Stepping Back or Stepping Out? Latinos, Immigration, and the 2016 Presidential Election

An Introduction and Commentary

Betina Cutaia Wilkinson, *Wake Forest University*

On June 16, 2015, Donald J. Trump declared his candidacy in the 2016 presidential election and made immigration a major issue. During his declaration speech, he referred to Mexicans as criminals, drug dealers, and rapists. He stated that to keep the criminals, drug dealers, and rapists out, he would build a "great wall" along the US–Mexico border and he would make Mexico pay for that wall (*Washington Post* Staff 2015). Never before in recent history had a presidential candidate made such explicitly biased remarks against an immigrant group in the United States. These comments instantly became front-page news for various reasons but especially because Latinos[1] are the largest immigrant and minority group in the United States. Today, Latinos comprise approximately 17% of the population, and Mexicans are the largest national-origin group (63.3%) of Latinos. From 2000 to 2010, Latinos accounted for more than 50% of the nation's growth in population. The Pew Research Center projects that the Latino population will continue to grow and by 2065, Latinos will comprise approximately 24% of the US population (Flores 2017).

THE RACIALIZATION OF IMMIGRATION

Throughout the 2016 election cycle, the racialization of immigration was mentioned repeatedly by political pundits, and it is discussed considerably in the Latino politics literature. Providing immigration a face and a name (i.e., brown and un-American, respectively), the racialization of immigration negatively impacts immigrants or those presumed to be immigrants. Labels such as *alien* and *illegal* used to describe unauthorized immigrants dehumanize Latinos, perpetuate a racial hierarchy in which whites are on top and Latinos are near the bottom, and ultimately labels all Latinos as "un-American" (Chavez, Lavariega Monforti, and Michelson 2015; Sampaio 2015). After September 11, 2001, the issue of immigration became associated with terrorism, and a plethora of legislation was proposed and enacted to ensure that our country remained "secure." For instance, Arizona's S.B. 1070 (enacted in 2010) permits law enforcement to determine the legal status of individuals if they have reasonable suspicion that the individuals lack legal status. This law results in racial profiling, given that since it was put into effect, Arizona law enforcement has focused almost entirely on reducing the number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico and Central America (Provine and Doty 2011).

Given the racialization of immigration perpetuated by Trump in his comments leading up to the 2016 election, Latinos had the choice to respond in two ways, as discussed by Michelson and Lavariega Monforti (2018) in their symposium contribution. One way was to hide in the shadows (particularly for unauthorized immigrants) in fear of deportation and to remain cynical about their prospects of being respected by the US government. Another way was to "hit the streets" and protest against Trump's negative remarks as well as to turn out to vote. These behaviors can be explained by reactive mobilization, in which Latinos feel politically threatened by restrictive laws or rhetoric and thus respond with increased protest activity, voter registration rates, and turnout (Ramirez 2013; Zepeda-Millán 2017). Michelson and Lavariega Monforti find that in 2016 compared to 2012, Latinos (i.e., citizens, residents, and unauthorized immigrants) reported lower levels of trust in government yet an increased interest and participation in politics in various forms. These responses are logical reactions to the rhetoric used and actions taken by Trump in

the months leading up to the election and by Barack Obama's presidency.

LATINOS AND US INTEGRATION

One long-standing concern regarding immigration from Latin America, particularly Mexico, is that immigrants are not integrating into US society. In his book, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Huntington (2004) argued that Mexican immigrants are not assimilating to the Anglo-Protestant culture of the United States and that they are bringing about the cultural and economic downfall of this country. These concerns were raised throughout the 2016 election cycle.

leading up to the 2016 election, the issues of immigration policy, healthcare, and Latinos are becoming interconnected. According to a Pew Hispanic Center report by Livingston (2009), there are major differences between US citizens' and residents' experiences with healthcare and those of unauthorized immigrants. Whereas only 17% of the US adult population lacks health insurance, 60% of unauthorized immigrants do not have access to health insurance. Approximately 41% of non-citizen, non-legal permanent resident Latinos claim that their primary healthcare provider is a community clinic or health center, often perceived as a "safety net" for vulnerable individuals. Regarding immigrants' satisfaction with

