

# THE Nation.

## A Driving Force

*The past and future of Latinx voters.*

*By Ed Morales*



Robert F. Kennedy and Herman Badillo in the Bronx in New York City during Badillo's campaign for Bronx borough president, 1965. (Bettmann / Getty)

**W**hen considering debates about political formulations as nebulous yet as desperately crucial as “the Latinx vote,” it can be vexing to consider those Latinx who vote Republican. In the age of Covid-19, Black Lives Matter protests, and radical right Trumpism, how could they exist? What common ground could Latinx voters possibly find with the Republican Party and its current fusion of fascistic nativism and deadly bottom-line billionaire capitalism? After all, are Latinx not, in the eyes of the Trump faithful, the living embodiment of the dire threat that Samuel P. Huntington saw to “the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers”?

Viewed from New York City, the center of the Northeast left-liberal bubble, where Latinx politics has long been driven by Puerto Rican Democrats, it can be easy to forget that going back to the 1960s, a substantial number of Latinx voters nationwide have consistently voted for Republican presidential candidates. And while Hispanic Republican support peaked at 40 percent for George W. Bush in 2004, the sobering reality is that Trump's Latinx support was somewhere between 20 and 30 percent in 2016. This hasn't waned considerably, even after three years of incessant immigrant bashing: In a poll conducted by Latino Decisions and published in late April, in the middle of the coronavirus crisis, 23 percent of Latinx voters said they were either voting for Trump or leaning toward doing so.

Geraldo Cadava tries to shed light on this thorny subject in *The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Identity, From Nixon to Trump*, which, along with Benjamin Francis-Fallon's *The Rise of the Latino Vote: A History*, illustrates just how complicated this story is. Starting their narratives in the early 20th century, when most Latinx voters (like their African American counterparts) shifted away from the Republican Party during its rightward turn, both books discuss how the Democrats and Republicans alike sought to organize disparate national and ethnic groups living in different regions into one “Latino” constituency by appealing to them through class interests—as workers/activists or as businessmen/property owners—as well as through their views (often stereotyped) on family unity and Christian morality. Situating the story of these voters in the context of a broader history of Latinx in the United States, both books offer important additions to this history's growing canon, which is beginning to chip away at long-standing narratives by giving a fuller account of the ambiguous yet undeniable historical reality of Latinx as a political constituency.

At the heart of any argument about “Latino” or “Hispanic” politics, of course, is also a discussion about those labels themselves, especially since political strategists and

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advocates and marketing consultants have played such a big role in creating the notion of a monolithic Latinidad. By carefully examining archives from underutilized sources like the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, along with the archives of Hispanic Republicans like Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Manuel Luján, Cadava and Francis-Fallon show that Latinx voters in both parties embraced the idea that Latinx should envision themselves as a national constituency in order to wield more power than individual groups could. Both books also show what was lost by creating one constituency out of many and offer new historical insight into the evolution of terms like “Hispanic” and “Latino,” which remain contested in local communities and the mass media.

Hispanic Republicans, Cadava argues, trace their origin to the shift in American politics in the New Deal era. When many African Americans transferred their allegiance from the Republicans to the Democrats, many US Latinx did so as well. But some grew disenchanted with the Democrats: Starting in the 1950s, small but noticeable numbers of Mexican Americans, frustrated by their perception that the Democrats were more concerned with African American votes, began to move back to the Republican Party. Groups like *Latinos con Eisenhower* and *Viva Nixon* (a group cochaired by *I Love Lucy* star Desi Arnaz) garnered support, mostly among the Mexican American–dominated Latinx populations in Texas, California, and the Southwest and offered a counterpoint to centrist groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens and progressive workers’ groups like *El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española*.

