

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Latinos and US Politics

Objectives

- Understand the definitions of agency and structure
- Understand what it means for race to be a social construction
- Understand the historical meaning and privileges that have been attached to whiteness in the United States
- Understand how Latinos fit (or not) into the US racial structure
- Understand the political, social, and economic implications of how Latinos were categorized racially
- Understand the effect US foreign and economic policy has on Latin American countries, on Latinos' decisions to migrate, and on their treatment upon arrival

Latinos, Immigration, and Politics

Scholars studying Latinos in the United States focus a great deal on issues of immigration and of political participation. Interestingly, both these issues most often are conceptualized as individual acts. Immigration is seen as a personal decision made by an individual or family, with little consideration of the macroeconomic context that influences that decision. Similarly, political engagement is most often discussed as (by and large) an individual choice. Individuals choose to vote, contact their elected officials, or run for political office. If they do not do so, it is because of a lack of interest rather than because of any sort of larger, structural constraint.

Yet the fact of the matter is that none of us, as individuals, can act with complete freedom, or with *agency* – defined as ‘the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power’.¹ In other words, agency is about how much we, as individuals, can accomplish on our own; about our ability to determine, by ourselves, the direction of our lives. Yet there are also institutional structures that may impede our ability to exercise that agency – to do exactly what we want, when we want it, and the way we want it. On

the most basic level there are rules and laws which limit our freedom of action. But, more importantly, there are also other kinds of institutional structures, social, political, or economic, which may constrain an individual's ability to act. Those structures include, but are not limited to, the employment and the housing markets, the legal system, including immigration rules, the political system, the educational system, and so on. How these structures operate within an individual's life varies over time and by geographic location. They are not static, yet they are not always easy to change either. Thus structures have an important impact on the individuals' ability to change their life for the better.

In this book I will explore the migration processes and political activity of the population of Latin American origin in the United States, placing an emphasis on the interaction between agency and structure. For example, during the Central American solidarity movement, the United States government refused to characterize Central American migrants as political refugees, despite the violence and political upheaval that existed in their home countries. These migrants were able to exercise agency in deciding to leave their homelands, yet were structurally constrained by the US government when they attempted to regularize their migration status in the United States. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 6, in coalition with other migrants and political organizations, they mobilized to change the US government's position and were partly successful, thus changing the institutional structure which future Central American migrants would face when arriving in the United States.

The Central American case is a good example of the interplay between agency and structure and of why it is important. When considering political activity and engagement, particularly that of minority groups, we must realize that there is a historical background and an institutional context which frame an individual's decision-making process. In order to decide to act politically, an individual must feel empowered to do so and must feel that her action can make a difference. If that person comes from a community or group which, historically, has not had much influence in the political system, it is less likely that she will feel that that is the best way to spend her time; or it is more likely that she will choose non-traditional forms of engagement (like protesting) in order to express her political views. Thus individuals do not make decisions in a vacuum.

The purpose of this book is to give the reader the historical and institutional context within which to situate US Latino politics. Understanding that context will help the reader also to understand why Latinos make

the decisions they do and what structural factors influence these choices. Only to look at one or the other is to miss an important part of the story.

Defining Latino: What's in a Name?

This text examines the history, migration, and politics of different groups of Latin American origin living in the United States. To begin with, it is important to consider what these groups should be called. The title of my book uses the word 'Latino', which is meant to describe all individuals, foreign and US born, who have ancestry in any of the Spanish-speaking nations of Latin America.² The term 'Hispanic' was adopted by the United States government during the 1970s and has the same definition as 'Latino'. 'Chicano' is meant to describe, specifically, individuals of Mexican origin in the United States. This term came directly out of the political organizing within the Mexican American community in the US south-west during the 1960s; hence its usage often presumes a certain political consciousness, in addition to being a national-origin identifier. 'Boricua' is a term used to describe Puerto Ricans in the United States (it comes from the name of an indigenous group native to the island), and 'Nuyorican', more specifically, is sometimes used to denote individuals of Puerto Rican origin living in New York City. Thus there are many terms which are used to describe individuals of Latin American origin; some of them are national-origin specific, others spring directly from the political mobilization of the community or from the desire of group members to come up with new terms to describe themselves. For the sake of simplicity, this text uses the term 'Latino' to refer to groups of Latin American origin generally, and national-origin specific terms to describe the experiences of individuals from particular countries. But it is important to note that these labels can be politically or personally important. Many Latinos choose to use different words to describe their identities – terms that are grounded in their particular historical, personal, and political experiences.

