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Latino Immigration and Citizenship

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Immigration figures prominently in Latino politics in both historical and contemporary terms. It underlies the formation and development of a longstanding Latino presence in the United States. Indeed, the very heritage of the Latino people is rooted in the history of conquest and settlement in the Americas. In more recent times, immigration has fueled the growth of the Latino population in the United States; over 40% of U.S. Latinos are first-generation immigrants. Whether viewed historically or in contemporary terms, the relationship between immigration and Latino politics raises a number of questions with far-reaching implications for American domestic, binational, and international policy concerns.

In this brief article, we limit ourselves to considering how U.S. immigration policies have shaped Latino demographics and affected Latino immigrants' status, how patterns of immigration have influenced political participation among members of the Latino community, and how Latino immigration has affected relations among sending states, especially Mexico, and the United States.

To be sure, immigration is a highly contested public policy issue. It creates schisms among the general population as well as Latinos themselves. But, as the public debate over immigration intensified during the 1990s, Latinos increasingly came together to express concern over, and opposition to, anti-immigrant attitudes and measures through their behavior at the ballot box, grassroots protest, and their pursuit of citizenship through naturalization.

Political scientists and scholars from related disciplines have noted that immigration is more than an issue to be supported or opposed. Indeed, its experiences help construct Latino ethnoracial identities (Garcia 1991), shape political attitudes and behavior (de la Garza et al. 1992; Jones-Correa 1998; Pachon and DeSipio 1994), and influence interest group mobilization (Gutierrez 1995; Sierra 1999). When considering these issues, scholars have often found it helpful to take into account the heterogeneity of the Latino population and consider how factors such as socioeconomic status, national origin, (non)citizenship, generations in the U.S., immigration status (e.g., legal resident, undocumented immigrant, refugee, or asylee), and nature of migration (e.g., permanent or circulatory) relate to individual and group attitudes and political behavior.

Ultimately, of course, immigration is a transnational phenomenon that perhaps can best be understood and addressed in a regional or global context, transcending the narrower domestic framework that drives unilateral decision making by the United States with regard to immigration and immigrants.

The Demographics of Immigration

Immigration and Naturalization Law

Somewhat obscured by the passage of civil rights and voting rights legislation in the mid-1960s was an equally revolutionary change in immigration law. The 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated the national-origin quotas that had for 40 years favored immigration from Northern and Western Europe. The changes established an immigration system built on the twin pillars of family unification and national labor needs. As a largely unanticipated consequence, the 1965 immigration law provided the statutory foundation for both a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants granted permanent residence and for a substantial shift in the countries and regions of origin of immigrants to the United States. Undocumented immigration also rose despite extensive legislative and administrative efforts to eliminate it.

Latinos have figured prominently in the post-1965 streams of both legal and undocumented immigrants.

In 1986, Congress sought to address national concerns about the growing number of undocumented immigrants by passing the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Although the act's provision for imposing sanctions on employers failed to curtail undocumented immigration, its "amnesty" provisions did greatly affect the Latino immigrant population. IRCA offered legal status to long-term undocumented residents of the United States as well as to short-term workers employed in agriculture. As a result, almost three million immigrants--most of whom were Latino--attained legal status. Importantly, these legalized immigrants began seeking naturalization during the 1990s.

In 1996, Congress again amended the immigration law, this time making the status of permanent residents more tenuous. Immigrants who committed felonies and certain misdemeanors in the United States were subjected to increased risk of deportation. A separate piece of legislation, the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, excluded permanent residents from participating in most social welfare programs (DeSipio and de la Garza 1998). In addition, Congress set minimum household income levels for sponsors of immigrants, making sponsorship requirements difficult to fulfill for many families. Implementation of this last provision of the law may alter the class balance of migrants from several Latin American countries and increase undocumented migration by those whose families cannot meet the sponsorship requirements. One estimate suggests that as many as 40% of Dominicans who migrated before 1996 would no longer be able to do so under the new legislation (Vega and Despradel 1999).

