
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.

Latino Incorporation and Political Participation in the United States and in Their Home Countries

The transnational literature claims that Latino immigrants will refuse to join the American mainstream and will instead remain loyal to their home countries. In short, it argues that Latino immigrants will not follow the historical paths of full socio-cultural, economic and political incorporation of earlier immigrants.

Although institutions like political machines, labor unions and the Catholic Church that incorporated immigrants between about 1880 and 1940 either no longer exist or have substantially evolved (Sterne 2001), new social, cultural, economic and political vehicles now play these incorporating roles. These new vehicles are schools, the mass media, programs focusing on immigrant naturalization and teaching English, parent-teacher associations and initiatives promoting political activities such as registering, voting, canvassing, wearing campaign buttons and writing letters to elected officials. How effectively are these and related types of activities promoting Latino political incorporation? This is the question to which we now turn. Specifically, we will gauge Latino immigrant incorporation by determining their political attachments to their home countries and to the United States through an analysis of political interests and participation.

The 2002 Survey of Immigrant Political and Civic Activities indicates that although an overwhelming majority of Latino immigrants are equally concerned about public affairs in their home country and in the United States, more than twice as many are primarily concerned with public affairs in the United States. More noteworthy is the fact that Latino immigrants feel more politically efficacious in the United States than in their respective home countries. Overall, 59 percent of the survey respondents felt that they had more influence in U.S. local governments than in home-country local governments, and 58 percent agreed that their influence in the U.S. national government was greater than the influence they could exert over their home country's national government. "The perceived lack of political influence in combination with a lack of interest in the home country's public affairs per se could lead to low participation in activities that are related to their home countries" (de la Garza and Cortina 2003), such as lobbying for foreign policies that would benefit their home countries over U.S. interests. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, a vast majority of Latino immigrants rarely or never participate in cultural activities, such as promoting home-country national culture through culinary, dance and folklore festivals and art expositions, or home-country-oriented political activities, such as getting together to discuss politics of the home country, voting in home country elections or contributing money to political campaigns in the home country.

It is also important to highlight that immigrant participation in U.S. affairs is constrained by citizenship status. Only U.S. citizens may vote, while non-U.S. citizens may participate in all other types of political activities. This helps explain why a vast majority of Latino legal residents are interested in U.S. politics, but only a small proportion actively participate in political activities.

When comparing Figure 1 with the second column of Table 1, we can see that Latino political participation both in the home country and in the United States is

very low. This may reflect the lack of socialization of immigrants into being politically active as well as the impact of a wide range of social and economic factors⁴ that influence political participation such as education, Americanization, unionization and discriminatory experiences that are positively correlated with political participation among immigrants. As individuals move up from one level of education to the next, the likelihood of participating in U.S. political activities increases. Similarly, as immigrants become more Americanized, which we measure in terms of years living in the United States, they are more likely to participate in U.S. political activities (de la Garza and Cortina 2003). Experiences with discrimination also stimulate U.S. political participation. Moreover, and contrary to what transnationalist theorists and anti-immigrant advocates claim, participation in cultural and political home-country-related activities stimulates involvement in U.S. political activities rather than dampens it. This does not mean, however, that these activities favor home-country interests over the United States, as we will note subsequently in this paper. These findings are similar to those by de la Garza and Pachon (2000) and de la Garza and Hazan (2003) that indicate that immigrant participation in these behaviors targets U.S. domestic policies rather than U.S. foreign policies toward home countries and, more significantly for our purposes, do not reflect immigrant efforts to advance the agenda of the home country.

Overall, the evidence presented so far suggests that there is no empirical support for the claim that Latinos refuse to join U.S. society or engage in lobbying for policies that would favor their countries of origin over U.S. interests. To the contrary, only very few immigrants are solely involved with cultural and political activities of the home country, a pattern that is surely conducive to their engaging in American society.

Transnationalism

Although immigrant transnational ties were evident in the last wave of immigration (1880s–1914) to the United States (Morawska 2001), the advent of new communication technologies and the ease of transportation has simplified and intensified the interaction between immigrants and their home countries. According to transnational theorists, these linkages between immigrants and their home countries contribute to slow immigrant incorporation while helping immigrants retain their home-country ties (Sassen 1996). This claim has been challenged by DeSipio et al. (2003), who show that on average, Latino immigrants were more likely to participate in activities that were related to the United States than in activities that promoted transnational ties. One way by which we can gauge the impact of Latino immigrant political participation and assess if Latinos could become effective advocates for policies favoring their countries of origin over U.S. interests is by analyzing Latino home-country attachments.

