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# Ethnic Concerns and Latino Party Identification [post-print]

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## Abstract

The accelerated growth of the Latino population in the United States has made Latinos a coveted addition to each major political party's base. In this paper we examine the influence of ethnic concerns on the party identification of Latinos in the U.S. In contrast to previous studies, we account for Latinos' perceptions of the political parties' concern for their ethnic interests, allowing such interests to be self-defined. In a multinomial logit analysis of pooled data from three surveys of Latinos taken in 1999, 2004, and 2006, we find such perceptions do affect Latino partisanship, along with variables such as nativity and country of origin or ancestry. We also find a tendency toward independence among Latinos. Finally, we find movement toward the Democratic Party in 2004, once ethnic concerns are taken into account. One implication of the findings is that the party that can best persuade Latinos of their concern for their interests is the party most likely to gain their loyalties; indeed, the parties must earn those loyalties.

## **Introduction**

Most Latinos (sans Cuban-Americans) have long been found to be firmly Democratic in their partisan identification (Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003; Grebler, Moore and Guzman 1970; de la Garza and DeSipio 1996; Garcia et. al. 2000), despite recent efforts by Republican strategists to convert Latinos to their cause (Basler 2008; Gimpel 2004; de la Garza and Cortina 2007). Nevertheless, Hajnal and Lee (2011) find that the percentage of Latinos who identify as independents or decline to state any identification exceeds the percentage identifying as Democrats and Republicans put together (p. 7).

In this paper, we investigate the determinants of Latino party identification as measured by surveys from 1999, 2004, and 2006. We hypothesize that Latinos' partisan identification over this period is affected by ethnic group concerns broadly defined as perceptions of which party has more concern for Latinos. There is evidence that a sense of an ethnically-linked fate affects Latinos' partisan identification in favor of the Democratic Party (Hajnal and Lee 2011), as does the experience of being the target of discrimination (Cain et al. 1991). Given this evidence on selected issues and experiences, we test the hypothesis that Latino partisanship is broadly affected by perceptions that a party is concerned with Latinos. Moreover, the Pew Hispanic Center found considerable partisan movement among Latinos between 1999 and 2006 (Lopez and Minushkin 2008). We examine that movement over time and locate the approximate date at which partisan change occurred.

## **The Literature and Hypotheses**

The literature indicates that Latino partisanship is influenced by a combination of ethnic variables and factors that also influence Anglo partisanship. Among the latter, income and education do not always have the same effects for Latinos as for Anglos. Some have found

income or personal finances to be unrelated to party identification (Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003; de la Garza and Cortina 2007; Dutwin et al. 2005); others have found the more typical positive relationship between income and Republican identification (Cain, Kiewiet and Uhlaner 1991; Bowler, Nicholson and Segura 2006; Fraga, Valenzuela and Harlan 2009; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Kelly and Kelly 2005). Education has been found variously to be unrelated to partisanship (Fraga et al. 2009; de la Garza and Cortina 2007); weakly yet positively related to Republican identification (Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003); and positively related to Democratic Party identification (Hajnal and Lee 2011).

Ethnic variables loom large in Latino partisanship. Latinos with Mexican and Puerto Rican roots tend to be Democrats, but Cuban Americans tend to be Republicans (Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003; de la Garza and Cortina 2007; Dutwin et al. 2005; Fraga, Valenzuela and Harlan 2009; Grebler, Moore and Guzman 1970). Latino partisanship is also affected by nativity, years in the U.S. and age, with non-Cuban Latinos and the native-born more likely to identify as Democrats with increased exposure to the U.S. political system (Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003; Cain, Kiewiet and Uhlaner 1991; Dutwin et al. 2005; Hajnal and Lee 2011).

Additionally, Wong (2000) finds English proficiency to be related to the acquisition of partisanship, although she does not examine the direction of the effect. Similarly, Dutwin et al. (2005) argue that language is the best single measure of acculturation. However, they decline to advance a hypothesis regarding its effect on partisanship due to conflicting indications in the literature; in their model, they find that it has no impact at all.

There is evidence that non-Cubans' preferences for the Democratic Party stem in part from being the target of discrimination (Cain, Kiewiet and Uhlaner 1991; Hajnal and Lee 2011) due to the Democrats' pro-racial equality policies and the Republicans' frequent anti-immigration

rhetoric and policy proposals (Bowler, Nicholson and Segura 2006; Hero et al. 2000). In addition, some scholarship examines the impact of specific ethnically-related issues, including the sense of linked fate with other Latinos (Fraga et al. 2009; Hajnal and Lee 2011); attitudes toward immigration (Fraga et al. 2009) and affirmative action (Alvarez and Garcia-Bedolla 2003), all of which are linked to partisanship. Moreover, those who identify ethnically as Latinos are more likely to be Democrats (Dutwin et al. 2005); however, evidence on partisan tendencies of naturalized citizens is mixed (Dutwin et al. 2005; Fraga, Valenzuela and Harlan 2009).

