

THE RISE AND FALL OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG LATINOS: THE ROLE OF IDENTITY AND PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

Deborah J. Schildkraut

This study analyzes how perceptions of discrimination against oneself and/or one's group and whether one self-identifies in national (American), national origin, or panethnic terms affect levels of political engagement among Latinos in the United States. The findings show that perceptions of discrimination against oneself are particularly damaging in that they promote both behavioral and attitudinal alienation (e.g., non-voting and lack of trust), especially among Latinos who identify primarily as American. Behavioral alienation can be mitigated, and even overcome, when perceptions of discrimination are accompanied by a panethnic or national origin self-identification. However, the attitudinal alienation created by perceptions of discrimination is not mitigated by any type of self-identification. These findings shed light on understudied factors that affect political engagement that are going to become more important to understand as the American population continues its ethnic diversification. In addition to expanding our knowledge of political engagement generally, this study also raises important questions about whether the adoption of an American self-identification is in fact beneficial for the health of our participatory political system as a whole.

Key words: political engagement; perceptions of discrimination; group identity; political participation; latino/hispanic panethnicity.

Over the years, studies of political engagement have supplied an impressive range of findings that highlight both the individual and institutional factors that affect political participation and opinions about the responsiveness

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and trustworthiness of the political system. Today, the standard set of individual-level factors that are used to examine political engagement includes, for example, a person's income, level of education, political interest, and age. It has also become standard to use more expansive datasets that include system-level factors such as mobilization efforts by political parties, candidates, and interest groups (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee, 2000; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995). More recently, scholars have found that general relationships uncovered in studies that focus on white Americans remain when examining non-whites, but that these relationships are conditioned in ways that are often overlooked (Leighley, 2001; Jackson, 2003; Michelson, 2003). Yet as the United States population continues to diversify—a process resulting primarily from many years of high immigration levels—it is becoming increasingly important to consider whether we might still be overlooking an important part of the story of political engagement when we rely on the standard tool kit that has served us well thus far. More specifically, I argue that we need to expand our inquiry so that we can account for how the experiences of immigrant minorities and their descendants—and the resulting perceptions generated by the immigrant experience—might affect political engagement.

In this study, I focus on two aspects of the immigrant experience that highlight understudied phenomena in political engagement research: perceptions of treatment by the host society and self-identification (i.e., whether a person thinks of herself primarily as an American or as a member of a particular ethnic or national origin group). Immigration in the United States is certainly not new, nor is the study of minority incorporation. Previous investigations have shown, for example, that perceptions of discrimination among members of minority groups can enhance behavioral engagement—which refers to actual activity, such as voting—and that self-identification has few consequences for attitudinal engagement—which refers to a person's attitudes about his or her connection to the political system, such as patriotism or trust in government (Citrin et al., 2002; de la Garza, Falcon, and Garcia, 1996; DeSipio, 2002; Leighley, 2001; Miller et al., 1981; Sidanius et al., 1997). Yet such investigations have relied primarily on regional data, have failed to distinguish between discrimination against one's ethnic group and against oneself personally, and have failed to distinguish between panethnic and national origin self-identifications. Moreover, previous studies do not examine the interactive nature of self-identification and perceptions of discrimination. Recently, however, survey data examining the views of Latinos in the United States have become available that allow us to overcome these limitations and to deepen our understanding of political engagement in 21st century America.

From all corners, we hear many a lamentation that Americans fail to live up to their civic duties and that they lack trust in, and esteem for, their

ected representatives. Many reasons abound, but as the nation's population becomes less white, we need to consider the roles that self-identification and perceived treatment by the dominant society play in affecting whether people carry out their civic responsibilities and have faith in the political process. In the end, I find that perceptions of discrimination against oneself are particularly damaging in that they promote both behavioral and attitudinal alienation, especially among Latinos who identify primarily as American. Behavioral alienation (political inactivity) can be mitigated, and even overcome, when perceptions of discrimination are accompanied by a panethnic or national origin self-identification. However, the attitudinal alienation (the sense that one is not connected to a shared political enterprise) created by perceptions of discrimination is not mitigated by any type of self-identification. These findings advance our understanding of political engagement by demonstrating the importance of factors that are all too often overlooked, but that are going to become increasingly relevant in American politics in the coming years. Moreover, they point to the power that individual experiences can have on one's relationship to the political process, and they raise questions about when—and whether—the adoption of an American self-identification is a desirable end.

ENGAGEMENT, DISCRIMINATION, AND IDENTITY

If we have learned anything from political participation research, it is that disparities in participation across groups parallel the traditional fault lines in American society. To put it bluntly, the “have-nots” are less likely to be involved than the “haves.” This is due to differences in individual-level resources and to differences in attention paid by the political establishment (Leighley, 2001; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). We have also learned from years of participation and public opinion research that the political system is often responsive to messages sent by the people, whether those messages are sent through public opinion polls or through more active forms of political involvement (Page and Shapiro, 1983; Stone and Rapoport, 1998). The less that people are involved, the less likely it is that their concerns will be addressed. Finally, we have also learned that the more that people are politically active, the more likely they are to hold relatively more favorable evaluations of the responsiveness of the political process (Finkel, 1985, 1987; Leighley, 1995; Madsen, 1987).¹ One important take home message from this body of work is that members of marginalized groups can indeed shift the attention of political actors in their direction through increased and sustained involvement.

It is well known that the United States has a history of mistreating its non-white members, a history we still have not fully overcome. It is also

well known that the number of non-white members of the United States population has increased dramatically over the past several decades. Together, these factors raise important questions for political engagement research, questions that require us to expand the range of topics under investigation. Two such questions are the following. First, how important is whether people think of themselves as American in affecting their level of engagement in the political process? Second, how important is whether they feel welcome or mistreated? In other words, under what conditions do individual-level perceptions such as these—perceptions that are especially relevant to the immigrant experience—enhance political activity, and under what conditions do they promote alienation? And finally, is there a relationship between self-identification and perceptions of discrimination that renders the normative question of whether people *should* adopt an American self-identification more complicated than it is typically cast? Given the concentration of many new immigrants and their descendants among the “have-nots”² and given the enduring concerns among many observers that immigrants shun assimilation (e.g., Huntington, 2004; Miller, 1998), these questions require attention.

In attempting to shed light on them, I examine two related, but distinct, types of political engagement: behavioral and attitudinal. Behavioral engagement refers to actual activity, such as voting, whereas attitudinal engagement refers to one’s evaluations about the responsiveness and trustworthiness of the political system. Most observers would agree that, all things being equal, more of both types of engagement is better than less. This is true not just for non-white citizens, but for citizens of all stripes and for the political process overall. Both types of engagement can be seen as barometers of the health of our participatory system. Our understanding of how the attitudinal fallout of current population dynamics affects such barometers is still rudimentary. Moreover, the potential benefits of having a citizenry that possesses strong attachments to the U.S. (e.g., Schatz, Staub, and Lavine, 1999; Sullivan, Fried, and Dietz, 1992; Theiss-Morse, 2003) and today’s climate of ethnic change and cultural tensions make it additionally important to examine how self-identification and perceptions of discrimination among immigrants and their children shape the development of the efficacious and civic-minded attitudes and behaviors that national attachments can engender.