Since 1986, Congress and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) have implemented various additional strategies to control undocumented migration, including bolstering deployment of Border Patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border to control initial entry and facilitating cooperative arrangements with employers to identify undocumented workers in the labor force. While these efforts have impeded the flow of undocumented migrants, they have not stemmed it. At the same time, large increases in the INS' budget for enforcement rather than service provision, as well as militarization of the border, have elicited criticism from Latinos and other groups who maintain that such policies lead directly and indirectly to human and civil rights abuses of migrants and residents in the border region.

Immigrant Numbers

The long-term impact of changes in U.S. immigration law are evident from a review of Table 1. Immigrants in the 1950s numbered approximately 2.5 million. By the 1980s, their number nearly tripled to 7.3 million. Legal immigration in the 1990s approached 10 million, which will make the 1990s the decade with the greatest number of immigrants in the nation's history (exceeding the 8.8 million in the first decade of the 1900s). In addition to the permanent residents, approximately 3 million undocumented immigrants entered the United States in the 1990s and stayed. These approximately 13 million immigrants have added approximately 5% to the nation's population since the last census.

The impact of the 1965 act can also be seen in the composition of this immigrant stream. In the 1950s, more than half of immigrants to the U.S. came from Europe (with Germany sending the most immigrants). By the 1990s, almost 45% of immigrants came from Latin America and another 31% were from Asia. The four countries supplying the largest number of immigrants were Mexico, the Philippines, China, and the Dominican Republic.

TABLE 1
Regions and Countries of Origin of Permanent Resident Immigrants, 1951–95

Region	1951–60	1961–70	1971–80	1981–90[a]	1991–97[a]
Total	2,515,479	3,321,677	4,493,314	7,338,062	6,944,591
Europe	1,325,727	1,123,492	800,368	761,550	1,039,091
Latin America and the Caribbean	605,681	1,193,645	1,618,884	3,111,760	3,083,686
Asia	153,249	427,642	1,588,178	2,738,157	2,133,952
Africa	14,092	28,954	80,779	176,893	242,736
Oceania	12,976	25,122	41,242	45,205	41,181
Latin American Countries					
Mexico	299,811	453,937	640,294	1,655,843	1,800,576
Cuba	78,948	108,536	264,863	144,578	121,296
Dominican Republic	9,897	93,292	148,135	252,035	279,798
El Salvador	5,895	14,992	34,436	213,539	164,721
Argentina	19,486	49,721	29,897	27,327	20,932
Columbia	18,048	72,028	77,347	122,849	92,921
Ecuador	9,841	36,780	50,077	56,315	53,191
Asian Countries					
China[b]	9,657	34,764	124,326	346,747	306,640
India	1,973	27,189	164,134	250,786	261,345
Korea	6,231	34,526	267,638	333,746	122,960
Philippines	19,307	98,376	354,987	548,764	400,952

Source: Authors' compilations based on U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (1999, Table 2).