While the issues of concern to Latinos vary over time, as we show below, several recent surveys make it possible to measure the impact over time of Latino-centric concerns on partisan identification; those surveys include a question asking which party has more concern for Latinos. By defining Latinos' interests generally (in effect, allowing the respondent to apply his or her own definition), we can comprehensively determine whether ethnic concerns affect Latinos' partisanship by examining their impact over time, even as the specific issues shift.

The impact of such concerns on African American partisanship has been examined; Hajnal and Lee (2011) find that blacks' partisanship is affected by perceptions of which party works harder on issues that blacks care about. However, a comprehensive, subjectively defined measure has not been used to estimate Latino partisanship. This research note fills that gap.

### **Hypotheses and Model**

Our major hypothesis is that Latinos are more likely to identify with the party that they deem to have the most concern for them. Drawing on the literature cited above, we also expect that native born Latinos and Latinos of non-Cuban origin are more likely to be Democrats than independents or Republicans. However, we have no specific expectations for income and education, given the mixed findings of previous research. In addition, given Wong's (2000)

finding that language affects the acquisition of partisanship, we include it in the model. But following Dutwin et al. (2005), we advance no specific hypothesis regarding its effect. We also expect that women tend to identify as Democrats, reflecting the gender gap in the larger society.

Finally, although Latinos have identified strongly as Democrats over time (de la Garza and Cortina 2007), there was change in Latino partisanship between 1999 and 2006, when the Pew Hispanic Center found that Latinos moved toward the Republican Party but then reversed course, moving more strongly than before into the ranks of the Democrats (Lopez and Minushkin 2008). To test for evidence of this change, we include dummy variables for the years of the surveys that supply the data for this analysis.

### **Data and Methods**

The data are drawn from surveys of Latinos taken in 1999, 2004, and 2006 (see Appendix for details). We create a pooled dataset, using questions common to each survey; the wording of these questions is identical. While pooling the data reduces the number of variables that may be used, it allows us to model changes in partisanship over time independent of other variables.

The dependent variable consists of responses to this question: "In politics today do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or member of some other party?" in the analysis, Republican=1; Democrat=2 and independent=3.<sup>1</sup>

For nativity, native-born Latinos are coded 1, otherwise 0. National origin is measured as a set of dummy variables: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and "other" Latino. The measure of acculturation is modeled on Marin et al. (1987); it consists of an additive scale of three measures English use including: ability to read a book or newspaper in English; ability to carry on a conversation in English; and primary language spoken at home. Scale scores range from 3 to 13;

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<sup>1</sup> The exact coding is not important for the multinomial logit analysis used here, as the estimates for each value of the dependent variable are reported in relationship to one other specific value.

higher scores indicate greater acculturation.<sup>2</sup> The coding of income, education, and gender are described in the Appendix.

The key independent variable is measured by the following question: "Which party has more concern for Latinos" – Democrats, Republicans, or no difference? We constructed three dummy variables from these responses. "Republicans more concerned" was coded 1, otherwise 0, and so on through the three responses. A possible concern with this variable is that those who are already Democrats simply assert that the Democratic Party is more concerned with Latinos, thus rationalizing their choice of party; if that were the case, the party concern variable would be endogenous. To assess this possibility we modeled "party more concerned" in each survey year, using as independent variables all of the specific ethnically-related issues in that year's survey. Overall, those issues change from survey to survey. To the extent that the respondent's positions on those issues explain the respondent's choice of the party they consider more concerned, we can have confidence in that variable as a measure of ethnic concerns.

In the interests of space we briefly summarize the results, which are available from the authors.<sup>3</sup> In 1999, the independent variables that are positively related to the dependent variable (indicating a tendency to choose the Democratic Party as most concerned) are personal experience with discrimination, the sense that Latinos would benefit from working together, and support for diplomatic relations with Cuba. In the 2004 survey, the significant variables are opposition to George Bush's immigration proposal and the sense that discrimination is a major problem. In 2006, they are the sense that the immigration marches of 2006 mark the beginning of a new Latino movement, the belief that the Democratic Party has the best position on

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<sup>2</sup> This scale produced a Cronbach's Alpha of .811, indicating a high degree of reliability. The mean score on this scale is 7, indicating a moderate degree of acculturation.

