



Why Republican Immigrant Bashing May Not Push Many Latinos to Vote for Democrats

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Denunciations of immigrants and immigration are unfortunately widespread in U.S. politics. Although politicians of all stripes engage in immigrant-bashing, today this strategy is most often pursued from the political right. We might therefore expect that immigrants or people who live in communities with many immigrants would turn away from the right and put their support behind Democrat politicians. In fact, many predict exactly this for the next few decades. As the proportion of Latinos in the U.S. population steadily grows, many observers believe that Democrats will gain support from large numbers of Latino voters who have immigrated or know immigrants.

But the growth of the Latino population may not have the dramatic political effects that many people are expecting. A study I recently published with colleagues Ray Block and Dan Tope suggests that the way Latinos will vote in the upcoming decades may depend not only on their reactions to immigrant-bashing but also on how Latinos' feelings toward black people affect their political preferences. To better understand the forces at work, we explore key dynamics in contemporary U.S. racial and ethnic politics.

A Toxic Blend of Racial and Ethnic Politics

Although immigrant-bashing plays a lead role in today's racial and ethnic politics, racial divides between blacks and whites never left the stage. Importantly, many non-Hispanic whites continue to hold false but widespread negative stereotypes about the work ethic of blacks. Leaders in both major U.S. parties have leveraged such stereotypes for political gain.

"Racial priming" is the label researchers use to refer to efforts by leaders to subtly link constituents' ideas about race with their ideas about politics. "Dog-whistle politics" is the colloquial terminology for such political maneuvers. Even though people from both parties have engaged in racial priming, it is important to remember that in recent times Republicans more than Democrats have tended to make negative appeals, framing minorities as undeserving beneficiaries of government programs, thus drawing many whites into socially and economically conservative political positions. Meanwhile, contemporary Democrats tend to make positive appeals to race — standing by minorities who form a key part of their party constituencies.

Influential leaders have successfully linked negative stereotypes about blacks to several policies and programs. For example, in the 1990s, political leaders from both parties tied conversations about cash assistance "welfare" programs to the notion that black people abused the benefits of such programs. Passed by a Republican Congress and signed by a Democratic President, the resulting 1996 law that dramatically cut cash assistance was called the "Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act" — a name that frames this reform as a solution to the lack of personal work ethic among beneficiaries. Against the backdrop of previous racially charged public debates, both the name of the policy and its contents subtly, but purposefully, encouraged white people to draw on negative stereotypes about black people when forming their opinions about "welfare reform."

Does Racial Priming Influence Latinos?

As non-Hispanic whites begin to lose their majority status in the national population, a key question for politicians and advocates is whether U.S. Latinos will respond to racial priming in the same way as non-Hispanic whites. To answer this question, we looked at a survey of 2,000 Latin Americans that asked several questions about how respondents felt toward health policy. The questions primed racial thinking at various levels by implicating Barack Obama in relation to the policy to different degrees. This survey also asked respondents directly whether they subscribe to negative stereotypes about black people. By comparing responses on the health policy and stereotype questions, we were able to determine whether racial priming increased the likelihood that Latinos would link their racial attitudes to their opinions about health policy.

What did we find? Overall, we learned that without racial priming, Latinos are less likely than non-Hispanic Whites to link their racial attitudes to policy. However, when health policy is racially primed – described in racial terms – Latino opinions are racially polarized in a way that reflects the attitudes of non-Hispanic whites, reacting to policy in light of racial attitudes.

To the degree that our survey findings translate into real-world political contexts, they suggest that Latino sentiments can be polarized by racial arguments. That in turn suggests that no one can be certain that racial politics will diminish in the United States as the proportion of Latinos in the population increases. Since many Latinos hold stereotypical views of Black people, policy preferences among Latinos could become more closely linked to those negative stereotypes. Conservative politicians who engage in racial priming could attract support from many Latinos as well as non-Hispanic whites – thereby unleashing a powerful counter-force to Latino rejection of immigrant-bashing. Over time, racial priming could induce many Latino voters to move away from Democrats and toward Republicans just like many non-Hispanic whites.

Racial Priming and Policy Debates

There is nothing wrong with Latinos considering race when they think about politics. America's problem is that racial priming has historically been used to stoke false and negative stereotypes about Black people, thereby souring race relations and short-circuiting clear thinking about policies. Public leaders and citizens alike have a responsibility to stop this kind of racial priming, and policymakers have a responsibility to frame policies in ways that encourage thoughtful debates free from ungrounded stereotypes. When ideas about race are linked to policy, Latinos and non-Hispanic whites in particular should make sure the discussions avoid negative racial frames and instead encourage reflection on the policy at hand. Real facts – for example about public assistance to Americans of all races – have been buried under false stereotypes for so long that simply questioning long-held assumptions may improve public debates.

Read more in Daniel Lanford, Ray Block, and Dan Tope, "Racial Attitudes and Health Care Policy Opinion: An Anglix-Latinx Contrast," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* (currently available from author).