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The Latino Vote : Toward More Polarization?

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Ethno-racial categories are composed of many groups.¹ That is why the Latino community has been described as heterogeneous. Yet, the Latino identity operates socially in a cohesive manner in the US because of internal and external factors. The internal factors are historical in the sense that people in Latin America have a common language that, in spite of national and regional differences, allows for the sharing of cultural goods, ideas and worldviews. They share this cultural heritage because they share a common history of colonization by Spain.² Colonization and fights for independence, along with a complicated relationship with the US that has always perceived the western hemisphere as its zone of influence, have brought a sense of commonality in many Latin American countries.³ And in the US, as Douglas Massey and Magaly R. Sánchez have shown in their book *Brokered Boundaries*, people of Latin American origin have faced an external force in the form of an anti-immigration discourse that explains, in part, their sense of identity as a community:

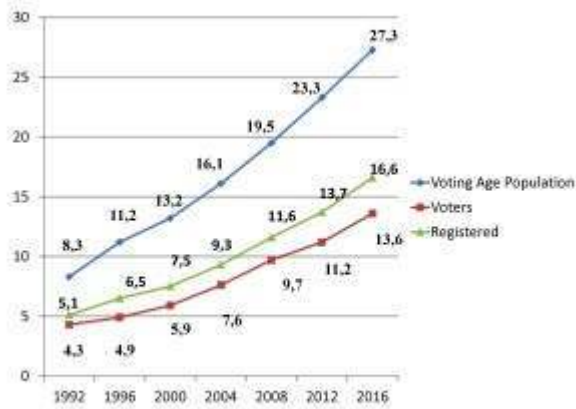
“For Latin American immigrants in the United States today, the processes of assimilation and identity formation are unfolding within a context characterized by an exceptional degree of anti-immigrant framing and immigrant-isolating boundary work. The tail wagging the dog is undocumented migration.” (Massey and Sanchez, 2010, p. 24)

- 2 Therefore there is such a thing as a Latino community. And this community, at the mass level, has distinct policy concerns (Martinez-Ebers et al. 2000; Fraga et al., 2007). Immigration is only one of many issues but it carries “tremendous emotional weight and is inevitably tied to these other issues” (Rouse 2016, p. 45). That is why immigration remains a rallying cry for Latinos and crucial policies such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) represent great mobilization tools (Barreto and Collinwood 2015). These internal and external factors help explain why scholars have identified a “Latino vote” (DeSipio 1996; Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; García 2012; Barreto and Segura 2014).
- 3 But while a lot has been written about the Latino community and its role in American politics there remain some misconceptions. Some of them are the idea that the Latino vote could be equated with a Catholic vote or that Latinos have reached such a demographic level that they have become an electoral giant. While this statement may be true locally, it is far from being the case nationally because of such factors as their geographical concentration, low citizenship rate and even lower turnout. Besides, important presidential election swing states, such as Florida, provide a contrasting picture. However, there appears to be a long-term trend in which Latino numbers are increasing in many parts of the country and help elect more Latinos into office. Moreover, Latinos are changing American politics because they tend to prefer the Democratic Party. Far from disproving the salience of the Latino vote, the election of Donald Trump might actually reinforce the confluence of racial and partisan polarization.

1 - The Potential Impact of the Latino Vote

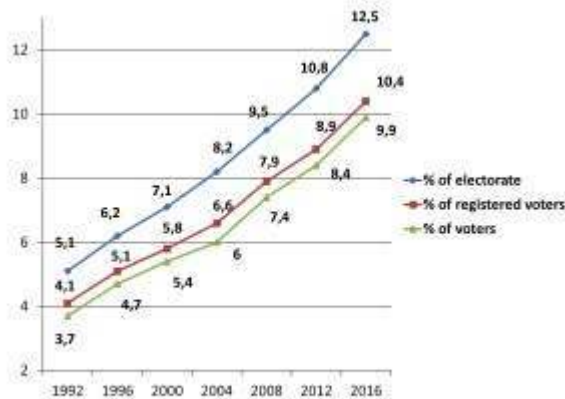
- 4 A persistent misconception about Latinos is that they are an electoral giant. While this may be true locally in a city like Los Angeles, it is not the case nationally, at least not yet. The Latino community has become a demographic giant and at the same time, at the national level, it is still an electoral dwarf. While in 1980 the Latino population comprised only 14.5 millions, according to the census, in 2015 it represented almost 18% of the US total population.⁴ Estimates also indicated that of the 57 million Latinos in the US in 2016, 27 millions were of voting age, that is about 16% of the electorate (Griffin et al. 2015). Yet only about 17 million Latinos were estimated to register to vote and less than 14 million were actually expected to vote in 2016 (NALEO 2016). Actually, according to the Current Population Survey, a grand total of 12.7 million Hispanics (of any race) voted in 2016 out of 15.2 millions who registered, for total voting age population of 26.6 million.⁵ These were disappointing numbers for the community.

