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THE ROLE OF THE LATINO VOTE IN THE 2016 US ELECTIONS

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The March 5, 2012 cover of *Time Magazine's* edition boldly stated: 'Yo decido. Why Latinos will pick the next president'. More recently, on June 3, 2016, Jonathan Capehart of *The Washington Post* began an article stating that '[i]n reading poll numbers of the 2016 presidential election, no number is more important to watch than that of Latino support. We've known this for years.'

For readers outside the United States these statements might seem like hyperbole, or at least strike them as puzzling. After all, really, why are Latinos important all of a sudden, who are they anyway, and why are they so politically relevant?

The short answer to these queries is that Latinos are now important because they have become the nation's second-largest demographic group, as a result of a marked rise in immigration rates of individuals from Latin America throughout the last decades of the twentieth century, together with their relatively higher birth rates. 'Latino' or 'Hispanic' (here used interchangeably) in the US context is a pan-ethnic social identifier for

people originating in Latin America and their descendants. More importantly, their existence as a demographic group, and their resulting political relevance, demonstrates how difficult it is to understand the US political system without exploring the role that concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' play in that society.

But before we delve into these issues in depth, it should be noted that over the past two decades predicting the growth of Latino political power in the United States has become a recurrent theme in political reporting, although, to date, predictions about the size and influence of this ethnic bloc have not been fulfilled.

There are many reasons for the disparity between the size of this population and their political effectiveness, among them the high proportion of adults who are not US citizens, as well as the fact that those who *are* citizens tend to be younger, less educated, and have lower incomes than the population as a whole -all conditions that are well known in political science to limit voting behaviour.

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If partisanship in the Democratic Party thus far has been uneven, certainly, Latinos have been abandoning the Republican Party. What remains to be seen is if this increasing partisanship will also translate into increased political mobilisation amongst this population.

But signs that this state of affairs may finally be changing can be found, however, beginning in the 2012 election when the size of the Latino vote for Obama surpassed the margin of the popular vote, arguably making Latino voters decisive in that election. And, as we shall see, there are good reasons to think that the 2016 election will be one where the Latino vote might finally be coming into maturity.

Why are 'Latinos' important?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States' 56.6 million Hispanics are now the country's second largest racial or ethnic group. People of Mexican origin account for almost two-thirds (34 million -of whom approximately 11.8 million were born in Mexico) of Latinos in the country. They are followed by those of Puerto Rican origin, with 4.9 million mainland inhabitants (and 3.5 million more residents of the island of Puerto Rico). In addition, there are five other Hispanic groups represented by more than 1 million people each: Cubans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, and Colombians.

This state of affairs is the result of one of the most significant demographic transformations in the United States'

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history. The (non-Hispanic) White population, which has long constituted the overwhelming majority, is projected to decline from its current 61 per cent of the total population to 47 per cent by 2050. The Black population is projected to remain fairly stable, currently representing 12.4 per cent of the population and 12.8 per cent in 2050, but the proportion of the Asian population will increase substantially, from 5.3 per cent to 8.4 per cent. Meanwhile, the Latino population -which represented only 3.5 per cent of the total US population in 1960- is expected to climb from the current 17.7 per cent to a projected 26.5 per cent by 2050.¹

There is general agreement that the seeds of the current demographic change can be found primarily in the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, commonly referred to as the Hart-Celler Act. This legislation represented a fundamental reordering of immigration law, and was passed in the same spirit as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, but also (in the context of the Cold War) with an eye to the United States' image abroad regarding racial equality. It ended the era of restrictive quotas begun with the passage of the Quota Act in 1924, and it both opened the way to the largest influx of

immigrants since the beginning of the twentieth century, and radically changed the mix of immigrants arriving in the United States. Although previous to 1965 immigrants from the 'Western Hemisphere' (in reality Mexico; Canada, especially Quebec; and, to a limited extent, Cuba and the West Indies) had not been subject to the quotas imposed on the rest of the world, in practice the absence of quotas was balanced with serious administrative barriers designed to mostly allow only non-permanent immigrant labour to enter the country. Thus, when quotas were lifted, many more Latin American immigrants began to make the formal move. This -combined with Europe's declining demographic growth- was why, as opposed to the previous migratory waves, immigrants no longer overwhelmingly originated from Europe and instead preponderantly came from Latin America, and increasingly from Asia.

