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Review Essay

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Latin Lessons

Who Are Hispanic Americans, and How Will They Vote?

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Latinos in the New Millennium: An Almanac of Opinion, Behavior, and Policy Preferences.

BY LUIS R. FRAGA, JOHN A. GARCIA, RODNEY E. HERO, MICHAEL JONES-CORREA, VALERIE MARTINEZ-EBERS, AND GARY M. SEGURA.

Cambridge University Press, 2011, 448 pp. \$99.00 (paper, \$36.99).

In June, as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on Arizona's controversial immigration law and the Obama administration announced a significant change in U.S. deportation policies, the country's roughly 50 million Latino residents were once again transformed from a diverse collection of individuals into an ethnic bloc and then into a political issue in the 2012 campaign season. It was hardly the first time, and it will certainly not be the last, as the U.S. government and American society and political culture struggle to make sense of the country's rapidly shifting demographics.

By now, the main questions have become familiar. How many Latino

voters are there? What do they care about? Are they conservative or liberal? Republicans or Democrats? Will Candidate X figure out how to appeal to them? Will they vote in November? If they overperform in the census but underperform at the polls, does it matter that Latino populations seem to be growing quickly in hotly contested swing states?

What has also become familiar is the lack of good answers to these questions, notwithstanding the many commentators, most of them not Latino, who confidently hold forth on the subject on talk radio and cable news, even though they tend to have rather modest firsthand knowledge of the country's Latino communities and, worse yet, rarely offer any hard data to ground their punditry in reality.

Latinos in the New Millennium represents a potential antidote to this vapid discourse and a data-rich corrective to the stereotypes that too often define Hispanics in the United States. Aptly

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describing the book as an almanac, its authors, a group of academic experts, have collected and synthesized a massive quantity of data on the political and personal sentiments of Latinos across all lines of national origin, citizenship and immigration status, and income and educational levels. Their findings simultaneously clarify and complicate the reductive portrait of Latinos that frames discussions of their social and political relevance.

Strategists and theorists from both major political parties, take heed: making this group yours in the years to come might be much harder than you think. Doing so will require contending with a set of contradictory qualities: progressive politics mixed with conservative values, assimilationist ideals in conflict with hardening ethnic identities, and meritocratic aspirations bumping up against the reality of academic underachievement.

ASSIMILATION REDUX

The book's hundreds of charts, graphs, and tables present data from the Latino National Survey (LNS), a strikingly thorough questionnaire given to 8,634 self-identifying Hispanic residents of the United States over the course of a nine-month period that ended in August 2006. The social scientists behind the LNS quantify the kinds of thoughts and behaviors that journalists usually explore through less rigorous methods: questions of identity, aspirations, political allegiance, and civic engagement. Perhaps most intriguing, the LNS represents an attempt to tease out just what it means that by 2042, an estimated 40 percent of U.S. residents will be able to trace their families back to

the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, or South America.

This coming demographic transformation is likely to have a far different effect on the country than did the changes wrought by earlier waves of immigration. Most of the groups of Europeans that came to the United States in large numbers between 1870 and 1920 followed a similar pattern: a steady increase of arrivals that quickly rose to a dramatic spike before gradually subsiding to a trickle. This pattern was accompanied by a shared trajectory of assimilation among the German, Irish, Italian, and eastern European Jewish immigrants who made up the bulk of those newcomers. Contact with the home country became more sporadic, use of the native language began to fall away, and, ultimately, intermarriage completed a process of acculturation that had begun when the first children born to immigrant parents headed off to an American school.

Latinos have not followed the same patterns. For one thing, their numbers have not peaked and fallen in the same manner. After Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a massive rewriting of U.S. immigration law that opened the country up to the rest of the world outside Europe, Latino populations that had long resided in the West, the Southwest, New York, and Florida were joined by millions of new Spanish-speaking immigrants. Modern transportation, telecommunications, and sheer proximity made moving to the United States from, say, Santo Domingo a very different proposition than boarding a steamship in Hamburg or Naples had been more than a century earlier. Partly for that reason, the Latino wave has never

really crested; nearly 40 million Latino immigrants have come to the United States since the laws changed in 1965.

