



# Latino Public Opinion & Realigning the American Electorate

Gary M. Segura

*Abstract: The growth and significance of the Latino electorate raises important questions about its preferences, identity, and impact. In this essay, I explore three facets of Latino public opinion and offer thoughts regarding their political impact. First, I demonstrate that Latino core beliefs about the role of government are progressive. Second, I explore the ways in which national origin, nativity, and generational status reveal important differences in how Latinos think about and participate in politics; I caution against over-interpreting the importance of these differences. Finally, I offer evidence that Latino pan-ethnic identity is sufficiently developed to constitute a political “group.” Given that this segment in the American electorate is increasingly unified and demonstrably left of center, I suggest that the growth of the Latino population and electorate could have substantial electoral and social impact.*



GARY M. SEGURA, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2010, is Professor of Political Science at Stanford University, where he is also Director of Chicana/o Studies in the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. He is a principal in the polling firm Latino Decisions and a principal investigator for the 2012 American National Election Studies. His publications include *Latino Lives in America: Making It Home* (2010), *“The Future is Ours”: Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multi-racial Era of American Politics* (with Shaun Bowler, 2011), and *Latinos in the New Millennium: An Almanac of Opinion, Behavior, and Policy Preferences* (with Luis Fraga et al., 2012).

The share of Latinos in the U.S. population has grown rapidly in the last decade, a phenomenon that is now widely recognized in academic and political circles. Just over 12 percent of the U.S. population in 2000, Latinos accounted for 16.3 percent in the 2010 Census – a 33 percent increase in ten years. A majority of that growth comes from native births rather than immigration. According to Census Bureau projections, Latinos will make up a third of the national population by 2050.

The Latino share of the electorate has considerably lagged the population share. Nevertheless, it has grown substantially. In 2008, Latinos were an estimated 9 percent of the national electorate, up considerably from 5.4 percent in 2000 and dramatically from 3.7 percent in 1992, when Bill Clinton was elected president.<sup>1</sup> Disadvantages in education and income are generally associated with lower rates of voter registration and turnout, but even here, Latinos have been closing the gap largely by overperforming their socioeconomic status. Controlling



for income and education, reported voter participation by Latinos trails that of non-Hispanic whites by a mere 4 percent.<sup>2</sup>

The remainder of the lag can be attributed to two factors, both of which will become less significant with time. First, Latinos in the United States are a very young population; among those who are citizens, only 57.7 percent are over the age of eighteen (compared with 79.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites) according to the 2010 American Community Survey. Second, non-citizens make up around 40 percent of the adult Latino population. While many of them are undocumented residents whose future in the country is uncertain at best, in time, these non-citizens will be replaced in the population with their U.S.-born offspring.

As a consequence, what Latinos think about government and politics matters a great deal to the future direction of the country. The growth of the Latino electorate has significantly reshaped politics in the Southwest and California and is beginning to do so in other states such as Texas, Florida, and even Georgia and North Carolina. As population increase and electoral growth continue, the impact that Latino public opinion has on the national conversation – and on political outcomes in particular – will only increase.

In this essay, I examine three facets of Latino public opinion that deserve closer scrutiny. First, focusing on the general orientation, or “ideology,” of Latino voters, I suggest that Latino core beliefs about the role of government are progressive or liberal. Second, I examine diversity among Latinos and its effects, both potential and realized, on public opinion and political behavior. The role of national origin, nativity, and generational status reveals important differences in how Latinos think about and participate in politics. Third, the diversity of the Latino population raises the question of whether we can

meaningfully consider Latinos a “group” for the purpose of evaluating America’s political future. I argue that Latino identity is sufficiently developed to constitute a political category and show that the evidence for strong and politically meaningful pan-ethnic identification is present and growing.

The summary effect of these three observations is clear. The most rapidly growing segment in the American electorate is increasingly unified and demonstrably left of center. If these realities remain steady and relatively unchanged, the growth of the Latino population and electorate could have substantial electoral and social impact.

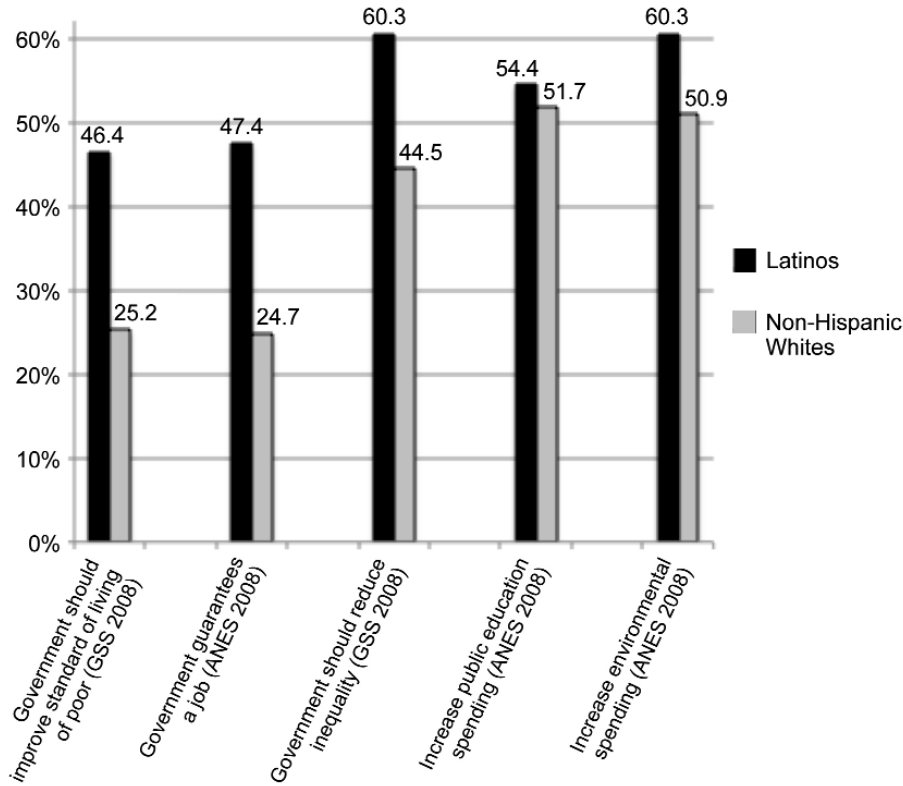
For most of the last thirty years, Latinos have given a preponderance of their votes to Democrats at both the state and national level, with the exception of South Florida Cubans. The Democratic ticket has taken between 65 and 70 percent of the two-party vote in national elections since the 1980s, with the notable exception of 2004, when George W. Bush secured approximately 40 percent of the vote in his quest for reelection.<sup>3</sup> For some time, GOP strategists have expressed frustration with this state of affairs, largely – so the story goes – because they believe that a church-going and entrepreneurial group should naturally be Republican. Ronald Reagan best expressed this sentiment when he reportedly told GOP Latino pollster Lionel Sosa, “Hispanics are Republicans, they just don’t know it yet.”

