The Roots of Latino Urban Agency
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Introduction:

Latino Urban Agency

The decision to compile this collection of essays on the urban political presence of the Latino community was based on a critically important question that is generally taken for granted when analyzing Latino politics. This question has to do with the definition of Latino politics in a changing political landscape in America. Is there, or can there be, a generic, overarching definition/identity of Latinos in the United States? The premise in approaching this question, and our resulting decision to compile these essays, is that the Latino community is one of the most diverse communities that can be defined ethnically.

More importantly, as diversity within the Latino community intensified toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the question of how Latino communities would relate to the larger changing political system, in what many political pundits called a post-racial era, became one of the most important questions facing both activists and scholars in the twenty-first century. An important factor to consider in this post-racial era is the emergence of particular political and electoral relationships between Latinos and the larger political community.

We argue that before we can address the future of urban politics and the resulting public policy in a changing twenty-first century, we must begin with an analysis of how Latinos came to terms with the political reality in their communities and how they then addressed the “system” of governance where they found themselves at the close of the twentieth century. As evidenced by the chapters in this volume, which focus on the decade closing the twentieth century, Latinos learned not to depend on the federal,
state, and local governments for needed resources, and they have strongly emphasized their multiple forms and strategies of urban agency in their quest to influence the various public policy outcomes in their communities. In fact, the various forms and strategies of agency are contextual and stem from a historically consistent marginalization. In this context, Latino urban agency has taken many forms and strategies such as mobilization, networks, lobbies, legal challenges, coalitions, appointments, and representation.

These articles take on greater importance if we are correct that to understand where we are, we must start with community politics as it expressed itself before 9/11 and the explosion of politics that intensified an anti-immigrant, anti-Latino discourse that radically changed the context of community empowerment and the promise of political inclusion. This collection of urban essays then represents the diverse ways that urban Latinos sought empowerment in an era that seemed to promise greater inclusion, that is, until 9/11.

In this context, various political scientists have focused on the political struggle of the Latino community for social, economic, and political advancement in their respective urban communities. In their pioneering study *Protest is Not Enough*, Browning et al. attempt to document the resulting urban change through a theory of political incorporation and policy responsiveness. The major premise in their analysis is that the dominant coalitions in these cities have diverse orientations toward minorities and their interests. As a consequence, they attempt a balanced approach using the characteristics of minority coalition to inform their analysis. Their work is especially significant because they attempt to move beyond minority mobilization to develop a theory of incorporation, which for them means achieving something more than getting elected. Minorities must become an integral part of a coalition. That is to say, the coalition must be dominant if the interests of minority groups are to influence policy.

**On the Ground and Running**

Our approach presents a picture of the community in all its diversity by focusing on the five major cities where the greatest demographic impact has occurred: San Antonio, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Miami. In order to make sense of the seemingly chaotic diaspora that Latino growth in the United States represents today, this analysis goes where the Latino community can be seen exercising their political power. While there is a
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multitude of community studies focusing on the Latino community across the urban landscape in the United States, this volume presents several studies that assess the diverse ways that these Latinos have exercised urban agency in the major cities that we have selected. The point is not to measure success or failure, but the process itself as these communities first identified the major issues in the context of their on-the-ground reality and second mobilized to address these issues. Hence, this book discusses the efforts of Latinos to address the diverse political realities that faced each of these communities at the approach of the twenty-first century.

These essays will add to an understanding of Latino politics as a complex and diverse force in the broader, national political context. Ultimately, this volume in total adds to the epistemological discourse on how Latinos seek to exercise their agency to transform politics. Each case study offers us a different view of political incorporation. That is to say, what connects Latino communities in their efforts to shape their surroundings to their needs is their politics of inclusion into the local system that determines their lives. Our chapters frame, in their particular studies, that the power of the Latino community lies in its ability to exploit available political opportunity structures. Together these chapters offer us a glimpse of what national politics would reflect.

Thus, a second premise in this volume is that the political future of the Latino community in the United States in the twenty-first century will be largely determined by the various roles they have played in the major urban centers across this nation. How this urban agency unfolded from San Antonio to Los Angeles to San Francisco, and from Chicago to Miami will go a long way to collectively shape the national political presence organizationally, legislatively, and electorally in the United States. Moreover, it will provide for a more nuanced and detailed understanding of Latino political incorporation nationally.

Thus, the collective attempt in this volume is to understand not only how the Latino movement for political power unfolded in some of the largest and most important American cities, but also the possibilities (and limitations) of the present and future—the adequacy of political incorporation of this previously excluded group, the extent to which they pursue the broader goals of the movement, what they might not do in pursuit of those goals, and the obstacles they encounter. Given the diversity between the various “Latino” communities in this era, the shape and content of their urban political presence will be an important factor in their ability to build coalitions within the more populous
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urban regions and beyond their urban boundaries into the national arena of politics.

