“Mostly Rich White Men, Nothing in Common”: Latino Views on Political (Under) Representation in the Trump Era

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Abstract
The idea of U.S. democracy rests on the assumption that all citizens will see their issues and needs reflected in elected officials. Yet, historically this has not been the case, as racialized minorities have been excluded and systematically marginalized from the representative process. Today, nonwhite populations remain significantly underrepresented in federal and state governments. Although scholars have examined the effects and mechanics of ethnoracial political representation, less is known about how individuals from minoritized populations perceive and make sense of political (under)representation. Drawing on a novel data set of 71 in-depth interviews with Latinos in the Chicagoland area and the San Francisco Bay, this article examines Latino understandings of representation. Our findings show that respondents view Latinos and other “people of color” as largely underrepresented amid an exceedingly white federal government. Yet Latino sentiments on the issue go beyond race, as respondents contend that class and a record of experience advocating on behalf of immigrant and working-class communities also matters for feeling represented by elected officials. Our findings make a case for bridging the sociological literature on racialization and political theories on representation, and have implications for understanding broader notions of political belonging and government trust.

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Keywords
Latinos, political representation, racial politics, elected officials, government, trust

The idea of liberal representative democracy has long rested on the belief that citizens can elect officials who represent their individual and community interests, and that democratic safeguards exist to remove from office those who do not carry out this mandate. This idea assumes, however, that communities have equal opportunities to make their concerns heard by elected representatives, and that more engagement in the political process equates to higher chances of having one’s issues addressed (Mills, 1997). Yet in the United States, racialized minorities have been historically excluded and systematically marginalized from the representative process. Even today, research suggests that these groups tend to experience a form of second-class citizenship (Nakano, 2002) and that they are significantly underrepresented in federal and state governments (Minta, 2011; Tate, 2018).

And while much is known about the positive effects of descriptive representation on minority civic engagement and political behavior (Banducci et al., 2004; Barreto, 2010; Rocha et al., 2010), less is known about how minoritized groups make sense of the lack of racial diversity in government writ large, and the federal government in particular. In this article, we examine the issue by focusing on Latinos, a severely underrepresented ethnoracial constituency in formal U.S. politics. Although this population makes up close to 20% of the U.S. population, they account for about 1% of the country’s elected and appointed officials (UnidosUS 2020). Drawing from a larger qualitative study on Latinos and political trust, we ask; How do Latino respondents understand Latino political (under)representation within the federal government? To what extent do Latino respondents equate descriptive with substantive representation? And how might their views and feelings about representation impact their sense of citizenship and belonging, as well as their perceptions of governmental institutions?

Our findings show that respondents have astute positions about the politics and problems of representation. On the one hand, the lack of racial diversity, especially Latino and “people of color” representation, makes them feel invisible and uncared for vis-à-vis the government. On the other hand, they are weary of tokenism and the limits of symbolic representation, especially when not attached to substantive political progress on issues seen as widely relevant to Latino communities, such as racial and economic inequality and immigration. These two stances reinforce one another and complicate their faith in U.S. democracy.

In the following pages, we first review the literature on race and political representation, highlighting the way that ethnoracial representation influences understandings of citizenship, and vice-versa. We then review our methods and present our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the implications our findings have for political belonging and trust in racialized representative democracies.
Literature Review

Race and Political Representation

Western political theorists and philosophers have long debated the meaning of political representation and its relationship to democratic governance. But as with most scholarly concepts and concerns, Western theories of political representation have racialized and colonial underpinnings (Mills, 1997). Dominant accounts of the U.S. government and electoral system tend to minimize how race and whiteness were foundational to the institution of political representation (for exceptions, see Beltrán, 2014; Feagin, 2012; Prewitt, 2013). Even so, scholars have grown empirically attentive to the contemporary relationship between race and political representation.