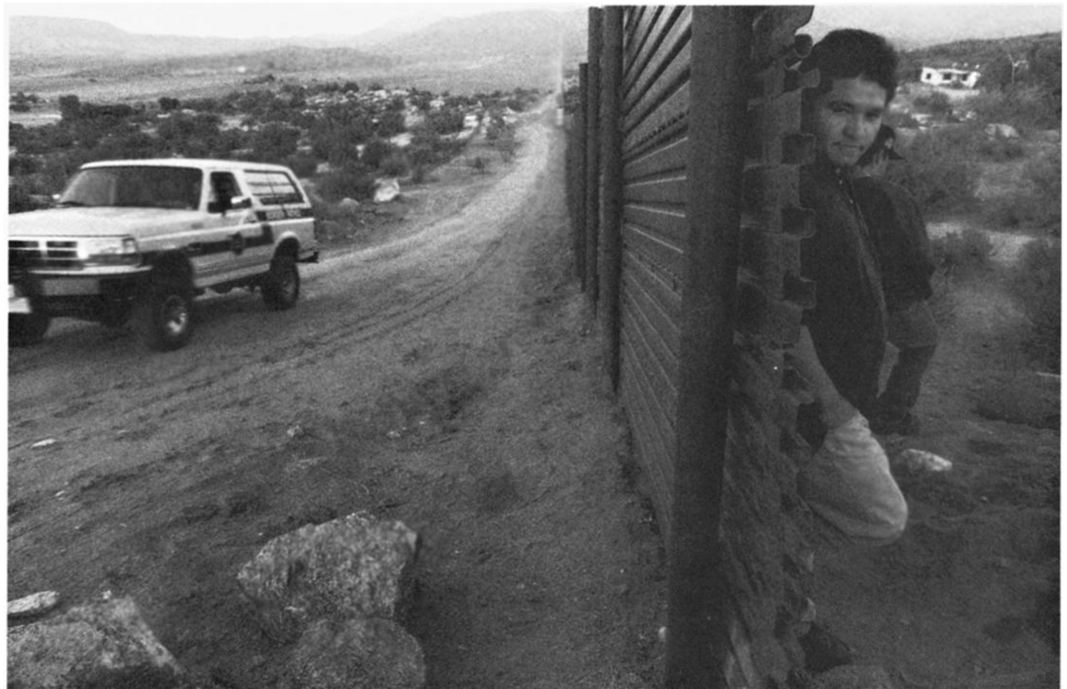
[a]Data from the 1980s and early 1990s include immigrants legalized under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

[b]After 1957, data for China include Taiwan. China data do not include Hong Kong.

The implications of these trends are far-ranging and have generated national debate over appropriate levels of immigration, the assimilative prospects of newcomers, and the costs and benefits associated with the new immigration. In particular, scholars have focused on the process of and prospects for full incorporation of Latino immigrants into U.S. society (e.g., see DeSipio 1996a; Jones-Correa 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 1996).[1] These scholars have pinpointed issues of citizenship as a significant concern for Latino politics.

Naturalization and Citizenship

Across all immigrant groups, naturalization has not kept pace with immigration. Despite significant increases in naturalization rates in the late 1990s, less than half of eligible immigrants have naturalized. Latino immigrants are somewhat less likely than immigrants from other parts of the world to secure naturalization. Demographic factors, such as lower levels of formal education than other immigrants, account for much of the variance (DeSipio 1996a). Also, proximity of the native country to the United States (immigrants from Canada and Mexico are the least likely to naturalize) and a complex application process, among other factors, discourage Latino naturalization (Pachon and DeSipio 1994).



National concerns about immigration have led to new policies to control undocumented migration, including increased deployment on the U.S-Mexico border. Photograph by Susan Sterner/AP.

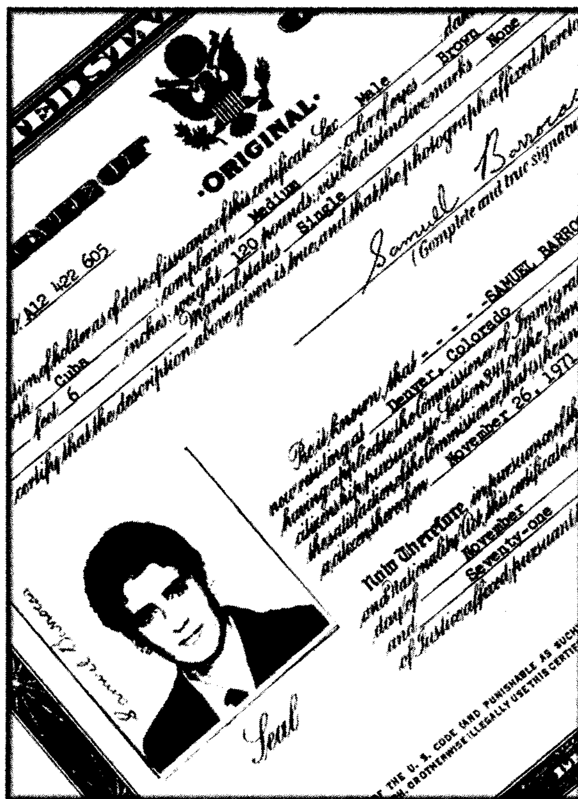
Differences in naturalization rates are, however, apparent across Latino groups. Notably, Cuban Americans have the highest naturalization rate among the new Latino immigrants. Beginning in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Cuban American leadership presented naturalization as a means for increasing leverage in Washington to promote the overthrow of Fidel Castro and Cuban communism, as well as a way to gain a power base in Miami and, over time, southern Florida. Such efforts were backed by the local and national Republican parties (Boswell and Curtis 1984; Portes and Stepick 1993).

