

**Latino Identity Politics Research: Problems and Opportunities**

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Ethnic identity is a central concept in the study of politics in multi cultural societies. Identities define criteria for group membership, differences from others, as well as legitimacy within the political process. Because ethnic identities also influence political behavior, they influence the distribution of power and resources. Ascribed identities that mark ethnic and racial minorities as inferior create social fault lines that generate tension and unrest. As scholars analyze the history of race relations, a substantial literature on Latino politics has emerged on the role that ethnic identity has played in community mobilization and individual behavior. Whether it is struggles against racial discrimination or cultural survival, identity has played an important role in mobilizing the Latino community. Although ethnic identity plays a key role in Latino politics, the impact of variables like income, education, phenotype, nativity, parentage, and ideology complicate our understanding of Latino identities. Many questions about identity and the way it interacts with these variables remain unanswered. What constitutes a Latino political identity? How do they differ from other political identities? How are ethnic political identities created? Why do they take the form that they do? In what ways are they distinct from other aspects of an individual's political identity? How do they change over time? Finally, when and how do ethnic identities animate political behavior?

The answer to these questions requires a collective effort and a plurality of data sets and methodological tools. If progress is going to be made in understanding the impact of Latino ethnic identity on the political process greater attention must be paid to the complexity and changing nature of ethnic identities. Indeed, it is important to re examine the importance of Latino identity itself. In this essay, I will review the literature on Latino identity politics and discuss ways that new debates over the role of identity in social movement organizations speaks

to the ways that ethnicity informs, interacts with, or operates independently of more conventional variables like class, political ideology, and immigrant status. I will argue for a closer examination of Latino ethnicity and suggest ways that Latino Political Scientists can build bridges across sub fields and disciplinary boundaries.

### **Identities and Latino Political Life**

Group relations are not static and it is important to recognize the degree to which identities vary between as well as within Latino subgroups. A considerable body of literature on social and economic assimilation predicts the gradual erasure of group differences as individual members of a group break through discriminatory barriers and find their way into the institutions of the larger society (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 2003). The political gains of the Civil Rights Movement era created new possibilities for increased assimilation by outlawing most forms of discrimination and moving the dynamics of Latino politics toward greater inclusion. Subsequent economic mobility and changes in the political sphere allowed Latino politics to encompass new organizations and political expressions that often extend beyond issues of race or cultural distinctions (Winant 1995). Changes in socio economic status indicate that a rigid system of racial hegemony based on outright segregation or coercion has been transformed so that Latinos are participating in an increasingly broad spectrum of political life. These changes have important implications for identity politics as Latinos are no longer thrown together along a single axis of racial domination and subordination (Melendez et al 1991; Gonzalez 2002).

What gives ethnic identities their importance is their ability to influence behavior and attitudes in ways that extend beyond the individual's material interests. Because social identities

are a more than the nominal membership in a racial or ethnic subgroup, the complexity of ethnic identities presents the researcher with some significant challenges. A sense of shared fate and cultural similarities are obvious the building blocks of an ethnic identity. However, ethnic identities are constructed phenomena that incorporate values that extend beyond ethnicity to include class and ideology (Jenkins 1996; Cornell and Hartmann 1998).

The traditional model of assimilation based on the experiences of white ethnic immigrants assumes a linear trend of incorporation where immigrants influenced but were eventually absorbed by larger culture. For Latinos, identities are influenced by a myriad of variables. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found that the process of ethnic identity formation is a less certain process, one profoundly influenced by the levels of discrimination, government policy, educational achievement, and family composition. The pressure toward socio economic incorporation still serves as a useful master trend in the assimilation process, but changing political currents and continued immigration should give researchers pause when theorizing on Latino identity (Alba and Nee 2003).

The tendency to treat Latino identity as unproblematic or sufficiently robust to explain a range of behaviors has deep roots in the literature on Latino politics. These early works uncovered a long history of conflict and social domination (Colon 1961; McWilliams 1949). Many of the first studies of Latino politics during the mid twentieth century reflected their author's interest in the militance of the Chicano and Puerto Rican Independence Movements. Some of the seminal texts on Latino politics were written by individuals who were either active participants or sympathetic to the ideals of the movements' demands for ethnic nationalism and autonomy. Part of their scholarly mission was to expose social injustices, challenge stereotypes, and document the persistence of Latino cultural distinctiveness. Consequently, this literature

was heavily skewed toward the leftist politics of Latino college students, radical groups like the Crusade for Justice, the Young Lords, and the land grant movement in northern New Mexico (Barrera 1979; Muñoz 1989; I. Garcia 1989). Interest in these themes remains high as scholars continue to explore the role of cultural nationalism in Latino politics (Haney Lopez 2003; Vigil 1999; Torres and Jose E. Velazquez 1998).

