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## ***Su Casa Es Nuestra Casa: Latino Politics Research and the Development of American Political Science***

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**S**ince the 1970s, Latino politics research has evolved, alternately responding to real-world political events and demographic changes, embracing new and emerging trends in the broader discipline, and offering new insights of its own that contribute to the development of political science. In so doing, there have emerged both an intellectual foundation and a growing body of empirical results, each of which challenges long-held theories and findings in the discipline more broadly. Thus, Latino politics research is central in refining and broadening our understanding of American politics. Immigration, social marginality, and their uncertain status as a racial or ethnic minority make this population unique and raise important obstacles in applying existing interpretations and orthodoxies from the discipline's other traditions to this emerging and rapidly growing segment of American society. The major contributions of this line of inquiry are identified in five key areas: pluralism, group identity and mobilization, political participation, institutions and representation, and assimilation. We conclude with some thoughts regarding how the evolution of American society and its Latino population will pose important questions for future generations of political scientists.

**T**he establishment of the American Political Science Association in 1903 occurred at a time of high immigration and, not coincidentally, during a period significantly influenced by Progressive Era ideas promoting institutional reforms that reflected theoretically informed responses to real-world developments like demographic change in the name of "good government." Several early APSA presidents expressed concern about the impact of these demographic changes on government (see, Goodnow 1905, 44; Shaw 1907, 179–80). Lord James Bryce, the fourth APSA president, complained in *The American Commonwealth* about the evils of the spoils system driven in large part, he wrote, by "an ignorant multitude, largely composed of recent immigrants, untrained in self-government . . ." ([1888], 1995, 577).

From their origins then, the consequences of racial/ethnic change and immigration for American

democracy have been a leitmotif in political science. Over the last generation, spurred by increasing levels of Latino political participation and office holding, as well as by rapid population growth fueled in part by increasing immigration from Latin America, Latino politics research has been at the forefront of efforts to understand the implications of the changing roles of race and ethnicity and related demographics for American politics.

Three major political developments produced transformations in U.S. politics that have had a direct impact on how the study of Latino politics has evolved. First, the public protests, civil disobedience, and related governmental responses of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, led to serious questioning of the capacity of many traditional practices and institutions of American politics to accommodate demands by members of ethnic and racial minority groups, including African Americans and Latinos. Scholars of Latino politics developed theoretical critiques and alternative explanations of American politics that were able to explain the persistent exclusion of Latinos from many centers of policy decision-making and yet also begin to attain more political access than ever before. Second, the renewal and expansion of the Voting Rights Act in 1975 to include language minorities, with the largest of these groups being Latinos, led to an increase in Latinos' opportunities to register, vote, and successfully run for office. Researchers constructed new data sets that more fully represented the Latino population, compensating for the deficiencies of many traditional data sets enabling them to study the values, patterns of participation, and representation of an expanded Latino presence in many areas of American politics. Third, the equalizing of country-based immigration

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quotas and the establishment of the family-unification policies in the 1965 Immigration Act led to an increase in immigration from Mexico and other countries in Latin American and Asia. Scholars of Latino politics produced nuanced interpretations of aspects of immigrant political incorporation in the United States, addressing issues of assimilation, identity, and transnationalism that added new understandings about the political system's capacity to respond to massive demographic change.

In this essay we outline the evolution of Latino politics research in five central areas of scholarship that developed in conjunction with the events outlined above: pluralism, group identity and mobilization, political participation, institutions and representation, and assimilation. We identify and describe major findings and make clear what these findings have added to our understanding of American politics. Thinking of "Latino politics" and "American politics" separately is misguided. Scholars of Latino politics have always placed their work within the larger context of American politics, even as they have challenged some of the theoretical premises and major empirical findings embedded in the literature. Just as it makes little sense to think of Latino politics apart from the broader context of American politics, increasingly it makes no sense to think of American political science separately from contributions of research in the area of Latino politics, and of the study of racial and ethnic politics more generally.