Renewed immigration was not the only reason for dramatic demographic change. As in all developed nations, the birth rate of the native-born began to drop around the same time,² and the population as a whole began to age -to the extent that the White population is projected not only to decrease as a proportion of the total, but also to begin to decrease in actual numbers beginning in 2030.³ In this context, the higher birth rate exhibited by the foreign-born has

acquired even more importance, making the second-generation offspring the main motor of population growth. According to the Census Bureau, between 1993 and 2013, the number of US-born Latinos under 18 in the United States more than doubled (increasing by 107 per cent),

compared with an increase of only 11 per cent of children under 18 in the general population.⁴ This growth in the second generation is occurring even in an era of reduced migration, such that, while the *number* of Latino immigrants present in the country increased slightly in the five years between 2007 and 2012 (from 18 million to 18.8 million), their *proportion* as part of the overall Latino population declined, falling from 40 per cent to 36 per cent.

Who are the Latinos?

As stated above, 'Latino' in the US context is a pan-ethnic social identifier, i.e. one that encompasses populations of different national origins on the basis of geography or culture, used by both society at large and by government. The definition currently used by the Federal Government is provided by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB): "Hispanic or Latino" refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or oth-

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 'Table 11. Percent Distribution of the Projected Population by Hispanic Origin and Race for the United States: 2015 to 2060'. *2014 National Population Projections: Summary Tables* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau June 2014) Available at: <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014/summarytables.html>.

2. For example, the 'Baby Boom' in the United States is considered to have ended with those born 1964.

3. U.S. Census Bureau, 'Table 12. Projected Change in Population Size by Hispanic Origin and Race for the United States: 2015 to 2060'. *2014 National Population Projections: Summary Tables*. Found at: <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014/summarytables.html>.

4. Krogstad, Jens Manuel. *11 facts for National Hispanic Heritage Month*, Fact Tank (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, September 16, 2014). Available online at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/16/11-facts-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/>. Accessed: February 19, 2015

er Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.' In the United States the broadly accepted social definitions of race are still mirrored in governmentally crafted definitions of both 'race' and 'ethnicity'. Although it is now considered by scientists across the board that the concept of race has no basis in biology, there is recognition that it is still an extremely powerful social concept.

But despite the seemingly comprehensive formal definition of the term, this social identifier is not always an easy fit. Pan-ethnic identities are most often imposed by more dominant elements of society upon subordinate groups, 'lumping' a number of distinct groups together in order to facilitate social control. One can appreciate this fact when one realises that Asian Americans, another pan-ethnic collective, encompasses the descendants of immigrants from China, Korea, and Japan, *and* those from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh -and also from everywhere in between.

More to the point, the core of the Latino pan-ethnic identity is composed of nineteen separate Latin American national-origin groups that have distinct cultural characteristics and racial histories. There also exist specific communities in the United States that emigrated from within these countries, such as indigenous peoples like Mayans that identify more strongly with their ethno-linguistic groups than with their specific national origin, or members of groups like *Jubans* (Cuban Jews), or *Lexicans* (Mexican Lebanese), that were the result of earlier migrations. Furthermore, the fluidity of this socio-political construct can perhaps best be seen in how the definition elides the participation of the Brazilian-, Haitian-, or even Philippine-origin communities, which are considered to be 'Latino' in some, though not all, areas of the United States. In other words, this is an ethnic group that is in the process of consolidation.

Nevertheless, the commonality across most of these groups of Spanish (or Iberian) culture, the widespread use of the Spanish language, and the Roman Catholic background, all serve as a common thread to the development of identity. This process is aided by decades of increasingly integrated entertainment and media cultures, that have served to knit the distinct communities more closely together.

