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Racism Ignored

This book is about how White Americans uniquely express racial-ethnic animus toward Latinos and how this often-ignored form of racial-ethnic hostility shapes their support for policies that adversely impact Latino communities. Its key argument is that the racialization of Latinos has created a belief system among some Whites that mixes attributes of race-ethnicity with race-neutral behaviors. This allows Whites to express animus toward Latinos in a race-neutral manner by blurring the lines between dislike toward the group and dislike toward certain behaviors. This form of racial animus directed at Latinos has been reiterated across time so frequently that these expressions have become a normal and accepted part of American political discourse. This book connects this too-frequently ignored form of animus toward Latinos with a range of political preferences of importance in contemporary politics.

There is little doubt that life for Latino Americans, and people of Latino descent living within the United States, has been replete with difficulty and discrimination. Latinos have been subjected to many of the same forms of social marginalization, segregation, violence, property loss, and violations of civil rights and liberties that other racial and ethnic groups have experienced. These forms of discrimination can be rooted in the same set of ideologies and group dominance orientations regularly used to justify discriminatory behavior (e.g., racism à la in-group favoritism and out-group hostility). But racism toward Latinos takes on an additional unique and more common form exhibited in debates over linguistic preferences, country of origin, American national identity, and immigration. Because it mixes conceptions of race with hostility toward Latino culture, it can be labeled as racism and ethnicism.

This racism-ethnicism toward Latinos, often revealed in statements of failed assimilation and the violation of Anglo-American norms, is the focus of this book.

This form of Latino-specific racism-ethnicism is on display in publications such as *Alien Nation*, *State of Emergency*, and *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. These writings argue that non-White Latinos who fail to adopt Anglo-American traditions are wreaking havoc on the nation. Economic blight, failing state educational systems, crime, teenage pregnancy rates, the strain on social welfare systems, and poverty are problems all attributed to the arrival of Latino immigrants and Latina/o Americans. In *Who Are We?*, Samuel P. Huntington argues that Latinos are threatening American identity by speaking in their native tongue, engaging in cultural traditions from their country of origin, and maintaining strong ties to family members abroad. Huntington fears that the inability of Latinos to assimilate into Anglo-American society will cause an increase in poverty, violence, and political conflict within the United States. In *State of Emergency*, Pat Buchanan (2006, 28) directly contrasts Latinos in an unfavorable light in relation to White-European immigrant groups stating,

Where the Italians wanted to be part of our family, millions of Mexicans are determined to retain their language and loyalty to Mexico. They prefer to remain outsiders. They do not wish to assimilate, and the nation no longer demands that they do so ... We are in the midst of a savage culture war in which traditionalist values have been losing ground for two generations.

In the book jacket of *Alien Nation*, Peter Brimelow writes that Latinos within the United States

are less educated, less skilled, more prone to trouble with the law, less inclined to share American culture and values, and altogether less likely to become Americans in name or spirit.

Sometimes these statements of failed assimilation are interwoven with arguments about the racial superiority of Americans with White-European ancestry, a need for White nationalism, and a desire for racial segregation. Few would doubt that within this context, statements of failed Latino assimilation and adherence to Anglo-American norms represent part of a racial ideology of old-fashioned racial bigotry rooted in a belief in the superiority of the White race.

I.1 IS IT RACISM?

At the same time, similar language is used by many Americans who do not formally endorse racial bigotry or associate themselves with White

supremacist ideologies, White nationalism, or racial segregation. Such comments frequently appear in interpersonal debates, among media pundits, and during online public discussions. For instance, a citizen at a town hall in Colorado asked “Why is it that the Irish, Italians and Eastern Europeans were able to assimilate and Latinos, to some extent, still have not?”¹ White Americans often seem at ease expressing this particular view because it gives the appearance that they dislike certain behaviors rather than Latinos as a group. In fact, many citizens endorse the idea that Latinos fail to adhere with Anglo-American norms while proclaiming racial neutrality (e.g., “I am not a racist”).

In speaking about Latinos, one blogger wrote, “I just want better educated, safer, and cleaner people living around me ... I’m not racist at all.”² A citizen on another popular website posed the question,

Why do Mexicans refuse to assimilate into the US culture? A LOT of them refuse to learn English, start gangs, stare at us like we don’t belong here, and speak Spanish fluently in public ... The Irish, Germans, Japanese, etc, have ALL learned English and are now functioning members of US society ... Do NOT call me a racist, because I know there are a lot of brain-washed idiots out there who will play the race card with me as soon as they read this. It doesn’t make me a racist to want my country to be able to be UNITED.³

These comments often cross the line between claims of racial-neutrality and outright bigotry toward Latinos. One such case is a blogger who commented on a message board that,

This is an american english seaking country and was once nice until all of them came along and polluted it with their diseases and prehistoric, unintelligent culture ... Also, no I’m not racist, it’s just that things have gone out of control with all of these illegal mexicans in our country and their rude, ignorant behavior on top of it and they are the ones who are racist because they figure since they are all heavily populated out here like roaches, they want to be the only race around and run things the way they want it.⁴

Perhaps the most notable example of how people that potentially harbor racism-ethnicism toward Latinos express their beliefs in statements

¹ David Conde, “The Assimilation of Latinos,” *La Voz*, April 12, 2017, available at www.lavozcolorado.com/detail.php?id=9084.

