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The politics of Latino publics: Immigration reform, political participation and intention to vote[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Latinos are the largest U.S. minority group and are poised to play an increasingly important role in U.S. society. Public relations practitioners who work in politics should be interested in what motivates young Latinos to participate in politics. This study reports the findings of a national nonprobability survey with young Latinos ($N=434$). The analysis explores how demographic variables, acculturation, political ideology and media use predict perceptions of the importance of immigration reform, reported political participation, and vote likelihood in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Of the dependent variables, findings show that acculturation ($\beta = -0.13$) only predicts perceptions of the importance of immigration reform, suggesting acculturation's effects are issue specific. Interest in politics is the largest influential factor in predicting all of the dependent variables.

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1. Introduction

Hispanics comprise more than 55 million Americans, according to the U.S. Census, and are considered by political campaign staff as an increasingly critical public to U.S. presidential election outcomes. Hispanics, or Latinos, are a diverse group. A 2013 Pew Research report shows that 68% of Hispanics, ages 5 or older, speak only English at home (Krogstad, Lopez, & Rohal, 2015). The conventional wisdom that campaigns must primarily use Spanish to reach U.S. Hispanics is outdated, as the growth in the U.S. Hispanic population is no longer from immigration but from U.S. births. According to *Advertising Age's* Hispanic Fact Pack 2015, fully 52% of Latinos are younger than 30. In combination, these data reveal a shift in demographics and suggest that campaign managers may need to (1) focus on mobilizing younger and more acculturated Latinos, and (2) use different strategies than they have used in the past.

The purpose of this research is to examine how demographics, level of acculturation, political interest, ideology, and media use influence young Hispanics' likelihood to vote in the 2016 presidential election campaign, perceptions of the importance of immigration reform, and political participation. These data should be of interest to public relations practitioners interested in building relationships with this public and engaging them in political activities.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Theory: social identity theory

Public relations publics can be categorized in many ways, and public relations practitioners engage in segmentation of publics (Kim & Krishna, 2013). In politics, segmentation of publics would be to identify potential voters and categorize them by common interests or identity. While discussions of publics often pertain to how publics define a problem, when applied to politics, the question at hand is: For whom should I vote?

When examining Latino voters, social identity theory explains why Latinos may engage in voting or holding specific beliefs about the issue of immigration reform. Social identity theory refers to how individuals choose to categorize themselves among groups in society to gain a sense of self, become part of a group, or to enhance their identity (Capozza & Brown, 2000; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). This, of course, includes the issue of identity abandonment as well. Social identity theory aims to explain how social categorization has implications for intergroup behavior (Capozza & Brown, 2000). Social identity is thought to be mutable, meaning that it varies by context. In the context of voting, social identity could vary based on a sense of one's ethnic identity and political affiliations, as well as other factors (Abrams, 1996). Therefore, the relationship for how Latinos identify as less or more acculturated in U.S. society may affect how they feel about politics. Thus, for public relations professionals, it is important to understand how level of acculturation may influence political attitudes and behaviors. What follows is an overview of select factors that may influence how Latinos vote.

2.2. Latinos and politics

2.2.1. Political interest and political participation

According to a Pew Research Center analysis of data from the 2013 American Community Survey, about three-quarters of Latinos are U.S. citizens, with the highest percentage of U.S. citizens being Puerto Rican, Spanish, Cuban and Mexican (López & Patten, 2015). While the news media and political strategists have talked about the influence of the "Latino Vote," the power of the Latino vote has not been realized as strongly as observers might expect. Some researchers have attributed this lack of influence to the geographic concentration of Latino communities in states that tend to vote Democratic, such as California and New York. They suggest this geographic concentration blunts their impact except in battleground states like Florida (Cave, 2016). Furthermore, Latinos that reside in places like the Midwest, or more rural areas where there is comparatively less concentration, Latinos may have less potential to affect election outcomes. In these areas, Latinos may lack access to news media that would provide information encouraging Latinos to get politically involved (Fowler, Hale, & Olsen, 2009). Moreover, researchers have found that news media in communities with a larger proportion of illegal immigrants were less likely to address Latino political interests. Thus, political participation by Latinos may be tempered by their lack of access to political information, and perhaps, by living in communities where they feel less welcome to participate in community life.

Others have reasoned that a lower participation among Latinos is due to their younger age. Similarly, as across other racial and ethnic groups, young people are less likely to vote compared to other age groups. For instance, data from the 2012 Current Population Survey shows that Latinos 18 to 29 years old were among the least likely to vote, with a reported 36.9% turnout rate (López & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). That is lower than the overall 48% of eligible Latinos who voted in 2012 and 66% of African Americans. Latinos who are college graduates and are of Cuban origin are most likely to vote (López & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013).

Political participation has often been associated with additional factors, such as level of acculturation, which is closely tied to language use. Less acculturated Latinos identify as using Spanish more than English, and prefer Spanish-language media (Salzman, 2014). Language is a more easily gathered substitute measure for a rather complex concept that encompasses other dimensions, such as self and social identity, attitudes towards the host culture, the stress related to acculturation, a person's personality and how they think through information (Berry, 1980). Acculturation is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional concept that takes into account not only attitudes towards the culture a person grew up in, but also how the person views the new culture in their situational context (Cabassa, 2003).

2.2.2. Latinos and ideology

Studies suggest that Latinos are more likely to back Democratic candidates, though research shows that the Latino vote can also depend on the individual candidate (Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008). For instance, in 2012, data reported that 71% of Latinos backed candidate Barack Obama for president versus Mitt Romney (López & Taylor, 2012), yet the gap is not always so large. In 2004, 40% of Latinos voted for George W. Bush while 58% supported John Kerry. Thus, Latinos may vote more for the candidate than for the party. Survey research by Connaughton (2004) revealed that young Texan Latinos found that the pull of ethnic identification and country of origin were stronger than that of party affiliation. However, when young Latinos were asked to identify their party, they were more likely to identify with the Democratic Party or as an Independent, and this party identification was stronger for older than younger Latinos.

Marketing research demonstrates that recently immigrated Latinos differ in values and ideologies when compared to Latinos born and raised in the U.S. or Latinos who are several generations away from immigration. Latinos who consume Spanish-language media and identify more highly with the Hispanic identity have tended to distrust business and trust government more than Latinos who did not (Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986). Latinos who consume Spanish-language

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