In the long-term, however, the 'Latino' identity may still be determined more by external forces, i.e. by the actions of government and of the society at large. However, it is important to note that in recent years the directions taken by government and society have diverged in very significant ways. Since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s government has generally striven for greater inclusion. Meanwhile, and perhaps as a reaction to what they see as undue favouritism, or a fear of loss of control, a significant -and increasing- number of Whites, have begun to adopt positions that are exclusionary.

The role of government is central to much of the discussion of social identity and its role in the creation and main-

tenance of systems of social organization and control, through its ability to determine, operationalize and change these concepts. A variety of actions, from the format of the census to the effects of a number of laws -through legislation and court decisions, regulate all manner of aspects of life, such as social behaviour, immigration, economics, and political access.

The U.S. Census Bureau has always reflected the country's social divisions -and to an extent has helped shape them. From the beginning, the decennial Census was not just about counting people. Rather, it was tied to important political questions, such as how many Congressional representatives each state would have, or how much tax they would owe the Federal government. In this system, conceptions of race played a key role, since slaves, even if they could not vote, counted as three-fifths of a person for Congressional apportionments. Until 1850, only heads of households were counted, with slaves listed as numbers, and not as names. The Census was also utilized to count people who were considered 'undesirable'. Indians (untaxed, i.e. belonging to a recognized sovereign tribe) were not counted at all until the late nineteenth century. Beginning in 1870 the Chinese were counted separately, followed by other Asian groups in the early 1900s. Mixed

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race categories for blacks were also begun to be recorded during this time. In the 1930 Census -in the midst of the nation's first mass deportation wave- there was a one-time inclusion of a 'Mexican' race category. Forms were filled out by census-takers who went door to door, and there was no ability for respondents to declare whichever ancestry they wished. Instructions to the enumerators indicated very specific rules about accepting certain responses from persons, especially those of mixed or non-White origins. Similarly, there were various state laws that defined blacks in very specific terms of descent.

As late as 1964, noted sociologist Milton Gordon stated that '[g]overnmental relationships to the larger society are, by definition, non-ethnically oriented'.⁵ Although some argued the veracity of that statement, it is quite obvious that the civil rights movement fundamentally changed that relationship. If the complicity of governments at all levels before that era in enforcing unequal outcomes had affected ethnic identity by enforcing it from outside the groups, the decision of governments to assist members of designated ethnic groups in making up for the injustices of the past through affirmative action and other programmes now gave a considerable stimulus to ethnic identity from within

5. Gordon, Milton M. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1964. P. 35

these groups by channelling benefits. State and local governments, but especially the federal government, stimulated ethnic consciousness and mobilization through a wide range of programmes. Thus, the nature of government programs further determined shifts in ethnic boundaries.

So, for example, as a result of the civil rights movement, the Census significantly changed its methods, and by the 1970 Census forms were completed by residents themselves. It also completely reversed its emphasis, enumerating to measure who was being excluded in order to help target resources, as opposed to the previous practice of enumerating in order to help exclude.

In the latest iteration of population groups on which the government must collect data, published in 1997⁶, the OMB required all federal agencies to use five race categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. For those respondents unable to identify with any of these race categories, the U.S. Census Bureau included a sixth category -'Some Other Race'- on the Census 2000 and 2010 questionnaires. In addition to the race categories, OMB also mandated the use of two 'ethnicities' independent of race: 'Hispanic or Latino' and 'Not Hispan-

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ic or Latino'. It also determined that 'race' and 'ethnicity' are separate and distinct concepts, and that when collecting these data via self-identification, two different questions must be used.

