Opinion

News



Marilyn Miranda, 9, draped in a Salvadoran flag, attends an immigration rally with her mother outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington June 4, 2019. Despite the problems of racism Hispanics may confront in the U.S., the physical dangers and extreme poverty in Honduras and other Central American countries lead immigrants to see America as a promised land. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Editor's note: *This week, NCR political columnist Michael Sean Winters looks at the Latino vote in the 2020 election and what it portends for the future of American politics. The first column is here.*

One theme emerges very clearly from the post-election analysis about the Hispanic vote: The conclusion that viewing Latinos as monolithic, as possessed of a singular, unifying identity, was the foundational problem made by many politicians and campaign consultants. Hispanic or Latino identity is a multi-faceted reality, ill-suited to one-size-fits-all approaches — even when it comes to how to refer to themselves.

"Latinos can be identified strongly both with their nation of origin and as part of an aggregate Latino or Hispanic group and as an American citizen," Luis Fraga, director of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame told NCR. "Even Latinos in the third or fourth generation strongly identify with their country of origin. As well, identity moves and shifts depending on context."

In fact, methods of self-reference have shifted in response to cultural circumstance and political necessity. " 'Latino' is a term that emerged in Chicago," says Fraga. "Puerto Rican and Mexican American activists were trying to build a bridge so they could claim a higher number of voters in dealing with the Chicago political machine. That is what mattered: How many votes could you bring to the table."

Victoria DeFrancesco Soto, assistant dean for civic engagement at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, agreed that identity is more fluid and less monolithic than some people presume. "Older folks seem to like 'Hispanic,' and younger people tend to prefer 'Latino,' " she told NCR, adding that designations like "Latinx" and "people of color" work in some circumstances but are confusing in others. "It depends on the circumstance and the audience," Soto says.

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American politics is drowning in identity, and to an extent, it always has been. The early English colonies were separated by distinct religious identities. The immigration waves of the 19th and 20th centuries created enclaves organized around ethnic identity. From start to finish, racial identity has been an often explicit and other times implicit source of identity and differentiation in society and politics.

At The New Yorker, Stephania Taladrid looked at the election results by profiling two former Obama administration officials, Stephanie Valencia and Carlos Odio, who formed the organization Equis to analyze Latino voting behavior and strategize about how to improve Latino turnout for Democrats. "Over the years, Valencia and Odio had seen Democrats make decisions guided by the notion that demography was destiny, that Latinos would inevitably vote Democratic," she wrote. But Democrats had never invested in even basic research about what motivated Latino voters, relying on polling data with ridiculously small sample sizes.

What is more, the Latino electorate is not only growing, it is young, and so it changes more from one cycle to the next: "More than half of eligible Latino voters this year couldn't vote in 2008," Odio said. "Because it's a constantly changing electorate, there isn't this sense of institutional memory that you're carrying from cycle to cycle."

In her profile, Taladrid documented the questions that continue to puzzle campaign strategists: "Is there a common agenda for the Latino community? Is it a progressive one? How do Latinos engage with their own identity? And how does their identity play into their politics?"

Taladrid also notes that Valencia and Odio quickly discerned a significant gender gap in Latino political preferences, a theme that others note as well. "Our polling and our actual conversations with Latino voters show that the vast percentage of Latino support for Trump was male," says Brendan Walsh, Arizona Political Director for UNITE HERE, Local 11. "Many of them are economically and socially conservative. The same pitch works for them as worked for many white working class voters."

Jennifer Medina at The New York Times recently looked at the attitudes of Latino men who had voted Republican, conducting interviews in different parts of the country. Among other things, she found that:

> These men challenged the notion that they were part of a minority ethnic group or demographic reliant on Democrats; many of them grew up in areas where Hispanics are the majority and are represented in government. And they said many Democrats did not understand how much Latino men identified with being a provider — earning enough money to support their families is central to the way they view both themselves and the political world.

In addition, many Hispanics had more conservative views on social issues like abortion and gun rights. Surprisingly, at least to most Anglo analysts, many also support stricter immigration policies.

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Race and gender garner the lion's share of attention in academic circles, but Hispanics, like everyone else, have other sources of identity also. "One of the Republican messages that resonated with Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley had to do with the oil and gas sector," says University of Texas' Soto, noting that many Latinos work in that industry or have a family member who does. She also noted that large numbers of Latinos along the border work in the law enforcement sector so their understanding of the role of law enforcement did not cohere with the calls from some progressives to defund the police.

Medina recalled an encounter that seems to me to have made an important point, albeit one she did not dig down on. She interviewed Sergio Arelleno, a Republican Latino in Arizona who campaigned for Trump last year and recently ran, and narrowly lost, a bid to become state party chair. He recalled going to a July 4 event when he was an 18-year-old infantryman while home on leave. He asked a woman who was working at a voter registration table what the difference was between Democrats and Republicans. She told him Democrats were the party of the poor people and Republicans cared about the rich.

"Well that made it easy — I didn't want to be poor, I wanted to be rich, so I chose Republican," Arellano told the Times. "Obviously she figured I would identify with the poor. There's an assumption that you're starting out in this country, you don't have any money, you will identify with the poor. But what I wanted was to make my own money." He said he encourages Republicans to soften their anti-immigrant rhetoric, adding, "Trump is not the party, the party is what we make it — a pro-business, pro-

family values," he said. "People who understand we want to make it as something here."

It is this aspirational quality in Latino voices that seems to come through again and again. "I think it is rooted in the immigrant experience," says Soto. Despite the problems of racism Hispanics may confront in the U.S., the physical dangers and extreme poverty in Honduras and other Central American countries lead immigrants to see America as a promised land. Trump's odes to patriotism may have been superficial, especially given his evident disdain for America's constitutional order, but they rang true to some Hispanics — and other immigrants. Conversely, when the Democrats deploy a language of grievance, even when it is justified, it does not resonate with people for whom migration is the decisive fact in their political awareness.

"Aspiration has always been a driving force for immigrants coming to America and for those who are of immigrant origin, including Latinos," says University of Notre Dame's Fraga. "It is a desire to provide greater opportunities for one's children that is often the primary motivating force for coming to the U.S. If one can tailor a message that combines aspiration and grievance, e.g., 'Your children cannot achieve unless barriers to opportunity are overcome,' I think [that] is the best way to go."