In summary, the gap between high rates of immigration from the Americas and lower rates of naturalization guarantee a continuing gap between political expectations and realities for Latinos. A large share of the Latino adult population is ineligible to vote, a fact pundits often overlook when naïvely making predictions about Latinos' political influence. Officially and informally welcoming newcomers to formally join the American body politic would do much to advance the political incorporation of Latino immigrants, as would fostering community-based mobilization. These measures did much to bring earlier generations of immigrants to the United States into equal membership in the polity.

Latino Immigrants and Political Participation

The recent rise in the Latino immigrant population calls for systematic examination of the place of immigrants in Latino politics. Beyond the issues associated with noncitizenship are questions regarding the nature and extent of newcomers' participation in American politics. Although scholars have not paid sufficient attention to this topic, some important observations have been made. For the most part, new citizens are less socialized to political participation than are U.S.-born Latinos. A series of studies show that naturalized citizens register, vote, and participate in community-based civic activities at rates lower than U.S.-born citizens (Bass and Casper 1999; DeSipio 1996b; Levitt and Olson 1996; Minnite, Holdaway, and Hayduk 1999; Mollenkopf, Olson, and Ross 1999). Nevertheless, immigrants' participation in American politics is evident and appears increasingly significant.[2]

Noncitizens generally practice a "politics of in-between"--avoiding formal commitments to either their countries of origin or the United States, participating instead in a dense network of social, cultural, and religious organizations (Jones-Correa 1998, 125).


ORIGINAL
A12 422 605
SAMUEL BARROCAS
Denver, Colorado
November 26, 1971
Seal

At the end of a long naturalization process, immigrants from Latin America become U.S. citizens. Shown here is a portion of the naturalization certificate received by Cuban immigrant Samuel Barrocas, husband of author Teresa Carrillo, in November 1971. Latino immigrants are somewhat less likely than immigrants from other parts of the world to naturalize; overall, less than half of currently eligible immigrants have become citizens (DeSipio 1996).

Undocumented immigrants have participated, not without risk, in unionization efforts to gain collective bargaining rights and to improve working conditions in immigrant-dominated trades and industries (Delgado 1993; Repak 1995).

By the mid-1990s, a number of factors came together to encourage immigrants to seek naturalization and increase their participation in electoral politics. A major surge in naturalization occurred when the large numbers of permanent legal residents created by IRCA in 1986 became eligible for citizenship. Furthermore, efforts on the part of the Clinton administration to reduce the backlog of naturalization cases had positive effects. Moreover, between 1992 and 1998, six Latin American countries--Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Mexico--recognized dual nationality, permitting immigrants from those countries to the United States to take on U.S. citizenship without losing their rights as nationals in their countries of origin (Jones-Correa 1998, 2000). Finally, a surge in anti-immigrant rhetoric and punitive public policy measures targeting both undocumented and legal immigrants pushed increasing numbers of Latino immigrants towards citizenship as a means for securing their status in a hostile social and political climate. The number of immigrants applying for citizenship in the New York metropolitan area more than doubled from 1992 to 1995 (to 141,235) before rising even faster in 1996 (Dugger 1996). Further, INS statistics show that a record 879,000 immigrant adults were naturalized in California between 1994 and 1997, and another 623,000 had applications pending (INS 1999).

