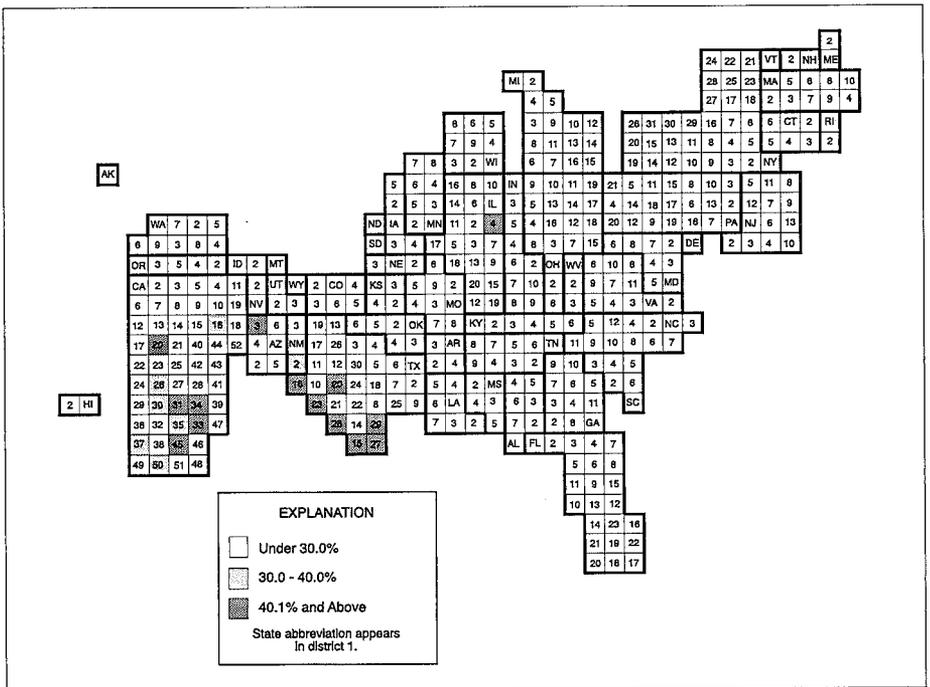
The votes of the sixty-one associate members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus were also examined (see Figure 2). Overall, the associate members were more opposed to NAFTA than were the core members of the CHC or Congress as a whole. Over 62 percent (38 out of 61) of the associate members voted against the bill. While six (86 percent) of the seven Republican associate members supported NAFTA, only seventeen (31 percent) of the fifty-one Democrats did so. These results are quite similar to the partisan levels of support reported above. There was also a substantial degree of regionality in the votes of the associate

members, with those representing states in the Southwest (*e.g.*, California, New Mexico, and Texas) being far more supportive of NAFTA than those from states in the northeastern or Great Lakes regions (*e.g.*, New York, New Jersey, and Michigan). Fifteen (63 percent) of the twenty-four House members representing southwestern states voted in favor of NAFTA, with most of them being Democrats and crossing party positions to do so. In contrast, only two (9 percent) of the twenty-three members from northeastern or Great Lakes states voted in favor of NAFTA. Region and party, therefore, appear to have had a greater influence on the votes of associate members of the CHC than connections to the caucus.

### **Impact of Largely Mexican or Mexican American Populations**

Given the foregoing findings, we might posit that House members representing districts that have large Mexican or Mexican American populations, including those who were not members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, generally supported NAFTA. There are twenty-one congressional districts in the United States that are 30 percent or more Mexican or Mexican American; fourteen of these have proportions over 40 percent (Figure 3). All but one of the twenty-one districts are in the southwestern states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. The lone nonsouthwestern district is the 4th district of Illinois, which is represented by Luis Gutierrez, a Puerto Rican American. All but three of the districts were represented by Democrats at the time of the vote; the Republican districts were California's 46th, New Mexico's 2nd, and Texas's 23rd district.

When considering all twenty-one districts with populations 30 percent or more of Mexican heritage, NAFTA was supported by a 13-to-8 margin, or 62 percent "yes" and 38 percent "no." These proportions are not dramatically in contrast to the level of support for NAFTA (54 to 46 percent) in the House membership as a whole. If all districts with 40 percent or more Mexican or Mexican-American population are examined, however, the results are substantially clearer. Ten of the fourteen districts with this population profile supported NAFTA: 71 percent "yes" and 29 percent "no." These results take on greater significance in light of the fact that the great majority of these House members were Democrats, and only 39 percent of all Democrats voted for NAFTA.



**Figure 3.** Congressional districts with large Mexican and Mexican American populations.

### Impact of Non-Mexican Hispanic Districts on the NAFTA Vote

The contrast in voting on NAFTA by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus split along Hispanic-origin and regional divisions. Only six congressional districts in the United States have non-Mexican Latino populations constituting more than 30 percent of the district's total population. These six districts include Florida's majority-Cuban 18th and 21st districts, the three significantly Puerto Rican districts in New York (12th, 15th, and 16th districts), and New Jersey's diverse 13th district with significant Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican populations (Figure 4). The representatives of these six districts all voted against NAFTA.