Building on Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) influential *The Concept of Representation*, this scholarship has explored the distinction between “descriptive” and “substantive” representation. Pitkin defined “descriptive” representation as a situation where the representative and represented are sufficiently alike, such that the representative could “stand for” the represented (p. 111). Within the work on racial politics, descriptive representation has mainly meant co-ethnoracial representation in which, for example, Black communities, are represented by Black elected officials. As Cristina Beltrán (2014) writes, in conditions of racial inequality where minority populations feel invisible, descriptive representation produces “a kind of beauty that feels and looks like a form of justice” (p. 141).

In contrast, substantive representation defines a situation in which the representative acts “in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 232). This form of representation is more difficult to measure and observe than descriptive representation because it hinges on researchers’ ability to accurately define a community’s issues. Nonetheless, work in this vein examines the extent to which women elected representatives take up and advocate for issues of concern for women (Wangnerud, 2009), or immigration issues are advocated for by the representatives of immigrant communities, for example (see Bird et al., 2010).

Scholars have explored the relationship between race and descriptive and substantive forms of representation in numerous ways. Some researchers have sought to understand how descriptive representation shapes or influences minority political behavior. This work finds a consistent and positive correlation, in as much as descriptive representation is linked to a more engaged and politically active minority population (Banducci et al., 2004; Barreto, 2010; Rocha et al., 2010). Other scholars have studied, and been cautious about, the link between descriptive and substantive racial representation. Research on African American and Latino elected officials, for example, finds that these officials are only sometimes more likely to pursue legislation that attends to minority interests (Tate, 2018). When descriptive and substantive representation are decoupled, a sort of symbolic or “token” form of political representation emerges (Minta, 2011). Taken together, research suggests that descriptive representation can positively shape the way that individuals feel about government—yet, for the most part, the lack of substantive policy change that improves life chances for minority communities can erode this enthusiasm in the long run (see Beltrán, 2014).
The topic of race and political representation has also been studied in terms of the sources of such disparity. Work has examined the extent to which the lack of minority elected officials has to do with minorities’ taste for political office, or the work of elite political party leaders to channel who can run under the party banner (Ocampo & Ray, 2020). Research suggests that, overall, Latino candidates do not underperform and are just as likely as their white counterparts to get elected when they run in diverse, local districts (Ocampo & Ray, 2020). As such, scholars have studied the factors that inhibit Latino candidacy efforts, including resources. Indeed, minority candidates are much less likely to have the coffers to finance their campaigns compared with whites (Casellas, 2010). Compounding these difficulties is the fact that white voters can display a racial bias, leading them to view minority candidates as less competent, and this can affect the ability of Latinos to win white electoral support (Sigelman et al., 1995).

Yet while much is known about the effects and mechanics of ethnoracial political representation, less is known about how individuals make sense of political (under)representation. By utilizing in-depth interviews with Latinos, we are able to explore the beliefs and assumptions that mediate between ethnoracial positionality and political representation.

**Latino Political Positionality**

To understand how Latinos think about political (under)representation and how it relates to issues of race and national belonging, we must first comprehend their complex social location as political subjects. A history of colonization, discrimination, and political disenfranchisement characterizes the dominant experience of Latinos in the United States (Acuna, 1972; Gómez, 2020; Martinez, 2018). Across the Southwest, Mexicans were often the targets of campaigns of racial terror (Montejano, 1987), while Puerto Ricans were systematically subjected to oppressive colonial tactics (Ramos-Zayas, 2004). And throughout the first half of the 20th century, Mexican Americans in the Southwest faced Jim Crow style segregation, including separate schools for Mexican children and exclusion from restaurants, pools, and even cemeteries that were for “Whites only” (Menchaca, 2002; Montejano, 1987). Discriminatory practices extended outside the Southwest, including housing covenants that restricted Latinos and African Americans from predominantly white neighborhoods in cities like New York and Chicago (Betancur, 1996). Moreover, Latinos across the country were historically excluded from serving on juries and other forms of civic engagement (Foley, 2006).

