



Latino Political Attitudes: Myths and Misconceptions

Albert Morales¹ · Claudia L. Rodriguez¹ · Thomas F. Schaller¹

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Abstract

The Latino population explosion is changing the electoral calculus in American politics. But Latino voters are often misunderstood, their heterogeneity underappreciated, the importance of their religious identities overstated, and their political clout ignored because of geographic concentration. In this article, we address these widely held misconceptions.

Keywords Latino politics · Latino voting

Latinos are the fastest-growing racial voting bloc in the United States. They are also more misunderstood than perhaps any other group of American voters.

In many ways, Latinos are similar to their fellow Americans. They want safe neighborhoods, good schools, affordable health care, a protected environment, and the opportunity to share in the American dream. Of course, in other ways they differ. Latinos are less likely to be engaged by campaigns and political parties, but more likely to consume political news in both Spanish and English. They are less likely to register and vote, and more likely to allow experiences from the nations where they, their parents or grandparents emigrated to inform their attitudes about American politics.

In this essay, we demystify the Latino voter. We cannot address every widely held misconception about Latino political attitudes, values and behaviors. So instead we focus on four persistent myths about contemporary Latino politics: That their power is diluted by their geographic concentration in the Sun Belt; that immigration is always the most important or defining issue to them; that their Christian faith and majority-Catholic identification dominates their political calculus; and, finally, that they engage with American civic and political culture in the same ways as other citizens.

The Geography of Latino Power

Latinos are not as geographically dispersed as African Americans and nowhere as diffuse as white Americans. Unlike African Americans, about half of whom are spread across the 11 former Confederate states of the so-called “Black Belt,” half of all Latinos live in just three Sun Belt states: California, Texas and Florida.

The fact that half of Latinos reside in the three most populous states limits Latinos’ electoral clout. The 32.7 million Latinos who presently live in California, Texas and Florida share six U.S. Senate seats, whereas the seven smallest and overwhelmingly white states—from Wyoming to Delaware—contain just 5.6 million Americans yet elect 14 senators. Nor does it help that California and Texas for the past three decades have been, respectively, reliably Democratic and Republican in statewide elections, including presidential races. Latino concentration dilutes Latino political power.

However, according to Census data, the share of Latinos in California, Florida and Texas peaked at 60.8% in 1990. The three-state share dropped to 53% by the 2000 Census, ticked up slightly by 2010 to 54.9%, but declined again to 54.1% based on 2019 population estimates and will continue to do so. Moreover, a closer examination of the remaining half of Latinos reveals a growing dispersion and potential for electoral influence in the future. Between 2000 and 2019, the next 15 largest Latino states have increased from 25.8% to 28.2% of the national Latino population share.¹

✉ Thomas F. Schaller
schaller@umbc.edu

¹ University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA

¹ All mentions of current populations or population shares were taken from or calculated by authors from the U.S. Census Bureau’s data 2019 population estimates, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-detail.html>

Unlike the Big 3, many of these 15 states are swing states, including Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Virginia. These eight states currently cast a combined 106 electoral votes – more than three times the 29 electors cast by Florida. The total number of electoral votes held by these eight swing states is expected to rise as a result of the 2020 reapportionment.

Of course, Latinos are already pivotal in the swing state of Florida. The combination of Cuban and South American Latinos in South Florida, along with the Puerto Ricans clustered in the Interstate-4 corridor between Orlando and Tampa, force presidential candidates and presidential aspirants to engage Latinos in the Sunshine State. Because Spanish is the de facto official language spoken in South Florida, especially on powerful Cuban radio and television networks, candidates need to think and communicate bilingually.

Meanwhile, Florida's neighboring Black Belt states are home to the fastest decade-over-decade Latino growth rates. According to a 2011 Pew Hispanic Center report, the Latino population more than doubled between 2000 and 2010 in eight states: South Carolina (148%), Alabama (145%), Tennessee (134%), Kentucky (122%), Arkansas (114%), North Carolina (111%), Maryland and Mississippi (106% each).² The eye-popping growth rates in all but Maryland and North Carolina are the result of rather small 2000 population starting baselines. But since 2010, Latino population shares in all eight states have further risen by between 19.9% (in Alabama) and 36.7% (in Maryland).³