But if, as mentioned above, government has shifted in significant ways towards more inclusion in racial and ethnic matters, there are significant forces among society that are moving in the opposite direction. We can see the effects of this resistance in the interesting question of why, given their large numbers and long history in the United States, Latino immigrants -or more importantly their descendants- are still not generally considered 'White', but rather a part of a different 'ethnicity'. After all, Latinos have been an integral part of much of what eventually became the United States since the sixteenth century, and in fact were legally considered to be 'White', and so eligible for citizenship (a condition, by the way, denied to almost all other people of 'colour' for many years), from the moment a significant number first became a part of the nation in 1848 under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which marked the end of the US-Mexico war. And currently an estimated 88 per cent of Latinos self-identify as White on census

forms. Also, many other immigrant groups, for instance, the Irish and the Italians, have travelled the path from being considered a different race at the time of their arrival to now being unquestionably White. So why does this not apply to Latinos?

The answer has to do with the historical effects of the political and social *debate* on immigration and its effects on the racial social order, together with its contemporary iteration, which seems dominated -to a significant extent, if Mr. Trump's candidacy is a valid measure- by fears of the effects of demographic change. Even today, many White residents see *all* Latinos as immigrants, and moreover as fundamentally 'illegals', which speaks not so much to reality as to the position that they have held in the American ethno-racial order for over 150 years. This has made Latinos the focus point of much of the discussion of the role of immigrants in the promotion of civil rights, and in the creation -and the threat- of a 'multicultural' country.

The migratory debate in the United States has, despite ebbs and flows, become more positive overall, but at the same time more heatedly partisan over the past 15 years. Immigration and its related issues have proven to be a good proxy for the economic and cultural debates that have accompanied the country's trajectory into

increasing political polarisation over the same period. And, while it could be argued that this hostile immigration debate might be caused by the generally weak economic climate that the United States has experienced since the beginning of the century, there is strong evidence that the current discourse on immigration has

also become much more combative in reaction to ethnic cues, that is, the fears surrounding 'the browning of America'. The nomination of Donald Trump as the presidential candidate for the Republican Party demonstrates that there is a considerable depth of feeling amongst a portion of the population -particularly lesser-educated, older, working- and lower-middle-class Whites- against immigrants, and more specifically, Latinos.

The result is that, if the immigration debate continues to fall along sharply partisan lines in ever more extreme positions, we are probably seeing only the beginning of a long-term division of the American electorate as the political utility of the Latino pan-ethnic identity grows ever more obvious. That is, it would lock-in the mutually reinforcing cycle of rejection, where politically heightened fears of the consequences of demographic change cause a negative immigration debate targeted at Latinos, who respond defensively by closing ranks around a unitary pan-ethnic identity, in order to increase their influence as a group, which in turn would beget more anxiety.

Without this sense of rejection, it is quite probable that most Latinos would, in the manner of so many immigrant groups before them, and as so many Latinos seem to have been doing for years, eventually become 'White', and thus dispose of the problem. That is, due to the inexorable forces of assimilation -integration, acculturation, and intermar-

6. OMB, *Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997.

riage- the 'Latino' pan-ethnic identification would cease to be functional, eventually evolving into yet one more 'symbolic ethnicity' Thus, ironically, it seems likely that it is precisely the fear of demographic and cultural change that would occur when Whites cease being the absolute majority of the population that is giving the pan-ethnic label political validity and so creating the very conditions for the change to occur -and perhaps even become permanent.

Why are 'Latinos' politically relevant?

Whites now make up 70 per cent of the electorate, down from 85 per cent in 1980. The U.S. Census currently projects that by 2060, Whites will make up only 46 per cent of the electorate, while Latinos will have grown from the current 13 per cent to 27 per cent of the voting pool.

Latino political influence over the past 15 years has been steadily growing, although unevenly. In part this is a function of the demographic characteristics of the Latino population itself, which combine to limit voting behaviour. Among the immigrant portion of the population, many are not citizens and so cannot vote. But even among those that can there is a wide range of levels of political acculturation, which has been demonstrated to have a crucial effect on political participation rates and partisanship. Those born in the United States, meanwhile, are overwhelmingly young and have relatively lower levels of earnings and educational attainment. More importantly, perhaps, is the relative newness of the pan-ethnic identity, and the very real difficulties in constructing such an 'imposed' identity. However, this is likely to begin to change, as the Latino population skews ever more to a US-born population, socialised in the American ethno-racial milieu and political system.