Existing Studies: Contributions and Limitations

Recent studies have done much to unpack the “black box” of racial and ethnic dummy variables that routinely return significant coefficients in our engagement models, even after controlling for other traditional factors such as age, education, and income. Such studies have found, for example, that

mobilization efforts are more effective when the person doing the mobilizing shares an ethnic background with the person being mobilized (Shaw et al., 2000; Michelson, 2003), that Latinos get less return on education than whites with regard to voting (Jackson, 2003), and that context—as measured by group size—can also affect the extent of participation (Leighley, 2001). Such studies are part of a welcome trend of recognizing that there is more to the story of political engagement than civic attitudes and economic resources. Much attention of late has been devoted to mobilization and the important interactions between mobilization and racial and ethnic matters.³ Yet there are other important components of the ethnic “black box” that such studies have not captured well. These attitudinal components regarding how people feel about their own place in their surrounding environment can be examined by looking at the perception of discrimination and self-identification.

Perceptions of discrimination and self-identification have not necessarily been ignored, but their treatment to date has only scratched the surface of the complicated ways in which these particular individual-level factors shape a person’s relationship to the political process. Research on group mobilization, for example, has documented that perceptions of discrimination can increase the likelihood of various forms of political participation, including voting and signing petitions (DeSipio, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Miller et al., 1981). Likewise, recent scholarship has shown that having a strong tie to one’s ethnic or national origin group has not proven to be an impediment to feeling proud to be an American, contrary to the claims of immigration critics (Citrin et al., 2002; de la Garza et al., 1996; Sidanius et al., 1997).⁴

Yet three main limitations can be identified in existing scholarship on political engagement generally and on more specific examinations of the relationship between traditionally marginalized groups and the political process. First, existing studies pay essentially no attention to the difference between perceptions of discrimination against oneself and perceptions of discrimination against one’s group, even though public opinion research has consistently shown that group interest is often a more powerful predictor of attitudes than self-interest (e.g., Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Sears and Funk, 1990). In general, however, the relative influence of group interest versus self interest on *behavior* has not been studied to the same extent as it has on attitudes and vote choice (for an important exception, see Green and Cowden, 1992). Furthermore, surveys consistently show that people are more likely to say that their group is discriminated against than to say that they personally have been victims of discrimination, a phenomenon known as the *personal-group discrepancy* (e.g., Crosby, 1984; Fuegen and Biernat, 2000; Kessler, Mummendey, and Leisse, 2000; Public Agenda, 2003; Sigel, 1996). Combining these two insights could prove to be an important step in the larger project of understanding the dynamics of how the immigrant

experience shapes political engagement, yet tests have not been conducted to examine if perceptions of group-level discrimination are indeed a more powerful influence on political engagement than individual-level discrimination. Studies that include measures of discrimination tend to examine group-level *or* individual-level, but not both (e.g., Leighley, 2001). DeSipio (2002) provides an exception in this regard. Contrary to the pattern described above, his study of Latino immigrants (who were not eligible to vote) found that only the perception of individual-level discrimination increased the likelihood of engaging in non-electoral forms of political activity; the perception of discrimination against one's national origin group had no impact. Given the consistent power of group interests to shape *policy attitudes* demonstrated elsewhere, DeSipio admitted that he did not expect these findings and had difficulty explaining them.

A second limitation of existing scholarship is that it has inadequately distinguished between panethnic self-identifications (e.g., Latino) and national origin self-identifications (e.g., Dominican). This is especially true of studies that use racial or ethnic dummy variables as the sole indicator of identity (e.g., Sidanius et al., 1997), but is also true of studies that ask respondents to choose either an American identity or a racial or ethnic identity (e.g., Citrin et al., 2002). Even studies in which all respondents are Latino have not addressed this distinction (e.g., de la Garza et al., 1996; Jackson, 2003; Michelson, 2003). Yet there are reasons to expect that panethnic identifications are more consequential than national origin identifications with respect to political engagement. As has been widely noted, the social group known as "Latino" or "Hispanic" is more or less unique to the United States, and its widespread use came about through a complex combination of host-society labeling and target-group reactions. At the individual level, one can imagine the following trajectory: Before coming to the U.S., a person sees himself as belonging to his country of origin. Upon arrival in the U.S., is it likely he and his descendants will continue to have a strong identification with the home country until either one of two kinds of experiences occur. First, they might acculturate and assimilate, which would promote an American identity. Alternatively, they may begin to ally themselves with other people of Latin American descent as a way to gain political power and influence, as a way to combat discrimination, and as a way to protect one's self-esteem against the damaging effects of discrimination and alienation. Thus, a panethnic identity might be more likely to affect one's relationship to the political process than "residual" ties to one's country of origin.⁵

This dynamic would be consistent with the arguments of Tajfel (1978) and other social identity theorists who have argued that a new group identity can emerge if people are treated by others as if they belong to that particular group. In a study of college students, for example, Schmitt, Spears, and Branscombe (2003) found that international students who perceived

that international students were discriminated against were more likely to identify with international students as a group. They were *not* more likely to identify with students from their own country of origin, even though the social category of “international student” only became real once the students enrolled, while their association with their country of origin had been with them their entire lives. If societal conditions promote the adoption of a Latino identity over the maintenance of a national origin identity, then it might also be the case that a Latino identity has more of an impact on political engagement than a national origin identity. But we simply do not know because the distinction between panethnic and national origin identifications has largely been ignored in previous political engagement scholarship.

The third limitation of existing studies is that few venture much beyond the identification question. They emphasize how the perception of negative treatment affects self-identification and whether those who identify as something other than American are still proud to be American. They do not take the next step of investigating more concrete political consequences. Citrin and colleagues (2002) and de la Garza and colleagues (1996) do frame their work as an answer to immigration critics who warn that current patterns of ethnic change threaten the stability of the American political system (e.g., Huntington, 2004). Citrin, however, finds that his rebuke of those critics might only be true for those who opt for either a fully American or a “hyphenated” identity. In his study, people who identified mainly as a member of a particular ethnic, racial, or nationality group exhibited *less* pride toward the U.S. than people who identified as an American or as a hyphenated American. This finding leads Citrin and his co-authors to argue that we do not need to worry if people maintain their ethnic identities just as long as they come to adopt an American identity too. Since they see no evidence to suggest that new immigrants and their children are not doing just that, they see no call for alarm. De la Garza and his co-authors also argue that those who claim that minority identifications are harmful to American society are making much ado about nothing. They make this argument based on findings showing that Americans of Mexican descent were not less patriotic than Anglos and were not less likely to endorse the traditional American value of individualism.

