



U.S. Latinos Care about Many Issues beyond Immigration

Stella Rouse, University of Maryland-College Park

Latinos living in the United States comprise the largest number of immigrants of any racial or ethnic group – and for this reason, many Americans presume that immigration is the issue that matters most to Latino citizens and residents. But is that true? Do Latinos themselves view immigration as their top concern, and if not what other issues are high on their political agenda? My research tackles this question, which is important for understanding the potential political influence of the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States.

The Challenge of Identifying Latino Priorities

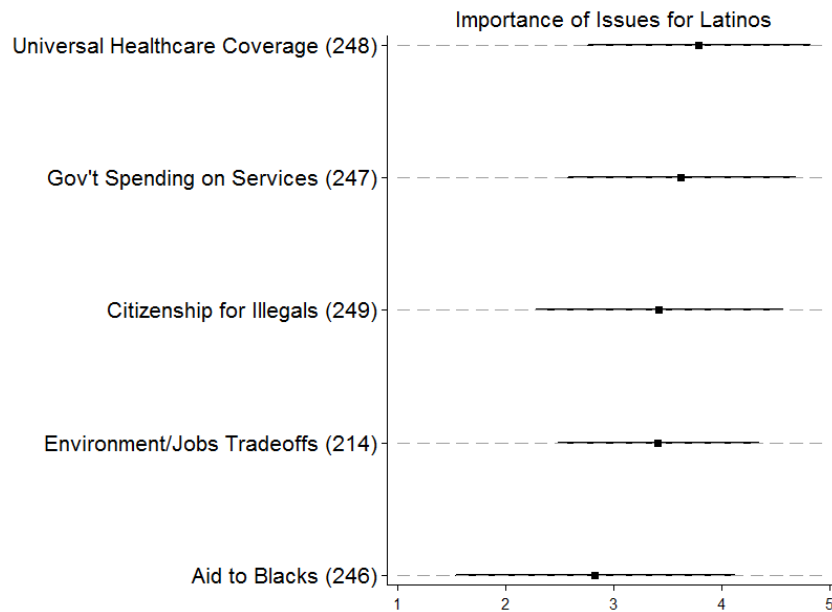
Latinos are a very diverse people. They are identified as a group not by race but through shared language and culture. More generally, however, Latinos have little in common. They have varied physical appearances and, more important, originate from different countries and have distinct histories and experiences. Dissimilarities among Latinos living in the United States have made it difficult for anyone, including group leaders, to identify and articulate a united, sustained set of issue priorities.

Many suppose that all Latinos care passionately and primarily about immigration, an emotional and complex issue in America. Repeatedly in recent times, anti-immigrant proposals have led Latinos and their supporters to organize marches and protests to oppose such measures. The visibility of these public gatherings gives the impression that immigration is the top priority for Latinos. However, media visibility is not the same as widespread social perceptions. A close look at the issues that actually matter most to Latinos reveals a different story.

Previous research in this area has often discussed issues that should matter to the Latino community, rather than taking nuanced steps to figure out what people really think. When scholars examine the opinions of Latinos comprehensively – and tease out the preferences of both ordinary Latinos as well as elites – immigration turns out not to be the top concern.

Issues of Personal Importance – And What Government Should Address

The figure displayed here is based on surveyed nationwide, representative responses to the 2008 American National Election Study. The figure displays answers from Latinos to a set of questions about how important various issues are to them personally. Notably, Latinos rank universal healthcare coverage as the most important issue, followed by government spending on social services. The issue of immigration – the survey asked specifically about the importance of providing citizenship for illegals – ranks third for Latino respondents overall.



Representatives and Their Constituents

My research also examined the issue preferences of Latino representatives, to see if they have different priorities than the constituents who elected them. If that were true, then it would be difficult to argue that Latinos in the United States have any sort of cohesive political agenda. But results from interviews with Latino state legislators reveal that representatives and voters have overlapping concerns. Overall, education is the top policy concern for Latino representatives, followed by health care. Only 8% of the Latino legislators name immigration as their top issue. These findings demonstrate considerable congruence between the interests that matter to the Latino population and those that are priorities for Latino legislators. Even on the issue of immigration, neither Latino citizens nor Latino elected leaders rank it as a top priority. In short, although immigration matters, both groups are more focused on education and social support for individuals and families. Such concerns are at the heart of Latino priorities and influence on U.S. public policies. Political parties and politicians concerned with being responsive to the growing Latino constituency should not only address the issue of immigration, but more importantly, should focus on education and health care, issues that appear to be the cornerstone of the Latino political agenda.

Read more in Stella M. Rouse, *Latinos in the Legislative Process: Interests and Influence* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).