² <http://mexicans-go-home.com/whats-worse-the-blacks-or-these-filthy-mexicans/comment-page-2/>.

³ Yahoo!Answers, “Why Do Mexicans Refuse to Assimilate to US Culture?” [answers.yahoo.com](http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20091101171443AAAMEXO) (2009), available at <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20091101171443AAAMEXO>.

⁴ <http://mexicans-go-home.com/whats-worse-the-blacks-or-these-filthy-mexicans/comment-page-2/>.

about failed Latino assimilation, and still deny overt racism, is a pair of statements by President Donald Trump. While campaigning for president, Trump frequently made comments about the inability of Latinos to assimilate, questioning their character and desire to adhere to Anglo-American norms. His most infamous quote is,

[W]hen Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.⁵

Although many people view these comments as a direct expression of Trump's racist belief system, Trump asserted in an interview with Howard Kurtz on Fox News "I don't have a racist bone in my body ... I love the Mexican people."⁶ Subsequently, it appears that while people are quick to deny they believe in the racist ideologies of the past, they are free to express their displeasure with how Latinos have assimilated in the United States as well as a sense that Latinos fail to adhere to traditional Anglo-American norms of behavior.

The use of this type of language and imagery is not all or nothing. Sometimes speakers will pick and chose which aspects of the racism-ethnicism they highlight, denying some aspects to illustrate the "real" problem that underlies the anti-Latino affect. Then-White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, in an interview with National Public Radio, used this type of an appeal to justify harsh immigration policies stating,

[T]he vast majority of the people that move illegally into the United States are not bad people. They're not criminals. They're not MS-13. Some of them are not. But they're also not people that would easily assimilate into the United States into our modern society. They're overwhelmingly rural people in the countries they come from fourth, fifth, sixth grade educations are kind of the norm. They don't speak English, obviously that's a big thing. They don't speak English. They don't integrate well, they don't have skills. They're not bad people.⁷

⁵ Phillips, Amber. "‘They’re Rapists.’ President Trump’s Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated." *Washington Post*. June 16, 2017, available at www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/06/16/theyre-rapists-presidents-trump-campaign-launch-speech-two-years-later-annotated/.

⁶ Robert King, "Trump: I'm Not a Racist," *Washington Examiner*, July 5, 2015, available at www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-im-not-racist/article/2567627.

⁷ "Transcript: White House Chief of Staff John Kelly's Interview with NPR," National Public Radio, May 11, 2018, available at www.npr.org/2018/05/11/610116389/transcript-white-house-chief-of-staff-john-kellys-interview-with-npr.

Kelly's comments tap into the perception of Latinos as violent criminals, although it explicitly rejects the breadth of the applicability. At the same time, it highlights the lack of assimilation due to language, education, and more generally cultural differences between Latino immigrants and the, presumably, Anglo-American culture. This rhetorical technique adds legitimacy to the second set of statements by rejecting an explicit racial motivation.

How much do these statements represent anti-Latino affect hidden in the language of failed assimilation and norm violation? How does the endorsement of these statements relate to support for policies that adversely affect the Latino community? How do beliefs about failed Latino assimilation and norm violation relate to favoring political candidates that voice similar concerns over America's growing Latino population? In this book, we examine the ingredients of these views and the consequences that they have on contemporary politics. We argue that these beliefs represent a unique form of Latino-specific racism-ethnicism distinct from explicit racial and ethnic animus and the endorsement of traditional stereotypes. As we will show, these less-overt expressions of racial and ethnic animus toward Latinos influence not only the debate over immigration, but also supposedly race-neutral policies and the public's electoral choices.

1.2 THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

We argue that beliefs about the inability of Latinos to assimilate and adhere to Anglo-American norms are a complex expression of anti-Latino sentiment and a preference for traditional patterns of Anglo-American family and social organization. These beliefs developed through a process of "racializing" Latinos to be a phylogenetically and culturally (e.g., behaviorally) distinct group from Whites – a process that began in the early colonial period as White Europeans created a set of economic and political institutions to subjugate the early mestizo population. This historical racialization process has resulted in a common set of beliefs that persist today regarding Latina/o assimilation, agency, cultural inferiority, and criminality. Thus, many of the modern criticisms of Latinos stem from discriminatory institutions of the past.