Figure Estimate of total Latino electorate, NALEO



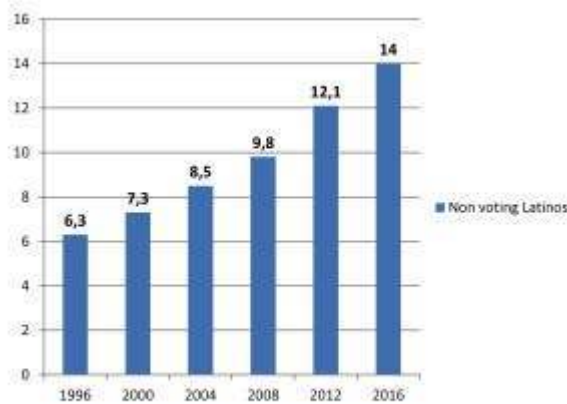
- 5 In 2016 the Latino Voting Age population was estimated to represent 12.5% of the total voting age population. But the registered number of Latinos only represented 10.4% of the total registered population and the number of Latinos projected to vote was only 10% of the American electorate going to the polls.

Figure Estimated Latino electorate impact as percentage of general electorate



- 6 To put it differently, projections estimated that about 12 million Latinos would not vote in 2016. This makes Latinos by far the largest reservoir of votes in the US that both major parties should try to tap into, especially since Latino numbers keep increasing in total numbers and as a share of the electorate. In that sense, Latinos represent the future of American politics. And the battle over this untapped potential should drive both major parties agenda for the foreseeable future. Over the past 20 years the GOP instrumentalized anti-immigrant, and anti-Latino sentiment for local electoral gains but demographics suggest that this strategy is becoming more dangerous and counterproductive with each election cycle (Robinson et al. 2016).

Figure 3 Estimate of total number of Latinos not voting, in millions



- 7 Indeed this steady increase in the Latino vote has the potential to be very impactful in the context of other groups’ decrease in total votes. Except in 2016, for the first time since 1980, the Euro-American share of the electoral did not decrease (it remained at its 2012 level of 73%).⁶

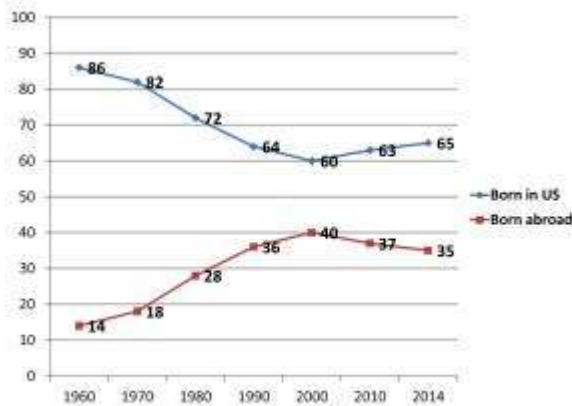
Figure 4 Net Vote Evolution per Race/ethnicity, in thousands. Source: Community Survey Population

Presidential year	Race/ethnicity	Total votes	Net change
2016	Euro-Americans	100,849	2,760
	African-Americans	17,019	-694
	Latinos	12,682	-1,494
2012	Euro-Americans	98,041	-2,001
	African-American	17,813	1,680
	Latinos	11,188	1,443
2008	Euro-Americans	100,042	475
	African-Americans	16,133	2,117
	Latinos	9,745	2,158
2004	Euro-Americans	99,567	1,098
	African-Americans	14,016	1,099
	Latinos	7,587	1,653
2000	Euro-Americans	98,469	2,865
	African-Americans	12,917	1,531
	Latinos	5,934	1,006