Then there is Texas. If the rising numbers of Democratic-leaning Latinos turn the Lone Star State from red to purple, the calculus for presidential elections (as well as statewide contests for governor and U.S. Senate) changes immediately. Although Donald Trump carried Texas by nine percentage points in 2016 and most pundits favor him to win it again, a number of head-to-head state polls in spring and summer 2020 showed Democratic nominee Joe Biden leading Trump by a point or two.⁴ “Republicans George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016 won narrow Electoral College victories despite losing the popular vote,” writes Latino Decisions political director Albert Morales. “For both GOP nominees, capturing the largest red-state electoral prize—Texas—was necessary to breach the 270-electoral, winning threshold.”⁵ For Bush, who in 2000 amassed just 271 electors, the

importance of his home state of Texas was no surprise. Less obvious is the fact that if Texas' 38 electors were removed from Trump's 2016 total of 306, he would have fallen short of 270 electoral votes.

Latino voting power is mostly limited by two factors. The first, beyond their control, is the remarkable share of Latinos still under 18 and therefore age-ineligible to vote. The second, within their control, are Latino registration and turnout rates, which lag behind those of white and black Americans. The next biggest limitation is geographic concentration. Like the first, Latinos have little control over this factor, but the limitations of geography are decreasing and Latino power should expand accordingly.

Religion Matters at the Margins

The vast majority of American Latinos are Christian, and a majority of those Christian Latinos are Catholic. But Latino religious identities are changing rapidly. Aside from a notable rise in evangelical Latinos, religion does not influence Latino political attitudes and partisan identities to the degree that it does for many white Christians.

Let's start with Latinos' changing religious identity. Two rather divergent patterns are notable: A significant chunk of Latinos is becoming more secular, while at the same time a smaller cohort is increasingly evangelized.

The fastest growing religious identity in the United States are so-called “religious nones,” people who either identify as atheist, agnostic or with no particular denomination and practice.⁶ In this regard, faith among Latinos mirrors that of their fellow Americans: They are becoming more secular. A 2014 Pew Research Center for Religion & Public Life survey found that a remarkable 24% of Latinos now identify as self-described “former Catholics.” In fact, the share of self-identified Catholics fell a remarkable 12 points in just four years between Pew's 2010 and 2014 polls. “The long-term decline in the share of Catholics among Hispanics may partly reflect religious changes underway in Latin America, where evangelical churches have been gaining adherents and the share of those with no religious affiliation has been slowly rising in a region that historically has been overwhelmingly Catholic,” the Pew report concludes. “But it also reflects religious changes taking place in the U.S., where Catholicism has had a net loss of adherents through religious switching (or

² “Census 2010: Hispanics Account for More Than Half of Nation's Growth in Past Decade,” Pew Hispanic Center report, March 24, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/reports/140.pdf>, Table 2

³ Ibid, Census Bureau 2019 population estimates.

⁴ Three consecutive statewide polls in Texas showed Biden with small, within-the-margin leads: <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-election-forecast/texas/>

⁵ “Texas-sized Opportunities, Part 3a,” by Albert Morales, Latino Decisions blog, September 6, 2019, <https://latinodecisions.com/blog/texas-sized-opportunities-part-3a/>

⁶ “A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones,’” by Michael Lipka, Pew Research Center, May 13, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>

⁰ “The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States,” Pew Research Center for Religion & Public Life, May 7, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/>

conversion) and the share of the religiously unaffiliated has been growing rapidly in the general public.⁷

Meanwhile, as the Pew study also indicates, Latino immigrants are contributing to the growth in the evangelizing of America. According to a recent LifeWay Research poll commissioned by *Christianity Today*, a small but growing cohort of Latino evangelicals has taken hold in the South, the country's most evangelized region. "The Latino population is growing, especially in the South, where 59 percent of the 218 new congregations surveyed are located," reports *Christianity Today's* Bekah McNeel. "And the evangelical faith is growing with it." Interestingly, the survey estimated that 80% of founding or lead pastors at Latino evangelical churches, and two-thirds of church members, were born outside the United States.⁸ The growing influence of Latino megachurches is an important exception to the general pattern that religious identity does not influence Latino political behavior and partisan attachments.

