

New Census Bureau estimates released yesterday conclude that Hispanics have overtaken blacks as the United States' largest minority group, 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 the numerical gulf will only continue to widen.

The Census Bureau 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 all 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 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 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 group 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, 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 two 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.

In other places, like Miami-Dade County, Fla., 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 group in Florida.

The Census Bureau, clearly aware of the benchmark's significance, unveiled the newest numbers at the annual convention of the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, a leading Hispanic organization, in Orlando, Fla. More than 900 people jammed a luncheon to hear Census Bureau Director Louis Kincannon outline the findings, LULAC spokeswoman Lorraine 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 bureau estimates released in January were interpreted by some as indicating the tipping point had arrived -- a conclusion 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, multi-racial 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.

Between April 1, 2000, and July 1, 2002, the period covered by the estimates, the Hispanic population grew 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.

About 53 percent of the Hispanic growth came from immigration, while the difference between births and deaths explained the rest, he said.