Research on group consciousness has investigated how group membership and perceptions of group-level and individual-level treatment affect political activity. Here again, however, studies tend to focus on group-level or individual-level treatment, but not both. Miller et al. (1981), for example, find that people who attributed systemic forces to their group’s relatively disadvantaged position in society were more likely to vote than people who attributed their group’s disadvantage to individual-level factors. And Duncan (1999) found that women who said they had personally been victims of

sexual harassment were more likely than other women to engage in political activities intended to further the cause of women's rights.

Several recent studies by social psychologists and medical sociologists go beyond the identification question to examine how the perception of discrimination affects individual-level well-being (e.g., Schmitt, Branscombe, and Postmes, 2003; Schmitt, Spears, and Branscombe, 2003; Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson, 2003; Noh and Kaspar, 2003; Finch, Kolodny, and Vega, 2000; Williams and Williams-Morris, 2000). These studies find that seeing oneself as discriminated against can have a negative impact on mental and physical health, but that this negative impact can be mitigated if the perception of discrimination is accompanied by self-identification with the aggrieved group. In other words, retaining a non-American self-identification might actually be beneficial for individuals that perceive discrimination. Scholars in these fields, however, do not extend their analyses to investigate political processes.⁶ Additionally, these studies generally restrict their focus to the impact of individual-level discrimination only.

In the analysis that follows, I address the limitations described here by (1) distinguishing perceptions of discrimination against one's group from perceptions of discrimination against oneself; (2) distinguishing panethnic and national origin identifications; and (3) moving beyond the identification question to examine how perceptions of discrimination and self-identification jointly affect political engagement. The results show that the reality of how identity and discrimination affect political engagement is not nearly as straightforward as immigration critics or immigration optimists contend, and they highlight the importance of investigating the role these factors play in shaping political activity.

DATA AND MEASURES

Data for this analysis come from the 2002 Survey of Latinos conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Pew Hispanic Center (hereafter KFF/PHC). This national survey was conducted from April to June of 2002. The total number of Latino respondents is 2,929. Of those, 1,736 were U.S. citizens. Only citizens are included in the analysis that follows because only citizens can register and vote in federal elections and only citizens are American by law. All data were weighted, using the weight for Latino respondents provided by KFF/PHC.

Perceptions of Group-level Discrimination

People were asked three questions to assess whether they felt Latinos, as a group, are treated negatively. They were asked: "In general, do you think

discrimination against Latinos is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem in schools? What about in the workplace? What about in preventing Latinos in general from succeeding in America?" Answers to all three questions were combined to form a scale where 0 means the respondent feels that all 3 types of discrimination are not a problem and 1 means the respondent feels that all 3 types are a major problem (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.80$). The distribution is widespread, but favors the perception of more discrimination. The mean point on the scale is 0.58 (standard deviation=0.32), and 72% of the respondents scored at the midpoint or higher.

Perceptions of Individual-level Discrimination

People were asked three questions to assess whether they felt they had personally been treated negatively because of their ethnicity. They were asked: "In your day-to-day life, how often do any of the following things happen to you because of your racial or ethnic background? First, you are treated with less respect than other people. Would you say very often, fairly often, once in a while, or never? How about you receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores? How about you are called names or insulted?" Again, answers to all three questions were combined to form a scale where 0 means the respondent feels that all 3 types of discrimination never happen to him or her personally and 1 means the respondent feels that all 3 happen very often (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.73$). The distribution of individual-level discrimination is quite different from the distribution of group-level discrimination. In line with numerous other studies, perceptions of discrimination at the group level are much more common than perceptions of discrimination at the individual level. Here, the mean is only 0.16 (standard deviation=0.2), and 77% of the respondents scored 0.2 or lower. Less than 1% says that all three forms of personal mistreatment occur very often.⁷

Self-identification

One of the first questions in the survey asked people where they and their ancestors are from. Later in the survey, people were asked whether they self-identify in national, national origin, or panethnic terms with the following question: "People choose different terms to describe themselves. I'm going to read you a few different descriptions. Please tell me whether you have ever described yourself as any of the following. . .[R's home country], a Latino or Hispanic, an American." Respondents who said yes to more than one of these options were then asked which term they use to describe themselves *first*. The distribution of these primary identities is the following: national origin 44%, American 34%, Latino 22%. Given that all

respondents in this analysis are U.S. citizens, it is noteworthy that while about one-third chose American, a plurality chose their country of origin as their primary identity. This measure of respondents' primary identification is used to capture self-identification in all remaining analyses.⁸

THE IMPACT OF PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Before moving on to examining impact of perceptions of discrimination and self-identification on political engagement, it is first reasonable to address the relationship *between* perceptions of discrimination and self-identification. A multinomial logit analysis (results not shown) indicates that while the perception of individual-level discrimination has no effect on self-identification, the perception of group-level discrimination does make people more likely to identify as Latino than as American. It is plausible to argue that self-identification itself affects how people interpret the treatment of their group and of themselves in society, and in reality, the relationship is probably reciprocal to some degree. Unfortunately, the KFF/PHC survey does not contain sufficient measures to pursue a 2-stage-least-squares investigation of this reciprocity. Nevertheless, the multinomial logit results indicate at a minimum that in our efforts to understand the relationship between perceptions of discrimination, identity, and political outcomes, we should be careful to distinguish between group-level and individual-level perceptions on the one hand and between panethnic and national origin identifications on the other. Conflating the different levels at which people perceive discrimination and the groups with which they identify can hinder our attempts to decipher the dynamics of political behavior in our increasingly diversified society.⁹

The remainder of the analysis takes us beyond the identification question and turns our attention to the impact of discrimination and self-identification on political engagement. Here, I distinguish the two forms of political engagement discussed earlier: behavioral and attitudinal. It is generally agreed that citizens in a healthy democratic society display high levels of both kinds of engagement, yet there are reasons to expect that they respond differently to the factors under investigation here, as I explain in more detail below.

