
Latinos as Foreign Policy Actors: Myth or Reality?

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Abstract

There are increasing claims regarding the attachments that Latin American immigrants have to their home countries and their potential roles as lobbyists for their countries of origin. These claims are not based on systematic analyses of immigrant perspectives and behavior but reflect instead the rhetoric and aspirations of home country and immigrant leaders. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which such claims reflect immigrant attitudes and behavior. Specifically, it will draw on surveys of Latin American immigrants that examine how they view home country issues, their levels of involvement in activities related to home countries and the strength of their attachments to U.S. institutions and society. This paper will pay particular attention to attitudes and behaviors directly linked to politics as distinct from those tied to cultural and social realms.

Introduction

What is the role that immigrants play as foreign policy actors in the United States? Since the early 1990s, there has been a widespread fear that immigrants may become effective advocates for policies favoring their countries of origin over U.S. interests. Particularly, and given the rapid increase of the Latino¹ population, this debate has been colored by simplistic assumptions and conspiratorial images regarding Latino loyalties toward their home countries. The purpose of this paper is to measure Latino involvement in U.S. and home-country politics. Our analysis is based on the results of two surveys conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute in 2002² and 2003.³

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, we review the literature on this issue to explicate both sides of the argument. In the second, we analyze the extent to which Latinos engage in U.S. politics and home-country politics paying particular attention to the extent to which Latinos are incorporated into mainstream American political life. The third part of the paper is related to the connections that immigrants have with their home countries at the individual and national level.

We will locate our analysis within three major approaches to international relations, the pluralist, the institutionalist and the transnationalist. The pluralist approach (Jervis 1976; Moravcsik 1997) argues that to understand the relationship between the domestic and international level we should look at the social structures that compose states in order to depict the type of “societies” that exist within a state’s territorial boundaries. In this view members of society with similar concerns form interest groups to influence foreign policy. In turn, policy makers incorporate interest groups preferences into foreign policy decisions. Foreign policy thus reflects societal rather than elite preferences. This argument challenges Marxist claims that foreign policy, like other policies, reflects the interest of capital rather than of society.

The institutionalist approach (Krasner 1978; Katzenstein 1978) argues that what matters most is the way in which states as institutions are built. That is, it is the characteristics or institutional features of states, which are autonomous from society, that explain how they behave at the international level. Following this logic, if the institutional characteristics of a state allow interactions between interest groups and policy makers, then the former could influence the latter in the construction of foreign policy (Milner 1997).

Neither the pluralist nor institutionalist perspectives has incorporated contemporary views in which Latinos not only constitute a domestic interest group but an international or home-country interest group. The transnationalist approach, which incorporates this view, suggests that Latinos may engage in the foreign policy debate as lobbyists for their countries of origin due to their individual and collective attachments. The logic of this perspective is that Latinos may be interested in the politics of their home countries and in U.S. foreign policy towards them (Glazer & Moynihan 1975; Rothenberg 1978; Rendon 1981; de la Garza et al. 1997).

In sum, the pluralist, institutionalist and transnationalist perspectives acknowledge the impact that Latinos as a domestic interest group may have on domestic and foreign politics. Unlike the pluralist and institutionalist approaches, the transnationalist approach does acknowledge that Latinos may also constitute a home-country lobby pursuing favorable U.S. foreign policies toward their home countries. In these cases, however, the claim requires that Latinos are well organized to influence foreign policy toward their home countries.

Latinos as Foreign Policy Actors

The debate regarding the role that immigrants play as U.S. foreign policy actors is centered on the extent to which they support core American values such as democracy, economic self-reliance and freedom of speech, as well as the nature of their ties to their countries of origin. Schlesinger (1992) argues that increased immigration has fueled the development of multiculturalism, which hinders the Americanization of Latino immigrants and therefore poses a threat to national unity. Americanization in this context is defined as the assimilation of American political values and ideals.

Similarly, Weiner (1995) argues that high levels of unwanted immigration will destabilize the political system within industrial democracies and therefore increase the probabilities of security crises. Huntington (1996) further argues that Latinos as immigrants “continue to adhere to and to propagate the values, costume and cultures of their home societies” creating “trans-state cultural communities” that do not share and support the American ideology (Huntington 1996, 304–305). Huntington also contends that in times of crises such as major future wars, the nation will not be able to count on Latino support because Latinos will not share the same values. In our view, arguments like these are essentially chauvinistic and rhetorical because they rely on a definition of the “national interest” that is so amorphous and subjective that any behavior that does not comply with Huntington et al.’s characterization may be defined as undermining the “national interest.”

de la Garza, Falcon and Garcia (1996) and Dowley and Silver (2000) challenge these arguments by showing that even though immigrants tend to create and maintain “trans-state cultural communities,” there is no evidence that these undermine immigrant support for American core values or that this transnational phenomenon leads Latino immigrants to be alienated from the American polity. As these authors have shown, Latino immigrants do not function as home-country lobbyists (de la Garza and Pachon 2000) and Latino foreign policy priorities resemble those of the U.S. government, i.e., promoting free trade and strengthening democratic values and practices in the Americas. Domínguez (2005) further argues that the reason that Latinos are not actively advancing home-country issues is that they “may not form a moral community” with their home countries, i.e., they differ regarding political values and policy preferences. In other words, Latinos are focused on issues affecting their daily lives in the United States, such as the economy, unemployment, housing and educational issues (de la Garza and Cortina 2003; Domínguez 2005) rather than home-country problems.