## PLURALISM

With a few scattered exceptions (Weeks 1930), the study of Latinos in American politics as a focused inquiry of the discipline did not begin until the 1970s. This intellectual project coincided with the end of a period when many Latinos were shut out of much U.S. politics and the beginning of a period when the practical consequences of the Civil Rights movement were beginning to be felt. This was reflected in both the sweeping critiques of the political system (the internal colonialism literature) and the debates in political science (the pluralism literature). With dependency theory and the study of anti-colonial movements informing analysis of comparative politics and democratic theory, it is not surprising that the "internal colonialism" model came to influence understandings of Latino politics, particularly given the economically, politically, and spatially segregated Latino populations at that time. One influential study considered the utility of three perspectives on Chicano (Mexican American) politics—pluralism, elitism, and internal colonialism (F. C. García and de la Garza 1977), suggesting that pluralism alone was inadequate as a sole or leading interpretive framework, and arguing that at best pluralism could be utilized only in conjunction with the two other approaches. Two years later, a major book by Mario Barrera (1979) rejected the pluralist approach entirely, arguing that the political marginalization of Mexican Americans in the Southwest was best understood through "class segmen-

tation," the interplay of racial hierarchy, and economic inequality. In short, research on Latinos (specifically Mexican Americans) in that decade contributed to a reconsideration, already percolating in analyses of the black civil rights struggle and pluralist/elitist debates of the time, of the very utility and applicability of "pluralism" as the dominant understanding of American politics.

These early studies of Latino politics built on, expanded, and challenged pluralism's premises of multiple centers of power in the political system that simultaneously made it possible for groups with relatively few resources to have access to political decision making and made it difficult for any one group to dominate access. Though influential in the nascent subfield of Latino politics, these theoretical claims were not systematically revisited until Hero's (1992) portrayal of "two-tiered pluralism" in American politics. Like authors writing in the 1970s, Hero argued that pluralist theory was incomplete because of its inadequate accounting of a racialized economic and political hierarchy in the United States. This hierarchy could be traced to the historical legacy of the coercive incorporation of populations from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and (for a time immediately after the Spanish-American War) Cuba into the United States. In this view, pluralism worked, but only up to a point, with racial and ethnic minorities perhaps playing a role in decision-making venues (as standard pluralist accounts emphasize) but *not* having "systemic power" (Stone 1980), having very little say in developmental policy (Peterson 1981), and being largely left out of agenda setting (Cobb and Elder 1983).

Together, these studies, marshalling both theoretical analyses and empirical data, questioned and on the whole disconfirmed a straightforward pluralist interpretation of American politics, and have continued to set an agenda for research in Latino politics. Extending this earlier work, Hero (1998) developed a more general "racial diversity" interpretation of politics in the American states, itself influenced by the theoretical insights of V. O. Key (1949) and others. This view also became the basis of a challenge to the social capital interpretation of American politics (Putnam 2000), which, Hero argued, overlooked the racial/ethnic dimensions of civic life and as a result provided an incomplete and inappropriate characterization of American politics (Hero 2003).

## GROUP IDENTITY AND MOBILIZATION

Even though the pluralist framework has tended to downplay the notion of group hierarchies in American politics, a significant strand of research in American politics has continued to focus on the mobilization of groups and how individuals come to see themselves as part of groups to form collective identities, particularly among minority populations. Group identity, embodying strong social attachments and collective political evaluations, has come to be understood as a political resource and a potential catalyst for political

mobilization (Dawson 1994; Marquez 2003; Uhlaner 1989). Research has found, however, that Latino group identity is very complex and that its saliency for political engagement is often situational (J. García 1982; Padilla 1986; Jones-Correa and Leal 1996; Stokes 2003). For example, national origin differences may persist in undermining a broader group basis for mobilization and subsequent group empowerment. Subsequent research has framed identity in both national origin and pan-ethnic (beyond national origin boundaries) terms (Segura and Rodrigues 2006).

The complexities of ethnic identity are reflected in Latino responses to contemporary policy debates concerning immigration and assimilation. Beginning in the 1990s, legislation and ballot initiatives were passed in a number of states, most notably California, enshrining English as a state's official language, denying noncitizens access to public services, and implementing punitive measures against undocumented aliens. Research indicates that these initiatives were perceived by a significant share of Latinos as outbursts of racial hostility directed at them as a group (Alvarez and Butterfield 2000), and these perceptions were subsequently shown to have significant and tangible implications. Several studies found that perceptions of threat (Marcus, Neuman, and Mackuen 2000) following the series of anti-immigrant propositions in California the 1980s and 1990s, for example, served to increase levels of political awareness and information among Latinos (Pantoja and Segura 2003; Ramakrishnan 2005). This heightened awareness translated into partisan and mobilization effects among Latinos in California (Barreto 2005; Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura 2001; Bowler, Nicholson, and Segura 2006), which were demonstrated to be sufficiently dramatic as to enhance Latino political power in the California legislature and, at the same time, to turn California into one of the most reliably Democratic states in recent national politics (Fraga and Ramírez 2003–2004). In short, the party system and electoral calculus have been importantly affected in ways illuminated in the Latino politics literature.

