

Testimony of Congressman José E. Serrano of New York
Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution:
Opportunities for Growth by Honoring Latino Americans and Asian Pacific Americans
Committee on House Administration
1310 Longworth House Office Building
February 5, 2020

Chairperson Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the Committee, thank you for your invitation to testify on the importance of honoring the contributions of Latino and Asian Pacific Americans, and ensuring their full inclusion within the Smithsonian Institution. I am proud to join my fellow New Yorker and colleague from Queens, Ms. Meng.

As you know, Latinos have been part of this country since its founding. Today, nearly 60 million Americans, or over 18 percent of the U.S. population, identify as Latino or Hispanic. As a proud Puerto Rican, I am one of them. The U.S. Census reports that by 2060, this community will reach 111 million, or nearly 28 percent of our population. In addition, Latinos make up a quarter of the nation's 54 million K-12 students. We are the largest ethnic group in the United States, and second only to Asian Americans in terms of growth.

Latinos have left an indelible mark on our nation's history and helped shape it in ways that most Americans, and even many in our own community, are unaware. We have served in every war since the American Revolution, fighting bravely and paying a heavy price on behalf of our Nation. We write award-winning Broadway plays and films. We are sports heroes and legends. We have been on the frontlines of the fights for civil rights. We have shaped the music we all dance to, the food we eat, and countless other staples of American life.

But Latino art and history is noticeably absent from recognition in many cultural institutions across the Nation, including the Smithsonian. To deny the telling of these stories not only does a disservice to our contributions and sacrifices, but also renders American history incomplete. There is no doubt that without the significant contributions of Latinos, the country we know today would be much different.

Last May, on the eighth anniversary of the Latino Museum Commission report to President Obama and the U.S. Congress, which laid forth a roadmap for creating a sustainable, world-class Latino Museum, a bipartisan group of colleagues joined me in reintroducing H.R. 2420, the National Museum of the American Latino Act. With 263 cosponsors in the House and counting, and 27 in the U.S. Senate, we are closer than ever to turning this dream into a reality.

H.R. 2420 was modeled after successful legislation that created other Smithsonian museums. It would authorize the establishment of a Latino Museum and use the commission report's vision and recommendations to get us there. It will be paid for just as other museums have, with 50 percent of the cost coming from private donations and 50 percent from federal funds.

Next year, the Molina Family Latino Gallery will open at the American History Museum. This is a step in the right direction. But no matter how hard we try, hundreds of years of history, art, and culture cannot be contained in one 4,500-square-foot exhibit. We deserve a dedicated museum of our own in the heart of Washington, D.C. We need a Latino Museum.

Thank you, Chairperson Lofgren and members of the Committee, for having this an important conversation and challenging the Smithsonian to be more vibrant, inclusive, and welcoming. With consideration of these bills, the Committee will continue honoring James Smithson's wish, that the Institution which bears his name will be "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." I am sure he would be proud of where we are today.