To further bring the regional character of Latinos out in relief, one needs only to contrast it with how black politics gained its greatest momentum in the twentieth century. Through national politics that have covered everything from civil rights to the war on poverty, even their regional and local politics have, to a large extent, thrived from the national image that came from both their national political agenda as well as from the historic experience in a black and white America. While their overall experience is diverse from north to south, urban to rural, even state-to-state, the galvanizing effects of a national civil rights agenda has firmly established African American politics in a national context. And while no one can, by any means, characterize the black community as one monolithic community, they do have a common agenda by which they debate, disagree, and mobilize.

On the other hand, the Latino community’s experience has been one of invisibility and/or exclusion from national politics. Hence, historically, the Latino community has had to resort to regional and local politics to address their political realities. Even in national politics, they have been approached regionally. The “Viva Kennedy” clubs in the 1960 presidential election are an early example of this regional approach to their communities. In 1959, the Kennedy campaign approached Juan McCormick, a long-time Latino political activist in Arizona, to organize “Viva Kennedy” political clubs throughout the Southwest to mobilize the Mexican American vote. The approach had to be further broken down into states. In Texas, Albert Peña, Jr. and others successfully worked this strategy beyond anyone’s wildest expectations, enabling Kennedy to carry Texas.

Even in the midst of the Latino diaspora that the United States began to experience in the 1990s, Latino politics were still essentially a regional and/or urban phenomenon. The issues that defined Latinos were cast in a regional character; even immigration and bilingual education were cast in a regional context. One very specific issue, for example, that confronted only those who lived in the Los Angeles area, was the almost complete disenfranchisement of an entire community in East Los Angeles from urban governance. This issue, plus the history of rapid and intense capitalist corporate development in Southern California, placed the Latino community in this region in a very different situation than in most other regions or urban areas. Thus, as Latino communities emerged in all of the major urban centers in the United States, with no over-arching historical identity—such
as is found in the black/white experience that produced a national civil rights agenda—they were still anchored in a regional cast.

Arising from this reality is the observation that from region to region, city to city, Latinos exhibit different cultural manifestations that speak to different origins as well as to different social, political, economic, and historical conditions. This leads to a third premise that across the urban political landscape, the Latino community has experienced different political formations, strategies, and ultimately different political outcomes in their different urban settings. If this premise is correct, then we must assess the conditions of Latino urban agency (i.e., the potential or non-potential of that agency) from city to city, in order to be able to gauge the role Latinos will play at the national level.

The Nature of Political Discourse

To move from disenfranchisement to political inclusion, Latinos have used a variety of methods. To explain the process of achieving and retaining political power, political incorporation theory needs to be part of the discourse in this introduction. The theory of political incorporation is a central idea in the study of politics: when a group is politically incorporated, it has opportunities to influence public policy. According to Browning et al., political incorporation explains local “movements demanding the power of political equality and their ability to achieve it.” Political incorporation is a widely used term to measure the extent to which group interests are effectively represented in policymaking in government. At the lowest level, a group is not represented at all, that is, there are no elected officials from the group, and the group does not participate in the governing coalition that controls the political decision-making through its use of resources. At the next level, racial minorities have formal representation in a governing body, but the government body is dominated by a coalition resistant to minority group interests. The highest form of incorporation is when racial minorities have an equal or a leading role in a dominant coalition that is strongly committed to minority group interests.

For Latinos, the achievement of political incorporation has been uneven. There is wide divergence in the levels of incorporation at the local, state, and national levels. Because this unevenness has unfolded differently in state and local contexts, the forms and strategies to achieve incorporation have evolved differently. In some contexts, Latinos were, until recently,
completely excluded from access to government. In other situations, they were partially included in a governing coalition as junior partners in political party- or business-centered states. Under certain circumstances, they achieve an equally dominant role without the use of a biracial coalition (e.g., the Cubans in Miami).

Manuel Castells, in his study of cities across the western part of the globe from Europe to Latin America to the United States, gives a more grassroots approach. His basic argument is that cities are in the end a product of conflict between elites who want to shape the city to their economic, social, and political needs, and communities who struggle to shape their urban experience to their particular community reality. This theory is not about incorporation strictly speaking. It is about how communities mobilize to stop the advance of the broader economic and social intrusions that tend not only disrupt their community but in reality undermine and destroy community. So in that sense, Castells was describing incorporation in his theoretical discussions of communities and how they maintain their identity.