This form of racism-ethnicism, masked in criticism of Latina/o behavior and culture, is particularly common today given that many White Americans prefer to avoid more direct forms of racism and ethnicism. Just as norms of equality and a desire to not appear racist constrained

the willingness of White Americans to express overt bigotry toward African Americans (Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears et al., 2000a), many people are unwilling to explicitly state their dislike toward Latinos or are unaware that they hold such beliefs (Pérez, 2010; Weyant, 2005). Subsequently, studies that rely on measures of traditional forms of racism can attenuate the role played by racism-ethnicism toward Latinos in people's political preferences and behavior. Instead, Americans who harbor Latino-specific racism-ethnicism feel more comfortable expressing these sentiments using arguments about how Latinos violate Anglo-American cultural norms. This allows people the comfort of harboring animus toward Latinos, while, at least in their own minds, appearing to support norms of equality and racial neutrality. Our primary argument is that these beliefs, what we refer to as Latina/o racism-ethnicism (LRE), are consequential to a range of salient political choices.

1.3 A LOOK AHEAD

In the chapters that follow we provide a detailed look at how the racialization of Latinos into a distinct non-White group shapes the way racism-ethnicism is expressed toward Latinos, as well as the effect of this form of racism-ethnicism on people's political preferences.

Chapter 2 contains the theoretical discussion detailing how the historical racialization of Latinos resulted in a distinct form of anti-Latina/o attitudes we refer to as LRE. Starting as early as the Spanish colonial caste system, the ancestors of modern Latinos faced discrimination that led Whites to view them as a non-White racial group. The discrimination Latinos faced resulting from the caste system limited their social mobility, helping to create a belief that Latinos were incapable of assimilating into colonial society. Other types of formal and informal practices of discrimination against Latinos (e.g., the *California Land Act*, Operation Wetback, the Zoot Suit Riots) had a similar effect, reinforcing beliefs about the inability of Latinos to assimilate as well as creating an impression that Latinos fail to adhere to Anglo-American norms. Thus, various historical institutions are partly responsible for shaping how Whites perceive Latina/o identity and ultimately shape the way that animus is expressed toward Latinos today. We refer to this animus as LRE because it conflates beliefs about Latinos as a non-White racial group with prejudice toward Latino culture. The chapter then describes why contemporary White Americans feel comfortable expressing this type of animus toward

Latinos and why it should connect to a wide range of political choices in contemporary American politics.

In Chapter 3, we explain our approach to measuring LRE. Evidence is presented showing that White Americans are more inclined to express animus toward Latinos in the language of LRE rooted in the historical racialization of Latinos rather than in more common forms of racial animus. We provide evidence that LRE is a coherent belief system distinct from other beliefs, such as ideology, ethnocentrism, and old-fashioned racial stereotypes. We then establish that responses to our measure of LRE are indeed capturing concerns about race. The chapter concludes by discussing some potential criticism to our approach.

Chapter 4 examines the most contentious debate directly involving Latinos – immigration. We explore common explanations for White opposition to open immigration policies and show how LRE is associated with both general opposition to immigration and a range of specific immigration-related policies.

Chapter 5 discusses how LRE relates to supposedly race-neutral policies – crime control and policing. Although neither policy should trigger beliefs about race or ethnicity (i.e., all citizens are equal before the eyes of the law), we show that this is far from the case. We suggest that news reporting of crime has increased the connection between Latinos and criminal behavior. This reporting is shown to increase the relationship between LRE and support for punitive crime control policies. Moreover, LRE is related to opposition to the policy of body cameras – especially in environments where the Latina/o crime narrative is accentuated. The connection between LRE and these policies illustrates the permeating role of this belief in shaping supposedly race-neutral policies.

Chapter 6 extends this analysis by examining the role of LRE in supporting laws related to voting registration and identification. We describe the debate over laws aimed at preventing voter fraud and how these laws potentially impact Latinos. We then show evidence that Whites harboring LRE are more likely to support laws that increase the barriers to voting than do Whites who feel amicable toward Latinos. Moreover, our evidence suggests that support for more-restrictive voting laws is related to LRE rather than specific threats posed by the growing Latina/o population.

Chapter 7 documents the role of LRE in contemporary elections. We argue that the rise of Latina/o political candidates, as well as the increased anti-Latina/o immigration rhetoric of the last several decades, has created an environment where LRE plays an important role in how White

Americans vote. We examine the role of LRE in the US House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections in both midterm and presidential election years. The evidence shows a consistent relationship between LRE and voting for Latina/o congressional candidates as well as Senate and state gubernatorial candidates that take a hardline immigration stance. Our evidence also points to LRE having played a significant role in the election of President Donald Trump – providing a more accurate predictor of voting for Trump than traditional explanations focusing on authoritarianism and ethnocentrism.

Chapter 8 discusses how our findings speak to the future of Latinos living in the United States. We suggest that LRE will most likely be a persistent presence in US politics, but can be muted when policy agendas shift and the electoral benefits of campaigning toward those who harbor LRE subside.