2 - The Structural Constraints of the Latino Vote

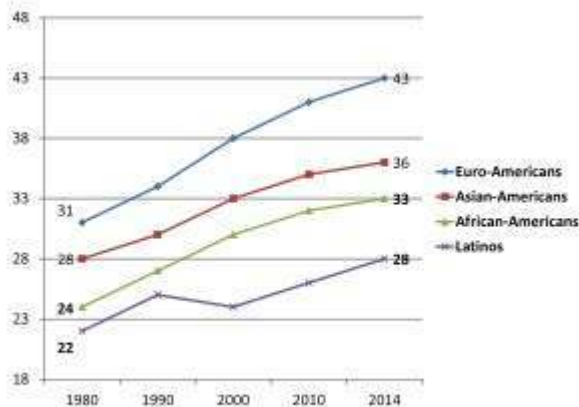
- 8 What are some of the reasons that explain the relative weakness of the Latino community as a voting group? First, to be eligible to vote, one needs to acquire US citizenship. Many Latinos were born abroad, even if that percentage is decreasing.⁷ In 2014, 27.7% of foreign- born Americans were born in Mexico. 35% of the Latino population (19 million people) were born outside the US while 65% were born in the US (36 million people). The foreign-born rates for other ethno-racial groups were 4% for Euro-Americans, 8.6% for African-Americans and 67% for Asian-Americans (Brown and Stepler 2016).

Figure 5 Percentage of foreign-born Latinos, US Census



- 9 In 2015 74% of Latinos eligible to become US citizens decided to naturalize. That is the highest percentage of naturalization among Latinos in 2 decades. However, only 42% of Mexicans opted to do so. A historically high mark for that community but still very low to really have an impact on the electoral process (Gonzalez-Barrea, 2017).
- 10 The second reason for this low electoral impact is that one needs to be 18 years old to be eligible to vote in the US and the Latino community is on average much younger than the rest of the population or other ethno-racial groups (Patten 2016). Figure 8 shows the median age according to race/ethnicity.

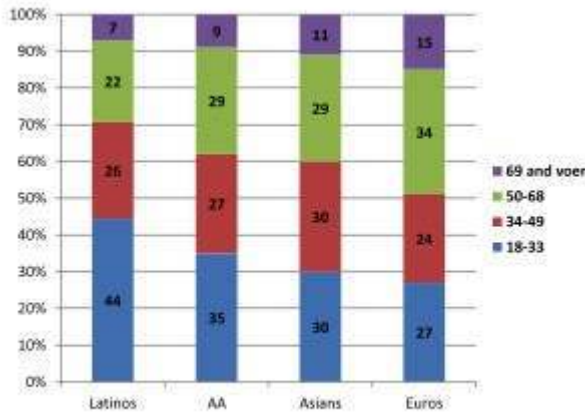
Figure 6 Median age by racial/ethnic group



- 11 The fact the Latino population is on average younger than the rest of the country means that fewer people are over 18 years of age and therefore eligible to vote. However, when they are above 18 years old Latino minors are on average younger than minors in the rest of the population. According to the Pew Research Center the vast majority of Latino youths (93% of them) are U.S-born citizens and therefore will automatically become eligible to vote once they turn 18. It is estimated that every year about 800,000 Latinos turn 18. By 2030, this number could grow to 1 million per year, adding a potential

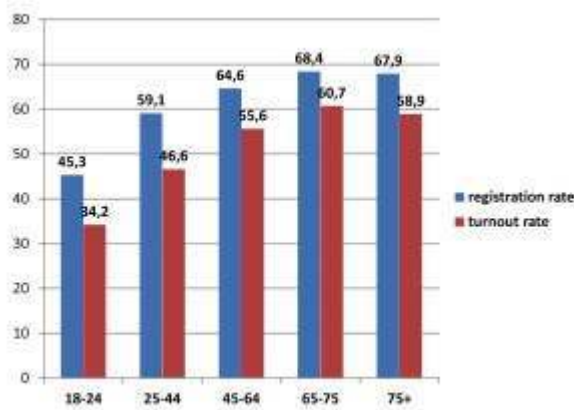
electorate of more than 16 million new Latino voters to the rolls by 2030 (Taylor et al. 2016).