Latinos' 'Ethnicity' and 'Race'

The fact that this book focuses on the experiences of Latinos in the United States also implies that Latinos constitute a social group, one that should be the focus of the present study. But what does it mean for something to be a social group? Political theorist Iris Young described

a social group as ‘a collective of persons differentiated from others by cultural forms, practices, special needs or capacities, structure of power, or privilege’ (Young 2000: 153). According to Young, what makes a collection of people into a group is ‘less some set of attributes its members share than the relation in which they stand to others’. In other words, defining Latinos as a social group does not mean that we need to assume that all Latinos are the same, share the same experiences, or have the same goals or aspirations. We will see in the next chapters that this is not the case. Latino national-origin groups have had very different experiences in the United States. They arrived at different points in American history, migrated for very different reasons, settled in different geographic settings, and have been treated in disparate ways by the United States government. There are important experiential differences within Latino national-origin groups as well; these are due to geographic location, class status, gender, sexual orientation, and other factors. Despite this heterogeneity, what is similar about the experiences of all US Latinos, however, is where they were placed in the US racial hierarchy and how that placement has affected their social, political, and economic opportunities.

Yet, given their differences of experience and background, if Latinos are a social group, are they also a racial group or an ethnic one? The distinction between these two characterizations has been the source of ongoing debates among scholars – debates which will not be resolved here. The term ‘race’ presupposes a common biological or genealogical ancestry among people. ‘Ethnicity’ places more of an emphasis on culture than on common genetic traits. In an attempt to bring together both concepts, sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) define ‘race’ as ‘a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies’. They emphasize social conflicts in order to get us away from biological understandings of what race is. There is no biological foundation for separate ‘races’ of humans. As recent DNA tests have proven, many individuals whom we see as ‘black’ are in fact more European than African in terms of their DNA. For example, Henry Louis Gates, a prominent African American intellectual, found he has as much European DNA as West African DNA (most African Americans are about 20 per cent European). This kind of testing forces us to reconsider what ‘race’ means and to see how these categorizations have more to do with society than with biology.

Feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff suggests using the term ‘ethnorace’ to describe the Latino experience in the United States. For her, ethnorace

is a concept which combines the experiences of both ethnicity and race. She argues that 'using only ethnicity belies the reality of most Latinos' everyday experiences, as well as obscures our own awareness about how ethnic identifications often do the work of race while seeming to be theoretically correct and politically advanced. Race dogs our steps; let us not run from it else we cause it to increase its determination' (Alcoff 2000: 246). Through this concept of *ethnorace*, Alcoff is attempting to make us recognize that racialized group members sometimes share common cultural practices, which is not part of how race is typically understood. In general, scholars like Omi, Winant, and Alcoff are attempting to find ways to define a social phenomenon which has historical roots and important material consequences but which is nevertheless artificial in that its underlying reality is fluid and changes over time.

In order to study race in a way that recognizes this fluidity, scholars describe racial processes as social constructions. Social construction means that the values attached to particular external attributes, such as skin color, are defined, or constructed, by society. Put another way, the problem is not that of the recognition of racial/ethnic differences among people, but rather that of the values, or hierarchies, attached to those differences. For the bulk of United States history, being defined as 'white' gave members of that group access to social, legal, economic, and political privileges which were closed to those not defined as 'white.' For example, one of the first laws passed by the United States Congress in 1790 was a citizenship law which stipulated that no non-white person could become a naturalized citizen of the United States. This restriction remained in force until 1948, when individuals of Chinese origin were allowed to be naturalized for the very first time. This racial restriction on naturalization was finally removed completely for all groups in 1952, with the McCarran Walter Act. In addition, many states made it illegal for a non-white to testify in court against a white; to serve on juries; to live where they wanted to live; or to work in the most skilled jobs. These restrictions limited both non-whites' access to the protection of the legal system and their possibilities for social, political, and economic mobility. Thus racial constructs have been directly related to access to fundamental items like resources, citizenship rights, and the protection of the state (that is, to having a criminal justice system which actually defends your person and/or your property). Therefore race may be constructed, but which category an individual belongs to has had, and continues to have, significant material and political implications for their life chances.