Likewise, years before the Cuban Revolution, recent South and Central American immigrants—particularly those who identified with Spain and were opposed to anti-American nationalism in Latin America—embraced some of Cold War conservatism’s anti-communist politics. At the onset of the Cold War, John Flores, a public relations representative whom Cadava credits with being “the first Hispanic to articulate a national vision for Hispanic Republican mobilization,” founded *Latinos con Eisenhower*. Despite being slighted by the president, who dismissed his request to be considered for the position of deputy assistant secretary for inter-American affairs, Flores argued that Latinx could play a key role in fighting communism in Latin America. Thanks to their knowledge of the “language, customs, and traditions of Latin America” as well as his “relationships with “anti-Communists south of the border,” they could help the United States more efficiently stave off leftist populism there. As Cadava shows, this anti-communist politics, far from being the sole province of Miami Cubans, was prevalent among a much wider range of Latinx.

**H**ispanic Republicans, while still a minority of Latinx voters, also began to craft an identity for themselves around Republican principles—in particular, small-business

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entrepreneurialism, patriarchal family values, and the rejection of the welfare state in addition to anti-communism. Their movement intensified in the late 1950s and early '60s around Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, when he ran for president in 1960, and it reached an apex with his victory in 1968. This support was premised on a politics of social conservatism and anti-communism, but Nixon was also willing to appeal to Latinx voters as part of his strategy to make up for his lack of support among African Americans. Public relations campaigns that painted Nixon, a native of Whittier, Calif., as "once a poor white man who worked alongside poor Mexicans in the orchards and fields" only further solidified this relationship. At the same time, some New York Puerto Ricans became supporters of the state's liberal Republican governor, Nelson Rockefeller, and were brought into the party by his softer strain of conservatism. Others were attracted to even more extreme right positions and supported Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964. Cuban exiles in Miami, who felt betrayed by the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, were especially drawn to Goldwater.

The realization that Republicans needed Latinx voters because black ones had mostly abandoned the party shaped an evolving so-called inclusion policy after Nixon's election in 1968. In a highlight of the book, Cadava examines Cuban American and Mexican American involvement in Watergate, which was not limited to the "plumbers" who raided the Democratic Party's offices but also included the "Brown Mafia," a group of Mexican American and Japanese American operatives who managed the patronage politics for the GOP in California and became involved in the tangled web of financial transactions associated with the Committee to Re-elect the President. The Brown Mafia was led by William Marumoto, a Japanese American raised in the LA barrio, and Benjamin "Boxcar" Fernández, who founded the Republican National Hispanic Assembly in 1974 in order to gain influence in the GOP as well as to encourage Hispanic participation in local party politics. Besides handing out federal contracts to supporters in pay-for-play schemes, these men tried unsuccessfully to bribe people like Nevada land-rights activist Luis Reies-Tijerina, the leader of La Raza Unida, a short-lived Mexican American third party, to get them to blunt their anti-Nixon stance.

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Postwar Hispanic Republicanism never won over a majority of Latinx voters, and as Cadava shows, it eventually found a home in neoconservatism. But even as President Ronald Reagan slashed social spending and used the War on Drugs to massively incarcerate poor people of color, he still courted Latinx voters with offers of immigration reform. In the 1990s the anti-immigration extremism of figures like John Tanton, the founder of the Federation for American Immigration Reform; the nativist presidential campaign of Pat Buchanan; and a series of anti-immigration laws passed in California and Arizona began to erode this support.

But “compassionate conservatism” returned with George W. Bush (whose brother Jeb Bush had married a Mexican national), who openly courted Latinx voters and won over 40 percent of them in 2004—a peak in the success of the inclusion strategy. In the 2008 election, however, this strategy could not be sustained by Arizona Senator John McCain (who, Cadava notes, declared “Build the danged fence!” in one of his campaign ads) as the Republican anti-immigration wing gained ascendancy, and Latinx voters showed just how vital they were to the Democratic coalition by helping to put Barack Obama in the White House for two terms.

**C**adava’s book deftly makes clear that there is not one type of Hispanic Republican but rather many: Cuban American, Mexican American, Central and South American, and to a lesser extent Puerto Rican. He reminds us that each of these groups of Republican voters, while often a minority in their own communities, were drawn to conservative politics for different reasons—historical, cultural, political, or economic. Cadava also does a good job of telling the story of the many different Hispanic Republican activists on the ground, writing compellingly about Fernández and his forgotten presidential campaign; Linda Chavez, who worked in the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations and once campaigned to make English the official language of the United States; and two US treasurers, Romana Bañuelos and Katherine Ortega. (The former suffered the indignity of an Immigration and Naturalization Service raid on her tortilla business, and the latter was roundly criticized for her uninspiring speech at the 1984 Republican National Convention.)