Here we use remittances as a proxy variable for multiple types of behavior to indicate how attached Latino immigrants are to their home-country communities. Remittances are selected because they have grown dramatically in the past decades, because they are essential to those left behind, because they reflect both

familial and community-level ties with home country and because they are considered important by home countries from which immigrants come.

The distinction between familial and community or collective remittances is crucial to our analysis. Familial remittances refer to those monies sent to family or friends for basic consumption, capital investment or other purposes that target the individuals who are the primary beneficiaries. Money sent for these purposes is not intended to contribute to the benefit of society per se though it does by alleviating extreme poverty and helping family members acquire a variety of social benefits, such as private medical attention. The second category targets community- or collective-level activities that include sending money for public works, economic development projects and improvement of social services, such as paying for improved water supplies or medical clinics. These types of remittances are explicit indicators of transnational political ties.

When Latino immigrants contribute to community projects in their home countries, they are making investments linked to home-country internal politics and policies. Thus, we expect that Latino immigrants who send funds for collective purposes to be more likely than those who do not make collective investments to try to influence U.S. policy toward their home country. Our hypothesis, then, is that immigrants who send collective remittances are more likely to be politically active in the United States (i.e., as lobbyists) and the home country. We use data from the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute 2003 Immigrant Remitting Behavior Survey to test this claim. Although respondents could send familial and collective remittances, a great majority send only familial remittances. Of these, 67 percent sent money home to contribute with expenses related to food and basic consumption, almost 12 percent sent money for education and health, and the remaining sent money for diverse purposes such as paying debts, buying land, paying for events, expanding or starting a business, buying a car, saving money and making home improvements. The rest did not know how the money they sent was primarily spent.

When we correlate sending familial remittances with participating in U.S. activities such as contributing money to a candidate, going to political rallies, voting in an election or even wearing a campaign button, we found that 98 percent of Latino immigrants who sent familial remittances did not actively participate in such activities. Clearly, as a group, Latino immigrants who send familial remittances are not engaging American politics in an attempt to shape U.S. foreign policy in ways that will serve their specific purposes.

We also found that approximately one-third of Latino immigrants sent money for both familial and collective projects. As stated previously we expect those Latino immigrants who invest in their home countries via collective remittances to be more engaged with U.S. political activities that will enhance the chances of having an impact regarding foreign policies that would benefit their countries of origin. The logic of this proposition is that they have more at stake in their home countries than those who remit for family purposes exclusively and therefore have more interest in U.S. policies toward their home countries than those who do not engage in these activities. However, 97 percent of the respondents who sent

money home for both familial and collective projects did not actively participate in U.S. politics.

Immigrant active political participation in the United States is clearly not shaped by home-country concerns. Moreover, those who remit to support home-country issues such as economic development are not politically active in the United States.⁵ This suggests that transnational ties do not result in immigrants engaging U.S. politics to advance home-country ties. This may be because, as Table 2 shows, Latino immigrants have different policy preferences in the United States than in their home countries. For instance, national security and education are issues that are salient only in the United States, and political corruption significantly decreased in salience as a policy concern in the United States in comparison with the saliency in their home countries.

With the evidence presented so far, can we argue that Latino immigrants “continue to adhere to and to propagate the values, costume and cultures of their home societies” or that Latinos are becoming effective advocates of policies favoring their communities of origin over U.S. interests? The answers to both questions is no. First, “transnational communities” are primarily based at the familial rather than at the political level, and this link does not hinder U.S. political participation or immigrant incorporation into the polity. Second, the very small number who form a political connection with their home countries are slightly more likely to participate in U.S. political activities. However, rather than seek to advance the agendas of their home countries, our analysis shows that even these Latino immigrants are primarily concerned with U.S. domestic policy issues, which are different from those policy issues that they had before they came to live permanently in the United States.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that there is no empirical evidence that Latino immigrants are actively involved in home-country affairs or that they are becoming advocates favoring their home countries over the United States. First, the literature reviewed shows that Latinos are not interested in engaging in foreign policy issues regarding their home countries simply because they are more concerned with familial issues rather than problems affecting their home countries as a whole. These relationships are based on individual rather than political ties. Consequently, Latinos do not continuously invest in the home country. Instead, their remittances are used for basic consumption. This helps explain why they are not motivated to become advocates for policies that may favor their home countries over U.S. interests. Second, Latino policy concerns are centered upon economic, health and educational issues, which are issues that affect them in their daily lives in the United States.

We would note, however, that given the U.S. institutional scaffolding, Latino participation in the foreign policy-making process is possible. One way to realize it is by forming organizations like the Israel lobby, by which they could influence

foreign policy makers. To date no institutions have been developed to play that role.