Figure 7 2016 estimate of generation percentage in electorate by



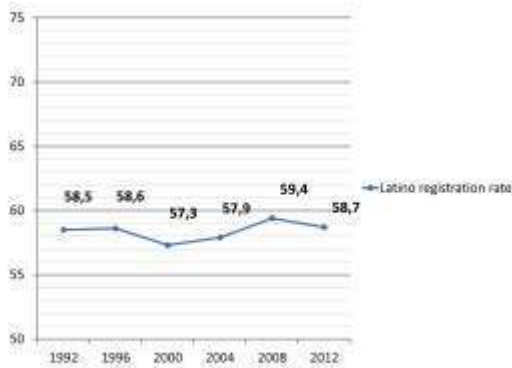
- 12 In 2016, however, millennials represented the single largest cohort of eligible voters for the Latino community (Krogstad 2016). This has important electoral consequences since young people register and turn out at much lower rates than older people. Voting rates have historically depended on an array of demographic factors, and age is one of them. In 2012, the overall population turnout rate of 18 to 24 year-olds was 34.5% while that of 65 to 75 year olds reached 60% (Current Population Survey 2013). As a result, an older community has an electoral built-in turnout advantage.

Figure 8 2012 registration and turnout rate by age group



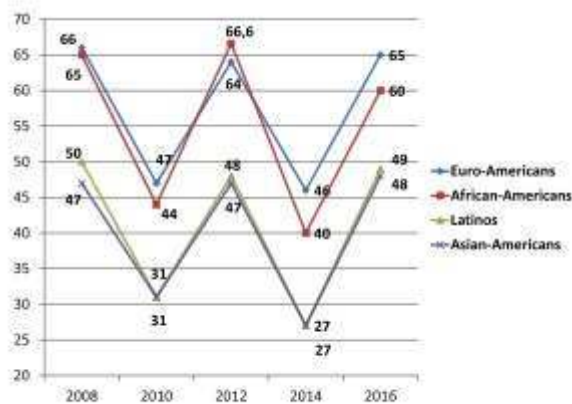
- 13 As a consequence, the third reason that the Latino vote remains much weaker than its total population numbers might suggest is that registration rates, in spite of massive registration drive efforts on the part of activists over the years, have remained extremely low. Since 1992 it has hovered around 58% and never exceeded 60%, while Euro-Americans and African-Americans have registered at rates superior to 70%.

Figure 9 Latino registration rate by presidential election year



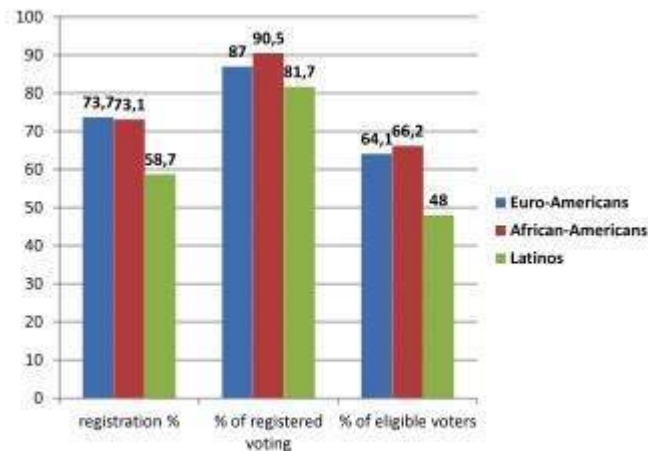
14 This low registration rate is combined with an anemic turnout rate. The Latino turnout rate has never gone over 50%. Latinos and Asians are the two groups that lag consistently in turnout rate when compared to Anglos or African-Americans. Moreover, during midterm elections, all groups suffer from a 20 point drop, and Latino turnout rates can dip below 30%.

Figure 10 Turnout rate by racial/ethnic group



15 Combined, all these factors help explain why the Latino electorate is at a disadvantage compared to Euro-Americans and African-Americans. For instance, in 2012, Latinos lagged behind Euro-Americans and African-Americans in terms of both registration and turnout rate among registered voters and eligible voters.⁸

Figure 11 2012 electoral participation per ethno-racial group



- 16 Finally, one of the main reasons why the Latino electorate has had a moderate impact on the presidential election is that Latino populations are highly concentrated in uncompetitive states such as California and Texas.

Figure 12 Latino population concentration per state, based on 2015 census estimates



- 17 This concentration has even more dire consequences in midterm elections. According to Nate Cohn, in 2014, Latinos represented less than 5% of eligible voters in nine of the 10 most competitive Senate states, and about 2.4% of the people who actually voted. The situation is almost as problematic in the House of Representatives where half of all Latinos live in just 65 of the nation's 435 congressional districts. Cohn estimated the Latino population share of the eligible electorate in the 2014 House battlegrounds to be 7.4% (Cohn 2015).
- 18 Only a handful of swing states have Latino population that can have a real electoral impact during the presidential elections as the percentage of Latino voting age citizens is superior to 5% in only three traditional battleground states: Nevada, Colorado, and Florida.