Where Latinos differ from white and black Americans is in the degree to which their religious identities drive their ideological and partisan identities. Abortion policy provides a perfect example. Although Latinos oppose abortion at slightly higher rates than white Americans do, their positions do not translate as directly into support for conservative politicians, pro-life groups, or the Republican Party. "The pro-life position among Latinos is not surprising given that over two-thirds of Latinos are Catholic, a religion whose doctrine does not admit abortion in any circumstance...[but politics] and religion are two separate realms for Latino voters," explains Victoria DeFrancisco Soto, a fellow at the LBJ School of Politics at the University of Texas. "More specifically, Latinos don't like their religious leaders meddling in politics."⁹

Even among the devout, religion is less predictive of Latinos' political attitudes. It is true that Protestant and evangelical Latinos tend to be generally more conservative than Latino Catholics, and secular former Catholics tend to be more liberal. In that sense, the ideological arrangements of Latinos by religious identity mirrors that of the larger American population. But unlike white Americans and especially African Americans, religion plays a lesser role in the formation of Latino political identities.

Immigration Is a Validating, Not Defining Issue

Long before Trump's disparaging comments about Mexican immigrants during the 2015 press conference in which he announced his presidential bid, immigration was an important issue for American Latinos. Immigration matters to Latinos because immigration policies disproportionately affect Latinos of every citizenship status: Even American-born or otherwise naturalized Latinos worry about the fates of their extended families living in the United States.

Two misconceptions, however, pervade the public view and media coverage of Latino politics. The first is that Latinos hold monolithic views about U.S. immigration policy. And the second is that immigration is the only or at least the defining issue for Latinos.

In fact, Latinos disagree about immigration. Although the vast majority support comprehensive immigration reform, a pathway to gain citizenship and public benefits like education and health care for undocumented workers, a small but persistent minority oppose one or more of these positions. In a 2019 *Univision* poll conducted by Latino Decisions, one-fifth of Latinos disagree with the statement that "I am frustrated with how President Trump and his allies treat immigrants and Latinos," and 15% support Trump's plans to build a 1900-mile wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.¹⁰

Moreover, immigration is not necessarily the most important issue to Latinos. Like most Americans, the economy, jobs and health care are often cited by higher shares of Latinos when asked which issues are most important to them. Likewise, during times of crisis the political focus of Latinos shifts just like it does for other Americans. For example, an August 2020 Latino Decisions poll showed that, at 47%, coronavirus vaulted to the top of Latinos' list of "most important issues facing your community." Only 18% cited immigration as their top issue.¹¹

Issues unrelated to immigration are also important to Latinos. On some issues, the opinions of Latinos, who vote majority Democratic in presidential elections and most state-wide races, track closely with their fellow partisans. A good example is Latino opposition to the Iraq war: According to a Pew poll taken in early 2005 at the height of the war, Latinos were more opposed to the war and less supportive of President George W. Bush's policies than the nation as a whole.¹² Latino opinions on climate and the environment likewise track closely with Democratic attitudes: More than four in five

⁷ "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States," Pew Research Center for Religion & Public Life, May 7, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/>

⁸ "Latino Immigrants Are Evangelizing America," by Bekah McNeel, *Christianity Today*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/july/hispanic-church-planting-survey-immigration-evangelism.html>

⁹ "Can the Republicans Connect with Latinos on Abortion?" by Victoria M. DeFrancisco Soto, *NBCLatino.com*, August 24, 2012, <https://nbclatino.com/2012/08/24/opinion-can-the-republicans-connect-with-latinos-on-abortion/>

¹⁰ Univision Noticias national poll of Latinos, conducted by Latino Decisions, June 2019, https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Miami_Dem_Debate_AV_HUB.pdf

¹¹ "Somos/UnidosUS National Survey of Latinos," conducted by Latino Decisions, August 7–15, 2020, <https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/National-and-State-Results-Somos-Unidos-Aug-Svy.pdf>

¹² "Survey On Latino Attitudes On The War In Iraq," Pew Research center, February 7, 2005, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2005/02/07/survey-on-latino-attitudes-on-the-war-in-iraq/>

Latinos surveyed in 2020 described clean air regulations and climate change as “important” or “very important” issues to them.¹³