How much evidence is there to support this contention? The answer is: somewhere between little and none. Latinos are significantly to the left of non-Hispanic whites on virtually every issue of public policy. With regard to issues that are minority- or race-specific, such as immigration and affirmative action, this is hardly surprising. Latinos are significantly more



Figure 1  
Selected Policy Liberalism of Latinos and Non-Hispanic Whites, 2008

Gary M.  
Segura



Bars represent the total share of respondents holding “liberal,” or left of midpoint, views on each issue. Source: Figure created by author using data from the American National Election Study (ANES), 2008; and the General Social Survey (GSS), 2008.

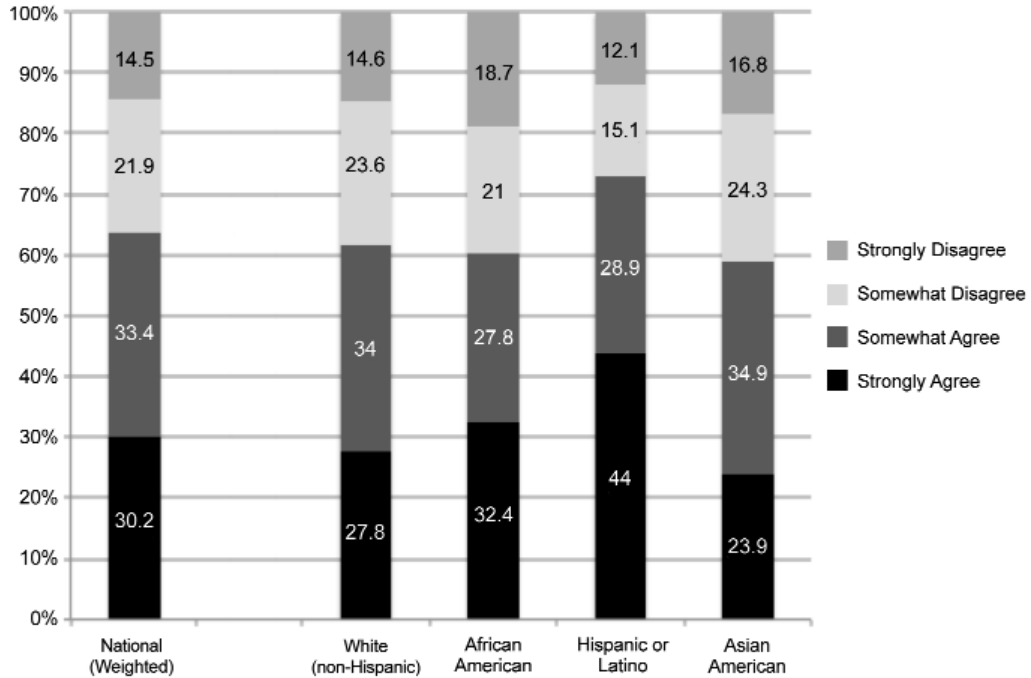
pro-immigrant, more supportive of affirmative action, and less enthusiastic about the death penalty than non-Hispanic whites. But as Donald Kinder and Nicholas Winter first noted, this liberalism extends to issues of redistributive policy.<sup>4</sup> And as Shaun Bowler and I report in our recent book, even issues without implicit racial content reveal a systematic liberal shift among Latinos.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 illustrates that in terms of government guarantees on standards of living, education, and the environment, Latinos are more liberal than their non-Hispanic white fellow citizens.

Even on matters of relative consensus (education), the difference between groups is meaningful.

But policy preferences are not the same as an overall approach to government. That is, the fact that Latinos are more liberal than whites on specific issues does not necessarily mean that they are philosophically pro-government. The high frequency of entrepreneurial activity among Latinos and a stereotypic perception of their strong work ethic have allowed conservatives to argue on behalf of Latinos’ “natural,” albeit unrealized, Republican-



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 Figure 2  
 Views on whether Minorities Should Be Self-Reliant



Respondents answered the following question: “If racial and ethnic minorities don’t do well in life they have no one to blame but themselves. Do you . . . strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?” Source: Figure created by author using data from the National Politics Study, 2004; figure adapted from Shaun Bowler and Gary M. Segura, *“The Future is Ours”: Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multiracial Era of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2011).

ism. In fact, significant evidence suggests that, consistent with conservatives’ claims, Latinos embrace the core individualist norm of self-reliance.