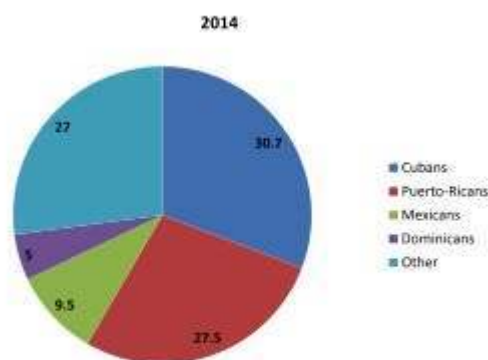
Figure 13 Latino voting age population estimates in swing states, based on 2015 census estimates

	% of Latinos voting age citizens	% of Latinos in general population
Florida	18.1	24.1
Nevada	17.2	27.8
Colorado	14.5	21.2
United-States	11.3	17.3
Virginia	4.6	8.8
Pennsylvania	4.5	6.5
Wisconsin	3.6	6.4
North Carolina	3.4	9
Iowa	2.9	5.5
Ohio	2.3	3.4

3 - The Florida Exception

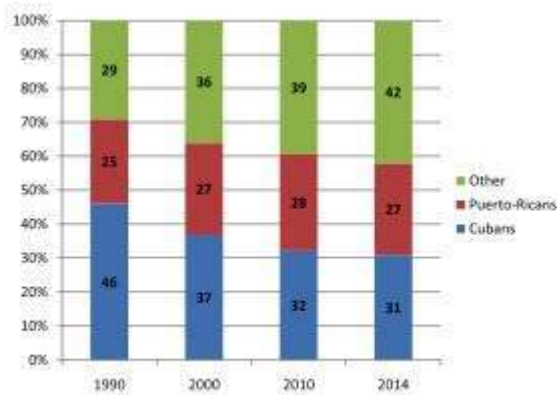
- 19 Nevada and Colorado have voted for the Democratic Party in each of the last three presidential cycles but their electoral college votes only amount to 15. On the other hand, Florida, with 29 Electoral College votes, is by far the largest swing state in which Latinos can impact the presidential election. But Florida is not representative of the Latino population in the rest of the nation. In 2016, the Latino population of the state was composed, roughly speaking, of 30% Cubans, 30% Porto Ricans and 30% other, with Mexican-Americans only accounting for about 10% (López and Stepler 2016).

Figure 14 Florida Latino population breakdown by national ancestry, 2016



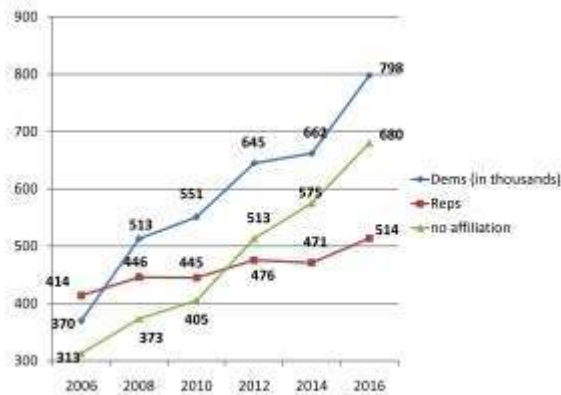
- 20 The overall trend, however, shows a decrease of the share of the Cuban population in the Florida Latino population over the past 30 years.

Figure 15 The changing composition of the Florida Latino population since 1990



- 21 This is important because Cubans and Puerto Ricans do not see immigration issues in the same light as Mexican Americans. Unlike foreign immigrants, Puerto Ricans arrive as citizens because of the island's status as a US territory. As residents of the island, they cannot vote in the general election, but once they relocate to a US state they can establish residency and become registered to vote. Thanks to the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act almost all Cuban migrants have been admitted under a special parole power exercised by the U.S. Attorney General that instantly grants them full legal status and puts them on a path to U.S. citizenship. And historically speaking Cubans have supported the Republican Party because of its tough position toward the Castro regime.⁹ For this reason the Florida legislature is an exception in the Union because its Latino caucus is mostly republican.
- 22 Moreover, Cubans have the highest turnout rate (67.1% in 2012) of all Latinos (Current Population Survey 2013). By comparison the Mexican American turnout rate was 44% that same year and 52.8% for Puerto Ricans. However, Cuban support for the Republican Party has eroded over the years (Krogstad 2014). According to the national exit polls in 2004, 78% of Cuban Americans voted for George W. Bush, while in 2012, the Cuban vote in Florida was split 49-47 between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. In 2016 the split seemed to continue (Krogstad and Flores 2016). This drop in popularity can be seen in the evolution of partisan affiliation of registered Latinos.¹⁰