Research on radical Civil Rights era politics brought greater clarity to the relationship between Latino identity and political mobilization, but few of these studies that tried to unpack the constituent parts of Latino identity. Latino labor organizers often took the lead in community organizing emphasizing the need for ethnic solidarity to improve working conditions, benefits, and wages (Mario Garcia 1989; Zamora 1993; Gomez-Quñones 1994; Pitti (2003). Others Latino labor organizers advocated the need for multi ethnic and racial class based coalitions (Ruiz 1987). The United Farm Workers Union was built, in part, by creating alliances with Anglo labor unions, community organizations, churches and the Democratic Party (Jenkins 1985; Mooney and Majka 1995). Other Latino social movement organizations generated political identities based on the principle of individual merit biculturalism. The most conservative of those groups endorsed free market capitalism and believed that in the long run, Latinos, like other immigrant groups before them, would find their lace in the social hierarchy (Marquez 1993; Mario Garcia 1989; Bonilla-Santiago 1988).

Research on Latino social movement organizations reveals a large number of distinct and oftentimes conflicting ethnic identities. Some Latino organizations sustain a membership based on an identity that recalls the separatist and nationalist goals of the 1960s. The need for ethno cultural solidarity and a general distrust of Anglo dominated society dominates their mobilizing strategies (Moore and Head, 1994; Marquez 1998). These groups exist side by side with Latino

Chambers of Commerce enhance the profit making capabilities of their members by fostering close personal relationships with elected officials, financial officers, and other entrepreneurs (Torres 1990; Marquez 2003). More recently, Latinos have created their own professional associations, women's groups, business groups, environmental organizations as well as traditional civil rights organizations (Pulido 1996; Honig 1996; Pardo 1997, 1998; Hardy-Fanta). Finally, some of the most active Latino political organizations reject the notion of racially organizing all together and work to build alliances across the lines of race and ethnicity (Wilson 1997; Shirley 1997; Warren 2001; Zavella, 1993).

In my own work, I have found a great diversity of political styles and goals among Latino political organizations. Indeed, Latino political identities span such a great range that the creative possibilities in the construction of a Latino political identity are quite remarkable. In terms of their normative content, Latinos activists who advocate free market capitalism, racial separatism, liberal feminism, and religiously based social justice are well represented and oftentimes operate within the same community. They come to different conclusions about the degree of racism practiced against Latinos and the appropriate remedies for racial discrimination. They differ in their understanding of the causes and justification for economic stratification. Finally, cultural attachment—a central component of group identity—varies in its importance to Latino activists. Some believe it is a necessary medium for the communication of issues common to the group and mutual recognition. Others scrupulously avoid cultural or racial appeals in their campaigns and assert that Latinos interests are best served in broad based coalitions (Marquez 2003).

Latino political identities are not just variations on a central theme, politics filtered through Spanish language ability and an ethnic portfolio. They are intertwined with beliefs

about the causes and intensity of racial discrimination, the fairness of economic hierarchies, and judgments about the politicization of Latino cultural attachments. Like other political identities, they contain essentially contested concepts that may or may not overlap with other Latino identities. Latino attitudes and behaviors can be driven by other identities weakly or weakly associated with ethnic ties and loyalties. Although the dynamic and ideological quality of identity politics greatly complicates our work as social scientists, the process of constructing ethnic boundaries goes to the very heart of our research. With this goal in mind, I will review some recent developments in Latino identity politics research and suggest ways that identity research can be strengthened in order to bring greater clarity to the Latino experience in the United States.

### **The Challenge of Identity Based Research**

A welcome development in Latino politics research has been the publication of several studies that compare and contrast the experience of all major sub national Latino groups (Garcia 1997; De la Garza et al. 1992; Portes and Bach 1985). What has emerged is a profile of Latinos that share many socio economic concerns, but retain significant cultural differences. Although there is a gap between those who study Latino politics with [large survey data sets] and those who conduct qualitative, historically oriented research, there have been some ... efforts to bring the two together. One book stands out in this regard. Latino Politics in America (2003) by John A. Garcia is a fine synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative literature on Latino identity politics. Garcia argues that a growing Latino population, shared political interests, and similar cultures bode well for the formation of a powerful pan Latino identity. He is optimistic that

political activists can help forge these shared characteristics into a greater sense of belonging across Latino subgroups, although he notes it is by no means a forgone conclusion.