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Notwithstanding, there is significant empirical evidence that counteracts the numerous anti-immigrant arguments made by Huntington. Not only are Latinos integrating politically by turning out to vote in record numbers (as illustrated by the 2016 presidential election) and serving in local and national governments, but they also are undergoing the naturalization process and making greater economic and educational gains (Bean, Brown, and Rumbaut 2006; Fraga and Segura 2006; Khalid 2016; Sanchez 2015). In her contribution to this symposium, García-Castañon (2018) offers an alternative to those like Huntington who claim that immigrants do not integrate. García-Castañon argues that Latinos, in response to hostile anti-immigrant environments (interestingly, often caused by those who state that Latinos are not assimilating), push back by reinforcing their civic, community, and familial resources. Using survey data from before and during the 2016 presidential election, García-Castañon finds that more foreign-born Latinos are engaged parents (as defined by, e.g., helping with homework, volunteering at their child's school, and attending PTA meetings) than native-born Mexicans as well as native-born whites. Marriage results in greater civic and political engagement, in which married foreign-born and native-born Latinos as well as whites partake in civic-engagement activities at greater rates than their single counterparts. Furthermore, married immigrant Latinos partake in political engagement at greater rates than their single counterparts. Thus, familial networks (i.e., through marriage and engaged parenting) can strengthen the civic and political engagement and identity of immigrants. Moreover, familial networks can counteract the negative effects of residing in a hostile, anti-immigrant environment.

LATINOS, IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT, AND HEALTH

Given the emerging Latino population and the contentious discussion of healthcare reform taking place in the months

the service provided by their healthcare provider, 46% of Latinos who are neither citizens nor permanent residents believed that their Spanish accent or the way that they communicated influenced the poor treatment that they received. Furthermore, 37% believed that their race or ethnicity played a role in their poor treatment by the provider (Livingston 2009).

Thus, how is immigration policy related to Latinos' access to healthcare and overall health? First, it is important to recognize that immigration enforcement operations in the United States have grown significantly in recent years. The Secure Communities program, an intergovernmental information-sharing program, began in 2008 and is still in place today. Focusing on people with a criminal background, Secure Communities coordinated local- and federal-government resources to identify, incarcerate, and eventually deport unauthorized immigrants. It is interesting that most individuals whose files were processed through the program had minor infractions (Kohli and Chavez 2013), and many Secure Communities enforcement efforts were correlated with the size of the Latino population in an area rather than crime (Cox and Miles 2013; Sampaio 2015). Although we have a limited understanding of immigration-policy enforcement on Latinos' health and access to healthcare, we know that immigration raids can negatively affect the emotional and physical health of immigrants and that local immigration-enforcement policies can decrease the likelihood that Latino immigrants will use health services (Lopez et al. 2017; Watson et al. 2014). In their symposium contribution, Cruz Nichols, Pedraza, and Lebrón (2018) conduct a comprehensive, contemporary analysis of the effects of deportations under Secure Communities and perceived racial policing of Latinos on their health. They conclude that deportations under the Secure Communities program are associated with greater mental-health needs among Latinos. Furthermore, Latinos who report that "people

like me" are more likely to be stopped, apprehended, or incarcerated by the police were less likely to report positive physical health.

STATES FIGHTING BACK WITH IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

Where the federal government fails to provide solutions to immigration issues in the United States, states often fill in the gaps by developing their own laws to address the complex social, political, and economic issues of immigration. During the 2016 election cycle, several states proposed and enacted immigration laws. In early 2016, Connecticut approved a law that granted unauthorized immigrant residents access to public funds to attend public universities. A few months later, the California Senate passed a law that authorized undocumented immigrants to gain access to health insurance. During this same period, numerous states enacted restrictive immigration legislation. Mississippi passed a bill that prohibits the establishment of sanctuary cities in which government officials or authorities limit or restrict federal immigration laws, thus requiring law enforcement to assist federal agencies in enforcing those laws. A few months later, the Louisiana state legislature passed a bill that prohibits sanctuary cities from receiving certain state funds. As to unauthorized immigrants, Georgia approved a law in which unauthorized immigrants or non-permanent residents are prohibited from serving on a local governing body. The legislature in Arizona went as far as proposing a bill that established criminal-sentencing requirements for undocumented immigrants; however, this bill did not become law ("2016 All Immigration Key Votes"). Needless to say, the state immigration legislation proposed and enacted in the months before the 2016 election were varied and often conflicting, revealing the nation's fervent sentiments on immigration.