Four of the six districts that are 30 percent or more non-Mexican Latino are represented by Democrats; the two Florida districts are represented by Republicans. While the four northeastern Democrats voted with the majority of their party, the two Florida representatives crossed party lines by their opposition. Lo-

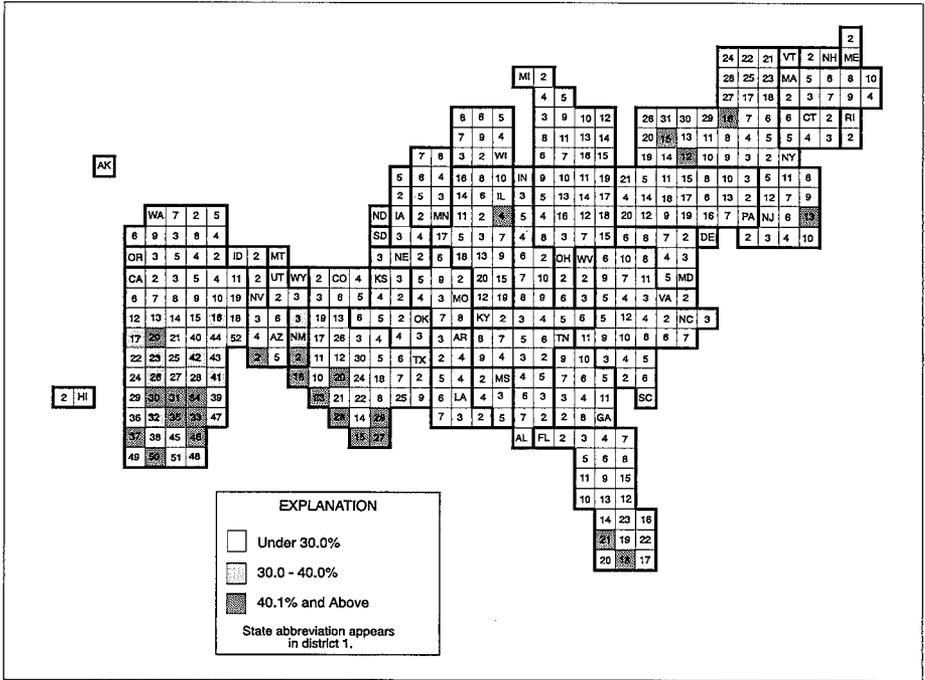


Figure 4. Congressional districts with large Latino populations.

cal sentiment within the electorate pertaining to the possible benefits of NAFTA to Castro's Cuba played a dominant role in the decision of the two Cuban American Representatives to vote against the bill. Local economic issues pertaining to fears of job losses and subsequent union opposition to their reelection efforts clearly played a role in the decision of the four northeastern members of the CHC who voted against NAFTA. Thus, in both circumstances, the importance of geography was not negated; rather, its impact emanated from the local, as opposed to regional, geographic scale.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether geography mattered in the congressional vote on NAFTA in 1993. While clearly sectional patterns were less evident in congressional voting on NAFTA, this study considered the role of

more localized and contextual factors. Toward that end, it addressed two research questions. First, what was the impact of membership in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus on support for NAFTA in 1993? Second, what impact did sizeable Latino populations in districts have upon congressional voting on NAFTA?

There was limited consensus within the CHC on the advisability of NAFTA. The caucus's membership was clearly divided by Hispanic origin: Mexican American representatives generally supported NAFTA, while non-Mexican members voted "no." This finding was also confirmed by the votes of representatives from districts with large Mexican American populations, which are located largely in the Southwest. Though overwhelmingly Democrats in party affiliation, those representatives from districts having more than 40 percent Mexican-heritage populations voted 71 percent in favor of NAFTA. Finally, representatives hailing from districts that were more than 30 percent non-Mexican Latino universally voted against the trade bill. With the exception of the two Cuban American districts in Florida, these districts are found in the more industrially developed and unionized Northeast and Great Lakes states.

These results suggest that geography continues to be an important factor in voting on trade bills in Congress. Rather than being pivotal at the sectional or regional level, however, district-level profiles must be considered. Thus, while sectional influences may be in decline, place-based influences are arguably on the increase. Our findings also underscore the local-to-global political linkages characterizing geographical landscapes. Clearly, localized district debates and sentiments influenced the votes of the nation's legislators over a continent-wide trade bill with global impacts and repercussions.

Finally, and not surprisingly, this analysis underscores the diversity of the Latino population in the United States, as well as those who represent them in Congress. Thus, efforts to extend free trade into Latin America will not necessarily find broad support among legislators of Latin American heritage. The political power of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus is somewhat limited by its diversity, but it is equally true that diverse populations will have contrasting positions on major issues, and their representation will reflect this reality.

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