

## Data Availability Statement

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Dataservice at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VHAPHV>. ■

## NOTES

1. With financial support from the Women Donors Network in 2015 (Women Donors Network 2019) and invaluable help from Jamil Scott between 2012 and 2015.
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## REORIENTING LATINO REPRESENTATION RESEARCH IN AN ERA OF DEMOCRATIC RECKONING

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DOI:10.1017/S1049096521001529

Of the many reckonings brought about by recent social and political upheavals, two that should concern political scientists include the needs to (1) recognize the extent to which our normative motivations may misdirect our assumptions; and (2) effectively address macro-level changes that are rewriting the rules by which actors play politics. I believe the consequence of these

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reckonings will be a recalibration of our expectations for representation and policy making.

Probably the most important development in American politics during my lifetime has been the gradual capture of both political parties by a small group of fantastically wealthy business interests. We need only to observe the growing disconnect between bullishness on Wall Street and the lived economic experience of most Americans to appreciate the power and privilege of big business in contemporary America. Political scientists such as Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have been sounding the alarm

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about growing concentrations of wealth and power for at least a decade. However, much political science research still approaches analysis from a perspective that Hacker and Pierson (2010) term “politics as electoral spectacle.” The approach implies a popular set of assumptions that parties and politicians operate according to the median-voter model: American parties (and two-party systems in general) yield “big tent” platforms and all politics is local in the sense that legislators represent constituency preferences. These assumptions are resilient because they reflect our normative understanding of democratic principles. However, as our democracy drifts from its foundations and toward what Pierson, Hacker, and others identify as “plutocratic populism,” asymmetric partisan polarization, and special-interest localism, these assumptions may lead research astray—or at least to incomplete conclusions.

My recent book, *From Inclusion to Influence: Latino Representation in Congress and Latino Political Incorporation in America*, was in press about the time of the 2016 election (Wilson 2017). It provides a useful example for reflecting on these concerns. The underlying normative premise of the book is the need for our democracy to effectively represent and incorporate its rapidly growing and largest nonwhite ethnic group. Like many works of political science with grand ambitions to answer big questions and solve major problems, my book nevertheless operates primarily at one level of analysis and focuses mostly on individual-level behaviors. It also is relatively bounded in terms of its focus on the representative–constituency relationship.

In Part I of the book, I develop a framework for understanding political incorporation as a process that plays out in three stages (i.e., political participation, representation, and policy outcomes) and across two dimensions (i.e., inclusion and influence) at each stage. I then focus more specifically on the representation component of this framework as a subprocess that links Latino constituents to government, sets policy agendas that prioritize Latino issues, articulates Latino interests and perspectives, and enables Latinos to influence policy decisions. My approach contrasts in important ways with earlier work on the subject, and I demonstrate how conceptualizing representation as a process and analyzing it as such allows me to construct a fuller picture of Latinos’ impact in Congress. Part I concludes

with a thorough overview of Latino descriptive representation in Congress that considers patterns by which Latinos have been elected to Congress and served on committees and in leadership positions.

The empirical thrust of my book illustrates the essential role that Latino representatives play in translating Latino political participation into enhanced inclusion and influence in the representative process. Part II examines how Latino ethnicity shapes a legislator’s connections with Latino constituents. It illustrates through observational and interview-based analysis critical differ-

ences in Latino and non-Latino representatives’ perception of their relationships with Latino constituencies and their roles as representatives of Latinos. The study then triangulates those findings with a battery of quantitative indicators that reveal the significant effect of representatives’ Latino ethnicity on patterns of outreach through the press and on their websites, as well as on staffing patterns.

The remainder of the book examines the impact of Latino representatives throughout the representative process with analyses of agenda setting, debate, and decision making. I explore multiple indicators of individual-level legislative behavior and offer interpretive accounts of collective action by members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. By analyzing bill sponsorship and agenda setting by committee chairs, I show how Latino representatives amplify the inclusion of Latino priorities on the congressional policy agenda. Analyses of floor speeches and “dear colleague” letters highlight differences in the ways that Latino representatives amplify Latino interests and Latino perspectives in policy debates, furthering the cause of inclusion and perhaps influencing how other policy makers think about issues that impact Latinos.

Finally, I contextualize the role played by Latino representatives in influencing legislative decisions by examining their collective successes and failures during the 110th and 111th Congresses. I illustrate how majority- and minority-party status, unified and divided government, and the position of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus within the larger Democratic Caucus shape the abilities of Latino representatives to effect change. My study points to underappreciated variations in the extent to which Latino legislators can be expected to substantively impact the legislative process. By refining this picture, the study contributes to broader theories about why, how, and when diversity in institutions matters.

A major conclusion that I draw from my research is that the future of Latino political incorporation hinges substantially on factors that are beyond the control of Latinos and their representatives. The book identifies Latinos’ positions within political parties and in relation to the presidency, for example, as critical factors that shape their congressional influence. It also draws connections between congressional representation and institutional

efforts to constrain Latino political influence through gerrymandering, voter ID laws, and other strategies aimed at stifling participation. Despite these challenges, the book expresses optimism for Latino political incorporation. What has become clearer more recently is that this optimism was predicated in part on the anticipated impact that demographic change will have on the representative–constituency relationship and on blinkered assumptions about the overriding importance of that relationship. It seems increasingly important to acknowledge that macro-level trends in our political environment are challenging the assumption that “demographics is destiny.”