Behavioral Engagement

Turning first to the behavioral side of political engagement, existing scholarship suggests that self-identification on its own (i.e., absent perceptions of discrimination) should not be especially consequential. Recall the optimistic findings from Citrin and from de la Garza, which show that how

one self-identifies does not necessarily affect levels of pride in the U.S. or patriotism. Moreover, Miller et al. (1981) argue and confirm that “there is no theoretical reason to expect a simple direct relationship between group identification and political participation” (p. 495). These earlier studies, however, could not distinguish between panethnic and national origin self-identifications. It is possible that self-identification, on its own, will indeed have implications for political behavior. For example, it could be that national origin identifications result in more of an orientation toward politics in the home country rather than toward the domestic politics of the United States, which could reduce political activity here.¹⁰ It is also possible, as discussed earlier, that the nature of ethnic politics in the United States might render a Latino self-identification more politically relevant than other forms of identification. I expect, however, that self-identifications will only become politically relevant when accompanied by perceptions of discrimination. As Miller et al. maintain, identities need to get politicized before they can affect political behavior. It is likely that perceptions of discrimination serve as a powerful means by which such politicization occurs. Thus, piecing together insights from the various studies discussed thus far, one plausible expectation is that perceptions of both group-level and individual-level discrimination will have negative impacts on political activity but that this negative effect will be mitigated, or possibly even overcome, when accompanied by a Latino self-identification. In other words, people who identify as Latino *and* perceive that they themselves and/or Latinos as a group are discriminated against might be the most likely to participate in politics whereas people who perceive discrimination but do not identify as Latino might be least likely to participate.

Anecdotally, an often-cited example of the combination of group attachment and the perception of discrimination promoting participation is the battle over Proposition 187 in California in 1994. This proposition, which passed but was ruled unconstitutional and was never enacted, would have restricted the social services that the state could provide to undocumented immigrants and their children. Yet many Latinos, including citizens and legal immigrants, interpreted the proposition as a direct attack against Latinos in general. In response to this perceived attack, Latino electoral participation surged. According to the Tomas Rivera Center, Latino turnout in California in 1994 was 34% higher than it was in 1990, the previous mid-term election.¹¹ Additionally, the Field Institute, a public policy research organization in California, reports that nearly half of Latino registered voters in California in 2000 registered after 1994 and that the post-1994 registrants are more likely to be foreign-born and to have lower levels of education than the pre-1994 registrants (DiCamillo and Field, 2000). These patterns suggest that the battle over Proposition 187 brought people into the political process who typically are less likely to participate and that it did so by

promoting group ties.¹² More generally, research on the damaging mental and physical effects of perceptions of discrimination has shown that identifying with the aggrieved group mitigates the destructive power of mistreatment (Branscombe et al., 1999; Noh and Kaspar, 2003). Therefore, it is possible that perceiving discrimination, absent a sense of group attachment, could lead a person to be politically apathetic whereas both perceiving discrimination and having strong ties to the group can either mitigate or overcome this negative impact.

For reasons described earlier, it is perhaps unlikely that a national origin identification will have the same mitigating impact as a panethnic identification. Empirical evidence does exist, on the other hand, to support the idea that both levels of discrimination can have significant implications for political behavior. The unique design of the KFF/PHC survey allows appropriate terms to be included in the analysis to test whether particular combinations of identity choices and perceptions of discrimination thwart or exacerbate the expected damaging effects of discrimination on its own.

The dependent variables I used to examine how the perception of discrimination and self-identification affect behavioral engagement are whether the respondent is registered to vote and whether the respondent says he or she has ever voted in a U.S. election. Both measures rely on unvalidated self-reports.¹³ Seventy-seven percent of the citizen respondents say they are registered to vote, and 72% say they have ever voted in a U.S. election. I ran a probit model for each of these dependent variables. Dummy variables for national origin and Latino self-identifications are included in the model, with American as the omitted category. Perceptions of group-level and individual-level discrimination are also included, as are interaction terms that allow me to assess the conditional impact of self-identification and perceptions of discrimination. The interaction terms combine:

- national origin identity and perceptions of individual-level discrimination;
- national origin identity and perceptions of group-level discrimination;
- Latino identity and perceptions of individual-level discrimination;
- Latino identity and perceptions of group-level discrimination.

I also controlled for a variety of non-controversial factors: age, education, generation (1st, 2nd, 3rd+), gender, income, and whether the respondent claims to speak English well. The KFF/PHC dataset does not include measures of mobilization. All non-dichotomous variables were re-coded to have a mean of zero and range of 1, except for the perception of discrimination scales, which still have a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1. The results are presented in Table 1. Broadly, they indicate the following: Absent perceptions of discrimination, American identifiers are more likely than others both to register and to vote. American identifiers, however, are significantly demobilized when they perceive individual-level discrimination whereas

TABLE 1. Impact of Self-identification and Perceptions of Discrimination on Behavioral Engagement

Independent Variable	Registered to Vote	Ever Voted in U.S. Election
Identify w/country of origin	-0.20	-0.43**
Identify as Latino/Hispanic	-.54**	-0.45*
Discrimination against the group	0.21	0.37
Discrimination against oneself	-1.26***	-1.57***
Generation	-0.39***	-0.08
Speaks English well	0.09	0.62***
Education	0.66***	0.67***
Age	2.03***	3.47
Gender (1=female)	0.14*	0.34***
Income	0.91***	1.26***
Nat'l origin × self discrimination	1.10**	2.34***
Nat'l origin × group discrimination	-0.11	-0.52
Latino × self discrimination	1.35**	2.58***
Latino × group discrimination	0.26	-0.51
Constant	1.05***	0.87***
N	1279	1285
Chi-squared	214.84	397.77

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

For all non-dummy variables (except perceptions of discrimination): mean=0; range=1.

Source: KFF/PHC 2002 Survey of Latinos.

Latino and national origin identifiers are mobilized. Group-level discrimination, on the other hand, appears to have no impact on behavioral engagement for any type of identifier.

To get a better sense of how individual-level discrimination and self-identification jointly affect behavioral engagement and to get a better sense of the *magnitude* of this impact, it is useful to examine the results in terms of predicted probabilities. Figure 1 illustrates how the probability of being registered to vote varies as a function of perceptions of individual-level discrimination for each type of identifier, and Figure 2 illustrates the same probabilities with respect to voting. In both figures, the predicted probabilities are calculated while holding all control variables—including the perception of group-level discrimination (which was insignificant in the probit models)—constant at their means and holding gender constant at male while the perception of individual-level discrimination varies across its observed range.

Confirming somewhat the optimism of Citrin and of de la Garza, the graphs show relatively small group-based differences in registration and voting absent perceptions of discrimination, with American identifiers being the most likely to register and vote. This likelihood, however, drops dramatically as the perception of individual-level discrimination increases, and

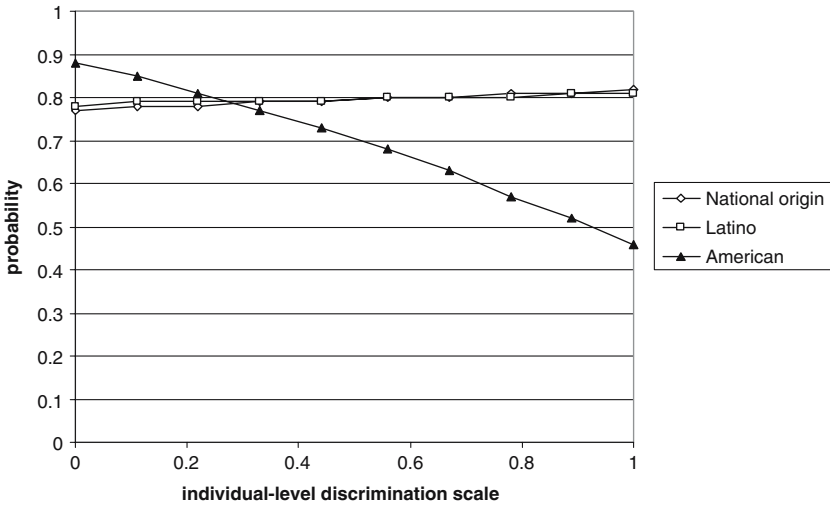


FIG. 1. Probability of being registered as individual-level discrimination varies.