Thus, what influences a state legislature to enact immigration legislation? We know that economic and cultural concerns may influence states to pass immigration laws (Borjas 1990; Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015). However, a critical question that often has been neglected is the extent that characteristics of state political institutions, particularly direct democracy mechanisms (DDMs),[2] influence state legislators to propose and enact immigration legislation. This question is addressed by Silva (2018) in her study of US state legislation from 1980 to 2014. Silva concludes in her symposium contribution that DDMs affect the passage of state immigration law such that states with DDMs pass more immigration laws than states without them. She suggests that DDMs influence legislators to pass legislation to prevent them from being shut out of the policy process and to reveal to constituents that they are representing their interests.

2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND IMMIGRATION

Throughout the 2016 campaign cycle, Latinos were mobilized by candidates' campaigns, non-profit organizations, and individual Latinos. *Voto Latino*, a civic media organization designed to empower Latino millennials, was active throughout the 2016 campaign cycle. A significant portion of its efforts was placed in mobilizing Latinos throughout the nation, particularly in the

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South (Bernal 2016). Numerous immigrant youth-advocacy groups throughout the country, such as United We Dream, NC Dream Team, and Community Change Action, were instrumental in educating and mobilizing Latinos. Hillary Clinton's campaign also was responsible for mobilizing Latino voters during the election cycle. She held rallies and gave speeches in numerous cities and towns with a large Latino population. She did not neglect the South, choosing to end her campaign with a midnight rally in Wake County, North Carolina—a place with a fairly large Latino population and home to the capital city of Raleigh (Heye 2016; "WakeGOV: Census, Demographics, and Population Data" 2016). Whereas Trump's campaign dedicated numerous resources to mobilize individuals in states with a large number of Latino voters, this attention to mobilizing Latinos did not compare to Clinton's campaign. Results from the Latino Decisions 2016 National Election Eve Poll revealed that 13% of Latinos believed that Trump truly cares about Latino voters compared to 60% who believed that Clinton truly cares (Latino Decisions 2016 Election Eve Poll). Still, a record number of Latinos voted last November and turned out in favor of Clinton who, according to Latino Decisions Election Eve poll data, won 79% of the Latino vote compared to Trump, who won 18% (Khalid 2016; Latino Decisions 2016).

Immigration has been a long-seated policy concern for Latinos and it was a mobilizing policy issue in the 2016 election. Trump's hostile remarks about Mexicans and the creation of a US–Mexico border divided US voters yet influenced many Latinos to turn out in favor of Clinton, signaling that they did not stand for xenophobic immigration rhetoric and that their voices were going to be heard loud and clear. The South is a place where immigration is becoming an increasingly contentious issue. The Latino population in Southern states is growing at an extremely fast pace, resulting in electoral competitiveness being increasingly shaped by new Latino voters (Wilkinson 2015). In his contribution to this symposium, Medina Vidal (2018) examines the immigration attitudes of Southern and non-Southern Latinos (i.e., relative to those of whites and blacks) after the 2016 election and reaches several intriguing conclusions.

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Among whites, blacks, and Latinos across the United States, non-Southern and Southern Latinos are the least supportive of building a wall on the US–Mexico border and the most supportive of allowing undocumented immigrants living in the United States to remain and be placed on a path to citizenship. Although differences exist between Southern and non-Southern Latinos' attitudes toward immigration, Southern whites by far comprise the group that is most supportive of building a wall and the least supportive of granting undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. Additionally, whites racialize immigration politics, meaning that whites (Southern and non-Southern) who believe that too much attention is given to race are less likely to support a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants than whites who believe that we pay too little attention to race.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

The 2016 election was momentous for numerous reasons—yet, what predictions can we make about future Latino voters? First, the future of the Latino vote is in the hands of millennials. Millennial Latinos eligible to vote comprise the largest share of all age categories across the United States—especially in many Southern states, such as North Carolina, where Latinos are impacting electoral results (López and Stepler 2016).