<sup>3</sup> We report results for an ordered logit analysis, where the coding for the dependent variable is 1=Republican, 2=no difference, and 3=Democrat. The results for a multinomial logit analysis of the same model are virtually identical.

immigration, and the sense that discrimination is a major problem. These results are consistent with the Democratic Party's long-standing pro-civil-rights stance (with the exception of Bush's immigration proposals). Therefore, it is likely that attitudes on these issues are not mere rationalizations of Democratic Party identification but, in fact, help to drive such identification.<sup>4</sup>

### Results

Figure 1 displays a plot of the changes in Latinos' partisan identification over the three surveys. Overall, while not static, Latino partisanship does not change dramatically. Yet there are noticeable differences in the marginal distributions: In 1999, 46.02% identified as Democrats, 20.46% as Republicans and 33.53% as independents. In 2004, Republicans made some gains, with 26.57% identifying as Republicans. This increase came in almost equal percentages (about 3% each) from Democrats and Independents, with Democratic identifiers at 43.24% and Independents at 30.19%. However, in 2006, Republicans lost about 7% from their 2004 total with those numbers reverting not to Democrats, but to Independents, at 37.69% of Latinos; their Democratic identification remained relatively static at 43.16%. Thus, Republican gains were temporary, while Latino independence grew.

### Figure 1 about here

Latinos' responses to the "party more concerned" question are as follows - Democrats: 42.8%; Republican: 12.9%; no difference: 44.17%. Figure 2 displays the bivariate relationship between Latinos' party identification and their perceptions of the party more concerned with Latinos. Those who think one party or the other is more concerned are more likely to identify with that party. Nevertheless, at least twenty percent of such respondents identify as

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the correlation between party identification and perceptions of party concern (using Kendall's tau) is .39; the two variables are independent beyond the .001 level of confidence.

independents, and more than half who see no difference still identify with a party. These results show that ethnic concerns are not fully determinative of partisanship.

**Figure 2 about here**

To determine the role played by explicitly ethnic concerns relative to the other variables specified above, we estimated a multinomial logit model of Latinos' partisan identification. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1. In the first two columns, the base category is identification with the Republican Party.

**Table 1 about here**

In the first column, we see that several variables are significant. If one believes that the Republican Party has more concern for Latinos, one is more likely to identify as a Republican; the reverse is true if one believes that the Democratic Party has more concern; the omitted category is "no difference." Latinos who are more acculturated are less likely to identify as Democrats than as Republicans. However, native-born respondents are more likely to identify as Democrats. The latter result may reflect Cain, Kiewiet and Uhlaner's (1991) finding that Latinos who have lived longer in the U.S. are more likely to have experienced discrimination. We speculate that such experiences are also more common among the least acculturated—by this measure, those who primarily use Spanish—even if they are native-born. Conversely, those who are foreign-born but use mainly English might experience less discrimination and thus be more likely to be Republicans. Finally, if one is of Mexican or "other" national origin, one is more likely to identify as a Democrat than Cuban-Americans and Puerto Ricans.

The second column shows the results of the Independent v. Republican analysis. The results for the "party most concerned" variable are similar to—albeit weaker than—those in the

first column. Acculturation has no significant effect, nor does nativity. If one is of Mexican or “other” national origin, one is more likely to identify as an Independent than as a Republican.

The third column compares independents and Democrats. Those who believe the Republican Party has more concern for Latinos are no more likely to identify as independents than Democrats. However, those who believe the Democratic Party has more concern for Latinos are significantly more likely to identify with that party. Acculturation has no significant impact, but again, native-born Latinos are more likely to identify as Democrats than independents.

Latinos overall were significantly more likely to identify with the Democrats in 2004 than in 1999; there was no effect for 2006 relative to 1999. The demographic variables often found to be related to partisanship are not significant after ethnic issues are taken into account.<sup>5</sup>

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

While numerous scholars have produced a valuable body of knowledge concerning the dynamics of Latino party identification, we have demonstrated that there is considerable value in including Latino-centric concerns in such models. In virtually all of our estimates, perceptions of which party has more concern for Latinos significantly influence Latinos’ party identification. That variable fails to reach significance only for “Republicans more concerned” in the independents v. Democrats model, an unremarkable result.