As Latinos continued to arrive in the United States throughout the 1970s and 1980s, sociologists and demographers wondered whether the relative ease of maintaining the Spanish language, visiting their countries of origin, and keeping up with news and politics back home would lead Latinos to assimilate more slowly and less fully than their European predecessors. Some predicted that Latinos would remain a distinct group in a way that European immigrants had not. Others thought Latinos would transform into just another group of “hyphenated Americans,” becoming the twenty-first-century version of the twentieth century’s Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants: remaining somewhat clannish, Catholic, and family-oriented, but eventually blending into the mainstream of American life.

It is still too soon to know which forecast will prove more accurate. But one thing is clear. The fate of Latino integration will in large part be determined by a perennially fraught issue in American life: the question of racial identity.

NOT BLACK AND WHITE

Americans are frequently tripped up by “official” racial and ethnic categories, such as the ones found on census response forms. One distinction in particular provokes confusion, especially among Americans of European descent: “non-Hispanic white.” The category implies that there is such a thing as a “Hispanic white,” an idea that European Americans sometimes find confusing but that seems perfectly obvious to Hispanics, who tend

to be far more conscious of the wide range of definitions of skin colors and facial features that exist in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking worlds.

The social scientists behind the LNS designed the survey to accommodate the comparatively fluid understandings of race and ethnicity found in many Latin American societies and to illuminate how Latinos have responded to the way race is generally understood in the United States, where the historically charged divide between blacks and whites seems to have produced a more rigid way of thinking about racial categories. The survey sought clues to whether Latinos in the United States have conformed to its long-standing black-white notions of race, replaced them, or subverted them. First, LNS respondents were asked, “What is your race? Are you White, Black, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, some other race or more than one?” About 68 percent answered “some other race,” around 22 percent answered white, around seven percent refused to answer, and less than three percent chose one of the other categories.

Then, critically, the LNS interviewer would refine the question with this follow-up: “In the U.S., we use a number of categories to describe ourselves racially. Do you feel that Latinos or Hispanics make up a distinctive racial group in America?” Just over half of respondents said they did, with a telling gap between the generations: Latinos were considered a distinct racial group by a minority (42 percent) of those born outside the United States but by a large majority (74 percent) of those born in the United States. The book’s authors see this as evidence that Latinos are indeed

becoming “racialized” as they integrate into American society.

Still, other evidence underlines just how unsettled the issue of racial identity remains among Hispanics in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau uses the vague term “origins,” rather than “race,” to describe “Latino” and “Hispanic,” and in 2010, when the census asked those with Latino or Hispanic “origins” to name their race, just over half chose white alone. In interviews I have conducted as a reporter during the past three decades, as well as in casual conversations, Latinos have sometimes told me that they indicate “white” when given this choice because, regardless of the census’ attempts at nuance, they are primarily mindful of the black-white racial binary in American culture—and they don’t consider themselves black.

But in a fascinating, if somewhat dispiriting, analysis, *Latinos in the New Millennium* reveals that the “racialization” of Latinos has as much to do with how Latinos believe they are perceived as it does with how they see themselves. A “substantial percentage of Latinos perceive discrimination,” the authors report, “and one response to this perception of being singled out because of their accent, skin color, immigrant origin or ethnic background is a strengthening of ethnic attachment and a sense that Latinos are a distinct racial group. Thus, the paradox is that even as Latinos Americanize, they may increasingly see themselves as part of a distinct ethnic or racial group.”

In this way, *Latinos in the New Millennium* offers an elegant distillation of the Latino predicament. In data set after data set, the book demonstrates how tens of millions of Latinos have integrated into U.S. society. With each successive

generation, dwindling numbers of Latinos report an intention to return to Central or South America or the Caribbean. More and more Latinos apply the term “family” only to people who live mostly or entirely in the United States. And Latinos are consuming more media in English, attending high school and college at higher rates, marrying members of other groups more frequently, participating in civic life and politics, starting businesses, remitting less and less money back “home” over time, and generally embracing the American ethos of hard work, self-reliance, and a reluctance to blame failure on prevailing social conditions. Yet a tendency in the rest of the society to “racialize” Latinos, and their own tendency to pay very close attention to social hostility, seems to place a clear limit on the degree to which Latinos will be absorbed into the majority.

