

Working Text
Latinos and Political Interventions

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Introduction

It is by now a matter of common knowledge that Latinos will surpass African Americans in numeric strength by halfway into this new decade, thereby attaining the distinction of comprising the country's largest minority. It is just as clear, however, that all is not well among the nation's Latinos and that their future prospects are far from reassuring. It is suggested here that in order for the vast majority of Latinos to achieve the "American Dream," serious reforms in public policy will be required.

However, a major share of the rapid Latino growth of recent decades has been due to migration. For some, this undermines the legitimacy of calls for reforms on behalf of the group. This sort of reasoning is patently wrongheaded on several grounds. First off, only a portion of the Latino population is immigrant --the vast majority were born citizens, while most others have been duly naturalized. Second, research clearly shows that immigrants generally, but especially Latinos, contribute more to governmental revenues in taxes than they receive in public provisions, particularly since they are often denied many public benefits.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Latino migration to the United States has hardly been a self-initiated process. Rather, the roots of these transplantations have been economic and political interventions by U.S. interests into Latin America. For example, the complete takeover of Puerto Rico and partial incorporation of Mexico, followed by decades of sporadic labor recruitment of the groups, mainly account for the fact that Mexicans and Puerto Ricans are today the largest Latino nationality groups in the US mainland.

Despite the legitimacy of our presence and our well-known contributions to the nation--in the labor force, in revitalizing areas, in the arts and sciences, in the armed forces during wartime, etc.-- far too many among us are ill, destitute, educationally deprived, institutionalized, or die young, while many more toil for long hours at arduous tasks, but remain teetering on the brink. Yet, it is likely that

much of this human suffering need not occur at all, or can be easily addressed through governmental action.

One caveat is in order here. Just as Latinos hail from many different nations, so too have they experienced different patterns in their respective processes of integration. Such differences, whether minor or major, cannot be fully accounted for here. Suffice to say that the problems and policies to be discussed here are of at least some relevance to all Latino groups.

Issues

The scope of the problem is easily shown. Throughout the 1990s, the poverty rate for Whites [referring to non-Hispanic Whites as data permit] remained under 10 percent, while those for Blacks [African Americans] and Latinos each hovered in the 25-30 percent range. Indeed, in 1994, the rate for Latinos surpassed that for Blacks for the first time; thereafter, the groups' rates have remained close. What's more, a substantial portion of these groups command incomes just barely over the poverty line. That the latter portions also experience substantial deprivation is validated by the government's own agencies, since numerous means-tested subsidy programs allow for incomes well above the poverty line.

Median household income figures tell a similar story. Those for 1998 show Whites commanding \$42.4 thousand yearly, Blacks \$25.4 thousand, and Latinos \$28.3 thousand. While this would suggest that Latinos are better off than African Americans, the figures mislead in this instance. The problem can be seen by looking at the corresponding figures on per capita income. Whereas Whites led the groups with \$23.0 thousand in such income, Blacks came in second at \$13.0 thousand, and Latinos were last at only \$11.4 thousand. The reason for this is that Latinos have significantly larger households. That translates into both more workers per household --hence more earnings-- but also more dependents. Thus, the additional dollars have to support more people as well. On balance, then, the two minorities fare about the same --far below Whites!

The larger number of workers per household among Latinos also reflects their higher labor force participation, which leads directly to another important point. Latinos are far more likely to be "working poor" than the others, despite having more workers per household. For example, some 29 percent of poor Latino families were headed by a full time/full year worker in 1998, as compared with only 24 percent of poor White ones and 19 percent of poor Black ones. Among Mexican origin families, the largest Hispanic grouping and the one with the most immigrants, the percentage is higher still (while it is generally lower for Puerto Ricans).

A key reason for this is the fact that Latinos, especially Mexican immigrants, are more likely to be mired in low wage service jobs and, especially,

harvesting and other backbreaking agricultural work. Not only does such work entail rock-bottom wages, but it is often unregulated, corrupted by exploitative practices, and not covered by such staples of working life as the social security system!

One clear example of the consequences of this patterning concerns health insurance. While the nation's health insurance crisis has grown steadily among all groups, as of 1998, "only" 12 percent of Whites lacked coverage, whereas 22 percent of Blacks and a whopping 35 percent of Latinos did so!

Still another major way Latinos are handicapped concerns education. Whereas 63 percent of Black adults [age 25 and over] and 78 percent of White ones had at least a high school education in 1990, only half of such Latinos did so. And while the latter figure is downwardly biased by the presence of recent immigrants, few of whom are educated, immigration accounts for only part of the gap. This is evident in that only 53 percent of Puerto Ricans, none of whom are immigrants, had 12 years of schooling.

Another issue is discrimination. A widely publicized series of ploys conducted by the research-oriented Urban Institute sought to determine if Blacks and Hispanics faced job discrimination. They concocted resumes tailored to present paired job seekers as equally qualified, then sent pairs of research workers bearing these equalized credentials to job sites with advertised openings. One in each pair of applicants was White, while the other was Black or Latino. They found that within the Black-White pairs, Whites received favorable treatment 21 percent of the time, while Blacks received favorable treatment 7 percent of the time. By contrast, within the Latino-White pairs, the corresponding favorable treatment figures were 31 percent for Whites and 11 percent for Latinos --an even wider gap!