Because racial categorizations determined access to resources, US federal and state governments had to come up with schemes in order to determine to what 'race' individuals belonged. Often referred to as the 'one-drop rule', these schemes attempted to define who was white and who was not. The 'one drop' refers to the fact that, in much of the country and particularly in the south, having one drop of black blood made it impossible by law to claim 'whiteness'. For example in California, in 1849, having half or more of 'Indian' blood would lead to one's being considered not 'white', and half or more of black blood made a person 'mulatto'. In 1851, the law was changed so that only one fourth of Indian blood would make a person not 'white'. Yet many of these laws were challenged, leading the courts to have to determine what constituted being 'white'. An especially good example is that of the prerequisite cases. These were cases brought by individuals who wanted to contest the 1790 law barring non-whites from being naturalized in the United States. Looking at petitions by Asian Indians from 1909 to 1923, we see that in 1909 the court in *Balsara* ruled that Asian Indians were *probably* not white, because the people on the jury thought it unlikely that Congress intended for Asian Indians to be considered white under the 1790 law. Yet in 1910 the court ruled in two cases that Asian Indians were white, on the basis of the petitioner's skin color and of scientific evidence regarding the origins of the Caucasian race. This ruling was reaffirmed in 1913, with appeal to legal precedent. Yet in 1917 the court ruled that Asian Indians were *not* white, on the basis of common knowledge and congressional intent. The same court reversed this position in 1919 and 1920, deciding again that the Asian Indians involved in those cases were white. Then in 1923 the Supreme Court ruled again, on the basis of common knowledge, that Asian Indians were not white. From that point on, on the basis of the 1923 legal precedent, the court ruled that Asian Indians are not white and therefore ineligible for naturalization.³ The Asian Indian case shows how difficult it was for the courts to maintain these kinds of racial categorizations in the face of any sort of systematic scrutiny. Yet that is exactly what the United States government did; and its action had important consequences for those US groups which were considered non-white. Latinos were one of those groups.

When Latinos became part of the United States, either through immigration or through conquest (as in the case of Puerto Ricans, or of Mexican Americans in the nineteenth-century southwest), they were inserted into this established racial order. Even though many Latinos are recent immigrants, it is important to realize that this historical

racial hierarchy continues to influence the playing field upon which their community sits today. For example, one complication for Latinos was that one-drop rules presupposed a strict, biological understanding of what race is. Under those schemes a person was black, white, or Indian, and there was no legal representation for intermediate categories like mulattos (people of black and white ancestry). Latinos, on the other hand, come from a variety of racial backgrounds. When the Spaniards arrived in Latin America, that continent had an indigenous population which numbered millions of inhabitants. Although a large proportion of this native population perished through disease and wars of conquest, a significant part survived, particularly in Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Perú, and Bolívia. The Spanish mixed with these groups, as did the Africans, creating what is called *mestizos* – individuals of mixed European, African, and indigenous descent. In the Caribbean, little of the indigenous population remained, which made it necessary for Spaniards to import African slaves to use as the bulk of the labor force. Those Africans mixed with the Spaniards and with the indigenous groups who remained on the islands, creating a new racial admixture; this is often called *mulatto*. After the end of slavery, Caribbean plantation-owners imported hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers to work in the fields. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, large numbers of Asians from other countries, including Japan, settled in other parts of Latin America, adding to its racial mixture. This is why, in the early twentieth century, José Vasconcelos called Latin Americans *la raza cósmica*, ‘the cosmic race’ – one made up of the blood of all the world’s races.

During the colonial period the Spaniards developed a complex *casta* system which laid out the racial hierarchy according to how much European, black or indigenous blood a particular individual had. Like the American system, the Spanish system had placed the white Europeans on top; but the remainder included many more racial options than were available in the United States. Most Latin American countries abolished the Spanish system after independence. But they still maintained the racial hierarchies. The difference was that their understanding of race included mixed race as a possibility, which was not true in most parts of the United States after the late nineteenth century.⁴

Thus, when Latinos arrived in the United States, they had to fit into a relatively rigid racial hierarchy, where it was very important whether a person was defined as ‘black’ or ‘white’. Yet many Latinos are of mixed race. Those of Mexican or Central American origin tend to be of mixed

indigenous background and those from the Caribbean are more likely to have African origins. But are they 'Indian'? Or are they 'black'? Or something else? The problem with people of mixed race is that often there can be significant differences in skin color even within the same family. One sibling can be quite dark-skinned, another one quite light-skinned. Since the US racial structure did not allow for the possibility of admixture, what often happened was that the lighter-skinned sibling would be treated as 'white', the darker as 'black'. At the height of segregation, this meant that they would go to separate schools, get to use separate bathroom facilities, and in general would have a very different set of opportunities, simply because one was seen as white and the other was not. Latinos, then, complicated the US racial structure and did not fit neatly into any of its racial categories. This racial ambiguity meant that the place they chose to settle in, and the particular history of that place, had an important impact on the kinds of opportunities open to them. There was no one, uniform response to, or treatment of, Latinos as a 'race'.