DEFYING LABELS

This apartness of Latinos might also be reinforced by the way in which they are treated by both major political parties as a somewhat monolithic (and slightly exotic) voting bloc, even though it is difficult to distinguish a consistent set of “Latino” political values. When pollsters with the LNS asked Latinos to name the biggest problem facing the United States in 2006, the three most common specific answers were the war in Iraq (31.5 percent), the economy (13.6 percent), and illegal immigration (11.4 percent). But when the same respondents were asked about the most important problems facing Latinos in particular, the most common specific answers were illegal immigration (29.8 percent), unemployment/jobs (12.1 percent), and education

(9.1 percent). Latinos looked at the country and saw one set of concerns, then looked at themselves and saw an entirely different one.

In the spring of 2006, the year the LNS was conducted, immigration was reignited as a contentious political issue after Congress failed to pass a bipartisan comprehensive reform bill. Tens of thousands of Latino workers took to the streets in May Day marches, and many non-Latino Americans howled at the sight of Mexican and other national flags being carried by the marchers through the streets of major cities. So it is not surprising that immigration weighed heavily on the minds of respondents to the LNS. But it is notable that they seemed to use the term “illegal immigration” when describing the problem, rather than “immigration reform” or just “immigration.” The LNS did not ask respondents to explain what they meant when they said something was a problem. But it is reasonable to speculate that many respondents meant not that there were too many illegal immigrants but rather that too many immigrants were deemed “illegal.”

Experts estimate that some 9.5 million people in the United States, including millions of Latinos, live in so-called mixed-status families, in which some members of a household have citizenship or legal status and others do not. These families know firsthand how slowly the immigration system can work for those trying to achieve legal residency. Those frustrations are possibly what LNS respondents were referring to when they described illegal immigration as a problem. Indeed, the LNS found that even large numbers of Cubans (who enjoy virtually automatic

legal status if they make it to the United States) and Puerto Ricans (who are American citizens from birth) are sympathetic to the plight of illegal immigrants, although not by the same large margins seen among Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Central Americans. The survey also showed that among all Latino subgroups, comfortable majorities support the creation of a path to citizenship and easier access to legal residence for those in the country illegally.

These views are in stark contrast to the rhetoric on immigration that the 2012 political season has produced, particularly during the Republican presidential primary campaign, when each GOP candidate sought to appear more hard-line on immigration than the next: Rick Santorum suggested that immigrant families should be split up in order to deport any members in the country illegally, Michele Bachmann called for the deportation of all illegal immigrants, and Mitt Romney advocated policies that would make life so unpleasant for illegal immigrants that they would choose to “self-deport.”

Some Republican strategists worry about the electoral consequences of such positions. “Republicans have done a mystifying job of either ignoring or offending Hispanic voters,” said Mark McKinnon, a political strategist who worked for President George W. Bush, in a recent interview with Bloomberg News. “And the consequences for the general election are likely to be significant and perhaps determinative to the outcome.”

PROGRESSIVE OR CONSERVATIVE?

But the GOP’s problems with Latinos might be far more deeply seated and might go beyond disagreements over a single issue.

Long before Ronald Reagan delivered his famous quip—“Latinos are Republican; they just don’t know it yet”—the GOP dreamed of hitching entrepreneurial, churchgoing, socially conservative Latinos to the party for the long term.

This dream has yet to be realized. The LNS showed that two out of three Latinos nationwide either identified or strongly identified with the Democratic Party. When asked about specific issues, such as government support for low-wage workers, government-backed access to health care, the provision of in-state college tuition to illegal immigrants, and creating paths to legal status for illegal immigrants, large majorities of Latinos across all income ranges, educational levels, and national origins chose policies that more closely resemble the positions of the national Democratic Party than those of the GOP.

It should come as no surprise that Latinos, who are disproportionately dependent on government services, are skeptical of a political party devoted to shrinking the role of government. Only a tiny minority of Latino students attend private schools, for example, so the funding and effectiveness of public education are crucial to their ability to climb into the middle class and stay there. Similarly, Latinos’ high degree of work-force participation—among the highest of all Americans—has not translated into reliable access to health care, and Latinos are the least insured group in the country. Correctly or not, they perceive government intervention as an answer to a health-care system that has not provided for their needs even when they work full time.

It now seems that Reagan was wrong: Latinos are not Republicans, and they do know it. That does not mean, however,

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that Latinos are liberals. When it comes to social issues, such as gay marriage and abortion, most Latinos still hold conservative views that are more in tune with those supported by the Republican Party.