The politics of immigration during the 1990s pushed newly naturalized Latino citizens toward the voting booth. In particular, the addition of Proposition 187 to the California ballot in 1994 galvanized Latino political participation. This proposition, which was designed to deny undocumented immigrants access to public education and state social services, was widely interpreted as an anti-immigrant, anti-Latino vendetta. The immediate effect of the proposition was to mobilize already-registered Latino voters in California, 78% of whom voted against it. However, because Latinos made up only 8% of the statewide electorate, their votes were overwhelmed by the 59% of the voting public who favored its passage (Cioe 1994).[3] Over the subsequent years, Latinos would increase their voting numbers and their percentage of the California electorate, with the mobilized votes of newly naturalized citizens constituting an important component of Latino vote expansion.

As new citizens added their names to the voter rolls, they made up a growing percentage of those who cast ballots in 1996 and 1998. Polls indicated that recently naturalized immigrants accounted for up to 40% of the 2 million Latino voters in the 1996 election in California. In 1998, almost 37% of all Latinos who voted in California reported being foreign-born. Although still underrepresented among the California electorate in relation to their share of the state's population, Latinos by 1998 made up 12% of the state's voters, up from 9% in 1990.[4]

While Proposition 187 and the backlash against immigrants in California were critical in mobilizing the Latino immigrant vote in that state, passage of national immigration and welfare reform legislation restricting rights and benefits for permanent legal immigrants had broader national effects. Latinos voted overwhelmingly against Republican candidates who they perceived using immigration and other "wedge" issues, such as affirmative action and bilingual education, against them. In one striking example, Cuban Americans, who generally vote Republican, gave 40% of their votes in 1996 to President Clinton. In the 1998 California gubernatorial election, Latinos emphatically supported Democrat Gray Davis over Republican Dan Lungren, signaling a repudiation of Republican Governor Pete Wilson, who championed Proposition 187 and followed an anti-immigrant agenda during his administration.

Events in California since 1994 and nationwide since 1996 have convinced analysts for both parties that the Latino vote is alienated with peril. In particular, Republicans appear to be tempering their anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the Republican National Committee has indicated it is prepared to spend $10 million on Latino voter turnout efforts in 2000. For its part, the Democratic Party has pledged to continue the efforts to attract Latino voters it began during the 1996 presidential campaign.

Transnational/Binational Populations and Issues

Immigration is best understood as a transnational phenomenon that has a great impact on national politics and international relations. A fundamental weakness of U.S. immigration and immigrant policies stems from the U.S.' failure to fully acknowledge that immigrants and immigration fulfill certain needs. This leads the government to pursue contradictory goals like eliminating barriers to trade and increasing barriers to the movement of labor across borders. In 1994, when Canada, Mexico, and the United States began implementing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), proponents argued that in the long term, free trade would enable Mexicans to stay home and find work. Six years later, there are still no clear indications of lower rates of migration. To the contrary, analysts have noted a positive correlation between foreign investment and out-migration from both Mexico and Central America (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Sassen Koob 1996).

In the United States, the constant need to fill low-wage positions insures a steady flow of immigrants. At the same time, out-migration from the sending countries of Latin America meets critical needs such as reducing demands for scarce resources and services and bringing hard currency into the economies. Mexican families and communities, especially, have grown more and more dependent on remittances from family members working in the U.S., which total an estimated $2 billion annually (Mexican Migration Project 1998).

Mexicans living and working in Mexico earn on average, between 10 and 20% per hour what they can earn in the U.S. Out-migration has been called Mexico's safety valve, providing needed employment to Mexico's growing workforce at a time when Mexico's economy can not create jobs to keep pace with population growth. Central and South American countries share many of Mexico's concerns regarding migration, although the degree of interdependence between Mexico and the U.S. is unmatched by any other Latin American country.