Figure 2 shows an across-group comparison on a key indicator of self-reliance: specifically, the question, “If racial and ethnic minorities don’t do well in life they have no one to blame but themselves. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?” Latinos hold the most “conservative” position on this question of any major racial or ethnic group. That is, a significantly higher percentage of Latinos somewhat agree or strongly agree with the stated

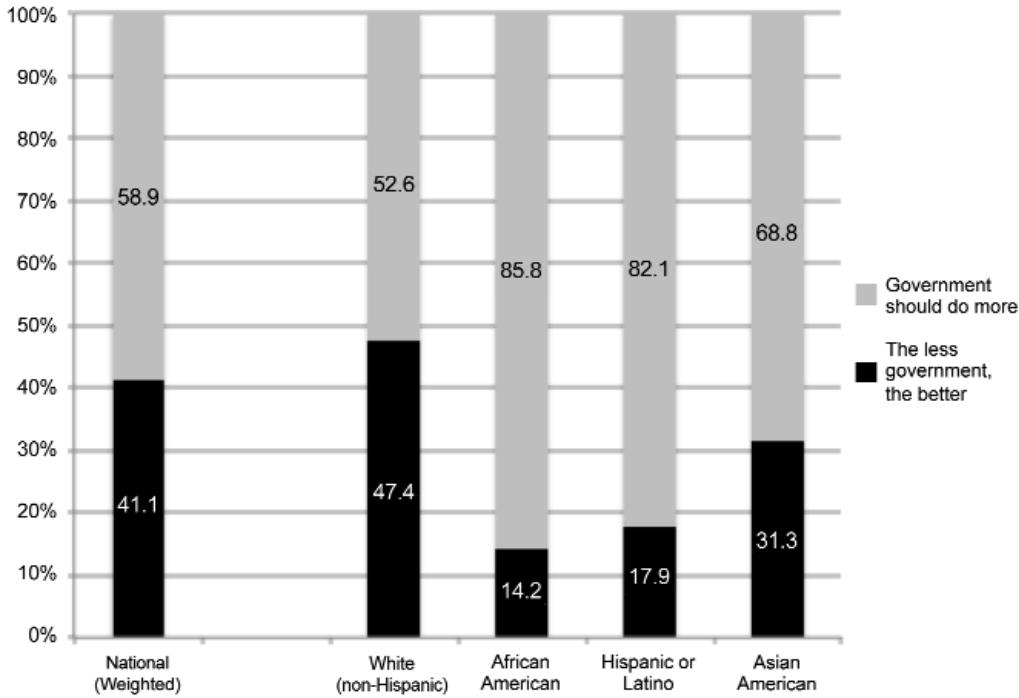
contention than any other group, including non-Hispanic whites. Certainly, this enthusiasm for a norm of self-reliance casts doubt on the underlying liberalism of Latino citizens.

Adherence to norms of self-reliance is generally associated with more conservative views on the role of government, which would seem to invite an accompanying preference among Latinos for limited government. Such an inclination would undermine the claim of Latino liberalism. However, the evidence does not support this conclusion. In fact, though a significant majority of Latinos express support for self-reliance, supermajorities of Lati-



Figure 3  
Views on Government Action to Solve Problems, by Race and Ethnicity

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Respondents answered the following question: “Which of two statements comes closer to your own opinion: ONE, the less government, the better; OR TWO, there are more things that government should be doing?”  
Source: Figure created by author using data from the American National Election Study, 2008; figure adapted from Shaun Bowler and Gary M. Segura, *“The Future is Ours”: Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multiracial Era of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2011).

nos also reliably embrace a greater role for government.

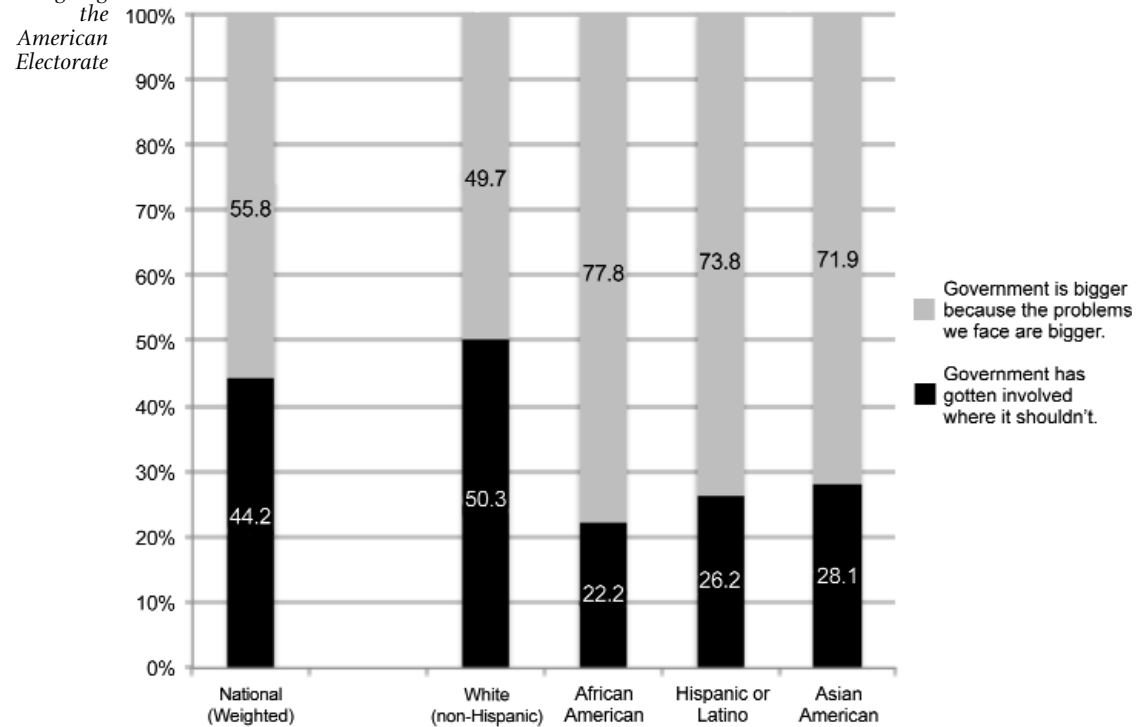
Figures 3 through 5 show Latino citizens’ responses to three questions designed to capture core feelings about the role of government, distinct from any particular policy area. Figure 3 reports group distributions on the following question: “Which of two statements comes closer to your own opinion: ONE, the less government, the better; OR TWO, there are more things that government should be doing?” This question juxtaposes the core contention of movement conservatism – that government is better when it is smaller – with a

desire for government to do more, not less. The stark choice is revelatory. More than 82 percent of Latino respondents would like government to do more, an almost 30-point difference compared with non-Hispanic whites. African Americans are only slightly more liberal.