Figure 16 Evolution of partisan affiliation of newly registered Latinos, 2006-2016



4 - Correlation Between Racial Polarization and Partisan Polarization

- 23 Exit polls consistently show the African American vote to be around 90% for the Democrats in presidential elections and the Latino Vote to hover around 70% for the same party. At the same time African American and Latino voters consistently prefer voting for a member of their own community. Because of the lack of diversity in the Republican candidate field in most states, this “identity vote” is de facto a Democratic vote. For this reason Bruce Cain declared that racial polarization and partisan polarization have become “two sides of the same coin” (Cain, 2013).
- 24 What characterizes the Florida Democratic coalition is that it has both a large Latino population and a large African American population. The following maps indicate that there was a strong correlation between the percentage of Euro-Americans in a county and Mitt Romney’s margin of victory in 2012. Obama won only one county in which the Anglo population was superior to 79%. But he only won Monroe County by less than 200 votes. The odds of Obama winning a county increased as the Anglo population got closer to 70%. Obama got 70% of the vote in Gadsden County, his best result in the state, in a county that was in 2010 36% Anglo.¹¹

Figure 17 Florida Anglo population concentration by county 2010 census

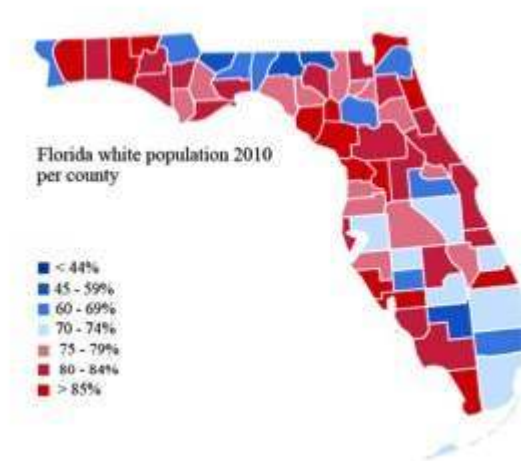


Figure 18 Florida presidential election results 2012 by county



- 25 Such obvious ethno-racial and partisan polarization has had tremendous consequences since GOP operatives have used ethno-racial affiliation as a proxy for partisan affiliation. As in other states controlled by Republicans, the decrease in the popularity of the Republican Party among Latinos in Florida has led the GOP to pass measures intended to discourage minorities to go to the polls, with seemingly significant results (Herron and Smith 2014). The correlation between partisan affiliation and ethnic/racial affiliation has led the GOP to conclude that it was in its electoral interest to demobilize segments of the electorate (Fox Piven et al. 2008; Haygood 2012; Levitt 2012; Gonzales 2012). On May 19, 2011, Florida Governor Rick Scott signed into law Florida's notorious House Bill 1355 which prevented ex-felons from being able to cast a ballot after serving their time, cutting back early voting from fourteen to eight days, and severely restricting voter registration drives (Herron and Smith 2013). Meanwhile, the state conducted a controversial statewide voter purge that attempted to eliminate individuals not legally entitled to cast a ballot from voter rolls (Ellement 2014). These measures were added on top of a non-strict voter ID law on the books since 1977.¹²

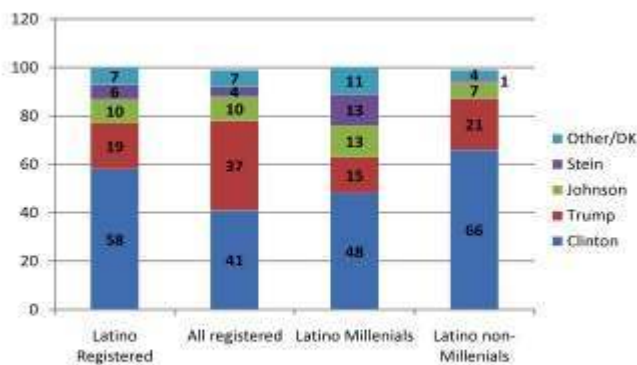
5 - 2016: The Actual Impact of the Latino Vote