Counter-reactions to nativism directed against Latinos have been seen to boost electoral registration and voting rates, as well as other forms of civic and political participation, although until now these effects have been limited either to particular locales or state initiatives (such as the reaction to Proposition 187 in California in 1994), or to particular time periods (such as the massive immigrant marches of 2006). In these cases it is evident that the negative immigration discourse caused increasing pan-ethnic identification and political and civic mobilization directly tied to the pan-ethnic identity. And, if partisanship in the Democratic Party thus far has been uneven, certainly, Latinos have been abandoning the Republican Party. What remains to be seen is if this increasing partisanship will also translate into increased political mobilisation amongst this population.

In this sense, the political utility of the pan-ethnic identity can be said to have moved the arc towards dis-assimilation, as members of the group begin to mediate their political participation not as members of a certain class or

geographic locality but as a member of an ethnic group. But if the Latino population retains a separate 'foreign' ethnic identity ascribed to them by a significant number of non-Latinos, this will have increasingly important political implications: currently, every year more than 800,000 young Latinos, citizens by birth, turn 18. That is, the Latino electorate now grows by roughly 3.2 million between each presidential race, and their concentration in a single political party will have long-lasting effects. More than 27 million Latinos will be eligible to vote in November, a 60 per cent increase from the 2006 mid-term elections.

How will Latinos vote in the 2016 elections?

The most recent large-scale survey of Latino voters, by *America's Voice* and the polling firm *Latino Decisions*,⁷ found that Mr. Trump is not only losing the Hispanic vote - he is losing it by far more than any previous Republican presidential candidate.⁸ According to the survey, were the elections to be held on that day, 70 per cent of registered Latino voters would vote for Hillary Clinton, and only 19 per cent would vote for Donald Trump. It bears noting that although this was a survey performed for a pro-immigrant interest group (*America's Voice*), the findings seem to be fairly solid:

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it was a very large survey, reaching 3,729 Latino registered voters online and by phone, and with an estimated margin of error of 1.6 per cent.

According to a July 2016 report by Pew Charitable Trust's Center for People and the Press, the size of the Latino electorate is projected to number 27.3 million eligible voters (adult US citizens) this year, and expected to make up 12-13 per cent of all eligible voters. This is a share of the electorate that is equal to that of African Americans among eligible voters. But, the report warns, 'voter turnout among Hispanics has long lagged that of other groups'.

Despite this concern, however, there is some evidence that Mr. Trump's hostile rhetoric may be galvanizing Latinos to turn out. The Trump campaign seems to have invigorated long-term efforts by Latinos and other groups to increase political participation. Civic groups and Latino-oriented media are making a huge push to register voters and get permanent residents to become citizens in swing states,

7. Top lines can be accessed at: http://www.latinodecisions.com/files/5014/7275/0241/AV_National_Release_Toplines.pdf
8. Ronald Reagan received 35 per cent of the Latino vote in 1980 and 37 per cent in 1984; George H.W. Bush received 30 per cent in 1988, and 25 in 1992; Bob Dole 21 per cent in 1996; George W. Bush 35 per cent in 2000, and 40 in 2004; John McCain 31 per cent in 2008; and Mitt Romney 27 per cent in 2012.

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hoping to unlock the power of a voting bloc that has historically had low turnout. There are reports of increased rates of voter registration among Hispanics in California and Florida, as well of applications for naturalizations ahead of the 2016 elections that are almost double those of previous years. According to Pew, 63 per cent, and to Latino Decisions significantly more (76 per cent) of Latino voters reported being more interested in politics this election cycle than they were in 2012 (vs. 60 per cent among all voters).

Only the elections will tell, but it seems that Mr. Trump, by seeking to exploit the discomfort and fears of a significant portion of the White electorate in order to win the presidency, might find his way blocked by the very population he sought to use as a scapegoat. The irony is that it very well could be that it is the Trump campaign that finally cements the power of the Latino vote for decades to come, by mobilizing their fears of exclusion.