Figure 4 compares responses across groups to the following question: “Which of two statements comes closer to your own opinion: ONE, the main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves; OR TWO, government has become bigger



Figure 4  
Public Attitudes on Government Growth, by Race and Ethnicity



Respondents answered the following question: “Which of two statements comes closer to your own opinion: ONE, the main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves; OR TWO, government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger?” Source: Figure created by author using data from the American National Election Study, 2008; figure adapted from Shaun Bowler and Gary M. Segura, *“The Future is Ours”: Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multiracial Era of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2011).

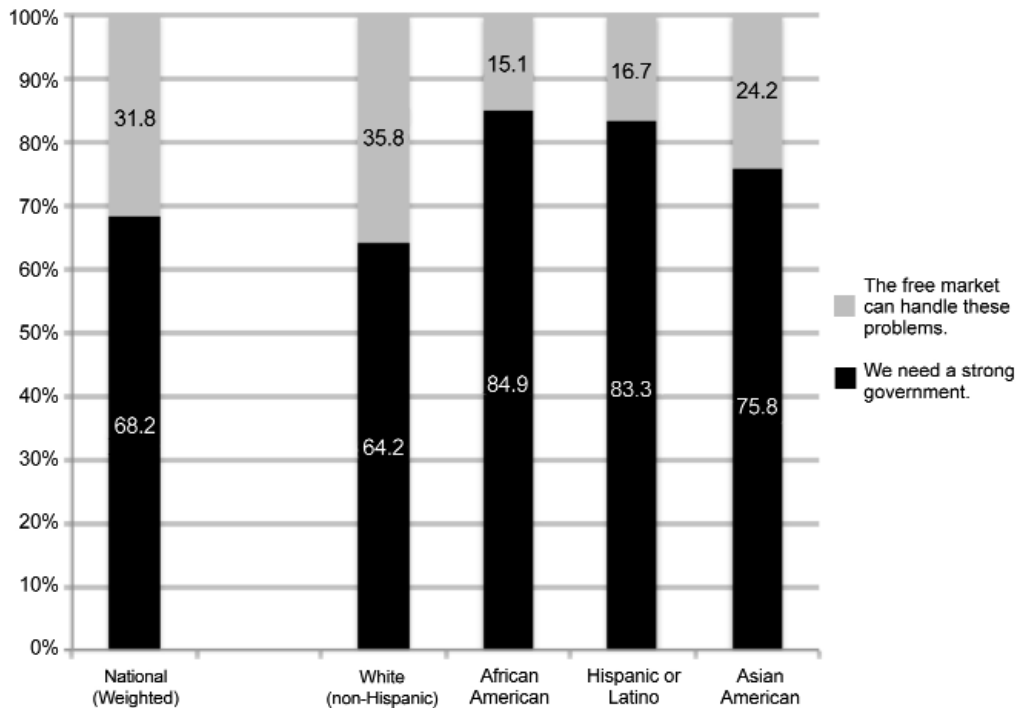
because the problems we face have become bigger?” As above, the question offers a choice between dichotomous sentiments regarding the growth of government, thereby tapping a core element of ideology. Here, once again, Latinos are significantly more liberal than non-Hispanic whites, more than half of whom believe that government has become involved in matters of personal responsibility. Almost 74 percent of Latinos believe that government growth has been justified by the scope or size of the problems we expect it to address.

Finally, Figure 5 shows citizen enthusiasm for the most frequently identified alternative to government action: namely, the free market. Specifically, respondents were asked: “Which of two statements comes closer to your own opinion: ONE, we need a strong government to handle today’s complex economic problems; OR TWO, the free market can handle these problems without government being involved?” This dichotomy again captures ideology in terms resonant with the public debate. And once again, Latinos are significantly to the left of non-Hispanic



Figure 5  
Preferences for Free Market vs. Government Solutions, by Race and Ethnicity

Gary M.  
Segura



Respondents answered the following question: “Which of two statements comes closer to your own opinion: ONE, we need a strong government to handle today’s complex economic problems; OR TWO, the free market can handle these problems without government being involved?” Source: Figure created by author using data from the American National Election Study, 2008; figure adapted from Shaun Bowler and Gary M. Segura, *“The Future is Ours”: Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multiracial Era of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2011).

whites. Less than 17 percent of Latinos see the free market as the preferred instrument of social change, whereas more than twice that share of non-Hispanic whites prefer the free market. However, it is worth noting that even among whites, the free market loses out to government action by almost two to one.

Among Latino citizens, there is general enthusiasm for an active, growing, and problem-solving government, and little enthusiasm for the alternative as described by the right: a shrinkage of government and reliance on the free market to solve

problems. Despite their embrace of a norm of self-reliance – a clear belief that individuals are for the most part responsible for their own outcomes – Latinos’ underlying ideology appears to be solidly progressive. This finding is directly reflected in their policy preferences, which, uniformly, are to the left of views held by non-Hispanic whites.

The oft-identified “exception” to this policy liberalism, one noted by pundit and politician alike, are “social” issues: specifically, abortion and gay rights. Even here, there is more to the story than meets



the eye. For one, Latinos are not significantly more conservative on gay rights than their non-Hispanic fellow citizens. In November 2011, a Univision News-Latino Decisions poll found that a plurality of all Latino registered voters – 43 percent – favored same-sex marriage equality, and another 17 percent favored civil union recognition. Less than a quarter of respondents opposed government recognition of same-sex relationships. Indeed, on the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES), Latino support for marriage equality (43.2 percent) exceeded that of non-Hispanic whites (39.6 percent); support for adoption rights (53.3 percent) was marginally higher than among non-Hispanic whites (52.5 percent); and support for nondiscrimination protection (71.3 percent), while slightly lower than that of whites (75.5 percent), was still espoused by a supermajority. None of these findings suggest that opinions on gay and lesbian rights deviate significantly from Latinos' overall liberalism; nor do they imply an opportunity for Republican outreach.