In this vein, political scientists have an opportunity to make a decisive contribution to the question of pan Latino and transnational identities. Recent scholarship suggests that there is great potential among Asian and Native Americans to renegotiate a bridging identity based on common cultural attributes and histories (Nagel 1996; Espiritu 1992). There is some evidence to show that pan Latino coalitions have coalesced in response to political threats and opportunities but the case for the potential power of a pan Latino identity is weak (De Leon 1989; Padilla 1985). There is a stronger case to be made for the power of transnational identities to influence attitudes and behavior (Jones Correa 1998; Levitt 2001; Vila 2000). There is also reason to believe that transnational identities can undermine the formation of pan Latino identities. The political status of Puerto Rico and the Communist regime in Cuba continue to have an enormous impact on Cuban Americans and Puerto Ricans (De los Angeles Torres 1999; Serrano 1999). However, these issues have little ethnic relevance to other Latino subnational groups. Indeed, transnational identities of South and Central American groups may actually inhibit community formation as individuals within these groups struggle to overcome the violence and devastation surrounding their immigration to the United States. Circumstances surrounding a group's history can inhibit institution building capacity, raise distrust among co-ethnics, or otherwise act as a demobilizing force (Menjívar 2000; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2002).

Pan Latino identities may have more symbolic than practical political value. The continuing importance of the exile politics and their antipathy toward the Castro regime distinguishes them from that of more liberal Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans (Torres 1999; Perez-Firmat 2000). Levitt (2001) found that Dominicans in Boston are deeply influenced

by the idea of life and politics in the Dominican Republic. Jones Correa (1998) found that Latino immigrants in New York City utilize a transnational identity powerfully oriented toward homeland politics and a desire to return. This view toward their country of origin is reinforced by the lack of desire to integrate them into local politics. Menjivar (2000) argues that the trauma of their experiences in their homeland fractures the Salvadoran population in the United States and hobbles the formation of community within their own group. Studies of Salvadorans and Guatemalan immigrants point to a similar difficulty with internal divisions as they struggle to contend with the impact their country's history of war and discrimination in the United States (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Mahler 1995).

A model for linking case studies of Latino identity formation and survey data is demonstrated in Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) study of assimilation among the children of immigrants. They find that Latinos' varied historical experiences set them on different social trajectories. Family structure, government policy, and discrimination play a critical role in identity formation. Of particular interest is their contrast between the processes of incorporation between two waves of Cuban immigrants. Cuban immigrants fleeing the Cuban revolution were light skinned, middle class professionals or government officials. They received a favorable reception from the government in terms of financial and resettlement aid while the public as a whole sympathized with their status as refugees from a communist regime. In contrast, the Marielistas who immigrated to the United States during the late 1970s were poor dark skinned Cubans widely perceived as criminals and lunatics let loose upon American society.

### **The Power of Identity**

The literature on Latino identity politics tends to focus on asserted identities, a set of self-proclaimed cultural and political commitments. For scholars who wrote about the radicalism of the 1960s, identities were seen as political statements, symbols of resistance and cultural survival that inspire activism. However, another equally important avenue of inquiry is the analysis of an identity's power to create change. Business owners, liberal civil rights activists, and cultural nationalists have always been active in Latino politics and it is important to explore the ways that the larger society responds to their demands. Some attention has been paid to the impact of Latino activists who challenge existing social and political structures and the ways that it has precipitated negotiations or repressive actions (Haney Lopez 2003). However, more work needs to be done on the power of identities to inspire Latinos and non Latinos to form coalitions, the conditions under which they form and the terms of negotiation.

In this vein, it is important to connect the idea of a constructed Latino identity to the political process. For example, new opportunity structures after World War II made it possible for African Americans to press their demands for equality before the law. The movement of millions of black people out of the rural south and the ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II set the stage for the successes of the contemporary Civil Rights Movement (Piven and Cloward 1977; Bloom 1982). The ideals of equal treatment before the law helped build broad based support for formal equal rights but failed to sustain a movement for economic equality (Hamilton and Hamilton 1997; Wilson 1996). These new opportunities were more conducive to building a liberal coalition but not for the more radical wing of the movement that called for a redistribution of wealth and power. However, the relationship between the formation of Latino ethnic identity, its impact in the political realm, and changing opportunity structures has received less attention.

Changing economic circumstances and state action can generate conditions under which some identities are more likely to foster alliances or facilitate access to political authorities. For example, increased political power and economic mobility can create increased opportunities for liberal Latino activists to participate in the political process and de legitimize demands for radical change. The successes they experience can, in turn, can generate a political climate where activists advocating moderate to conservative identities have the greatest number of opportunities to advance their agenda. In a context where moderation is rewarded with power and resources, activists who are able to frame their claims within those parameters are more likely to gain legitimacy and financial support (Marquez 2003b).