With respect to country of origin, we find the well-known differences between Latinos of Cuban and non-Cuban origin, with Mexicans and “others” particularly unlikely to identify as Republicans. However, the failure of those variables to attain significance in the independents v. Democrats model suggests that among non-Cubans, there is no significant preference for Democrats over independence once ethnic concerns are accounted for. In the other comparisons,

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<sup>5</sup> For income and education, this result is not explained by collinearity: Kendall’s tau = .36; it is not significant.

the ethnic variables have an independent effect; yet in two of these cases, the coefficients are significant only at the .1 level of confidence. This strongly suggests that the Democratic Party does not have a lock on Latinos' partisan loyalties even among those ethnic groups normally found to be most strongly inclined to identify with it. Moreover, acculturation only benefits the Republican Party as compared with Democrats; more acculturated Latinos are as likely to be independents as Republicans or Democrats, again indicating a tendency toward independence among Latinos (Hajnal and Lee 2011). All else equal, however, the native-born are strongly inclined to the Democratic Party. Finally, over time, the trend toward the Democratic Party, which manifests itself in 2004, is strong. However, the contrast with 1999, the omitted category, does not appear in 2006, a surprising result given the national tide toward the Democrats in that year. The Republican surge among Latinos in the early 2000's may have been a function of George W. Bush's immigration proposals, a variable that contributes to the choice of the Republican Party as more concerned (as described above). Once that is taken into account, the year variable reflects a trend toward Democrats.

The increase in independence among Latinos is not reflected in the larger population of the U.S. during the same time period. In national surveys, the Pew Research Center found the percentage of the population not affiliated with a party unchanged at 30 percent between 2004 and 2006 (Pew Research Center 2009). For Latinos in 2006, the level of independence is 37 percent, nearly 25 percent higher than for the general population. The trend toward independence is one that both parties will have to deal with, one that might present opportunities for either party to make gains in individual elections, depending on short term forces. At the very least, the importance of Latino-centric issues to partisan identity suggests that if the major political parties want to win the firm allegiance of Latinos, they must earn it.

## APPENDIX

The 1999 data were collected in a nationally representative sample survey conducted by telephone by the Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. The survey had 2,417 Latino adults 18 years and older and was weighted to provide a nationally representative sample. This survey also included non-Latinos, but only Latinos are analyzed in this paper. Respondents were coded as Latino if they answered yes to the question, "Are you, yourself of Hispanic or Latin origin or descent, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some other Latin background?" The respondents included 312 Cubans, 318 Puerto Ricans and 818 Mexicans, with the remaining 593 coming from Central or South American background.

The 2004 data come from the joint Pew Hispanic Center/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation study: "National Survey of Latinos: Politics and Civic Participation." This study included 2,288 respondents and was weighted to provide a nationally representative sample of Latinos. The sample included 1,110 Mexican descent, 282 of Puerto Rican descent, 421 Cubans and 447 of other national origin background.

The 2006 study was conducted by telephone by the Pew Hispanic Center among 2,000 Hispanic adults, 18 years and older, who had the option to respond in Spanish, English, or a combination of the two languages. (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). The sample was weighted to provide a nationally representative sample. The respondents included 713 respondents of Mexican origin, 300 of Puerto Rican Origin, 238 of Cuban and the remainder from other Latin American or European background.

The control variables in the multivariate model are coded as follows: for gender, female=1; male=0; for education, 1=none through grade 8; 2=high school incomplete; 3=High school grad or GED; 4=Business, technical or vocational school; 5=Some college, no 4-yr degree; 6=College graduate; 7=post-graduate training or professional. 9="refused," and is treated as missing. Income=1 if less than \$50,000 and 2 if more than \$50,000.