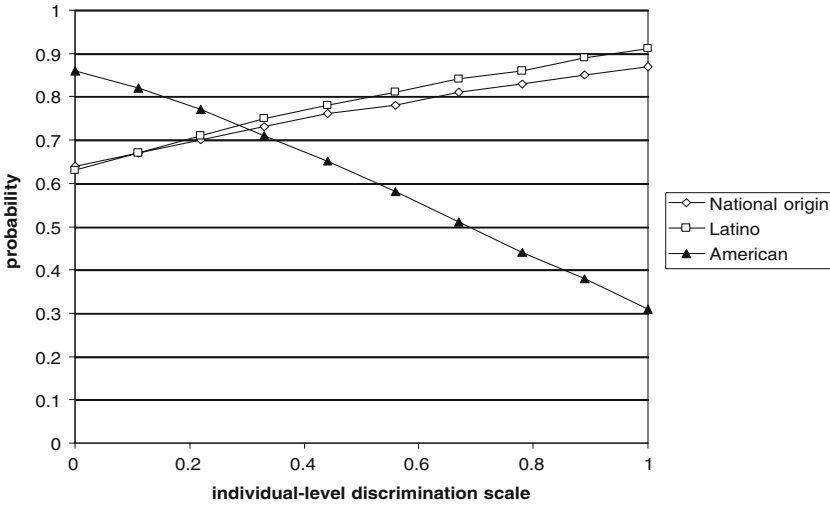


FIG. 2. Probability of having ever voted in a U.S. election as individual-level discrimination varies.

large differences in registration and voting emerge across the different types of identifiers. Turning first to Figure 1, the registration likelihood of Latino and national origin identifiers is unaffected by individual-level discrimination whereas American identifiers quite substantially drop out of the politi-

cal scene. Their demobilization is striking. This drop off in registration kicks in at about 0.33 on the individual-level discrimination scale. About 22% of the respondents who self-identify as American fall at 0.33 or higher on that scale, and these respondents account for 7.5% of the total citizen sample. Thus, a small, but non-trivial segment of the sample is being demobilized to some extent.

The results are similar for voting (Figure 2). The probability that an American identifier will vote drops *over 50 percentage points* as the individual-level discrimination scale increases from 0 to 1. Additionally, the political involvement of national origin and Latino identifiers *increases* in response to such discrimination; they are motivated to become more involved than they would otherwise be. National origin identifiers experience a 23 percentage point increase in their likelihood of voting as the individual-level discrimination scale increases from 0 to 1 while Latino identifiers experience a 28 percentage point increase. Whereas panethnic and national origin identifications seem to inoculate respondents against the damaging effect of discrimination on registering, they seem to help respondents *overcome* the damaging effect of discrimination on voting.

The increased mobilization of panethnic identifiers in the face of individual-level discrimination is not surprising. It is exactly what existing research on the power of group solidarity to attenuate the negative impacts of being a victim of discrimination would lead us to expect (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Noh and Kaspar, 2003; Schmitt, Spears, and Branscombe, 2003). The minimal effect of group-level discrimination was less expected, especially given the consistent findings in other areas demonstrating the power of group interest to shape policy preferences, though it does parallel DeSipio's (2002) findings described earlier. The research on group versus self-interest with regard to policy preferences identifies certain conditions that make significant effects for self-interest more likely, such as when the policy consequences for the individual are clear and substantial, and when attributing blame or responsibility to "the system" as opposed to individuals is more feasible (Mutz, 1998; Sears and Funk, 1990). At a minimum, the patterns shown here, along with DeSipio's similar findings, suggest that particular individual experiences among members of traditionally marginalized groups might comprise another set of factors that render individual-level concerns more politically powerful than group-level concerns. Perhaps the experience of discrimination is uniquely potent relative to other individual-level factors in affecting behavior. The disparities between American identifiers on the one hand and national origin and Latino identifiers on the other point to just how powerful these individual experiences can be and to just how central group-based attachments can be in helping people cope with negative treatment and in keeping them connected to the political process, a connection that is essential for ensuring that their needs and

concerns are addressed. Additionally, it could also be that it is simply misguided to assume that group interest affects policy attitudes and behavior in similar ways. Whereas perceptions of group interest are generally more influential over attitudes than perceptions of self-interest, the patterns here seem to suggest that self-interest is more consequential for behavior, at least when it comes to discrimination. Previous scholarship in other policy areas, as well as in laboratory settings, also highlight that self-interest and direct experience can affect behaviors more than they affect attitudes (e.g., Sivacek and Crano; 1982; Green and Cowden, 1992; Ratner and Miller; 2001; Regan and Fazio, 1977).

Moreover, it is interesting to note that Latino identifiers and national origin identifiers are more similar than they are different. Even though perceptions of group-level discrimination increase the likelihood of identifying as Latino rather than with one's country of origin, both types of self-identification are rather indistinguishable when it comes to political participation. When identity-based differences appear, they are between these groups on the one hand and American identifiers on the other.¹⁴

Attitudinal Engagement

Political engagement has attitudinal as well as behavioral components. Having a citizenry that trusts the government and feels that politicians care about their constituents' concerns is generally considered to be part of a healthy democratic society. As Citrin and Luks (2001) point out, although mistrust does not necessarily affect turnout, it can lead to timidity among politicians, hindering innovation and the likelihood that officials will make "necessary, if costly, commitments" (p. 26). Trust is also important for citizen compliance with the law and willingness to support spending decisions (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2001; Tyler, 2001). Among the factors that have been shown to affect levels of attitudinal support for political actors and institutions are approval ratings of congress and the president and feelings about the fairness and equity of the political process (e.g., Citrin and Luks, 2001; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001b). Yet despite these valuable findings, we still know little about how attitudinal factors related to the immigrant experience, factors that I have argued are increasingly important in our political system, relate to attitudinal engagement. A recent edited volume on trust in government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001a), for example, barely addresses factors related to race and ethnicity. One chapter shows that overall levels of trust between blacks and whites are not substantially different, although it does not explore whether their low levels of trust have similar *causes* (Alford, 2001). Other studies in the volume tangentially mention that blacks are sometimes less trusting than whites (Owen and Dennis, 2001; Richardson, Houston, and Hadjiharalambous, 2001). Thus,

what little attention is paid to the role of race and ethnicity deals only with blacks and, again, only involves the use of a racial dummy variable. How self-identification and perceptions of treatment by the dominant society affect attitudinal engagement among non-whites in general, and among Latinos in particular, appears to be understudied indeed.

