Few Hispanics elected locally despite growth in population

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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More than one in five residents of Broward and Palm Beach counties is Hispanic, but that hasn't translated into power at city halls, county commissions or in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C.

Only a few of the two counties' elected officials are Hispanic – and the numbers won't change much, if at all, in the 23 cities, towns and villages holding elections on March 12.

"We need more Hispanics in the elected positions," said Julio Fuentes, president of the Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, based in Palm Beach County.

Based on interviews with Hispanic elected officials and Democratic and Republican activists, Broward and Palm Beach counties have 15 Hispanics in municipal, county, state legislative or congressional offices. That works out to 3.5 percent of the 422 elected officials in the two counties.

The numbers include several who live in Miami-Dade County and represent districts that cover parts of South Broward. They don't include judges, who often are appointed to the bench and then stand for re-election.

There's no official directory of Hispanic officials. And voter registration records don't provide a complete picture because Hispanic wasn't an option on the forms before 1995. Since then it's been an option, but not a required category.

The 2010 Census reported 689,070 Hispanic residents in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Based on the numbers alone, Zelden, a professor of history and legal studies who specializes in politics and voting at Nova Southeastern University, said there ought to be more Hispanic candidates and elected officials. He's among the political scientists, Hispanic politicians and party leaders who cited several reasons why there aren't.

**Hispanics are geographically spread out.** Though some cities in southern and western Broward and east-central Palm Beach County have large numbers of Hispanics – 45 percent in Weston and 40 percent in Lake Worth – the population tends to be diffuse, making it more difficult to develop a critical mass of voters, Zelden said.

African-American and Caribbean-American voters, by contrast, tend to live in more centralized communities. One result is large enough populations blocs to make it easier for black candidates to get elected to local, state and federal offices.
Population doesn't mean eligible voters. The Hispanic population is younger than the population as a whole, so there is a relatively large proportion of people who aren't old enough to vote. And many newer residents aren't yet citizens, which means they can't register to vote or run for office, said Weston Commissioner Jim Norton, one of the few Hispanic elected officials in the two counties.

Hispanics aren't monolithic. The tendency by some to lump Hispanics together as one community creates a misleading picture, Norton said. Hispanic voters come from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, South America and Central America.

"It's a language and it's shared cultural origins, but the difference between Cubans and Mexicans and Argentinians can be vast. They have different cultures, world outlooks," Zelden said.

Hispanics who are eligible don't vote in line with their numbers. With the notable exception of Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade County, Hispanics traditionally haven't turned out at the rates of other groups, said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University.

Councilman Valentin Rodriguez of Lake Clarke Shores in Palm Beach County said participating in elections hasn't yet become ingrained for many. "They're hard workers and they're producers, but not a group that's politically organized to get behind a candidate."

That's starting to change. When Alexander Lewy ran for the Hallandale Beach City Commission in 2010, he said his smallest mailing – a post card was all he could afford with his remaining campaign funds – went to the city's Hispanic voters. He said he had more phone calls from that mailing than from any of his other big, glossy mailings that went to more voters.

Lewy became Hallandale's first Hispanic commissioner. He's considering a candidacy for state representative next year; if he wins, Lewy would be the first Hispanic state legislator who lives in Broward.

Lewy said an official doesn't need to be Hispanic to represent the Hispanic community. But he gets more calls from the community than other commissioners. "Because they know that I speak Spanish, they just feel more comfortable speaking with me, I suppose."

Rodriguez, who will get his turn as mayor in April, said he doesn't' want to be seen as the council member "who just speaks up for Hispanic interests. I'm not going to treat you any better or give you any more attention because your last name is Gomez."

But, he said, a different perspective can make for better decision-making. If, for example, a house is crammed with too many residents, it may be common for people from a different country and culture. If a Hispanic official understands that, "instead of just giving code violations, you talk to them" to solve the problem.

Norton said dramatic change in participation, and a resulting increase in elected officials, might not come until second- and third-generation Hispanics develop roots in the community. Wagner,
the FAU political scientist, said recent elections, such as last year's presidential contest, suggest it could come faster.

"My expectation is that you'll see a fairly stark reversal," he said. "They're going to be a very significant voting bloc."