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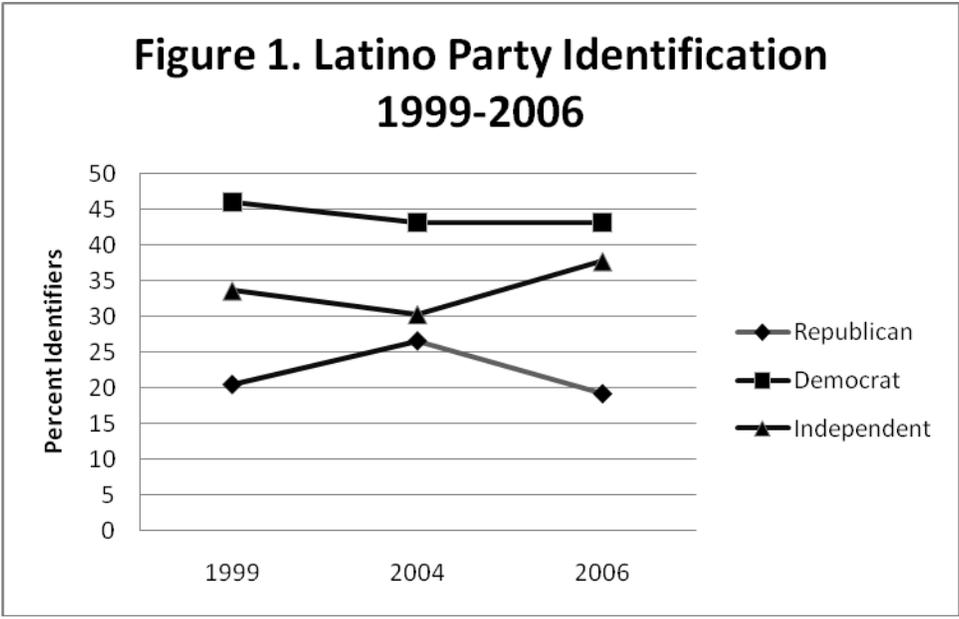
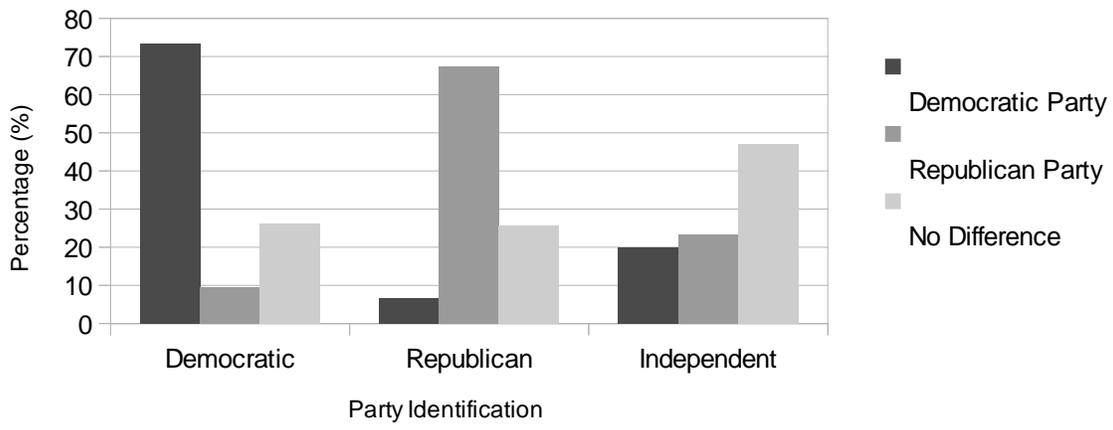


Figure 2. Percentage Partisan Identification Among Latinos by Party More Concerned, 1999-2006



**Table 1. Determinants of Hispanic Party Identification**

Independent variable	Democrats v. Republicans	Independents v. Republicans	Independents v. Democrats
	Coefficient <sup>a</sup> (Std. Error)	Coefficient <sup>a</sup> (Std. Error)	Coefficient <sup>a</sup> (Std. Error)
Republicans More Concerned	-2.05*** (.49)	-1.23*** (.31)	.81 (.51)
Democrats More Concerned	2.66*** (.32)	.94*** (.33)	-1.72*** (.23)
Acculturation	-.12* (.06)	-.06 (.05)	.06 (.05)
Income	-.09 (.08)	-.02 (.07)	.07 (.06)
Gender	.01 (.27)	.19 (.25)	.18 (.22)
Education	-.04 (.08)	-.05 (.08)	-.01 (.07)
Native Born	.70* (.38)	-.04 (.36)	-.73** (.34)
Mexican	.55* (.30)	1.02** (.35)	.47 (.31)
Puerto Rican	.32 (.50)	-.05 (.56)	-.37 (.49)
Other ethnic	.75** (.36)	.75* (.40)	-.01 (.37)
2004 dummy	.73*** (.23)	.18 (.23)	-.54*** (.21)
2006 dummy	.10 (.26)	-.11 (.25)	-.21 (.17)
Constant	.07 (.51)	.31 (.49)	.24 (.43)

<sup>a</sup> Coefficients are multinomial logit estimates.

Number of observations 4820  
Wald chi-square 190.34\*\*\*(24d.f.)  
Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> 0.18

\* Significant at .10

\*\* Significant at .05

\*\*\*Significant at .01