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Hispanics pass blacks as largest U.S. minority

Immigration, higher birth rates indicate that gap will widen

By ANDRES VIGLUCCI AND TIM HENDERSON
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Immigration and higher birth rates fueled the increase in the Census.

New Census Bureau estimates released Wednesday conclude that Hispanics have overtaken blacks as the United States' largest minority, a long-predicted milestone confirming just how thoroughly immigration has altered the nation's demographic mix.

Even as sociologists and political scientists debate the implications of the shift, one thing is certain: Much faster growth in the Hispanic population, fueled by immigration and higher birth rates, means that the numerical gulf will continue to widen.

The Census Bureau's estimates put the number of Hispanics at 38.8 million, compared with 38.3 million blacks, out of a total U.S. population of 288.4 million.

What this means is unclear. Many foresee increasing Hispanic economic and political clout, potentially at blacks' expense.

Some see little prospect of a Hispanic national monolith, noting that the label groups people of widely differing -- and sometimes rivaling -- cultures, national origins and races.

Others note that the effects are already evident. Hispanic voters are a growing factor in state and national elections, in which they often serve as swing voting blocs. Presidential

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candidates attempt sound bites in Spanish, and more Hispanic candidates vie for, and win, elected office.

"Personally, I don't think that's bad," said Donald Spivey, a professor at the University of Miami who specializes in African-American history. ``It means we will see a greater diversity in America. It doesn't mean a lessening of the power or influence of African Americans. There will be more players in the arena."

Moreover, the national numbers obscure a different picture at the state, local or regional level, where one minority often enjoys a clear numerical, and often political, edge.

In the South, for instance, the black population with the exception of Florida's is still much larger than the Hispanic, and in the Northeast and Midwest, the overall mix and the politics remain very much a white-black proposition, said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., who has written extensively on black migration back to the South in the 1990s.

"The tipping point nationally doesn't make much difference for the local areas that have long been dominated by one race or the other," Frey said. ``But Hispanics will have a higher share of all those populations as we move forward."

Still, fast-growing Hispanic populations in some large metropolitan areas like New York, Boston and Chicago, where the black and Hispanic groups have been roughly equal in size, might change the local political and social equilibrium, said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the State University of New York at Albany.

"But these are a minority of metros," he said in an e-mail.

In other places, like Miami-Dade County, the change happened long ago. Hispanics are an absolute majority in the county, census figures show. And the 2000 Census confirmed that Hispanics are the largest minority in Florida.

The Census Bureau, clearly aware of the benchmark's

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significance, unveiled the newest numbers at the annual convention of the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, a leading Hispanic organization, held in Orlando. More than 900 people jammed a luncheon to hear Census Bureau Director Louis Kincannon outline the findings, LULAC spokeswoman Lorraine Quiroga said.

Quiroga said organization leaders hope the numbers will give them new ammunition to persuade federal authorities to increase efforts to spur Hispanic homeownership, expand school-dropout prevention programs, and increase Hispanic hires in the U.S. Civil Service, where their numbers lag far behind their proportion in the population, according to a new LULAC study. Those issues bridge divisions among Hispanics, she said.

"There are a lot of common interests that we have, despite our differences," Quiroga said.

When exactly the milestone occurred has been the subject of some academic debate. The 2000 Census found rough numerical parity between blacks and Hispanics, and Census Bureau estimates released in January were interpreted by some as indicating that the tipping point had arrived -- a conclusion that others disputed.

At that time, the number of people who identified themselves as either African American only, or as African American in combination with another race, still slightly outnumbered the total Hispanic population.

In this newer set of estimates, however, Hispanics outnumbered the total of all black-only and black, multiracial people. The Census Bureau arrived at those numbers by adding births to and subtracting deaths from 2000 Census figures, estimating net immigration, and adding the net movement of U.S. armed forces and civilian citizens to the country.

"The official population estimates now indicate that the Hispanic community is the nation's largest minority community," Kincannon said in a written statement. ``This is an important event in this country -- an event that we know

is the result of the growth of a vibrant and diverse population that is vital to America's future."

Between April 1, 2000, and July 1, 2002, the period covered by the estimates, the Hispanic population grew by 9.8 percent, outstripping the national growth rate of 2.5 percent, Kincannon said. Hispanics accounted for 3.5 million of the U.S. population increase of 6.9 million.



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