- 26 In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost Florida by about 113,000 votes, that is 1.2% of state votes. However, Florida ended up not being the most crucial state since even without Florida, Donald Trump would still have reached 270 electoral votes because of his very narrow margins in Wisconsin, which he won by 22,748 votes (that is 0.77% of the votes), Michigan, which he won by 10,704 votes (that is 0.22% of the votes) and Pennsylvania which he won by 44,292 (that is 0.72% of the votes). In those states Latinos represented 3.6%, 3.1% and 4.5% of eligible voters. The Electoral College gives an enormous advantage to swing states and it so happened that in 2016 the most crucial swing states were states with small Latino populations. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by almost 3 million votes but received 224 Electoral College votes. To say it differently, she received 48% of the vote but 42% of the Electoral College. On the other hand, Donald Trump received 46% of the votes but 56% of the Electoral College votes (307). In the most populous state, California, the state with the largest Latino population of the Union, she won by a whopping 30% and received 4.3 million votes more than her opponent. In a winner-take-all voting system, however, these votes do not count.
- 27 In 2016, the Republicans did not need the Latino vote to win.¹³ Yet, it was one of the closest elections in the history of the nation and it probably could not be replicated. First of all, because the margins in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania were extremely narrow and represented a worst-case-scenario breakdown of the Democrats' "blue wall". Secondly, because the unpopularity of the Republican brand among Latinos is at an all-time low and may not improve during a Trump presidency (Sargent 2016). Finally, because the Latino population in the US keeps increasing and by 2020 their presence might shake up the electoral map. For instance, 31% of the population of Arizona was estimated to be Latino in 2016, representing 21.5% of the electorate. Hillary Clinton lost Arizona by 3.5% whereas Obama had lost it by almost 10% in 2012 and 2008. In the same vein, Clinton lost Texas, a non-competitive state where none of the candidates campaigned and a state in which 28.1% of eligible voters in 2016 were Latinos, by less than 10%. 10% is still a comfortable margin but an improvement from 2012 when Obama lost by 16%. Making Texas, and its 36 Electoral College votes, competitive again has been the Holy Grail for the Democratic Party for some time and it is not beyond the realms of possibility. Since 2000, the fastest-growing segment of the Latino population has been in southern metropolitan areas. When combined with the African-American vote, this growing Latino presence already helped flip Virginia and made North Carolina competitive. So the argument that this demographic evolution is bound to benefit the Democrats is still solid. It does not mean, however, that Democrats should take the Latino vote for granted or clear the field for a historically unpopular Washington insider again.
- 28 Exit polls estimated that 17% of voters in Florida in 2016 were Latinos, which of course is probably too high considering that they represented only 18% of eligible voters. The problem with exit polls is that they are notoriously unreliable when it comes to Latinos. As soon as the 2016 Exit Polls were released they were at the heart of a controversy because they estimated that Latinos voted for Donald Trump at a rate of 28% while 66% voted for Hillary Clinton.¹⁴ The polling firm Latino Decisions, co-founded by UCLA professor Matt Barreto, estimated that only 18% of Latino voters chose the GOP in 2016 (Sanchez and Barreto 2016). This was confirmed by another study by Francisco Pedraza

and Bryan Wilcox Archuleta. Using Ecological Inference they estimated that 77% of Latinos in Texas voted for Hillary Clinton and 19% vote for Trump as opposed to the 61-34 split presented by Exit Polls in that state (Pedraza and Wilcox Archuleta 2016). Their study suggests that Latinos voted Democrat at a rate of 80% in Arizona, California and Nevada.¹⁵

- 29 Before the election a Pew Research Center polls also showed that the Republican candidate would receive less than 20% of the votes and that support number was actually a dreadful 15% among Latino Millennials (Lopez et al. 2016).

Figure 19 Pew Research Center Poll August-September 2016



- 30 What these numbers suggest is that the Republican brand, or at least the particular candidate in 2016, was especially unpopular among young Latinos. As a consequence the future of the GOP among the next generation of voters is rather bleak. Furthermore, this rejection of the GOP by Latino youth indicates that the pattern of partisan polarization among Latinos might actually increase. Latinos do not vote Democrats at rates close to that of the African Americans but these polls and 2016 voting pattern analyses, along with the overall tone of the message by Donald Trump towards the Latino community, suggest that Latinos might feel repulsed by the GOP at the national level, which should, but may not necessarily, benefit the Democrats.