Fortunately, the KFF/PHC survey allows us to address this issue in more depth. Here, the two dependent variables measure whether respondents think that “political leaders are interested in the problems of particular concern to Latinos living [in the United States] or not” and how often they feel they can trust the government in Washington to do what’s right: never (0), some of the time (1), most of the time (2), just about always (3). I refer to low scores on both measures as “attitudinal alienation.” Forty-one percent of the citizen sample felt than politicians are interested in issues that concern Latinos and the mean level of trust in government was 1.55. I used the same control variables as those included in the analyses of behavioral engagement.¹⁵

As before, there are reasons to expect that self-identification, absent perceptions of discrimination, will have little impact on attitudinal alienation. If self-identification matters at all, it is likely that it will only do so in the presence of discrimination. But will the patterns regarding perceptions of discrimination be the same as the patterns discussed thus far? Existing scholarship provides little to go on here. On the one hand, some studies have documented that political participation can enhance the extent to which people feel that the political system is responsive to their concerns and can reduce alienation (e.g., Finkel, 1985, 1987; Leighley, 1995; Madsen, 1987). To the extent that Latino and national origin identifiers who perceive individual-level discrimination are more politically involved than others, perhaps their esteem for government and politicians will improve as they find themselves increasingly interacting with the political process. However, this possibility seems unlikely from a purely commonsensical standpoint. Rather, a more logical expectation is that perceptions of negative treatment—at both the individual and group levels—will increase the sense that “the system,” as embodied by both “the government” and “politicians,” are not to be trusted and do not represent one’s concerns or the concerns of one’s group. Whether the attitudinal assessments of Latino identifiers, national origin identifiers, and American identifiers react differently to increased perceptions of discrimination or whether all become increasingly alienated is an open question.

The format for this analysis is identical to the one used in the previous section. A probit model was used when attitudes about whether politicians share Latino issue concerns was the dependent variable, and an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used when trust in government was the dependent variable. The results appear in Table 2. They show that Latino

identifiers, absent perceptions of discrimination, are less likely than everyone else to think that politicians share a concern for issues that Latinos care about but that self-identification has no impact on overall trust in government. Additionally, perceptions of both types of discrimination worsen respondents' evaluations of politicians, whereas only individual-level discrimination significantly diminishes trust in government. As before, individual-level discrimination is more consequential than group-level discrimination. Unlike before, however, this effect is not conditional on self-identification.

Figures 3a and b illustrate the predicted probabilities of thinking that politicians share Latino issue concerns for each identity type as perceptions of discrimination vary. Figure 3a shows the impact of group-level discrimination while Figure 3b shows the impact of individual-level discrimination. Similarly, Figures 4a and b illustrate the predicted level of trust (on the 4-point scale) for each identity type as perceptions of discrimination vary.

Across 3 of the 4 figures, the story is primarily one of similarity across identity groups, with each group becoming more alienated as the perception of discrimination increases, and with individual-level discrimination being more powerful than group-level. Among national origin and American identifiers, for example, the likelihood of thinking that politicians are interested in issues that Latinos care about drops by 33 and 27 percentage points,

TABLE 2. Impact of Self-identification and Perceptions of Discrimination on Attitudinal Engagement

Independent Variable	Pols Interested in Latinos	Trust in Government
Identify w/country of origin	-0.08	0.14
Identify as Latino/Hispanic	-0.64***	0.08
Discrimination against the group	-0.68***	-0.12
Discrimination against oneself	-1.12***	-0.72***
Generation	-0.16	-0.07
Speaks English well	-0.08	-0.35***
Education	-0.06	-0.05
Age	0.05	-0.42***
Gender (1=female)	-0.38***	-0.03
Income	-0.25	0.10
Nat'l origin × self discrimination	0.27	0.08
Nat'l origin × group discrimination	-0.17	-0.24
Latino × self discrimination	0.38	0.14
Latino × group discrimination	0.74**	-0.23
Constant	0.62***	1.79***
N	1218	1254
Chi-squared/R-squared	113.23	0.06

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

For all non-dummy variables (except perceptions of discrimination): mean=0; range=1.
 Source: KFF/PHC 2002 Survey of Latinos.

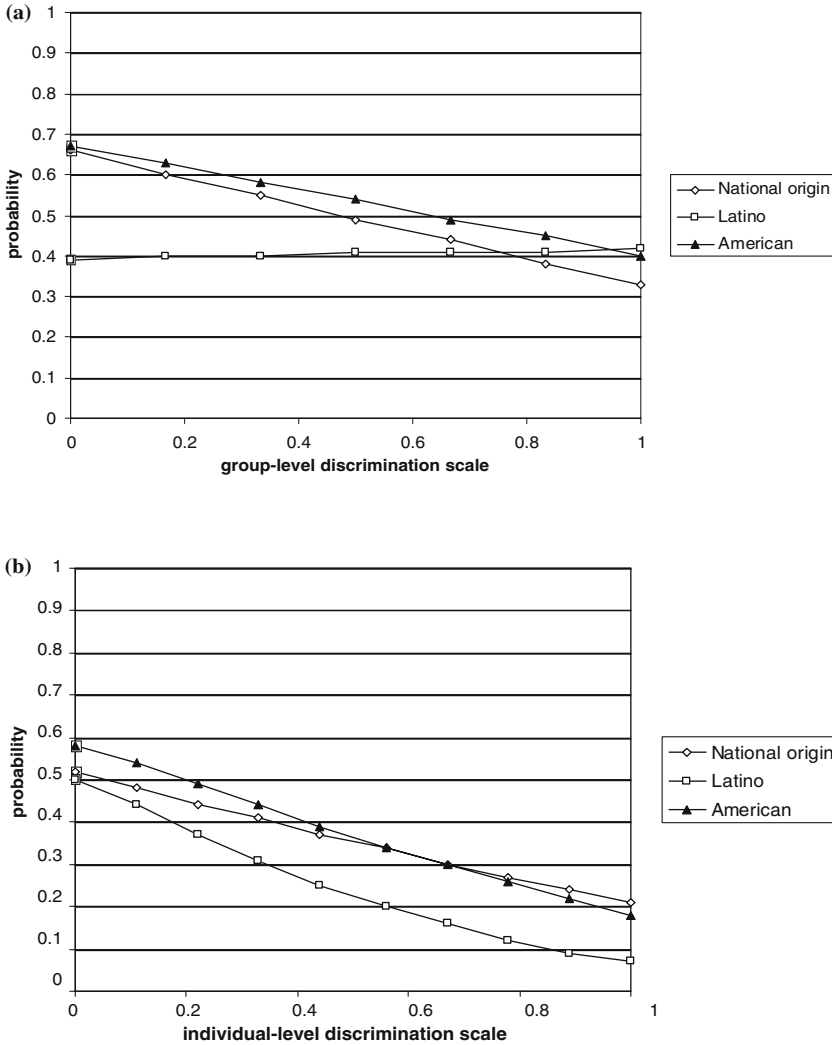


FIG. 3. (a) Probability of thinking politicians care about issues that Latinos care about as group-level discrimination varies; (b) probability of thinking politicians care about issues that Latinos care about as individual-level discrimination varies.