This brings us to the issue of abortion. In fairness, every measure of opinion on reproductive choice does suggest that Latinos are more conservative on this issue than non-Hispanic whites. However, the difference is less significant than generally assumed. In the 2008 ANES, 39.5 percent of non-Hispanic whites favored broad abortion rights; the comparable number among Latinos was 33.1 percent. Similarly, while 46.6 percent of whites supported choice in the instances of rape or incest, or when the life of the mother is in danger, the comparable figure for Latinos was 44 percent. In short, while Latinos appear to be marginally more conservative than whites on the issue of reproductive choice, the difference hardly seems sizable.

Perhaps most damning to the claim that social conservatism is a bridge from Latinos to a more conservative or Republican

identity is the persistent disinterest in these issues from Latino registered voters themselves. Polls of Latino voters that ask respondents to identify the issues most important to them generally find that voters do not pay much attention to the matters of gay rights and abortion. With supermajorities of Latinos voting Democratic despite somewhat conservative views on abortion, this result is hardly surprising.

Although Latinos are generally left of center on policy matters – and in their core beliefs about government – intragroup variation could temper expectations about their ability to drive political change. The Latino population of the United States is diverse on several important dimensions. These distinctions complicate analysis of Latino public opinion, but their effect – that is, the degree to which they yield meaningful differences in views or behavior – varies considerably. Here, I focus on three demographic characteristics that are important to understanding Latino opinion and behavior: national origin, nativity (including differences by age), and generation in the United States.

*National Origin.* Among the myriad complications of examining Latino public opinion and political participation is the definitional question of who, exactly, is a Latino. As foolish as this might sound, the issue of identity has considerable social and methodological implications. For one, Latinos are descended from nineteen Latin American nations (including the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico) from which Latino residents of the United States might have migrated or descended. Second, while the ethnic histories of the Iberian Peninsula and Southern Europe are complex enough, the varied racial histories of Latin America add another layer of complexity. Each Latin American nation reflects a mixture of indigenous,





European, and African ancestral origins in permutations and combinations that make Latino identity racially complex.<sup>6</sup> In the 2006 Latino National Survey, 51.2 percent of the 8,634 respondents believed that Latinos constituted a distinct racial category, but the reality of that claim varies across national origins. Mexicans, many Central Americans, Peruvians, and Bolivians are of mestizo and indigenous ancestries; Colombian, Venezuelan, and Caribbean national origins more clearly reflect the African diaspora in the Western hemisphere; and individuals from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay better represent Spanish (and other European) colonization. Yet despite these differences, in the context of American politics all are considered Latino or Hispanic. Research suggests that this racial complexity has an effect in the American political environment.<sup>7</sup>

That said, we should not overstate the diversity of national origins in the Latino population. More than 65 percent of all Latinos are Mexican or Mexican American, and another 9.1 percent are Puerto Rican. Salvadorans make up 3.6 percent; Cubans, 3.5 percent; and Dominicans, 2.8 percent.<sup>8</sup> Almost 86 percent of the Latino population is from those five national origin groups. Guatemalans (2.2 percent) and Colombians (1.9 percent) are by far the largest of the remaining groups. While more than a dozen other Latin American nations are represented in the U.S. populace, the population shares of those national-origin groups are tiny. Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and to a lesser extent Puerto Ricans, dominate the conversation.

Though these national-origin groups have distinct cultural characteristics and racial histories, the Spanish language, Roman Catholicism, and decades of increasingly integrated entertainment and media cultures have served to knit the distinct communities more closely together.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, several national-origin-specific characteristics can, and do, shape public opinion and political participation.

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The most politically distinct group is made up of Cuban Americans in South Florida, many of whom are refugees (or offspring of refugees) of the Cuban revolution. Stereotypically Republican, Cubans have been influenced by the unique circumstances of their arrival in the 1960s; by the privileged legal immigration regime that they and no other Latino immigrants enjoy; and by their economic circumstances relative to other Latinos. Many who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s came with some resources and received considerable assistance from the United States. Their Republicanism is rooted in both these resource differences and their experience of the Cold War. Moreover, under the 1995 revisions of the Cuban Adjustment Act, Cuban migrants who reach U.S. soil are afforded nearly automatic asylum and legal status, removing immigration status as a barrier to growth and political incorporation.

Cuban distinctiveness appears to be eroding, however. Younger Cubans, several generations removed from the Castro experience, and those descended from the wave of arrivals associated with the Mariel Boatlift in 1980 (“Marielitos,” who came with fewer resources and face some within-group bias from the longer-established population) are far less likely to be Republican. Their opinions and political characteristics more closely reflect those of other U.S. Latinos.

The Puerto Rican experience is also unique. Because Puerto Rico is part of the United States, Puerto Ricans, including those born on the island, are U.S. citizens from birth – a provision of the Jones Act of 1917. Citizenship, along with the fact that migration to and from the island is without legal consequence, highlights two key distinctions between Puerto Ricans and other



Latinos: namely, that immigration is not an immediate issue, and that access to the political process is straightforward.

Nevertheless, and for reasons that remain underexplored, political participation among mainland Puerto Ricans lags considerably behind other Latino national-origin groups and, more curiously, behind the performance of voters on the island. As Louis DeSipio noted in 2006, “Despite these relatively equal opportunities to participate politically in the United States or in Puerto Rico, turnout in Puerto Rican Elections is approximately twice as high as Puerto Rican participation in mainland elections.”<sup>10</sup> DeSipio attributes this difference to electoral institutions and the absence of meaningful party mobilization on the mainland; and to different dimensions of contestation on the island. The effect is significant: Puerto Rican turnout hovers around 40 percent on the mainland but is more than twice that on the island. The under-mobilization of Puerto Ricans remains a missed opportunity in terms of Latino impact on the U.S. political system.