The civil rights movement brought legal protections against these overt forms of discrimination, but today many Latinos still face informal practices of racial steering in housing markets, discriminatory lending practices in finance, and inequalities in schooling (Krysan & Crowder, 2017; Ochoa, 2013). Immigration and policing practices further affect the position of Latinos, leaving many vulnerable to deportation and subjecting even those who are citizens to racial profiling from police (Armenta, 2017). Moreover, longitudinal research shows that racial inequalities persist across generations, well after immigrant families have established themselves in the United States.
These exclusions and barriers tend to be most severe for poor or working-class and darker-skinned Latinos. This position at the lower end of the racial hierarchy is coupled with a national narrative that has long cast Latinos as absent and even in contradiction to U.S. identity and history. Latinos have often been seen as an affront to the white protestant narrative of the country (Chavez, 2008), have been portrayed as forever foreigners (Rocco, 2004), and erased from the country’s historical record (Gómez, 2007). Moreover, there is a long tradition of elected officials scapegoating immigrants as criminals and invaders in the nation (Chavez, 2008), and Trump’s rhetoric, in the previous administration, mirrored this discourse (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2021). In effect, Latinos’ historical and contemporary experience of oppression in the United States may affect how they perceive the political system and its elected officials. Our study investigates how Latinos feel about political representation, and who they feel represents them and their community.

**Method and Data**

This article is based on data from a broader qualitative project on Latinos and political trust. Our interviews are drawn from two large metropolitan regions, the Chicagoland area and the San Francisco Bay. These locations are similar in that they are both very diverse cities with high levels of immigration, long-standings histories of racial segregation, and current gentrification. Importantly, both contexts are also politically liberal and have offered sanctuary to undocumented immigrants. There are, of course, important empirical differences across these two sites, including the more long-standing role of Black political representation in Chicago compared with the Bay Area. Nonetheless, our interviews indicated significantly more similarities than differences in federal government perceptions, and as such, we report the main themes as they emerged in the sample as a whole.

Our sample includes a diverse group of 71 Latinos, including 35 from the Bay Area and 36 from Chicago. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish in 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, a few years into the Trump administration. Study participants were recruited through social media advertisements, local churches and organizations, as well as through ads in major transportation hubs. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 72 years old. Twenty-three respondents (32%) had graduated college, 18 had taken some college courses but did not have a college degree (25%), 19 had graduated high school (27%), and 11 had less than a high school education (16%). The sample included 32 immigrants (45%) and 31 U.S.-born Latinos (44%). Another eight interviewees (11%) were 1.5 generation, born abroad but migrated to the U.S. as children.

Respondents were asked about how they perceive government institutions, how they get their information on government affairs, their voting tendencies and patterns, and, more generally, their political worldviews. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to over 2 hours, averaging about 1 to 1.5 hours. They were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes related to government trust, including respondent perceptions of the federal, state, and local governments. In the following section, we focus on themes related to political representation.
Findings

Our interviews revealed that respondents had a great deal to say on the topic of political representation. The first section of our analysis explores how Latinos in the study felt about the federal government and shows that most believed that their experiences were not adequately represented by the majority of elected officials, who tend to be white and from more affluent backgrounds. Respondents thus expressed a desire to see more “people of color” and working-class representatives give voice to their experiences, citing that more descriptive representation would make them more trusting of government. The second section focuses on the more complicated nuances of representation, as our respondents revealed feeling hope, and then subsequent disappointment, when elected representatives of color did not follow through with promises or enacted laws and policies perceived to be harmful to the broader Latino community. This section also shows how Latino respondents also saw important merits in the work of some white elected officials who they felt had truly, and substantively, advocated for Latinos.

Perceptions of Descriptive (Under)Representation

When we asked our respondents whether they felt that the federal government could be trusted to represent them and their community, the answer was typically a resounding “no.” Many respondents linked distrust to underrepresentation. Indeed, 90% of respondents in both cities couched this sentiment in racial terms, with references to the pervasive whiteness of the Trump administration, as well as the lack of Latinos and other people of color in Congress more generally. Overall, Latinos felt skeptical about the ability of whites to work on their behalf and expressed a strong want for people who “look like them.” Jesse, a 25-year-old working-class Mexican American respondent in the Bay Area said,

> If you look at them, they’re all . . . older white males with a history in politics. There’s not really anyone that looks like you and I . . . they don’t live in neighborhoods we do . . . I don’t see any representation equal to us.