respectively. The only exception to this story is in Figure 3a, which shows that the average Latino identifier is 28 percentage points less likely than the average American identifier—and 27 percentage points less likely than the average national origin identifier—to think that politicians share Latino

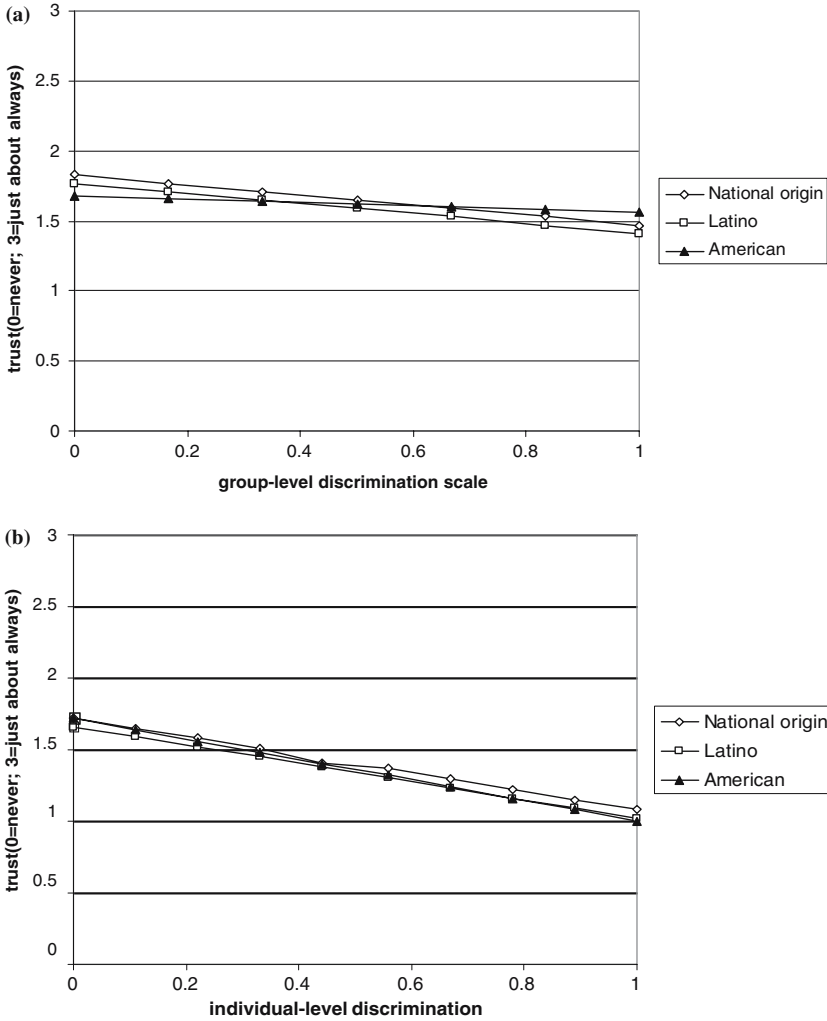


FIG. 4. (a) Predicted level of trust in government as group-level discrimination varies; (b) predicted level of trust in government as individual-level discrimination varies.

issue concerns. Those differences disappear, however, with national origin and American identifiers becoming more alienated as their perception of group-level discrimination increases. When group-level discrimination is at its maximum, all three types of identifiers are essentially indistinguishable, with respondents in each group having about a 40% chance of thinking that

politicians are interested in issues that Latinos care about. Why evaluations among Latino identifiers remain constant as evaluations among other identifiers worsen is curious; no *post-hoc* explanations are immediately apparent.

With regard to trust in government, it is important to point out that only with individual-level discrimination does the decrease in trust actually lead to a different predicted response option. All three types of identifiers are predicted to trust government “most of the time” at both the left and right ends of Figure 4a. In Figure 4b, all three types of identifiers lose sufficient trust in government that their predicted responses go from “most of the time” to “some of the time.”¹⁶

While I was again somewhat surprised at the comparatively weak effect of group-level discrimination, we should not necessarily be surprised to see individual-level discrimination affect trust in government so powerfully. Brehm and Rahn (1997) have demonstrated that members of racial and ethnic minority groups tend to have lower levels of generalized trust than whites. Generalized trust (a.k.a. interpersonal or social trust) is a set of beliefs about whether people in general tend to be fair, trustworthy, and helpful, or whether they tend to look out for themselves and take advantage of others. As Brehm and Rahn explain, these racial differences in generalized trust are most likely due to an increased chance of being a victim of discrimination, “which may contribute to a suspiciousness of one’s surroundings and the motives of others” (p. 1009). This research further shows that generalized trust affects trust and confidence in political institutions: the more one trusts other people, the more one trusts government. In other words, “confidence in institutions requires confidence in one’s fellow citizens” (p. 1015). Victims of discrimination are less likely to trust their fellow citizens and thus are less likely to trust government. The KFF/PHC survey does not measure generalized trust, but given these established findings, it is likely that respondents in this survey who think they have been a victim of discrimination have lower levels of generalized trust, which in turn decreases their trust in government.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The research presented here extends the recent trend of attempting to unpack the “black box” of ethnicity and its impact on political engagement. Using a new and innovative dataset, I was able to tap into understudied attitudes related to the immigrant experience and examine how they affect one’s relationship to the political process. The analysis allows me to advance our understanding of political engagement generally and to contribute to important timely discussions about the role of self-identification in contemporary American politics.

Based on the findings, I can side neither with the immigration critics who charge that the fabric of American society is at risk when many citizens identify with their ethnic group nor with the optimists who claim that how people identify has little bearing on the political process. Perceptions of group-level discrimination hinder the adoption of an American identity. Despite some negative consequences attributed to having a strong sense of national identity, there are also positive consequences, and it is reasonable to desire that all Americans indeed see themselves as American. As the nation's population continues to diversify, we need to consider seriously the potential outcomes that might occur if we end up having a plurality of the population consist of members of traditionally marginalized groups that do not see themselves as Americans. Given how widespread perceptions of group-level discrimination are, this is no small point. At the same time, there is some evidence that self-identification on its own can, in fact, be of concern with regard to political engagement. Both Latino and national origin identifiers are somewhat less likely to vote than those who identify primarily as an American, absent perceptions of discrimination.