For example, there were large numbers of Latinos, mostly of Mexican origin, living in the state of Texas during the nineteenth century. Many had been there originally when Texas was part of Mexico. Texas turned into a slave state once it became part of the United States, and after emancipation it developed and enforced strict Jim Crow laws, requiring racial segregation in neighborhoods, schools, and public facilities. Like the rest of the south, Texas also passed laws to keep the blacks from voting. Yet in Texas African Americans were not the only large minority group; there were Mexican Americans as well. Jim Crow Laws were applied to the Mexican population because they too were seen as non-white, despite their legal categorization as white under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This was not true in New Mexico, however, where Latinos of Mexican origin remained in the majority until the twentieth century: in New Mexico segregation was not as extreme as in Texas. Mexican Americans were allowed voting rights. Moreover, they held public office positions and much of the political power until the mid-twentieth century. Thus local context had an important impact on racial definitions and racial restrictions, even in the case of the same national-origin group. These differences were possible because of Latino racial ambiguity.

Thus race is not 'real' in a biological sense, but racial categories still have important implications for the opportunities which various groups have in our society. Without an understanding of the historical

legacy of race, it is difficult to understand the current distribution of resources and opportunities within American society. Being white gave individuals access to citizenship; access to land under the homestead act in the nineteenth century (which was restricted to whites); access to legal protection and the right to organize unions, which significantly increased unionized workers' wages and benefits (many unions prohibited non-white membership, and many people of color worked in industries not covered under the National Labor Relations Act); access to subsidized federal home loans (the FHA program redlined and excluded African American, Mexican American, and mixed race neighborhoods); and access to public education of quality.⁵ Recent studies have shown that whites and African Americans with similar levels of income and education still have very different levels of total wealth because whites are much more likely to inherit real estate and other funds from their parents.⁶ That inheritance is the fruit of a highly exclusionary racial history. Because of this history, 'color-blindness' will not erase the inequality which has accumulated from racial categorizations. It is only by looking at race that we can begin to address its negative legacy.

Latino Political Incorporation

But how does racialization relate to Latino politics? Racialization is important in terms of having shaped the way Latinos are seen by non-Latinos, the opportunities they have been afforded, and the kinds of restrictions which have been placed on their incorporation into political life. Some Latinos living in the United States have been present in their communities since before they became part of the United States. We will see in the following chapters the significance of that long-term relationship. Yet a very large proportion of Latinos in the United States have arrived there since 1970. So, even though not all Latinos are immigrants or recent immigrants, the community contains enough immigrants that thinking about how immigrant politics varies from non-immigrant politics is an important part of learning about the Latino political experience in the United States. Immigrant political incorporation is different from non-immigrant political incorporation because of two factors:

- 1 Immigrants choose to be part of the United States, and therefore must overcome important structural hurdles before they can even consider engaging politically.

2 Immigrant inclusion is about defining the boundaries of the US polity, and therefore speaks in important ways to issues of race, inequality, and power within American society, in ways that are somewhat different from (but related to) what is happening with US born racialized groups.

Yet immigrants do not arrive in their new country as a clean slate. They bring a set of resources and a historical experience that shape their decision to migrate and their opportunity structure once they arrive. Thus the study of immigrant incorporation needs to begin with the international structural context which embeds the decision to migrate. Immigrants' decisions to migrate are embedded in macro-geopolitical processes over which their subjects have little control, such as economic recession or dislocation, war, or natural disaster. Once immigrants arrive in the United States, they must deal with an immigration bureaucracy which, as we will see in the following chapters, does not treat them all the same. The country an immigrant comes from, and the relationship the US government has with that country at the time of migration, strongly affect how easy or difficult the legal aspects of the migration process are going to be. Hence not only the immigrants' legal and economic status upon their arrival, but even their tendency to come from particular countries and their choice to go to particular countries are intimately related with US foreign and economic policy.