Obviously, most of these factors are highly interrelated and linked to material disadvantage. Among additionally related serious problems are Latinos' disproportionate representation among street gangs, drug abusers, homicide victims, the homeless, the prison population, and so forth. Clearly, poverty can breed these problems, but it can also be caused by them. Adding to the dilemma is the fact that the prospects for change in material conditions are nil. Real wages among the less skilled and educated workers have been falling for years, with no relief in sight. Is it possible that the problems have both their roots and potential solutions in government policy?

Political Interventions

There is an abundance of areas where better policies will both address the existing dilemmas and prevent their recurrence and, of great significance, such reforms would benefit a far greater aggregation of Americans than just those of

Hispanic origin. While only a few can be briefly reviewed here, they speak directly to the issues noted above.

Health policy is a natural starting point. The US spends more money on health care than any other nation, whether taken from the perspective of per capita spending or as a percentage of GDP [gross domestic product], yet delivers far less satisfactory service. Not only were over 44 million without coverage in 1998 [including over 1/3 of all Latinos], but millions more were very unhappy with their coverage [including the present author and everyone he knows].

A comparison with Canada is instructive here. Canada, like virtually every other industrialized nation on earth excluding the US, has a nationalized health system. Whereas the US expended about 14.2 percent of its GDP on health in the mid-1990s, Canada spent only about 9.8 of its GDP. Despite this, 1992 figures on health performance favor Canada hands down. Whereas US infant mortality that year registered at 8.5 per thousand, Canada's rate was 6.1. Likewise, life-expectancies for men and women, respectively, were 74.9 and 81.4 years in Canada, but only 72.3 and 79.1 years in the US. Indeed, in a recent survey of 10 industrialized countries, US respondents were the least satisfied with their systems, while Canadians were the most satisfied. What's more, even Canadian physicians preferred their system over the "fee for service" variety of the US. Clearly, US health policy is in critical condition and Latinos are among its key casualties.

The criminal justice system is another case-in-point. The systematic problems there, which detrimentally affect Latinos and other minorities, extend far beyond the discriminatory treatment they frequently encounter --though that is an obvious area of great concern. For example, in the early 1990s, the US had far and away the highest rate of incarceration in the entire world! Whereas some 519 people were imprisoned here for every 100,000 in the population, the nation with the second highest number, Poland, experienced a corresponding rate of only 160 persons. The vast majority of countries exhibit rates below 100 persons, many well below.

Despite this, the US remains the most violent society among the industrialized countries, if not the entire world. For example, in the US, 9.4 persons of every 100,000 in the population were murdered in 1990. This compares with the corresponding figures of 1.1 for England, Wales and France, 1.2 for Germany and Norway, 1.3 Sweden, 1.4 for Switzerland, 1.7 for Scotland, and only 2.6 for Italy, despite the latter's distinction as the home nation of the US's Mafia. Clearly, there are serious flaws in our system and at least two factors stand out here --most other industrialized countries ban guns and regulate drugs, rather than the other way around. This undermines access to guns and the profitability of drug sales. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of our prisoners, especially minority men, are in for drug and violence offenses, with most of the

latter cases involving firearms. In the meantime, crimes against humanity [war crimes], crimes against the environment by corporations, crimes against the constitution, such as conducting secret wars and lying to Congress, etc., routinely go unpunished. A major overhaul would appear necessary!

Our nation's social welfare policy also needs overhauling. Every single industrialized nation on earth experiences lower rates of poverty than the US, usually much lower. For example, a comparison of child poverty rates across the US and fifteen Western industrialized nations found the US rate was greater than three times higher [21.5 to 6.7] than the others' average rate! In addition to nationalized health care systems, these nations all feature more liberalized welfare policies [e.g., unemployment insurance, child allowances] than we do. Contrary to US style conservative dogma, their systems have not wreaked havoc on their economies or societies.

This country's educational institutions are yet another source of acute inequalities that fall heavily on minority shoulders. Among the deepest problems is per capita spending differences across districts. Virtually every major city's central school districts are minority saturated and woefully underfunded, at the same time that surrounding suburban schools, particularly in the wealthier districts, enjoy boundless amenities and near lily white constituencies. Most other industrialized nations permit far fewer inequities among public schools than the US [why should we?]. Other problems here include the lack of commitment to such critical, minority-focused programs as bilingual education and Affirmative Action.

Labor policies also need shoring up. The number and percentage of "working poor" families has increased steadily during the past two decades; this must be addressed. For example, the Earned Income Tax Credit [EITC] could be expanded and its low level of participation could be addressed [perhaps through increased outreach efforts]. Also, the range of coverage by the social security system and minimum wage laws should be examined for potential expansion as appropriate. It is also clear that anti-discrimination efforts need to be stepped up. Likewise, laws need to be passed [or rescinded] that will put an end to the second class treatment of immigrants. After all, beyond Native Americans, we are essentially a nation of immigrants.

In short, there is a strong basis for the assertion that many current policies have hindered, rather than served, the interests of most Americans, including Latinos. Their reversal should provide substantial alleviation. But it would be foolish to believe their particular features came about by chance or benign misinformation. Rather, policies have generally taken their particular forms because in that way they best serve the interests of particular individuals or constituencies with influence. Overcoming such interests will require more than

mere intellectual strength. It will surely require a substantial dose of political strength as well --for THAT is the stuff of political interventions!