More recently, the mass mobilization of Latino immigrants and other marginalized segments of American society in the large-scale demonstrations that took place in the spring of 2006 will likely expand the attention and conceptual development of research on political participation, citizenship, group membership, communication, mobilization, and social movements that have long been central themes in the study of Latino politics (Segura and Rodrigues 2006) and also topics of more general inquiry. Thus the study of Latino group identities and the political events shaping those identities have both extended and broadened the discipline's understanding of the role of individual and group identities in political behavior and mobilization.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The 1975 renewal and expansion of the Voting Rights Act provided the opportunity for Latinos to assert their

voting rights, building on the experience of the short-lived Raza Unida Party, which appealed to Mexican-American ethnonationalist sentiments to challenge the dominance of both the Democrat and Republican parties, and on the efforts of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, founded in 1974 to register Latinos to vote. Latino politics research focusing on this increased political participation has challenged a number of major accepted explanations of the factors driving behavior. For example, research on Latinos has illustrated the limitations of the socioeconomic status or resource model. Moreover, findings on the pivotal and potentially evolving importance of immigration and naturalization to overall Latino empowerment, the different role of religion in mobilization among Latinos vis-à-vis other populations, differential participation along gender lines, and the logic of political parties in their response to demographic change have enriched our understanding of political participation in the United States.

The leading interpretation of individual participation is the socioeconomic status and/or resource model (Verba and Nie 1972; cf. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Education, income, and occupation are found to provide an individual with the knowledge, skills, opportunities, and resources to engage in a wide range of political activities. This model generally has been used as if it had universal applicability. However, it seems to work somewhat differently for Latinos. Although education is broadly important across groups (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), for Latinos education, more than income and occupation, is the key factor explaining levels of participation (J. García 1997; J. García and Arce 1988; Nelson 1979; J. García and Sanchez 2004; Pantoja, Ramírez, and Segura 2001). Confounding factors such as the relatively compressed range of occupational and income attainment among Latinos, higher proportions of foreign-born, and higher percentages of bilingualism are group attributes that complicate the process of Latino political incorporation (J. García 1982; DeSipio 1996a, 1996b) and diminish the capacity of the model—and specifically its income-related aspects—to explain individual-level Latino political participation.

The contemporary demographic and cultural changes associated with the large and growing Latino population have stimulated renewed examination of the connection between naturalization and participation (Barreto 2005; Ramakrishnan 2005). Non-citizens are excluded from formal electoral participation, of course, but their particular immigration experiences appear to affect their formal political participation, *ceteris paribus*, after naturalization (DeSipio 1996a, 1996b; J. García 1982; Pachón and DeSipio 1994). Length of residence in the United States is associated with higher levels of participation, although the gap with other groups is not eliminated (DeSipio 1996b; Jones-Correa 1998).

A key factor often identified as driving an individual's civic and political engagement is religious affiliation and commitment (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Specifically, Protestants are said to participate

more than Catholics because Protestant churches are less hierarchical in structure and process and thus provide their members more opportunities to engage in activities that prepare and encourage individual involvement in the political arena. This claim was examined, and questioned, by Jones-Correa and Leal (2001), who found that participation rates of Latino Protestants and Latino Catholics do not differ substantially. Rather, they suggest that the explanation provided by Verba et al. placed too much emphasis on skill learning and not enough on other factors, namely, contact and social networks. Contact has been shown repeatedly to play an important role in Latino mobilization (Ramírez 2005; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000), but the religious basis of such mobilization—long understood among African Americans—now has been established more firmly in research on Latinos.

Just as there has been increasing attention to differences in the political attitudes and participation of men and women in the larger population (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001), so too have researchers in Latino politics increasingly pointed to variation in participatory styles and strategies by gender. Montoya (1996) found significant disparities in Latino public opinion by gender, whereas Hardy-Fanta's work (1993) emphasized how the definitions men and women have of politics lead to very distinct organizational behaviors and outcomes a finding seconded by Jones-Correa (1998), who found gendered strategies among Latin American immigrants to naturalization and participation in the United States.