*Nativity and Generation.* Approximately 40 percent of all Latinos are foreign born. This number, however, understates the role of nativity in Latino political life. About 34 percent of the Latino population is under the age of eighteen; 93 percent of those young people are U.S. citizens, with just 1 percent naturalized and 92 percent native born. By contrast, 52 percent of adults are foreign born, less than a third of whom (31 percent of the total) have naturalized to U.S. citizenship.<sup>11</sup> These totals indicate two important facts about the Latino population: only 64 percent of adults are citizens of the United States; and naturalized citizens make up just 25 percent of the total. An additional share are island-born Puerto Ricans who, while not naturalized citizens of the United States, have still experienced the economic, social, and linguistic challenges of migration.

While these percentages vary significantly by state, place of birth can shape attitudes and engagement in American politics in three important ways. First, the path to migration and citizenship is a profound self-selection process. Those who migrate are arguably different from their countrymen who do not, and moving from immigrant status to citizenship is an even more strenuous selection process. In the past, the naturalization process was primarily driven by life events – marriage, childbirth, and the like – and naturalized immigrants voted less often than native citizens.<sup>12</sup> More recently, however, considerable evidence has shown that naturalization may occur as a consequence of political events, particularly rhetoric, initiatives, and legislation that target immigrants. Among the consequences of a politically driven naturalization may well be a higher propensity to turn out for elections.<sup>13</sup>

Second, foreign-born citizens may hold beliefs and expectations about politics that are rooted in home-country experience. Sergio Wals has demonstrated that variations in nation of birth can shape turnout propensity, as experience with democracy (or lack thereof) may affect both expectations from and orientations toward the U.S. political system.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, for immigrants who arrive after school age, foreign birth implies adult socialization to the U.S. political system. Melissa Michelson has observed a curious process of adverse socialization, whereby foreign-born citizens have a more favorable view of U.S. politics than those of later generations, a finding confirmed elsewhere with regard to efficacy.<sup>15</sup> Foreign-born citizens are more likely to identify as independents than as partisans<sup>16</sup> and less likely to see commonality with African Americans. The takeaway is that the process of “becoming” American carries with it a growing familiarity with U.S. political coalitions, an increasing aware-



ness of racial hierarchies in American society, and decreasing satisfaction with American institutions and processes.

The passage of generations, in theory, has the potential to erode the political distinctiveness of Latino citizens across national-origin groups and between Latinos and non-Latinos. As data from the Latino National Survey reveal (see Table 1), Latinos in later generations are significantly more likely to out-marry (with declining frequency of Hispanic surnames) and to experience substantial economic and educational mobility; they are less likely to retain their Catholic identity and significantly less likely to speak Spanish.

It is certainly the case that in later generations, assimilation and acculturation produce changes in political behavior. These changes can vary in form and function over time. For example, while self-reported electoral participation increases monotonically over generations, participation in ethnically based political activities – including protests, rallies, and organizations – increases through the first two generations but decreases thereafter.<sup>17</sup>

*The Effects of In-Group Variation.* We should take care not to over-interpret the political effects of within-group diversification. There are at least as many similarities as differences among national-origin groups, generations, and nativities. For example, a commitment to the Spanish language and the retention of Latino cultural practices are widely shared across cohorts. Community and identity are enormously unifying factors.

A critical dynamic in this process is the ongoing debate over immigration and policy toward undocumented immigrants. It has become increasingly clear that perceived attacks on the community have a substantial ability to unify political views, notwithstanding nativity and generation. A perfect example is the Latino community's reaction to the passage of SB 1070 in

Arizona, the “papers please” law designed to allow local police to identify undocumented aliens during virtually any contact with the public. According to polling data gathered just a week after the bill was signed into law, opposition among Latino registered voters transcended generational boundaries. As Figure 6 illustrates, supermajorities of all generations opposed the law. Two facts about the figure are especially revealing. First, all respondents in the poll are citizen registered voters – that is, the most secure and incorporated Latino members of society. Second, the fourth generation (last column) is limited to individuals whose *grandparents* were U.S.-born and thus who have an established history as part of American society. The breadth of opposition across generations is informative.

How are the citizens in the poll interpreting this law, which ostensibly is aimed at undocumented immigrants? Their consensus is likely a result of the widespread expectation that enforcement would involve racial profiling and therefore would conceivably threaten all Latinos, a belief that again transcended generation (see Figure 7). These 2010 findings from Arizona are deeply reminiscent of the political effects of Proposition 187 in California and other anti-Latino or anti-immigrant actions, which appear to have had large-scale and significant political effects on Latinos across generations.<sup>18</sup> Issues that cut to the heart of ethnic identity are particularly likely to transcend differences in nativity, generation, or national-origin group.