## **Conclusion**

In my research on social movement organizations, I have found that Latino identities are elastic enough to expand to accommodate virtually any political agenda. A sense of ethnic loyalty and bonds, the defining feature of identity, are easily incorporated within a broad spectrum of ideological orientations. Some business groups fulfill a commitment to ethnic advancement by increasing entrepreneurial opportunities and training a new generation of business owners. At the same time, some community organizations recruit members and engage in political actions based upon a primordial sense of group attachment and mutual obligation. Other Latino activists argue that ethnic loyalties have no appropriate role in the public sphere and work to build multi ethnic coalitions. In other words, Latino political identities only make sense when understood with the larger universe of their values and goals.

One major of my research on Latino political identities is to encourage more field work on Latino politics that analyzes the constituent elements of Latino identity. Another is to

encourage my colleagues who conduct quantitative research to consider the implications of my findings in their own work. My research is on social movement organizations that are generally recognized as important players in Latino politics, but the limitations of my historical and qualitative methods leaves many important questions unanswered. Leaders and primary activists with Latino political organizations—those who supplied the bulk of my data—are highly intelligent, ideologically oriented individuals. They are adept at synthesizing the idea of ethnicity with a political agenda that will recruit new members and keep existing members within the fold. While I understood how Latino identities drove the politics of each group, I do not know how many Latino activists or those in the general population subscribe to those identities.

The practical demands of research and professional survival make it difficult for individual scholars to incorporate all the conceptual and empirical demands that identity politics research requires. Still, mobilization along the lines of race and ethnicity builds upon some powerful cleavages in our society clarifying the relationship between identity and politics is central to our mission. There is a need to ask more probing questions about Latino identity and its relationship to their political attitudes and actions. Additional historical and ethnographic field work on Latino identity can give a rich insight into the elements of identity, but that work needs to be dovetailed with survey data. For example, it is important to understand the way Latinos assess the character of racism in the United States. I have studied organizations whose activists were convinced that the divide between themselves and the white majority was deep, almost insurmountable. Likewise, I have studied groups whose members were frustrated by the barriers erected by the majority but feel that those problems can be resolved. How many Latinos believe that racism is a problem that can or will eventually be resolved through institutional

means or economic incorporation? How many others believe that that racism is a permanent force that links their fate closely to that of other Latinos?

Of equal importance is a detailed understanding of Latino's perception of social stratification and the means they propose to deal with it. I have studied groups who endorse free market capitalism and accept the inequalities it generates as long as racism did not determine the final outcome. Conversely, some Latino organizations critique market driven inequalities and believe discrimination plays a vital function in maintaining or justifying economic hierarchies. Hence groups on both ends of the ideological spectrum condemn racism, but for different reasons. What do Latinos believe about the cause of social inequalities and what, if anything, do they propose to do about them? I have found that conservative Latino activists favor equal opportunity and civil rights as the remedy for social inequality. Radicals tend to favor disruptive politics, but often engage in traditional lobbying tactics as the only viable outlets for political activism. To what extent and in what combination are these sentiments held by Latinos beyond the realm of social movement organizations?

Finally, the potential for Latino cultural practices and distinctiveness to inform attitudes and behavior should be re examined. I have yet to study a Latino political organization where activists devalued their cultural heritage. However, I have found significant differences in the way they believe culture can and should play a role in their organizational work. Appeals for racial solidarity based on a shared ethno cultural heritage are widespread, but the importance they attach to cultural ties varies from group to group. Some groups base their organizing efforts on the assumption that one's ethno cultural background encompasses a wide spectrum of an individual's sentiments and political interests. Others see it as a medium that can facilitate cooperation between individuals with different political views. Still other Latino organizers

express a deep pride in their cultural heritage but reject racial and ethnic organizing altogether. These attitudes do not preclude the formation of pan Latino coalitions, but they do caution against premature claims that political movements are driven by ethnic attitudes rather than forces common to others with similar class and occupational features.

Latino identity is too complex a force to be treated as a nominal variable. The negotiations that I documented in my research on social movement organizations reveal that the bonds of culture can be a very strong force in some contexts but not in others. Latino identities are formed by bringing a number of variables together with the demands of practical political goals and other values. They are the product of complex negotiations between Latinos as well as other groups and interests (Hardy-Fanta 1993; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Jennings 1994).

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