As a region, the Americas are moving toward increased economic integration while lacking corresponding regional political integration such as that among the states of the European Union. Within the United States, key sectors of the economy have maintained a great dependence on immigrant labor even as immigration policies have become more and more restrictive. While political debates focus on controlling the flow of undocumented immigration and limiting the rights and access to public services of immigrants, and beefed up border control in key locations has succeeded in conveying an image of control, all that recent policies have succeeded in doing is making the crossing more costly and dangerous for immigrants. We are moving toward what Peter Andreas (1996, 1999) has referred to as a borderless economy with barricaded borders.

The limitations of working within an outdated framework of national politics to address a transnational phenomenon such as immigration has become evident. For both Mexico and the United States, the reality of free trade and regional economic integration presents a challenge that demands moving beyond the confines of nationalism and addressing transnational problems with innovative solutions.

Organized labor in the U.S. has shown some recognition of the need for such innovation. A number of sectors of the U.S. workforce are particularly dependent on immigrant laborers, including agriculture, janitorial services, restaurant and hotel services, garment-making, manufacturing, and many forms of informal sector services such as child and elder care and domestic services (Cornelius 1998; Guarnizo 1996). These jobs have been resistant to capital flight, as they are largely services tied to the geographic location of the population buying the services. This stability has attracted the attention of AFL-CIO unions in search of new sectors to organize. U.S. unions have become increasingly cognizant of the fact that as manufacturing moves offshore, unionization of service sector workers may be the most feasible approach to pursue (Delgado 1993; Figueroa 1996).

As early as the 1970s, the United Farm Workers and other unions began moving away from focusing on citizenship and toward a unionization strategy that disregards the immigration status of the employee. Unionization campaigns in the 1990s that addressed the needs of immigrant workers have included the multicity Justice for Janitors movement, a sustained push for contracts for hotel and restaurant workers with the largest hotel chains, and a number of campaigns in the agricultural and food-processing industries that employ immigrants (Milkman 2000). The AFL-CIO has created a new executive vice-presidential position charged with diversifying union membership. Linda Chavez-Thompson is the first to occupy the position and is the highest ranking woman and Latina in the labor movement.

Latino advocacy for immigrant rights has included campaigns to enhance opportunities for legal entry, decrease the militarization and attendant violence along the U.S.-Mexico border, increase access to public services for immigrants, increase regulation of labor, health, and safety standards in all workplaces, and establish limited voting rights in school board elections for noncitizen parents of students in the public education system. Each of these requested reforms points to how the U.S. can accommodate increasing transnationalism, binationalism, and migratory patterns that are an inevitable part of regional economic integration (Carrillo 1998).

In conclusion, immigration will remain a principal influence on Latino politics for the foreseeable future. The steady pressure of demographic change driven by immigration processes, the issues incorporating newcomers raise, and governmental responses to families and communities negotiating their livelihoods at once within and across national borders must all be considered if Americans hope to fashion a more inclusive and stronger democracy in the long term.

Notes

1. Data from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP) show that the longer they stay in the United States, the more migrants become integrated in the U.S., regardless of legal status. As migrants accumulate time in the U.S., they speak and understand more English, earn higher wages, get higher-status jobs, pay more taxes, spend and invest more in the U.S., draw on more U.S. services, and establish stronger connections to U.S. citizens and institutions. The MMP, codirected by Professors Jorge Durand of the University of Guadalajara and Douglas S. Massey from the University of Pennsylvania, sponsors a web site that provides public access to a comprehensive database of social and economic information on Mexican-U.S. migration (www.pop.upenn.edu/mexmig/).

2. According to one study of the November 1996 election, census data revealed that naturalized Latinos (53%) were more likely to vote than native-born Latinos (42%). But the small sample size of the study, and, hence, its large margin of error, casts some doubt on this finding (see Casper and Bass 1998).

3. For further analysis of the *Times* exit poll data, see Schockman (1998).

4. According to *The Los Angeles Times* ("Profile" 1998), Latino voters in California cast 12% of the votes in 1998. Whites cast 69%, blacks 14%, and Asians 3%. The William C. Velásquez Institute (1998), however, estimated that Latinos constituted 13.5% of the California electorate in the November 1998 election.

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