However stated, the four distinct pathways to political incorporation do not negate Castells theory of the city. One incorporation theory is political, and the other is sociological and historical. These pathways include 1) demand/protest, 2) non-confrontational political evolution, 3) legal challenges to structural barriers, and 4) coalition politics. The first pathway, demand/protest, includes violent and nonviolent protest (e.g., sit-ins, demonstrations, boycotts) and also includes more traditional tactics such as mass mobilization at city meetings and exchanges with city officials. Michelson’s chapter on Chicago addresses this angle of political incorporation. The second pathway is more gradual political evolution, without demand and protest. Instead, individuals in the Latino community are cultivated by political elites to run for office, usually as pro-business candidates and alternatives to more grassroots candidates. The chapters by DeLeon, Monforti et al., and Manzano and Vega exemplify this perspective of political incorporation. A third pathway is the use of legal challenges (i.e., voting-rights lawsuits that challenge redistricting and reapportionment plans) that lead to restructuring the electoral system. The fourth pathway is the use of coalition politics. Ambruster-Sandoval’s chapter on Latinos in Los Angeles speaks to this aspect of incorporation. Insights derived from these case studies might then serve as harbingers for other large metropolitan areas affected by the “internationalization” of their populations, economies, and politics through the incorporation of new immigrant populations.
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Methodology

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, the racial and ethnic composition of the US population has changed markedly. Minorities are increasing their presence in the United States and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The Latino population is driving these transformations. While currently one of every six residents of the United States is Latino, it is projected that Latinos could account for one of every five residents by 2035, one of every four by 2055, and one of every three by 2100. We begin the twenty-first century with the Latino population concentrated in five of the most populated states of the United States. According to the 2010 US Census, states with the largest share of Latino population are California (37.6%), Texas (37.6%), Florida (22.4%), New York (17.6%), and Illinois (15.8%). From these states, we picked the cities with the largest population of Latinos as indicated by the 2010 US Census: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, San Antonio, and Chicago. We included San Francisco because of its recent political battles and its comparable size in the Latino population. The authors employ both qualitative and quantitative analysis in their approach to studying Latino agency. The authors discuss the different ways such progress can manifest itself in disparate cities.

Chapter Organization

We begin with Ralph Arnbuster-Sandoval’s chapter “Latino Political Agency in Los Angeles Past & Present.” The author carefully examines Latino political agency in Los Angeles, notably in relation to a past history of multi-racial coalitions of the left—a tradition that has continued into the ’90s and beyond against a brutal context of inter-racial (i.e., black-brown) gang violence. They point out that Latino political agency can be both constrained and facilitated by where Latinos stand in reference to others. The authors add the helpful suggestion that pop culture, and music especially, has helped both to express and to accelerate multi-racial politics in the city.

“The Rebirth of Latino Urban Agency in San Francisco: From the MCO to the MAC, 1967–2002,” written by Richard Edward DeLeon links specific place-based political, economic, and cultural features of San Francisco to the dynamics of insurgent Latino politics as well as to wider circles of progressive politics in the city. With battles over land used as his dynamic
context, DeLeon analyzes the changing tides of urban resistance, the ebb and flow of victory, defeat, and re-emergence, including the importance of the introduction of district elections as a main institutional change. This reform favored a politics in which Latino working-class interests exploited electoral strategies that emphasized communal, place, and ideological considerations above identity politics. The chapter allows us to see how the Latino community really does construct their “political agency” in the process of engaging a city with a specific history of progressive politics and a changing political design.

Melissa R. Michelson’s “The Fight for School Equity in Chicago’s Latino Neighborhoods” focuses on the long and embattled minority in Chicago, causing a historic alliance between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. She details the emerging patterns of Latino political action. Michelson points to a grassroots level of Latino political agency and organization that drew inspiration from, but was not reliant on, the growth in the Latino population in the United States as well as the growth in the number of elected political representation by Latinos.

Monforti, Flores, and Moreno’s chapter on Miami is about how one leader, in this case the mayor, became the agent of change. Similar to Stone’s analysis of Atlanta’s black leadership, Diaz’s populist persona and minority developers transformed the city’s image from one of corruption to one of renaissance. Monforti et al. detail the ascension of Diaz as mayor and the way in which his leadership (and growth machine strategies) led to unprecedented growth in the city’s real estate market, changing its skyline and creating a population shift.

Manzano and Vega’s “I Don’t See Color, I Just Vote For the Best Candidate: The Persistence of Ethnic Polarized Voting” examines ethnic polarization in urban elections. Using the 1991 and 2005 San Antonio mayoral races, the authors consider the role of ethnicity from the perspective of both the voters and candidates. They provide a statistically sophisticated analysis of the most orthodox form of American political agency: voting. The authors find that ethnic voting is a fact of political life in San Antonio.

The last chapter, titled “Latino Urban Agency in the twenty-first Century,” highlights the growing political power of Latinos in cities, or more specifically, their political agency. This volume encompasses everything from a diversity of cities, to the heterogeneity of the Latino population in the United States, to the conventional and unconventional forms of political agency. The political incorporation of Latinos in these five major urban
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areas suggest that Latinos are in fact gaining access to the same political institutions that worked so hard to marginalize them. These case studies will allow us to project what national politics look like when Latinos exercise their agency.

Endnotes

1. In this edited volume, the term Latino is used to refer to people of Spanish speaking descent. The term is used inclusively to mean people from Latin America and the Caribbean.
4. Ibid.