Yet the other main results of this analysis suggest that we need to consider how self-identification interacts with other factors, mainly perceptions of discrimination, before we can come to any firm conclusions about whether retaining non-American self-identifications is a problem. Perceptions of discrimination promote both attitudinal and behavioral alienation. When accompanied by a panethnic or national origin identification, behavioral alienation is mitigated, and even overcome; when accompanied by an American identification, it gets worse. The conditions under which self-identifications on the one hand, and individual-level and group-level perceptions on the other, are more influential over political engagement still require further study, but the results thus far suggest that if people perceive discrimination, then we should want them to have a sense of ethnic or national origin group solidarity if we think that, all things being equal, more behavioral engagement is better than less. The general similarity between Latino identifiers and national origin identifiers suggests that the cognitive and emotional boundaries between these two primary identifications is perhaps not as distinct as the boundary between those two types of self-identification on the one hand and American identification on the other. In fact, models in which the primary identity variable is collapsed into two categories—American and non-American (results not shown)—yield essentially identical findings to the ones described earlier. Whether these similarities between Latino and national origin identifiers generalizes to other political phenomena remains to be seen. Further investigations will be needed to shed more light on the conditions under which it might be useful to distinguish between, or “rank order,” these two types of identifications and whether the

main boundary to emphasize is that between American identifiers on the one hand and everyone else on the other.

In the meantime, we have at this stage learned that non-American identifiers engage in more civic-minded behavior than American identifiers when perceptions of individual-level discrimination are present, while American identifiers engage in more civic-minded behavior absent such perceptions. Additionally, individual-level discrimination is generally more consequential than group-level discrimination; this is true for both behavioral and attitudinal engagement. The problem is that individual-level discrimination is less likely than group-level discrimination to generate the group solidarity that can counteract discrimination's damaging effects. Moreover, group attachment will do nothing to ameliorate the attitudinal alienation that perceptions of discrimination promote.

Perhaps in a perfect world, we would see people thinking of themselves as American while still being proud of their ethnic heritage, not perceiving discrimination, being involved in politics, and holding their government and elected officials in high regard. In a slightly less perfect world, we would acknowledge that the treatment of the host society has a big role to play in whether people feel like they are part of the national community, and we would take necessary measures to rectify the negative treatment that promotes alienation. In the world we've got, however, we should not decry national origin and panethnic ties when we see them, for they seem to mitigate the damage done by the negative treatment of the host society and to promote the political action needed to create a political system that is more responsive to people's needs.

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NOTES

1. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995), however, find that people who are more politically active have lower approval ratings of Congress than people who are less politically active.
2. See Census press release: "Income Stable, Poverty Up, Numbers of Americans With and Without Health Insurance Rise, Census Bureau Reports," August 26, 2004. Available at: http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/income_wealth/002484.html. Accessed on 10/12/04.
3. The study of attitudes about the trustworthiness of government and responsiveness of elected officials has lagged behind studies of participation in terms of opening the "black box" of ethnic dummy variables.
4. Sidanius et al. (1997) found that levels of patriotism "decreased as a function of ethnic attachment among African Americans" (p. 129) but *not* among Latinos.

5. These trajectories are ideal-types, of course. In reality, people are likely to acculturate, identify with other Latinos, and retain cultural attachments to their country of origin.
6. Sanders (2001) shows that people who claim to have fought back against perceived discrimination do not suffer from as much psychological harm as people who did not. However, she does not examine whether the perception of discrimination affected the likelihood of being politically involved in the first place. Also see Putnam (2001) for a discussion of the health benefits of civic engagement.
7. Many reasons for this *personal-group discrepancy* have been postulated and tested, including motivational goals (which manifest in the desire to maintain a positive self-esteem), cognitive processes (which render group-based comparisons easier than individual comparisons), variations in how the phenomenon of discrimination is construed (involving interactions between frequency and severity), and informational explanations (which claim that people simply rely on different sets of information when comparing the self to others than when comparing the group to others). No consensus has emerged, however, in support of one of these explanations over the others. For more on the personal-group discrepancy, see Kessler et al. (2000), Fuegen and Biernat (2000), Crosby (1984).
8. People who said they only identified with one of the options were coded by KFF/PHC as choosing that identity first. Future studies with this dataset will involve examining the causes and consequences of different identity permutations (e.g., American first and Latino second, only Latino, national origin first and Latino second, etc.). Thirteen percent of the citizen sample chose only one identity, 38% chose two, and 50% said they, at times, identify as American, as Latino, and as a member of their country of origin.
9. Additionally, the multinomial logit shows that non-controversial acculturation measures such as how long one's family has been in the United States and how well one speaks English, increase the likelihood of self-identifying primarily as American. People who are older and have more education are also more likely to identify as American than as Latino or as a member of one's national origin group, reflecting the likelihood that older and more educated respondents are more integrated into mainstream American institutions and society.
10. DeSipio and colleagues (2003) found that Latino immigrants who remained politically active in their countries of origin were more likely than other Latino immigrants to be politically active in the United States. They write, "transnational politics neither crowds out U.S.-focused activities nor comes at the expense of political engagement" (p. 26). In other words, participation seems to beget participation.
11. According to a press release found at: http://www.azteca.net/aztec/immigrat/trc_94vo.html. Accessed 2/10/04.
12. Leighley (2001) points out that the rise in turnout associated with events such as the battle over Proposition 187 is probably also due, in part, to increases in targeted mobilization efforts on the part of ethnic organizations and "political entrepreneurs" (p. 40).
13. Shaw et al. (2000) compare models for self-reported and validated turnout among Latinos in three states. Even though they find evidence of over-reporting, the substantive findings in both models are quite similar. The magnitude of some coefficients (such as partisan identification and political attentiveness) is smaller in the validated model. Additionally, mobilization by a Latino group is more influential in the validated model.
14. The questions about registration and voting are the only two measures of political behavior included in the KFF/PHC survey. I was thus unable to test whether the patterns described here differ when the political activity in question is both more intense and less likely to suffer from over-reporting. I did run models with dummy variables to account for any differences in national origin (results not shown). The categories (coded by KFF/PHC) were Mexican (omitted category), Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central American, South American, and "other." The only main difference in these models versus the models described above is that Dominicans and "other" Latinos were slightly more likely to vote than Mexicans.

15. The KFF/PHC survey does not include approval ratings or questions about the fairness and equity of the political process.
16. Here again I ran models with national origin dummy variables (not shown). Cubans and Dominicans were slightly more likely than Mexicans to think politicians are interested in issues that Latinos care about ($p = 0.1$). Puerto Ricans had less trust in government than Mexicans, while Cubans and South Americans had more. All of these effects were small.

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