Not surprisingly, immigration was the most important issue to Latinos in 2016. The Trump campaign’s incessant anti-immigrant rhetoric triggered both surface and latent Latino support for more inclusive and humane immigration policies. Contrary to culturally biased¹⁴ exit polls that pegged Latino support for Hillary Clinton below 70%, Matt Barreto, Thomas Schaller and Gary Segura of Latino Decisions cited internal polling data and ecological inference studies in key states that estimated Latino support for Clinton at closer to 80%. “These levels of support make perfect sense in an election year in which Latinos and especially immigration and border policy were front and center, and xenophobic statements and anti-immigrant sentiment were commonplace,” they conclude.¹⁵

At the most rudimentary level, immigration policies influence how Latinos view their legitimacy as Americans. According to a 2018 study, since Trump took office the share of Latinos who say they “are confident about their place in America” dropped eight points, and the share who expressed “serious concerns” about their place rose by the same amount. “This growth in worry about their place in America is driven by a rise in concern among immigrants, those with no college education and independent voters who do not identify with or lean toward either the Republican or the Democratic parties,” conclude study co-authors Mark Hugo Lopez, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad. Nevertheless, the overall split remains quite even: 49% express “confidence” versus 46% who have “concerns.”¹⁶

Immigration is best understood as a gateway or validating issue for most Latinos. That is, Latinos are more likely to tune out politicians with whom they otherwise might agree on other issues if those leaders support restrictive border laws, oppose the DREAM Act and related measures designed to transition undocumented residents to citizenship, or other anti-immigrant policies.

¹³ <https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CA-TX-LD-Poll-Final-Slide-Deck.pdf>

¹⁴ Culturally biased exit polls can be skewed in a number of ways, but especially because they tend to undersample first-generation and/or exclusively Spanish-speaking Latinos and oversample college-educated and/or more affluent Latinos.

¹⁵ “Latinos and the 2016 Election,” by Matt Barreto, Thomas Schaller and Gary Segura, Chapter 8 in *Trumped: The 2016 Election That Broke All the Rules*, Larry J. Sabato, Kyle Kondik and Geoffrey Skelley, eds., (2017: Rowman & Littlefield), quote from p. 134.

¹⁶ “Latinos Have Become More Pessimistic About Their Place in America,” Pew Center Hispanic Trends report by Mark Hugo Lopez, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad, October 25, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2018/10/25/latinos-have-become-more-pessimistic-about-their-place-in-america/>

Citizenship, Participation and Efficacy

With over 32 million eligible voters in 2020 and a growing population driven by its youth, Latinos possess resounding electoral power. Every year, nearly 1 million U.S.-born Latinos turn 18 years old and become part of the electorate for the very first time.¹⁷ Yet it seems that in every electoral cycle, political pundits often question Latinos’ political potential and blame them for “failing to show up to vote.” Although turnout numbers certainly indicate there is room for growth, it is important to outline key factors that contribute to lower participation levels. Engagement and participation with American civic and political culture manifest differently among Latinos and play a larger role than those headlines would lead us to believe.

First, let us consider Latinos’ views and experiences with the political process. As stated above, given the generational diversity of the electorate, Latinos’ understanding of American politics tends to be guided by experiences traced back to their families’ country of origin, where voting practices are in their native language and may be seen as a collective activity as opposed to Americans’ traditional individualistic view of voting. With a lack of familiarity with the American political system and institutional barriers that make it difficult to gain access—such as all-English voting materials, complicated registration requirements, and confusing ballot language—Latinos lack incentive to participate.

Over the last two decades alone, courts mandated increased efforts to enforce fair voting access where cities and counties have failed to provide multilingual voting materials.¹⁸ While young Latinos are much more likely to prefer bilingual and English content and can serve as a guide for their older Spanish-speaking relatives, here too exists a resource gap, as this cohort enters the electorate with no previous background knowledge. And given that political parties often focus on “likely voters” for mobilizing efforts, this emerging demographic is being left out of the political process, thus furthering lower turnout rates.

Latinos also often feel disillusioned by a system that does not seem to be working for them. When it comes to the significance of their vote, Latinos tend to feel lower levels of efficacy, meaning it is not exactly clear to them how their individual votes will change anything. Considering these factors, focus groups conducted by

¹⁷ “An Awakened Giant: The Hispanic Electorate is Likely to Double by 2030,” Pew Hispanic Center Report, November 14, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2012/11/14/an-awakened-giant-the-hispanic-electorate-is-likely-to-double-by-2030/>

¹⁸ “Cases Raising Claims Under the Language Minority Provisions of the Voting Rights Act,” United States Department of Justice, September 9, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/cases-raising-claims-under-language-minority-provisions-voting-rights-act>

Latino Decisions found that community-oriented “get out the vote” messages promote higher political participation, but extensive efforts need to be made to target diverse Latino communities.