Yet Cadava largely does not address the way questions of race within and outside the Latinx community were manifested in Hispanic Republican politics. While it’s true that Mexican American politicians had a history of seeking to define their communities as legally white, by the time Hispanic Republicans came on the scene, many Mexican Americans were shifting away from an assimilationist understanding of their identity toward a Chicanismo that stressed indigenous roots. The Cuban migration to South Florida and the subsequent rise of the Cuban Republican voter also had a strong racial dynamic to it, since many of the middle- and upper-class Cubans who fled Castro’s revolution had a relatively easy path to citizenship through the Cuban Adjustment Act and avoided the racialization of noncitizen status.

The labels “Hispanic” and “Latino,” while often used synonymously, have sometimes also been encoded with racial undertones that can at times explain the differences between Hispanic Republicans and Latino Democrats. In the context of politics, “Hispanic” is sometimes used as a way to signal Spanish (hence European) origins, while “Latino,” a

somewhat more recent term, is often used to allude to a mixed Afro-Indio-Iberian identity and has represented a kind of Bolivarian melting pot of mixed-race Caribbean and South American migrants—although in the Southwest it has also been used as a label that avoided the indigenous identity of Mexican Americans, or Chicanos. (Recently two new terms have come into use as well: “Latinx,” a label that proposes a new inclusivity for gender-nonbinary folks, and the acronym “BIPOC,” for “black, Indigenous, and people of color.”)

Likewise, despite the fact that many US Latinx identify as people of color, the *mestizaje* ideologies that both of these terms promote have, in many countries in Central and South America as well as in the United States, supported a notion of inclusion that does not disrupt a culture of white supremacy. The gains made by people of color during Latin America’s pink tide have been checked by a recent surge of right-wing racism in countries like Brazil, Guatemala, and Bolivia. In Brazil, which has historically claimed to be a racial democracy, a right-wing nationalist like Jair Bolsonaro has been able to take power and avow a racialized politics with a striking resemblance to Trump’s America, while in Guatemala a former blackface comedian, Jimmy Morales, took office, and in Bolivia, the coup against Evo Morales was carried out with the use of anti-Indigenous rhetoric.

**B**y taking on the full spectrum of political history and examining the far larger majority of Latinx Democrats and left-wing activists, Francis-Fallon’s book helps fill in the other side of the history that Cadava explores, charting some of the tensions among Latinx voters who were loyal Democrats and found Republicanism antithetical to their ideals, as well as the GOP’s determination to convert some of these voters to its cause. *The Rise of the Latino Voter* takes us back to the jockeying for position between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans during the John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter years. While Francis-Fallon weaves fascinating details about the careers of Democrats like San Antonio’s Henry Gonzalez, Los Angeles’s Eddie Roybal, and New York’s Herman Badillo into a broader story about the formation of a political constituency, he also considers the role of Latinx movements that worked outside electoral politics.

Providing insight into the way that attempts to organize Latinx nationwide resulted in these movements seeking to foreground class- and race-based oppression as well as reject American exceptionalism and imperialism, Francis-Fallon shows how Latinx voters helped change not only the Democratic and Republican parties but also the egalitarian and internationalist politics of the American left. He cites El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española in the 1930s, which was inspired by other multiracial Popular Front groups and “fus[ed] class and culture consciousness...[and] advocated for striking workers as it demanded an educational system that nurtured its members’ language and heritage.”



