



## The Effect of Discrimination on Latinx Public Opinion in the United States

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Every day, it seems, there is a new headline on the Trump administration's immigration policy, from legal challenges to changes in enforcement directives. Arguably, the most important one has been the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on federal immigration agent profiling issued in early September of 2025. The core of this decision holds that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have the ability to stop (and question) individuals based on location, apparent job, language use (i.e., Spanish or English with an accent), and/or "apparent race or ethnicity." Although these interactions between ICE agents and the public were occurring before this decision, we have since seen an uptick in enforcement efforts nationwide.

Although the Latinx population is not the only one that has a significant foreign-born population in the country, it has been almost exclusively the focus of these enforcement efforts since the start of the Trump administration. Policymakers who want to protect the rights of those with Latinx background must work boldly to gain the trust of this community that has historically been the face of political attacks.

### Immigration and Acculturation

An implicit, and sometimes explicit, expectation of immigrants in the United States is that they assimilate into American society. However, as with many other things, that is easier said than done. Just as there are a number of facets of assimilation (e.g., social, economic, cultural, etc.), there are several factors that can influence that process – from education to employment and place of residence, amongst others. Assuming migrants want to assimilate, there are ways the government and the American people can make it easier or harder for them to do so.

### Discrimination and Its Impact

As a result of heightened enforcement efforts, more individuals of both documented and undocumented populations are coming into contact with ICE agents. While this enforcement is having its own impact on the psyche of the Latinx community, it does not exist in a vacuum. The current situation is also affecting this community through public discourse and interpersonal interactions. In addition to the enforcement directives coming down through the Department of Homeland Security, we also have the ways in which politicians, pundits, and members of the public are talking about these operations and of the immigrant population. Whether it is through social media or interpersonal communication, some individuals are seeing this problematic language, some of which is directed at them.

The tragic event at that Walmart in El Paso, Texas, back in 2019 stands out as one of the more egregious examples of anti-Hispanic (and anti-immigrant) rhetoric transformed into action. While it stands alone in its magnitude, reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation released show that ethnically-motivated hate crimes targeting the Hispanic population have increased since then. Though high-profile events like that mass shooting can be impactful, there is also reason to expect that the everyday, person-to-person interactions can also have damaging consequences for individuals, from structuring their behavior and influencing their sense of belonging in our country.

Our work focuses on the impact of discrimination and assimilation on the public opinion of Latinx respondents. In essence, building on a number of works in the discipline, we argue that not all immigrants (or their children) experience America in the same way – some enter welcoming, supportive environments, while others enter more hostile ones. That variation, we believe, can influence the extent to which immigrants (and their families) assimilate into mainstream American culture. While all Latinxs, U.S.-born or not, are likely seeing what is happening at the federal level and across the states with respect to immigration enforcement, not all are being personally impacted by it. Similarly, though all might have some sense of the current climate and discrimination that some in the community are experiencing, not everyone has personally been discriminated against.

## **Our Work on Personal Discrimination Experiences and Assimilation**

In our study, we focus our attention on those respondents who have personally experienced discrimination in an attempt to see how those experiences interact with attitudinal assimilation and how they might influence the political preferences of those individuals as compared to those without that personal experience with discrimination based on their racial background or ethnicity, immigration status, skin color, and/or accent. Whereas many scholars assume that immigrants and their native-born children will assimilate culturally, economically, and politically, we contend that this is far from automatic. Indeed, those who do not feel welcomed by society may not want to “fit in” or aspire to be like their non-immigrant counterparts. We put this to a test by leveraging a national-level survey with Latinx and non-Latinx White respondents for comparison—exploring whether migrants and their later-generation descendants adopt policy positions more similar to their non-immigrant peers. As mentioned above, the core difference that we are interested in is whether a respondent professed experiencing a discriminatory experience tied to their background. We find support for the idea that those who experienced discrimination personally were less likely to hold “mainstream” policy positions when compared to their Latinx peers who did not have the same experience.

In short, across a number of policy domains, we find that amongst Latinxs, those that had personal experiences with discrimination based on the markers described above, were least like their Latinx and non-Latinx White counterparts. That is, those with personal experiences with discrimination were least likely to adopt mainstream political preferences. However, for those Latinxs without that personal experience, we found a convergence in political preferences—with second and third generation respondents holding more similar, and oftentimes, indistinguishable preferences from their non-Latinx White counterparts. Though there are a lot of factors that can influence the extent to which migrants assimilate into the country, clearly the context in which they are in matters—those with negative experiences are more likely to “fit in.”

While it is seemingly unlikely, given the current administration’s disposition on the foreign-born population, and the recent influx of funds appropriated to the interior immigration enforcement apparatus, our recommendation would be to avoid further alienating the Latinx population in the U.S. Clearly, policies have

consequences, and our work shows one of the downstream impacts of an anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx environment on the political attitudes of the largest minority group and voting bloc in our country. If the goal is to encourage the social and political integration of migrants into American society, then our politics and policy need to reflect that moving forward.

**Read more in Giovanni D. Pleites-Hernandez and J. Robert Shrode, "The Impact of Acculturation and Personal Discrimination on Latinx Public Opinion." *Social Science Quarterly* 105, no. 5. (2024): 1634-1648.**