Finally, research on Latinos as participants in and objects of American party politics reveals that the consequences of increased demographic growth and related political participation do not necessarily affect Latinos in all states equally (Fraga and Ramírez 2003–2004). Although both political parties may be more active in claiming sensitivity to Latino concerns, the parties must balance this claim with the necessity of winning the votes of moderate whites in key swing states (Fraga and Leal 2004). The study of Latino political incorporation provides insight into the strategic choices American political parties make as they attempt to position themselves to win elections now and in the future.

## INSTITUTIONS AND REPRESENTATION

Although it is common to say that “institutions matter,” Latino-focused research has underscored the particularly important implications of institutional design in determining political access for distinct segments of the American polity (Jones-Correa 2005), and the related policy benefits that follow from that access (Meier and Stewart 1991). Analyses of the historical origins and contemporary consequences of electoral structures provide important insights into both the exclusionary reality and inclusive potential for descriptive and substantive representation through the design of American political institutions.

The reconfiguration of institutional structures and processes, such as the creation of majority–minority

electoral districts, was instituted to address the underrepresentation of Latinos and other minorities. Many of these efforts stemmed directly from legal claims made under the Voting Rights Act. Studies consistently demonstrate that the structure of electoral institutions significantly affects levels of Latino representation in local governments. As early as 1966, Wolfinger and Field (1966, 325) argued that local government reforms related to the Municipal Reform Movement of the Progressive Era had disempowering consequences for African Americans in the South and Mexican Americans in Texas. Later studies provided evidence confirming that reform mechanisms, including at-large, nonpartisan elections and exclusionary slating often institutionalized the representational exclusion of Latinos under conditions of white-dominant polarized voting (Fraga 1988; Jones-Correa 2001).

Analyses of electoral structure and local school boards further demonstrate how at-large elections can limit Latino representation (Fraga, Meier, and England 1986; Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004). This research also finds, however, that alternative electoral structures, especially single-member district elections, result in significantly higher levels of Latino representation, even after controlling for relevant factors such as population size. Moreover, enhanced board representation also leads to the appointment of more Latino administrators and teachers with concomitant effects on Latino student performance (Meier et al. 2001). This focus on substate governance demonstrates that opportunities to influence policy decision making were and remain limited for Latinos by explicit institutional design. The flip side of this is that the opportunity for Latinos to elect co-ethnics has meaningful behavioral effects as well. Among other effects, Latino citizens represented by Latino public officials appear even to vote more frequently (Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004) than other Latinos who are not descriptively represented. There is consensus that electoral institutions can be redesigned to promote greater access to governance, and this greater access can lead to identifiable policy gains.

## ASSIMILATION

Pluralist assumptions about the relative openness of American politics have often been accompanied by the presumption that this openness works best when individuals and groups assimilate to prevailing cultural and societal norms. Lower rates of political incorporation and participation by Latinos have been interpreted as a reflection of their “deficiencies” in the appropriate norms of individualism, cultural mores, and values (Nelson 1979). Large-scale immigration from both Latin America and Asia since the 1970s, which was fostered by the 1965 immigration legislation and civil rights orientations of this era, has led to and reinforced earlier concerns about the assimilation, values, and loyalties of these groups. These concerns have their clearest expression in several recent works (e.g., Huntington 2004) whose central premise is that Latinos and especially Mexican immigrants have remained

culturally and linguistically isolated, under-performing in economic and educational measures of social mobility, and not sharing the Anglo-Protestant democratic values that are a crucial factor for achievement in the American context. These alleged deficiencies are said to make Latinos, particularly recent immigrant arrivals, a threat to American national identity.