Religiosity certainly plays a role in shaping those values. More than 70 percent of LNS respondents identified as Catholic, and the survey found that Latinos are relatively devout, with more than half of respondents attending church at least once a week. And although the proportion of Latinos who are Catholic is declining, the Protestant churches to which many Latinos are now flocking—often seeking a more expressive form of worship—are just as disapproving of abortion, divorce, and homosexuality as mainstream Catholicism.

Still, Latinos' traditionalism on moral issues might not indicate a more far-reaching embrace of social conservatism. Although popular culture stereotypes Latino men as macho brutes and Latino women as submissive caregivers, the LNS showed that Latinos hold relatively egalitarian views on gender. Firm majorities of Latinos, across most national groups and socioeconomic levels, supported women's access to birth control, agreed with the concept of "equal pay for equal work," and approved of men and women sharing child-rearing responsibilities.

It may well be that the daily realities of life in the United States have tempered the patriarchal elements of home-country cultures, a process that might ultimately affect Latino views on social or moral issues, such as abortion. On that issue, Latinos have something in common with African Americans: both groups tend to associate with churches that condemn abortion, and yet, according to the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, black women and, to a lesser degree, Latino women make up a disproportionate share of those who have abortions. In minority communities with high levels of family dissolution, high rates of unemployment among already low-income male breadwinners, and high numbers of households headed by single women, the issue of abortion has a palpable economic dimension that is rarely reflected by the rather abstract national political debate over reproductive rights. That might explain why African Americans and Latinos tend to support politicians who are pro-choice, even though the dominant black and Hispanic religious groups disapprove of abortion. Republicans hoping to appeal to the presumed religious conservatism of Hispanics might find this complexity a difficult obstacle to overcome.

¿SÍ, SE PUEDE?

Latinos in the New Millennium closes its thorough survey of Latino attitudes and aspirations with a sobering look at Latinos' views on education. Stereotypes suggest that Latinos do not care deeply about English acquisition or educational achievement. The LNS suggests both those ideas are wrong. Latinos strongly believe that education will provide a reliable route to a better life for their children.

Survey respondents were asked, "How far would you like to see your children go in school?" Across the board, large majorities declared college was a goal. In response to the question "How far do you think your child will actually go in school?" virtually all Latinos said they believed their children would finish high school, and sizable majorities believed their children would finish college. And

Latin Lessons

a surprisingly high number of Latinos believed their children would attend graduate school.

Yet those beliefs are completely out of sync with the reality of Latino students' generally poor performance in the nation's school systems. Among Latinos, as the authors put it, there is "an apparent—yet difficult to explain—disjunction. On the one hand there are high aspirations, high expectations, high levels of school engagement, and favorable ratings of schools; on the other hand there is the reality that Latino students have low rates of high school completion, college attendance, and especially graduation from college."

The book's expert authors offer no compelling explanations for this disjunction, only conceding that it deserves further study. I suspect that it might be related to a paradoxical view of the power of government that, in my reporting on Latino communities, I have found is prevalent among working-class Hispanics and more recent immigrants. Such Latinos generally do not expect a just or equitable provision of public services. At the same time, they tend to be tremendously deferential to some public and civic institutions that carry authority, such as schools and churches.

In other words, Latinos who are willing to be critical of, say, police officers or sanitation workers are often not as quick to hold educators responsible for their shortcomings. Community organizers in Chicago and New York learned this the hard way during the long struggles for school reform in those cities, when organizers found it difficult to persuade Latino communities to exert pressure on local schools and educational authorities. Latino communities' uneasy combination

of cynicism and deference when it comes to public services might be keeping them from securing the resources they need to provide their children with the educational opportunities they clearly value.

Whatever the reasons for it, academic underachievement among Latinos is a challenge that is far more important than any effort to understand Latinos for short-term political gain. That is because of the degree to which the United States' success in the coming half century will depend on Latino success. In a few decades, the U.S. economy will increasingly rest on the shoulders of a largely nonwhite, heavily Latino work force providing services and care to millions of mostly white retirees. As Latinos become a larger part of the American whole, quietly consigning them to failure and isolation is hardly a recipe for national prosperity and stability. Whether they realize it or not, all Americans are now deeply invested in the successful integration of Latinos. Their own future affluence and well-being might well depend on it. 🌐