Though I have presented evidence of substantial similarity across what is in many ways a diverse population, the above discussion is still a step shy of establishing a sense of group identity: that is, an awareness of commonality that could serve as a mobilizing factor and facilitate political

Gary M.  
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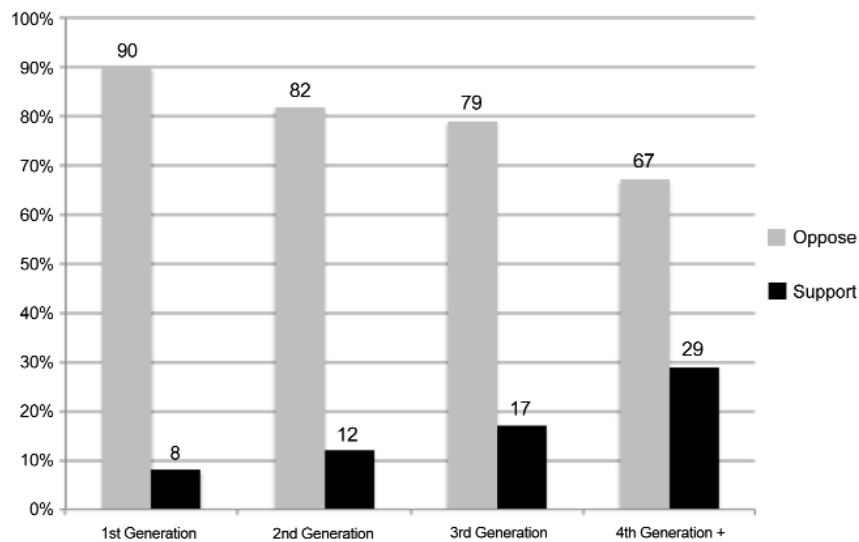


*Latino Public Opinion & Realigning the American Electorate*  
**Table 1**  
 Selected Markers of Assimilation and Acculturation by Generation, 2006

Generation	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Roman Catholic	73.8%	69.7%	66.8%	58.1%
Social Capital (Group Participation)	14.1	25.0	29.4	33.4
Military Service, Self or Family	16.1	48.9	68.6	72.3
Education < High School	49.7	22.9	17.6	16.2
Household Income < \$35K	53.4	34.9	29.2	33.4
Percent Marrying Non-Latinos	13.3	32.2	42.6	53.3
English Proficiency	38.3*	93.2	98.6	99.0
Spanish Proficiency	99.2	91.6	68.7	60.5

\*Includes non-citizens. Source: Table created by author using data from the Latino National Survey, 2006.

**Figure 6**  
 Support and Opposition to SB 1070 among Arizona Latino Registered Voters, May 2010



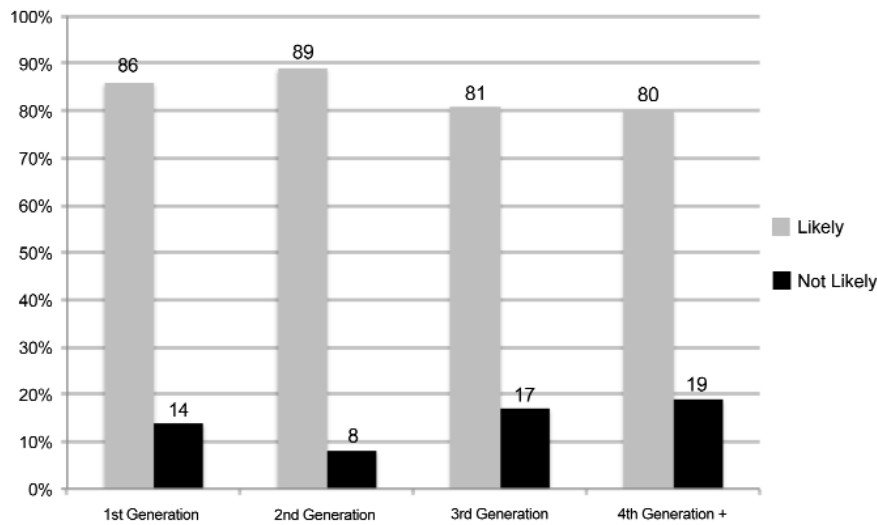
Respondents answered the following question: "Arizona has passed a law that will require state and local police to determine the immigration status of a person if there is a reasonable suspicion he or she is an illegal immigrant, and would charge anyone with trespassing who is not carrying proof of legal status when questioned by the police, and also prohibit immigrants from working as day laborers. From what you have heard, do you [rotate: support or oppose] the new immigration law in Arizona?" Source: Figure created by author using data from National Council of La Raza/Service Employees International Union/Latino Decisions Arizona Poll, April – May 2010.



Figure 7

Estimation of the Likelihood that Non-Immigrants Will Be Caught Up in Enforcement of SB 1070, as Expressed by Arizona Latino Registered Voters, May 2010

Gary M.  
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Respondents answered the following question: "How likely do you think it is that Latinos who are legal immigrants or U.S. citizens will get stopped or questioned by the police? Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all?" Source: Figure created by author using data from National Council of La Raza/Service Employees International Union/Latino Decisions Arizona Poll, April – May 2010.

coherence and collective action. The cross-generation reaction to anti-immigrant political developments suggests at least the possibility that this superordinate identity exists.

Do Latinos (or Hispanics) see themselves as a "group"? In other words, do persons of Latin American ancestry from different national-origin groups constitute a politically significant pan-ethnic identity? When the Latino National Political Survey was completed in 1989, there was little evidence for the claim that Latinos were a group in any meaningful sense.<sup>19</sup> The vast majority of those respondents understood themselves in terms of national identities.<sup>20</sup>

However, a mountain of evidence now suggests that this social reality has changed. The Latino National Survey completed in 2006 found very high levels

of identification with pan-ethnic terminology, with at least 87.6 percent of respondents saying that they thought of themselves in these terms "somewhat strongly" or "very strongly." Moreover, when asked to choose between national-origin identifiers, the pan-ethnic term, or merely "American" (an arbitrary, forced choice that only an academic could devise), more than a third of them chose the pan-ethnic identifier (38.3 percent). My colleagues in the Latino National Survey and I have argued that this forced choice is artificial, that identities are multiple and simultaneous.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the change between 1989 and 2006 reflects a significant shift in how Latinos or Hispanics envision themselves in the national fabric.