What Jesse articulates here is an aspiration for descriptive representation for his community. And for Jesse, “looking like us” was not just about racial identity but also about class background. Similarly, another Puerto Rican Chicago respondent noted,

> I think about the fact that there are very few Latinos in the government, especially at the highest point of government in Washington. I think about the fact that many of the people that occupy those positions are white males who have a different view of the country.

Indeed, race, age, and gender, in unison, were constantly invoked by our respondents as reasons not to trust the majority of elected officials who they believed could not understand their experiences. As one Bay Area woman noted, “They are old . . . They are all mostly White. They are all mostly men. I don’t have nothing in common with those people. So do I trust them? No.”
As Latinos in the study spoke in broad terms about the overwhelming whiteness of the government, many of our respondents also expressed deep concerns specifically about the Trump administration. Respondents thus stated that they felt that his identity as an extremely wealthy white man made him fundamentally unable to understand the plight of working-class Latinos and immigrants. As Irma, a Mexican immigrant in the Bay Area, stated:

I know that this president, he’s been rich all his time and he probably doesn’t know what it is to be put in our shoes. Like I said, I don’t trust the government 100%. I think many times, they just look at the world in their own perspective. He [Trump] will have no idea what it is for a person to come and work for the minimum wage, where you have to live. . . . Immigrants they don’t make enough money and they don’t have medical insurance and they don’t have rights. They’re just trying to provide for their families. [But] he’s looking and judging sometimes people like that, “Oh, no. They come to rape. They come to this. They come to that.” And people believe him.

Here, we see references to both immigrant status and class. For Irma, Trump was out of touch with the realities of Latinos’ lived experiences, and this, she believed, affected his view of immigrants. Moreover, this and other respondents claimed that Trump’s stereotypes about immigrants and Latinos created a hostile climate. According to this logic, Trump’s inability to understand and represent their interests posed a danger to Latinos.

And while the overwhelming majority of respondents spoke of their mistrust in the federal government, especially in the Trump administration, about 60% of them provided examples of Latinos and other people of color that they did trust in government. Chief among the examples offered were Congressional representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jesús “Chuy” Garcia, and Luis Gutiérrez. For some, this embrace had to do with these representatives’ ethnoracial background. As one Chicago area respondent noted, Chuy Garcia is “Latino from our home state in Mexico. Also, I just root for those that I have more similarities with because I think those are the people that have our best interest.” For many of our respondents, seeing Latinos in office led to greater feelings of trust, partly because they surmised that these representatives would advocate for the needs of their community.

However, it is important to note that just over a quarter of our respondents pointed out that it would not be simply Latino representation that would make them feel more trust toward government, it was also a broader “people of color” representation. The following brief exchange highlights this:

Interviewer: What can be done in order for the government to be more trustful?  
Respondent: To become more inclusive of minority groups.  
Interviewer: And what does inclusion look like for you?  
Respondent: Appointments of people of color to cabinet positions

In effect, the sense of descriptive representation could go beyond simply Latinos to include African American, Asian, and Native American elected officials. One prominent example was former president Barack Obama. About 75% of respondents mentioned
that he had represented the Latino community. One Mexican American woman from the Bay Area said she trusted Obama because:

he was a diverse president, versus like the white presidents that we’ve always ever had. I think when you have a white president, it’s more one sided. . . . They can’t represent, because I mean, they can only be sympathetic. . . . They haven’t lived what other people have lived.