Conclusion

- 31 In an extremely tight 2016 presidential election the Latino vote does not appear to have been determinant. Nonetheless, demographics indicate that while being limited by high geographic concentration, low citizenship rates and low registration and turnout rates, the potential of the Latino vote is as strong as ever. In some states the Latino electorate cannot be ignored. At the national level, courting the Latino vote is poised to extend the electoral map and is still the best long-term calculation for the major parties. Alienating them is getting riskier with each election cycle and political context will determine how long the current GOP can survive on an electoral base that has been dangerously reduced.¹⁶ If immigration reform is as central an issue as some scholars have observed, the very uncertainty surrounding the future of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA),

coupled with the national outcry surrounding Donald Trump's first executive order on immigration and his subsequent plummeting approval ratings so early in his presidency (Agiesta 2017), does not bode well for the Republican Party and may well undermine its hope to regain popularity among the fastest growing segment of the American electorate.

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NOTES

1. I give the word ethno-racial the same meaning as historian David Hollinger in his description of the ethno-racial pentagon. David Hollinger, *Post-Ethnic America*, New York: Basic Books, 1995. According to the Directive 15 of the Office of Management and Budget, the Hispanic/Latino census category is an ethnic and not a racial category. However, from a practical standpoint, this category works as a racial category, especially in the field of public policies aimed at monitoring and fighting discrimination.
2. It is more complicated to talk about an Asian community in the US because of this lack of internal unifying factors such as a common language or a common history of colonization.
3. The very expression Latin America conveys this sense of commonality.
4. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/00>
5. Current Population Survey 2016, Table 4.b. "Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2016". The total Latino population was estimated to reach 39 million out of which 26.6 millions were citizens.
6. Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2016, *Census Bureau*, May 10 2017, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html
7. People born in Puerto Rico are not considered foreign-born.
8. Eligible voter population includes people over 18 years old but excludes felons barred from voting.
9. This is consistent over the years in opinion polls, Guillermo J. Grenier and Hugh Gladwin, 2016 FIU Cuba Poll, <http://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2016-cuba-poll.pdf>
10. Florida Department of State, Election Division, Bookclosing Report – Regular, <http://dos.myflorida.com/elections/data-statistics/voter-registration-statistics/bookclosing/bookclosing-reports-regular/>; The registration numbers for 2016 are as of October 18 2016, http://dos.myflorida.com/media/697212/2016general_partyrace.pdf
11. This correlation held in 2012 in other southern swing states such as Virginia or North Carolina where Obama polled lower among Euro-Americans than his national average of 39% but he won Florida, Virginia and made North Carolina competitive.
12. A recent working paper studied elections from 2008-2012 and found that Latino turnout was 10.3% lower in states with strict photo identification requirements than in other states. The authors also found that the participation gap between eligible Latino and white voters increased from 5.3% to 11.9% in states with strict photo identification requirements. Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, "Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Voters," Working Paper, University of California, San Diego, 2015, <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~zhajnal/page5/documents/voterIDhajnaletal.pdf>
13. Some might argue that the Latino vote played a role locally because the election was so tight. For instance, in Michigan the Latino turnout rate was 70% in 2012 for a total of 158,000 votes while it dropped to 36% in 2016 for a total of 74,000 votes. Or in Florida where the Latino turnout rate reached 62% in 2012 but only 54% in 2016 (Current Population Survey, 2017).
14. <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls>
15. Even without using ecological reference one can be suspicious of exit polls number just by looking at homogeneous precincts, that is precincts that are at least 90% Latino, to get a rough estimation.
16. During the 1980 presidential elections, the share of the Anglo vote was 88%. In 2012 it was 72%.

ABSTRACTS

Much has been written about the Latino community and its role in American politics. Yet there remain some misconceptions. While they have become the largest ethno-racial minority in the country their political impact has remained limited at the national level due to their geographical concentration, low rate of citizenship and registration and even lower turnout rates. Yet, demographics suggest they probably hold the key to the electoral future of the two major parties. In 2016 Donald Trump was elected president in spite of harsh anti-Latino rhetoric. However his election was exceptional on many levels. Alienating the Latino community remains a dangerous gamble for the GOP in the long term because it could lead to more ethno-racial and partisan polarization that may hamper its electoral prospects.

INDEX

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