Moreover, evidence shows that this pan-ethnic identification has social and political import. Latinos from all groups per-



ceive significant commonality and linked fate with other Latinos, even those expressly from national-origin groups other than their own. The 2006 Latino National Survey assessed whether respondents felt they and their national-origin group shared political, economic, and social conditions in common with other Latinos. Overwhelmingly, they did. A surprising 71.9 percent said that, in their individual capacity, they had “some” or “a lot” in common with other Latinos in “[t]hinking about issues like job opportunities, educational attainment or income.” When the question was posed with respect to the respondent’s national-origin group, 74.6 percent said that their group had “some” or “a lot” in common with Latinos of other national-origin groups. While there was some variation, these results were largely consistent across national-origin groups.

When the focus turns to political concerns, the level of perceived commonality is again high, though it is lower than on the social dimension. Here, 56.1 percent of respondents felt that as individuals they had “some” or “a lot” in common with other Latinos in “thinking about things like government services and employment, political power, and representation”; an even healthier 64.4 percent felt the same when assessing commonality between their own national-origin groups and others.

Finally, respondents were asked whether their fate and their group’s fate were linked to the fate of other Latinos – the “linked fate” measure first described by political scientist Michael Dawson.<sup>22</sup> At the individual level, 63.4 percent said their fate was linked “some” or “a lot” to others’. When asked about the fate of their national-origin group relative to other Latino groups, 71.6 percent said the two were linked “some” or “a lot.” Thus, huge majorities of Latinos believe that their

futures and those of their co-ethnics are intrinsically linked.

The belief that Latinos and their futures are linked very likely gives rise to greater efforts at group-based mobilization. Most major national organizations, political and otherwise, use pan-ethnic terminology and view the Latino constituency as being composed of the entire population – both across generations and, most important, across nationality groups. The National Council of La Raza, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, and the Univision and Telemundo television networks all define their constituency as the pan-ethnic Latino or Hispanic population.

It is not clear why Latinos increasingly identify with pan-ethnic descriptors, but scholars have offered a variety of explanations. Pan-ethnic identity may emerge as a consequence of population diversity and political cooperation, where pan-ethnic groups would possess political power that individual national-origin groups do not.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, it may have been created by political entrepreneurs seeking to empower Latinos through coalition and, in so doing, run roughshod over important community, cultural, and social distinctions.<sup>24</sup> Or it may merely reflect changes in the cultural and media establishment, mentioned above, which has increasingly addressed Latinos as a somewhat undifferentiated whole. Whatever the case, we can now say with confidence that Latinos are a group: they see themselves in this way, and they use this shared identity to act politically.

And when they act politically, they act progressively. Latinos prefer more government engagement in solving society’s challenges, not less. Despite an embrace of self-reliance, they see a critical and de-



cisive role for government. The result is a supermajority that votes Democrat, with a political effect that is likely to grow as the Latino share of the electorate continues to rise rapidly. If the recent past is prologue, and without substantial changes in current preference distributions, this increasingly unified and empowered population has the potential, almost by itself, to signal a political realignment in American politics.

Gary M.  
Segura

#### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Shaun Bowler and Gary M. Segura, *"The Future is Ours": Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multiracial Era of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Exit polls suggesting that the number was closer to 44 percent have been widely discredited. For more on this debate, see Matt Barreto, Fernando Guerra, Mara Marks, Stephen Nuño, and Nathan Woods, "Controversies in Exit Polling: Implementing a Racially Stratified Homogenous Precinct Approach," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39 (July 2006); and Francisco Pedraza and Matt Barreto, "Exit Polls and Ethnic Diversity: How to Improve Estimates and Reduce Bias Among Minority Voters," in *Elections and Exit Polling*, ed. Wendy Alvey and Fritz Scheuren (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley and Sons, 2008).
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- <sup>5</sup> Bowler and Segura, *"The Future is Ours."*
- <sup>6</sup> Mark Q. Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Atiya Kai Stokes-Brown, "The Hidden Politics of Identity: Racial Self-Identification and Latino Political Engagement," *Politics and Policy* 37 (2009): 1281–1305.
- <sup>8</sup> Pew Hispanic Center, "Country of Origin Profiles" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, May 26, 2011, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/05/26/country-of-origin-profiles/> (accessed February 27, 2012).
- <sup>9</sup> Gary M. Segura and Helena Alves Rodrigues, "Comparative Ethnic Politics in the United States: Beyond Black and White," *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 375–395.
- <sup>10</sup> Louis DeSipio, "Latino Civic and Political Participation," in *Hispanics and the Future of America*, ed. Marta Tienda and Faith Mitchell (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2006), 463.
- <sup>11</sup> For data on nativity and age, see the Census Bureau website, [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_10\\_1YR\\_B05003I&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_1YR_B05003I&prodType=table) (accessed February 29, 2012).
- <sup>12</sup> Louis DeSipio, *Counting on the Latino Vote: Latinos as a New Electorate* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).
- <sup>13</sup> Adrian Pantoja, Ricardo Ramirez, and Gary M. Segura, "Citizens by Choice, Voters by Necessity: Patterns in Political Mobilization by Naturalized Latinos," *Political Research Quarterly* 54 (4) (2001): 729–750.



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- <sup>14</sup> Sergio Wals, “Does What Happens in Los Mochis Stay in Los Mochis? Explaining Post-migration Political Behavior,” *Political Research Quarterly* (forthcoming, 2012).
- <sup>15</sup> Melissa R. Michelson, “The Corrosive Effect of Acculturation: How Mexican Americans Lose Political Trust,” *Social Science Quarterly* 84 (4) (2003): 918–933; Francisco Pedraza, Shaun Bowler, and Gary M. Segura, “The Efficacy and Alienation of Juan Q. Public: The Immigration Marches and Orientations Toward American Political Institutions,” in *Rallying for Immigrant Rights*, ed. Irene Bloemraad and Kim Voss (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
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- <sup>19</sup> Luis R. Fraga, Rodney E. Hero, John A. Garcia, Michael Jones-Correa, Valerie Martinez-Ebers, and Gary M. Segura, *Latinos in the New Millennium: An Almanac of Opinion, Behavior, and Policy Preferences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
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- <sup>23</sup> Felix M. Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).
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