Francis-Fallon begins his story with the United States' annexation of Mexican territories in 1848, which created an emerging sense of collective identity among Mexican Americans. He then tracks the formation of a "Hispano" identity with New Mexico's statehood in 1912, the establishment of the League of United Latin American Citizens, and the move by the majority of Latinx voters to the Democratic Party in the 1930s. Taking us into the post-World War II era, when Mexican Americans formed important political bases in Los Angeles and San Antonio, he charts the Viva Kennedy years, the civil rights movement, and the attempts to arrange a "shotgun wedding" between East Coast and West Coast groups in the late 1960s. The last few chapters discuss the limits of Latinx liberalism and the emergence of Hispanic conservatism, neatly intersecting with the subject of Cadava's book.

The most compelling part of Francis-Fallon's analysis comes when he documents the efforts by early Latinx Democrats to build multiracial constituencies by invoking the notion of a pan-Latinx identity, which helped bring together a variety of Spanish-speaking communities and connect them to other racial, ethnic, or social struggles. These efforts proved to be a potent political force in many cities, including New York and Chicago. But Francis-Fallon's story of how Latinx voters and organizers helped shape a nationwide agenda is also telling for the present moment. Recounting the first Unidos Conference, held in New York in 1971, he shows how Badillo, a Puerto Rican congressman from New York, and Roybal, a Mexican American congressman from Los Angeles, helped lead a discussion on the creation of a national Latinx agenda that tried to significantly influence the Democratic Party.

Yet even in the midst of a unity conference, divisions were hard to transcend. While Badillo and Roybal were largely successful in their efforts, the fractures that appeared at the conference exposed prior divisions—ideological, cultural, and historical—that remain unresolved. For example, despite New Mexico Senator Joseph Montoya's passionate plea for unity, Badillo was repudiated by Puerto Rican independence activists, who insisted the conference endorse their demand to decolonize Puerto Rico. "What seemed to have been most disquieting to the congressmen who had brought them together, was that many who remained until Sunday seemed genuinely poised to reject Democrats and Republicans alike," Francis-Fallon writes.

Badillo and Roybal managed to smooth over most of these differences in the short term, especially those between West Coast Mexican Americans and East Coast Puerto Ricans, and in the years that followed they were able to develop a national Latinx platform that connected the injustice of Mexican immigration crackdowns, US colonial economic policies in Puerto Rico, and the need for normalizing relations with Cuba. But the Democratic Party did not appear ready to take up this pan-Latinx program, and many Latinx Democrats found themselves frustrated with what they saw as Carter's unresponsiveness on numerous national issues because of his "color-blind" refusal to

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address “special interests.” Yet Latinx Democrats continued to stick by the party, even as it increasingly took their votes for granted.

**T**he struggle to create a pan-Latinx identity and politics has posed challenges ever since. Latinx voters are regionally disconnected, with greatly varied class backgrounds and citizenship statuses. They are also racially dispersed: There are white, black, Asian, Indigenous, and multiracial Latinx. Yet it is also clear that Latinx voters play a vital role in contemporary electoral politics. One of the major driving forces behind Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders’s early support in the Democratic primaries this year came from Latinx, with 50 percent voting for him in Nevada and California and 39 percent in Texas. Moreover, Joe Biden’s success in the upcoming general election will depend, in part, on ensuring that he has their votes.

During a moment when it’s clearer than ever that the extreme rightism of Trump must be defeated, Latinx voters have seemingly no choice but to support a centrist Democrat running on an agenda that has traditionally neglected their concerns. But even if this is the case, the lessons of the Unidos Convention remain: The best hope for Latinx is a more radical politics that seeks a broad multiracial and multicultural coalition aimed at reversing the growing economic and racial inequalities found in society today. Likewise, we need a politics that seeks to remake US foreign policy, which has been a key driver of Latin American crises and immigration to the United States in the first place. Meanwhile, there’s the problem highlighted in Cadava’s book—of your *tío* or *prima* who believes that the best hope to get through the coronavirus crisis is a revival of Trump’s “record-setting economy.” Maybe Hispanic Republicans can provide them with the important insight that while the Democrats have failed in innumerable ways, the Republicans have been even worse. It’s no accident that many of us have never heard of Benjamin “Boxcar” Fernández and Katherine Ortega. After all, their party did nearly everything it could to put them on the wrong side of history.

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