Examination of these claims has been facilitated by the development of a body of large-scale data sets, such as the National Chicano Survey (1979), the National Latino Immigrant Survey (1988), and the Latino National Political Survey (1989), by Latino politics researchers. As a result of research drawing on these data, charges of Latinos' deficiencies have been shown to be largely, if not entirely, unsubstantiated. Contrary to other assertions, this research finds that Hispanics are, in fact, well "assimilated," with most Latinos holding or sharing the same core values and attitudinal predispositions associated with democracy as other Americans. Indeed, in some instances Latino survey respondents manifest values of individualism and patriotism that exceed those of native-born whites (de la Garza et al. 1996). The vast majority of Latino immigrants believe that speaking English is somewhat or very important for social mobility (de la Garza et al. 1992; Pachón and DeSipio 1994). English-language acquisition by new immigrants and their children occurs rapidly—with a majority reaching English proficiency within 10 years of arrival—and is virtually complete by the second generation (Alba 2006; Pachón and DeSipio 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

This body of research has, then, provided evidence about Latinos' orientations regarding identity and American political culture that both clarifies and extends knowledge about American social and political development by refuting a large array of stubbornly held misconceptions (Fraga and Segura 2006). Perhaps more importantly, this research has also demonstrated that Latino assimilation into American political culture and practices is a highly complex and contested process, not driven entirely by individual attitudes and behaviors (García-Bedolla 2005; F. C. García, Falcon, and de la Garza, 1996; Jones-Correa 1998; Sampaio 2004). This line of research has directly challenged notions of assimilation as a linear, monotonic process with a static endpoint, in which retention of ancestral values and traditions results in downward socioeconomic mobility and political isolation. Research on Latinos indicates that the persistence of ancestral origins and the incorporation of American values and lifestyles are not mutually exclusive—certainly not for all groups under all circumstances.

In numerous surveys that ask respondents about their disposition toward "assimilation" versus "maintaining cultural uniqueness," Latinos consistently reply affirmatively to both. These persistent home country ties can retain political content as well (Jones-Correa 1998). Assimilation is thus more dynamic and less demarcated across generations than previously conceptualized. In the process of contributing to a more realistic and fully defined characterization of the assimilation process and alternative models of immigrant adapta-

tion, Latino politics research has highlighted the importance of multiple identities, dynamic and changing understandings of race and ethnicity, and the impact of globalization and transnationalism, all occurring under the broader rubric of "American identity." By the 1990s, this body of research generated richer discussions drawing in part from analyses and approaches in the other social sciences as well as political science.

## CONCLUSION

The first published article in the *Review* that directly related to Latinos examined race, immigration, assimilation, political identity, transnationalism, citizenship, civic engagement, political participation, and political incorporation (Weeks 1930), all themes that should be central to a comprehensive understanding of American politics. Unfortunately, 40 years passed before political science research would again focus on Latino communities and their role in American politics to address these fundamental dimensions of how the political system works. By challenging existing theoretical paradigms, developing original datasets, utilizing sophisticated analytical techniques, and generating a rich body of empirical findings, research on Latino politics has pushed the study of American politics to more consciously and systematically consider the demographic diversity that has been and will increasingly become a central feature of the American polity. The importance of Latino politics research to challenging and refining existing orthodoxies and interpretations in the study of American politics as well as providing unique insights should assure that the study of Latino politics has a prominent home in American political analyses commensurate with the theoretical issues it addresses.

It is the good fortune of those working in this field, and to the benefit of the discipline at large, that there is no shortage of research questions to be posed and pursued given the continually changing American demographic mosaic. For example, ongoing and future work might question the centrality of citizenship status as the basis for political involvement, recognizing the political engagement of immigrants in a variety of nonelectoral institutional spheres, political activities, and targeted political institutions and policies. Fascinating questions regarding the dynamics of group aggregation and mobilization and the development of pan-ethnic group formation and identity are only now beginning to be answered with newly available data. Whether Latinos coalesce with—or compete with—African Americans, Asian Americans, and others is pivotal in shaping the immediate political future of this society but is only now beginning to attract the attention of political scientists.

These questions and more will animate the substantive queries of the subfield of Latino politics with significant implications for the study of American politics. One would and should expect that such contributions are increasingly likely to be recognized by the discipline as the importance of Latinos in the American political system increases, and as the study of Latino

politics continues to develop in ways that challenge, modify, and affirm—in short, fundamentally inform and advance—mainstream research foci and findings. Political science, we believe, has much to gain from extensively and thoughtfully incorporating this body of knowledge into its general efforts to grasp the forces and changes driving politics and policy in the United States and indeed, elsewhere. Many political systems around the world also have experienced or are experiencing increasing racial/ethnic change and complexity. Research on Latino politics in America has something to offer the cross-national study of race and its political implications for other such states as well.

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