To summarize, we have analyzed if Latinos are engaged with their home countries to the extent that they could be effective advocates for policies that would favor their home countries over U.S. interests. We have engaged this debate both theoretically and empirically. International relations literature gives us a theoretical framework by which we can analyze this phenomenon. The pluralist approach would not expect Latinos to be involved in the foreign policy-making process because their interests are not organized in interest groups capable of influencing decision makers. Moreover, given the fact that Latino interests are centered in U.S. domestic issues, they are not very likely to engage in foreign policy making because of a lack of organization and a lack of interest. The institutionalist approach predicts that all groups are allowed to participate in shaping policy makers' decisions, but for Latinos this is a meaningless right because they cannot exercise it due to low levels of institutionalization (i.e., organization). The transnationalist perspective predicts that given Latino attachments to their countries of origin they would be motivated to participate in U.S. politics to advance their home-country interests over U.S. interests. The evidence presented in this paper shows that this is not the case simply because Latinos are not concerned with home-country issues per se. In addition, transnational communities or attachments to the home country are based and sustained at the familial rather than at the collective or community level.

The findings of this paper are important because they discredit unfounded and ideological arguments regarding Latino immigrant incorporation into mainstream American life. They strongly reject transnationalist arguments about the creation and maintenance of unincorporated Latino communities and also suggest that the theories regarding how any interest group engages foreign policy apply to Latino foreign policy involvement.

Endnotes

¹ In this paper, we use the terms Latino and Hispanic interchangeably to refer to persons in the United States who can trace their ancestry to the Spanish-speaking regions of Latin America and the Caribbean.

² The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute conducted interviews with a total of 1,602 Latino immigrants in the United States over a thirty-day period from 22 July to 28 August in 2002. Samples were drawn from four nationality groups: Mexicans, Dominicans, Salvadorians and Puerto Ricans, who although not immigrants because of the *Jones Act*, they experience similar process of political adaptation as other migrants do. The interviews were conducted via phone in the language of respondent's choice—either English or Spanish.

³ The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute conducted interviews with a total of eight hundred Latino immigrants who remitted money in the United States over a thirty-day period from 4 November to 3 December in 2003. Samples were drawn from two nationality groups: Mexicans and Salvadorians. The interviews were conducted via phone in the language of respondent's choice—either English or Spanish.

Figure 1
U.S. Political Participation, Citizens and Legal Residents

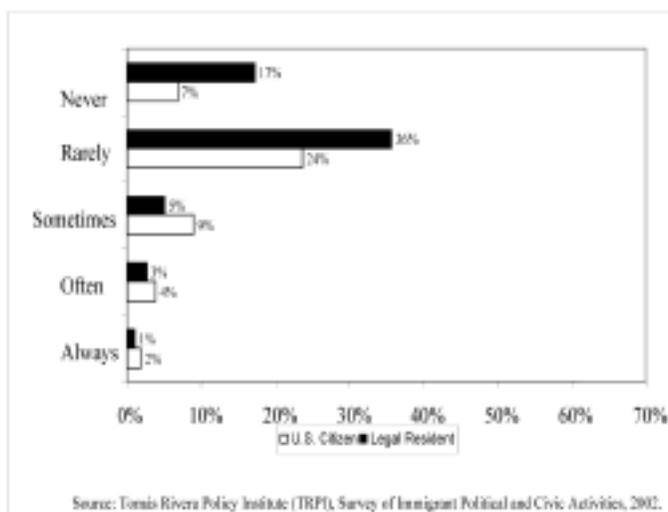


Table 1
Cultural and Political Participation Related to Home Country

	Cultural Participation	Political Participation
Always	1%	0%
Often	4%	1%
Sometimes	18%	21%
Rarely	25%	44%
Never	52%	33%

Source: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI), Survey of Immigrant Political and Civic Activities, 2002.

Table 2
Latino Immigrant U.S. and Home Country Policy Issues

	Policy Issues in the U.S.	Policy Issues in U.S. Local Community	Policy Issues in Home Country
Economic Issues	32%	27%	51%
Education	4%	7%	2%
National Security	29%	9%	3%
Crime and Drugs	0%	21%	13%
Political Corruption	2%	1%	0%
Healthcare	1%	1%	1%
Race Relations	1%	1%	0%
Discrimination	4%	4%	NA
Family Values	1%	1%	0%
Social Security	1%	1%	0%
Illegal Immigration/Emigration	9%	7%	1%
U.S. Colonialism	NA	NA	1%
Welfare	0%	1%	0%
Environmental Issues	0%	1%	1%
Affirmative Actions	0%	4%	NA
Something Else	11%	23%	20%

Source: Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI), Survey of Immigrant Political and Civic Activities, 2002.

⁴ For a review of the literature regarding political socialization, electoral and non-electoral behavior and electoral engagement see Rodolfo de la Garza 2004.

⁵ Calculations available upon request.

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