Former president Obama stood out as a person of color that many Latinos felt had a deeper knowledge of the community. In the Bay Area, some respondents also expressed confidence in former California senator Kamala Harris.2

While some respondents did mention that their state and local governments also lacked Latinos and other people of color, these comments were significantly fewer than those that addressed a lack of representation in the Office of the President, especially the Trump administration, and in the federal government more broadly. Moreover, it was in thinking about the state government that respondents were able to more quickly juxtapose the lack of diversity in the federal level with the more diverse state legislatures and municipal government bodies in their regions. For example, Marta, a teacher in Chicago, expressed, “Like even here in [the neighborhood of] Pilsen . . . there are like progressives and more people of color that are trying to be involved in the government. So I feel like that gives me an inkling of hope to trust the government.” But even though recent elections gave her some hope, Marta worried that progressives of color, being “greatly outnumbered by white rich people,” would eventually become the “machine” and “system” that ignored Latinos.

In sum, respondents expressed a strong desire for “descriptive representation” in ways that centered race, class, and community. Additionally, they did not draw stark lines between “co-ethnic” representatives and other representatives of color. As a consequence of presumably inhabiting similar social conditions and confronting similar realities, most believed that other non-Latino “people of color” were better able to represent their interests than whites officials were. But, like Marta noted above, close to 20% of respondents also felt that the overwhelming whiteness and affluence of government posed a serious challenge to minority candidates’ ability to set the political agenda.

Perceptions of Tokenism and Substantive Representation

While our respondents bemoaned the lack of diversity in the federal government, and the racism and nativism of the Trump administration in particular, they were also quick to note the limits of descriptive representation. Indeed nearly a third of our respondents indicated that descriptive representation on its own would not be enough to make them feel more trusting of the government. For example, Clari, a Puerto Rican from Chicago, spoke of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s and Sonia Sotomayor’s3 ability to represent Latinos both as women of color and as advocates for immigrants. She stated:
I think the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and then the appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court give me hope and give me renewed trust in the government. Because they’re people who I feel, like, understand the position of immigrant families in this country. They’re women of color who are for that agenda because not everybody who looks like you or who’s from the same community as you has the same agenda.

In this example, Clari stretched beyond elected officials to also think of the government writ large and the lack of diversity in all branches of the federal government. While not being an elected official, Sotomayor embodied descriptive and substantive representation for her. At the same time, Clari noted that not all “from the same community” have Latino interests in mind, indicating the limits of descriptive representation and the enactment of racial justice more broadly (see Beltrán, 2014).

As previously discussed, Obama had given many of our respondents hope in government, yet his immigration policies alienated some of them, thus creating ambivalence. Indeed, a clear 37% of our respondents, including many of those who had praised Obama, also mentioned that his administration’s policies had negatively affected the Latino community. Elena, a 28-year-old Mexican American DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient in the Bay Area stated:

Yes. I feel like under Obama I was always fearful of deportation, maybe not so much for my own deportation, especially after deferred action came into place, because, essentially, one of the things about DACA is protection from deportation. But I was always fearful of people in my community getting deported, given that under him over a million people got deported. And under him, I was fearful of deportation, especially because after my dad was deported under his tenure, so deportation was always something very present in my family. Under the current president [Trump], it’s just too much to keep up, given that he constantly keeps putting all these, like, immigration related policies that affect the Latino community.

Here, we see Elena take issue with Obama’s immigration policies, some of which had profound consequences for her family. While she described life under the Trump administration as “just too much,” she further expressed that she never felt that Obama actually supported her community. Similarly, while some California respondents mentioned Kamala Harris as someone who could represent them, others were critical of her prior position as a prosecutor and her role in criminalizing African American and Latino communities. Alyssa, a 24-year-old Mexican American woman in the Bay Area said of Harrriss,

She’s from Oakland, so we hear about her a lot . . . But supposedly she helped write some law . . . that massively incarcerated people of color and Black people. So I don’t know if she’s a puppet, or what’s going on with her, to be honest.