Second, although Latinos have remained strongly committed to Democratic candidates in recent presidential elections, they are not solid Democrats. According to the Latino Decisions 2016 National Election Eve Poll, 33% of Latinos do not agree with the Republican Party on many issues but would consider supporting Republican candidates in the future if it helps to pass immigration reform with a path to citizenship. However, if the past is any indication of the future, Republicans will not lead the effort in passing comprehensive immigration reform with a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants so it remains to be seen whether Latinos will cast their votes for Republican candidates.

Third and most important, immigration will remain the defining issue in Latino politics as long as anti-Latino nativism persists. Regardless of national origin and socioeconomic status, Latinos are linked due to experiences with racism. Yet, as suggested by the articles in this symposium, Latinos will not remain in the shadows but rather will display that this country belongs to them as much as it does to others. ■

NOTES

1. I use *Latino* as a gender-neutral term.
2. *Direct democracy mechanisms* refer to ballot initiatives and political referenda.

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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Vanessa Cruz Nichols *is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and a postdoctoral fellow with the Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society at Indiana University. Her research focuses on the role of elite mobilizing strategies and issue activism among Latinos is at the intersection of political communication, Latino politics, immigration, political behavior, psychology, and public policy. Her book project is tentatively titled* Latinos Rising to the Challenge: Political Responses to Peril and Promise. *Cruz Nichols was a co-student investigator of the 2015 Latino National Health and Immigration Survey. She may be reached at vcruznic@indiana.edu.*

Marcela García-Castañon *is assistant professor of political science at San Francisco State University. García-Castañon's research centers on immigrant political socialization, specializing in family dynamics and community integration. She may be reached mgcs@sfsu.edu.*

Jessica L. Lavariega Monforti *is dean of the College of Arts and Science and professor of political science at California Lutheran University. Her recent publications include a coauthored book on immigration (*Living the Dream, *Paradigm Press, 2014), and an article in* Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies *(2017) on the Latina/o gender gap in the 2016 election. She is also the editor of a forthcoming two-volume encyclopedia on Latins in the US political system. She can be reached at jlavariega@callutheran.edu.*

Alana M.W. LeBrón *is assistant professor in the Department of Chicano/Latino Studies and the Department of Population Health and Disease Prevention at the University of California, Irvine. Dr. LeBrón's research focuses on the (re)production of social inequalities that shape inequities in health and opportunities for intervention to promote health equity. She was a co-student investigator of the 2015 Latino National Health and Immigration Survey. She may be reached at alebron@uci.edu.*

Xavier Medina Vidal *is Diane D. Blair Professor of Latino Studies and assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas. His research focuses on questions related to Latinos in the US South, and Mexican transnational political behavior. He may be reached at dxmedina@uark.edu.*

Melissa R. Michelson *is professor of political science at Menlo College. Her recent publications include a book on how to change attitudes about LGBT rights (*Listen, We Need to Talk, *Oxford University Press, 2017), and an article in the* American Political Science Review *(November 2016) on how to increase Latino voter turnout. She can be reached at melissa.michelson@menlo.edu.*

Francisco I. Pedraza *is assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and School of Public Policy at the University of California at Riverside. His research centers on political attitude formation and political behavior, with a special emphasis on attitudes and behaviors of racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States. A Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Scholar in Health Policy Research from 2012 to 2014, Dr. Pedraza is the Co-PI of the 2015 Latino National Health and Immigration Survey and coordinates the Politics of Race, Immigration, and Ethnicity Consortium. fpedraza@ucr.edu.*

Andrea Silva *is assistant professor in the Political Science Department at the University of North Texas. Her research centers on American politics, particularly immigration and Latino politics. She can be reached at andrea.silva@unt.edu.*

Betina Cutaia Wilkinson *is associate professor of political science at Wake Forest University. Her research interests include Latina/o political behavior, race and media, race and crime, and immigration policy. Her latest book project* Partners or Rivals? Power and Latino, Black and White Relations in the 21st Century *(University of Virginia Press, 2015) recently won the Race, Ethnicity, and Politics Section's Best Book Award on Inter-Race Relations in the United States. Wilkinson's research has been published in several political science and multidisciplinary journals including* Political Research Quarterly, Social Science Quarterly, American Politics Research, PS: Political Science and Politics *and* Race and Social Problems. *For more information about this symposium, please contact her at wilkinbc@wfu.edu.*