The ability of Latinos (as well as African Americans and women) to exercise congressional influence occurs almost entirely within a Democratic Caucus that is now approximately 44% female and 42% nonwhite. Under this scenario, we might expect Latinos to exercise substantial influence, particularly given their

environment is openly hostile to progress on policies that address both the public interest and Latino interests.

The bounded nature of my own design—and many other studies of Latino and legislative politics—misses a host of powerful forces that may be key to explaining variations in the relationships between representatives and constituents, as well as policy outcomes. Advancing research on Latino representation requires greater attention to factors that lie outside of the traditional locus of analysis. A modest first step is to examine the roles that interest groups play in facilitating or hindering progress on Latino priorities. Whereas a growing body of work connects the behaviors of Latino representatives and their Latino constituents, the broader universe of connections that shape the behaviors of Latino representatives remains largely unconsidered. Presumably, the abilities of Latino representatives to represent Latinos are distorted at the individual level by the same interest-group forces that influence all

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disproportionate residency in swing states such as Florida and Arizona. However, several factors stand in the way of Latino priorities, including immigration reform. First, fierce opposition can be anticipated from a Republican Party that has signed a Faustian bargain with a xenophobic political constituency of its own making. Second, the policy agenda under a Democratic government will follow the lead of the President and party leaders. The Obama administration’s focus on healthcare and House Speaker Pelosi’s focus on climate legislation during the 111th Congress expended the party’s political capital and crowded immigration reform off the agenda. It is questionable whether the Biden administration will expend political capital on immigration reform or other Latino priorities while facing so many other pressing concerns. A third factor, which could work in favor of Latino priorities, is that members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus are positioned to collectively exercise veto power over the House agenda. Razor-thin Democratic majorities enable Latino representatives (and other Democratic blocs) to collectively demand concessions from leadership. Nevertheless, these efforts are rare, vulnerable to defection, and extremely risky in the current political environment. In summary, prospects for enhanced Latino influence in the current Congress are dim.

So far, this speculation falls within the parameters considered by my book. If the aperture is expanded to consider macro-level trends toward extreme concentrations of wealth and political influence and to the apparent responses of the political parties to those trends, prospects for Latino influence dim further. The Republican embrace of a plutocratic populism that combines policies that concentrate wealth with divisive cultural appeals is well documented (Hacker and Pierson 2020). At the same time, however, the Democratic embrace of neoliberal economics is more than a matter of isolated defections or policy “drift” due to derailment of Democratic initiatives by special interests. Since the Clinton administration, Democrats often have led such efforts (Frank 2017). The four decades since the election of Ronald Reagan thus produced policy that mostly deepens economic inequality and further concentrates wealth and power. Such an

environment is openly hostile to progress on policies that address both the public interest and Latino interests.

representatives in Congress. We might hypothesize, for example, that major business interests and donors tend not only to receive priority from Latino representatives but, when push comes to shove, they also often supplant the interests of poorer Latino constituents.

Second, it is important to consider Latino representation within the context of what political parties—the Democratic Party in particular—actually represent. The substantial disappearance of class as a cleavage separating party priorities and coalitions leaves all working-class people—including most Latinos—without reliable economic representation. The cultural cleavages that currently fill the void should upend traditional thinking about the interplay between demographic change and partisan politics and lead to diminished expectations for an emerging Democratic majority—not to mention progress on many Latino priorities.

Testing hypotheses like these may take substantial observational data collection. A more holistic approach to examining representative behavior offers one possible avenue. Incorporating the participant-observation approach pioneered by Fenno (1978) along with archival research that would permit a more comprehensive understanding of representatives’ activities and political connections offer useful—albeit time consuming—tools for pursuing such an approach.

Research also might devote more attention to analyzing specific cases of successful and failed congressional policy initiatives. Gaining a better understanding of the configuration of interest groups and partisan coalitions that influence specific policy decisions and outcomes would enhance our insight into the circumstances that shape Latino influence. Patterns of interest-group support and opposition ultimately may provide even more explanatory power than assessments of the efforts of Latino activists and representatives regarding immigration reform, education spending, Latino healthcare priorities, labor policy, and myriad other initiatives that shape substantive policy responsiveness to Latinos. These patterns also may supply potent targets for political activists interested in bringing about more representative policy making.

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These are modest but, I think, important suggestions if we are to develop more clear-eyed explanations and more realistic expectations about the future of Latino representation—and democratic representation more generally. The future is not entirely bleak, but elections alone likely will not lead to the type of political empowerment required to fully incorporate Latinos and other underrepresented groups. Neither are elections alone likely to restore a class politics that can head off and reverse continued concentration of wealth and power in America. To avoid oversimplifying a more complicated reality, we must reach beyond the connections that bond representatives to constituents and explore the forces that sever those bonds. ■


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