Hearing about Kamala Harris’s history on the issues, Alyssa did not feel like she would trust her to represent her interests. On the other hand, Governor Newsom, a white man, was someone whom she did trust. She explains,
The governor. He’s a white man, and generally I don’t feel comfy with those people, or trust them. But it seems like Governor Newsom is actually trying to take progressive steps forward . . . he mentions a lot about immigrants. I think he looks out for immigrants and stuff like that. . . . We have a lot of sanctuary cities.

Indeed, even though a majority of our respondents bemoaned the lack of diversity in government, 50% of them still expressed trust in white officials, such as Richard Durbin and Bernie Sanders, who despite their ethnoracial background seemed committed to issues some respondents felt were important to the Latino community. In speaking about select white officials, respondents focused on specificities in record and rhetoric, such as California’s sanctuary policies, and thus looked beyond ethnoracial identity and class. In other words, although our respondents criticized the government writ large as a system run mainly by white, affluent men, they acknowledged those certain white male officials who had, at least to some extent, supported the Latino community.

Taken together, our analysis revealed some of the deep tensions between descriptive and substantive representation. Instead of presuming that descriptive representation would automatically lead to substantive representation, about one third of our respondents were more sober on the issue and were quick to point to the ways that the mere presence of “people of color” could not be equated with substantive representation. At the same time, we see that a longing for more diversity in government was not antithetical to the belief that some non-Latino and non-people of color officials, especially Democrats, could adequately represent Latino issues.

Conclusion

Our study explored how Latinos feel about their representatives and the lack of diversity in the federal government. We find that Latinos within our study very much desire more descriptive representation, people who not only “look” like them, but also live like them. This includes not just race, but also social location and community connections. However, this experiential variant of descriptive representation was not without critique. Our respondents were well aware of the limits of such representation and, thus, yearned for more substantive, politically based forms of representation.

Our findings also reveal a few additional insights about Latinos and political representation. First, respondents often expressed intersectional ideas about representation. While interviewees mainly saw the lack of diversity in the federal government through a racial lens and denounced the systemic exclusion of Latinos, they were also quick to note that class was also important. Latino descriptive representation meant having someone who not only looked like them, but also that understood and was from immigrant and working-class communities. Moreover, respondents provided a strong critique of the whiteness of elected officials, especially in the federal government, but this critique was closely linked to a frustration with white officials’ unwillingness to address class inequality in significant and lasting ways. Consequently, political elites were described as both white and wealthy—and altogether removed from the particular
raced and classed realities lived by our respondents. This invites more research on how ideas about political representation relate, overlap, and combine across other axes of domination (Collins, 2000).

Second, our respondents did not limit their desire for representation to co-ethnics or even co-panethnics. They also expressed support for representation for non-Latino people of color, thus indicating the ways that racialized experiences can overlap and serve as an opportunity for coalition building across communities (see Hero & Tolbert, 1995). At the same time, half of our respondents indicated feeling represented by particular white male elected officials.

In conclusion, our article encourages greater attention to the beliefs, assumptions, and desires that minoritized actors—citizen and noncitizen—have about political representation. What people think and feel about the issue not only matters for discrete political outcomes, as past surveys and experimental research shows, but also for political trust and belonging.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article and its open access publication is based upon work funded by COST Action 16111 EthmigSurveyData (https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA16111/), supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) and funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union; the University of Oxford; the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and the Casa de Velázquez in Madrid.

**Notes**

1. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (D-14NY) is a Democrat and Congresswoman representing a district in New York City. Jesús “Chuy” García (D-4IL) is a Democrat and Congressman representing a district in Chicago. Luis Gutierrez is a Democrat and former Illinois Congressman who served from 1993 to 2019.
2. Kamala Harris (D-CA) was a senator from California and is now Vice President of the United States.
3. Sonia Sotomayor was elected to the Supreme Court by President Barack Obama in 2013.
4. Gavin Newsome is a Democrat and was elected the Governor of California in 2018.
5. Richard Durbin (D-IL) is a Democrat and Senator of Illinois.
6. Berni Sanders (I-VT) is an Independent who caucuses with Democrats as Senator from Vermont.

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