In addition to barriers that discourage participation, voter outreach campaigns toward Latino voters are also often limited in scope compared to other groups. Latino voters get contacted at far lower rates during presidential election cycles compared to white voters.¹⁹ According to an August 2020 Latino Decisions poll, more than 64% of Latinos report not having been contacted by anyone from any political party or a non-partisan civic group.²⁰ This unfortunate trend has permeated every election cycle. Despite this pattern, Latino turnout in 2018 surged relative to the preceding 2014 midterm—a nearly 13% boost, according to Census records—thanks to greater 2018 campaign contact and spending, particularly from the Democratic Party. In the past, “late investment [in previous cycles] negatively impacted execution” for the Democrats, noted Emmy Ruiz, former state director for the Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton presidential campaigns. Democrats learned from this and increased outreach in 2018.²¹

Given that direct contact is positively related to increased turnout, why is there still a sizeable gap in Latino turnout numbers compared to other groups? The answer can partly be found by looking at demographic growth trends. Campaigns and mobilization groups may be increasing their reach, but the growth of the Latino electorate seems to be far outpacing messaging efforts.

With an increasingly young and diverse electorate, candidates and parties will need to adapt and diversify their contacting methods to engage Latinos. For example, as mentioned earlier, immigration is an issue priority for Latinos, but new Latino voters are slightly more removed from the immigrant experience. Immigration is not the sole motivating issue. In fact, current research suggests that Millennial and Generation Z Latinos want to see issues discussed through an intersectional lens, and are much more motivated to become engaged in movements that promote equality for all. Recent polling data reflects this sentiment. Current top issue priorities for young Latinos pertain to protecting immigrant rights, stopping discrimination against minority groups, and

criminal justice and police reform, in addition to health care and economic concerns.²²

Themes of community and solidarity tend to resonate well among Latinos, but there is no one-size-fits-all messaging strategy that will “capture the Latino vote.” Institutional barriers, demographic limitations, and campaign efforts (or lack thereof) explain why Latino turnout is less a function of apathy or lack of interest than a byproduct of candidates and parties misunderstanding and ignoring Latino voters. Both first-time Latino voters and those with a history of participation need to be continually *invited* into a political system that will work for them and give them the tools necessary to navigate the process.

Conclusion

The Latino population explosion is changing the electoral calculus in American politics. But Latino voters are often misunderstood, their heterogeneity underappreciated, the importance of their religious identities overstated, and their political clout ignored because of geographic concentration. Is it any surprise that candidates and political parties tend to contact and engage them less than they do other American voters?

As the Latino population ages and a larger share becomes age-eligible registered voters, misconceptions and myths about Latino voters will exact a heavy political price on campaigns and consultants who misunderstand what matters to this nascent bloc of voters.

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Albert Morales is Senior Political Director at Latino Decisions, based in Washington D.C. He has over 20 years of experience working in Democratic politics, including serving as a senior official with the Democratic National Committee under three different DNC Chairs.

Claudia L. Rodriguez is an Analyst at Latino Decisions based in Los Angeles. She has extensive experience in directing Latino political research and has worked through numerous election cycles providing expert analysis on young Latino voting patterns.

Thomas F. Schaller is professor of political science at University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He has published three books and more than two hundred articles or op-eds about state and national politics.

¹⁹ “5 Ways to Increase Voter Turnout in Latinx American Communities,” Center for American Progress, June 21, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2018/06/21/452549/5-ways-increase-voter-turnout-latinx-american-communities/>

²⁰ “Voter Turnout Rates Among All White Voting Age and Major Racial Ethnic Groups Were Higher than in 2014,” U.S. Census Bureau Population Report, April 23, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html>

²¹ “Latino vote surged in 2018, new data shows,” by Benjy Sarlin and Stephen Nuño-Pérez, *NBCnews.com*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/latino-vote-surged-2018-new-data-shows-n998481>

²² “Young Latinos: A Generation of Change,” Telemundo and BuzzFeed News, June 2020, <https://online.flipbuilder.com/telemundo/nrty/>