US Foreign Economic Policy and Latino Politics

The United States' relations with Latin America have been deeply affected by two important US principles: manifest destiny and the Monroe doctrine. The idea of manifest destiny – that the United States was 'destined' to be an Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation that stretched from coast to coast – had its roots in colonial political thought. In 1811, John Adams summed it up like this:

The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs. For the common happiness of them all, for their peace and prosperity, I believe it is indispensable that they should be associated in one federal Union.

Like Adams, many Americans believed that it was God's will that the United States should control the north American territory, and that the

nation needed to be based on a common set of political ideals, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. This creed was one of the main justifications underlying US territorial expansion through the US–Mexican War. We will see that it also had important consequences on how the US dealt with the incorporation of the Mexican population present in those territories when they were annexed into the United States. Over time, this idea that it was the US’ destiny to control a particular geographic sphere would expand beyond the North American continent and extend across the western hemisphere through the Monroe doctrine.

James Adams’ son, John Quincy Adams, developed the Monroe doctrine in 1823, when he was President James Monroe’s secretary of state. The main thrust of the doctrine was that, as countries in the Americas were becoming independent from the imperial European powers, the United States did not want Europe to re-colonize the western hemisphere. In his State of the Union message in December of that year, President Monroe declared that the United States would not interfere in European wars or internal affairs and expected Europe to stay out of the affairs of the new world. European attempts to influence the new world would be interpreted by the United States as threats to its ‘peace and safety’.

President James Polk invoked the principle of manifest destiny and the Monroe doctrine in an 1845 address to Congress in support of westward expansion into Mexican territory. In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt added the ‘Roosevelt corollary’ to the Monroe doctrine, which defined US intervention in Latin American domestic affairs as necessary for US national security:

All that this country [the United States] desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.

This corollary was used to justify US intervention in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. It was officially reversed in 1934 with the advent of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s ‘good neighbor’ policy towards Latin America. Yet the principle that the United States’ political and economic interests are intimately related to that of Latin America

remained. Throughout the twentieth century, the United States' economic interests played a central role in the development of Latin American banking, infrastructure, and industry. Similarly, the US government, particularly after the start of the cold war, continually intervened in Latin American internal governmental and military affairs.

This US involvement is critically important for understanding Latino migration flows to the United States. Many Latin American migrants worked for US companies in their home countries. Many were directly recruited by those companies to come to the United States, and those companies often lobbied the US Congress to ensure that these migration flows would continue. The economic development policies pursued by Latin American governments, and therefore the economic opportunities available to their populations, particularly employment, often were strongly influenced by the US financial sector and by the US government. After the advent of the cold war, US strategic concerns and levels of military aid often affected the success or failure of social movements to redistribute wealth in these countries. Thus the way the United States expressed its political and economic interests in the region affected the Latin Americans' economic and political situation on the ground, the facility with which they were able to migrate to the United States, and the legal terms under which they were accepted under US immigration policy.

Conclusion

We will see in the following chapters that there were important domestic and international political reasons why the US government involved itself in the politics of Latin American countries and encouraged or discouraged migration from them. For different reasons, the US government has made immigrant settlement much easier for some national-origin groups than for others. This, in turn, has affected how quickly and under what terms Latino immigrants have been allowed to join the polity. These decisions also have affected the immigrants' choice of places to settle, the kinds of transnational and co-ethnic social networks available to them in those places, and what political and economic opportunity structures were present in those communities. It follows that that experience has had an important impact on these immigrants' trust in government, feelings of personal efficacy, and willingness to become engaged politically. These opportunity structures also affect their socio-economic mobility; immigrants of higher socioeconomic

status are more likely to engage politically. This means that having more economic opportunities also affects political incorporation. This is a good example of how agency and structure interact. A particular immigrant brings a set of skills (education, funding, personal drive) which affect her ability to succeed in her new country. But that success is also affected by the institutions she must interact with on the ground. How open those institutions are, and how much they will enable her to take advantage of their resources, is outside of her control.

What this interaction looks like for immigrants from each national-origin group also varies over time. Each community has faced particular challenges, has organized so as to improve their position, and all have achieved important successes. That mobilization, in turn, has changed the structural context for new immigrants. Therefore nothing in these stories is 'static'; there is constant movement across historical time. It is only by looking at the historical trajectory of each national-origin group that we may understand fully the Latino political incorporation process today. This is what we will be doing in the following chapters.