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Boricua in the Barrio: Political Trust among Puerto Ricans in Chicago and Nationwide
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Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37715107
Existing research establishes that political trust is not only an important determinant of individual political behavior and government effectiveness, but may also measure the health of democracy. The present study examines political trust among Puerto Ricans in Chicago and nationwide. The analysis encompasses a dozen surveys conducted between 1992 and 2002, with a special focus on the Latino community in Chicago. The research reveals that political trust is higher among island-born Puerto Ricans than among mainland-born residents. The findings support the hypothesis that acculturation processes, such as language shift and increased exposure to U.S. culture, contribute to lower political trust among mainland-born individuals.

**Key words:** political trust, acculturation, island-born, mainland-born, Chicago, public opinion

**ABSTRACT**

Political trust among Puerto Ricans in Chicago and nationwide is examined in this study. The analysis encompasses a decade of public opinion research and a wide geographic area. Lower political trust among mainland-born residents is found to be associated with acculturation processes, such as language shift and increased exposure to U.S. culture.
One major exception to the lack of good public opinion data about Puerto Ricans is the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS), conducted in 1989–1990. More recent data are available from a series of national surveys, for example, in the 1992 National Election Study (NES), of which the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) was a part. However, the LNPS has some limitations. The survey was conducted in English, and the sample size is relatively small. Moreover, the sample is not representative of the Puerto Rican population as a whole. Of the 32.8 million Latinos currently estimated to live within the United States (not including Puerto Rico), only about 9.0 percent are Puerto Rican (Therrien and Ramirez 2000).

Assimilation and Ethnic Competition Theory

Acculturation at the individual level refers to the cultural learning that occurs when immigrants come into contact with a new culture. As a result, individuals change their values, norms, attitudes, and behaviors. The process of assimilation leads to the reduction of cultural differences between the immigrant group and the host society. However, there are also cases where assimilation does not occur, and cultural differences persist. One major exception to the lack of good public opinion data about Puerto Ricans is the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS), conducted in 1989–1990. More recent data are available from a series of national surveys, for example, in the 1992 National Election Study (NES), of which the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) was a part. However, the LNPS has some limitations. The survey was conducted in English, and the sample size is relatively small. Moreover, the sample is not representative of the Puerto Rican population as a whole. Of the 32.8 million Latinos currently estimated to live within the United States (not including Puerto Rico), only about 9.0 percent are Puerto Rican (Therrien and Ramirez 2000).

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great to be overcome by the adoption of American cultural practices. Although not discussed by Park, Latinos (like Asian-Americans and African-Americans) are a racialized group. Latinos are given a clear message, once they arrive here, that being Hispanic means not being white (García Bedolla 1999).

Another reason why assimilation theory may not be appropriate for Latinos is that a central assumption of this literature is that there is “continuous first-hand contact” between the two cultures. Yet, undocumented immigrants have less frequent contact with Anglos because they fear detection by government authorities.

A more appropriate model of acculturation for Latinos may be ethnic competition theory, also known as the separation mode of acculturation. In this model, individuals choose to resist acculturation, as they hold fast to their language, customs, and religious beliefs. This is in contrast to the assimilation model, which assumes that immigrants will adopt the dominant culture. Ethnic competition theory suggests that immigrants may prefer to maintain their own culture, even if it means sacrificing economic opportunities in the host country.

Several recent empirical studies on Latino immigrant incorporation suggest that Latinos do not acculturate in the same manner as have previous, European immigrant groups. Instead, they may learn to be critical of the government because they become aware of their unequal position in society and of the realities of discrimination. Their identity is transformed from that of an immigrant (or migrant) looking forward to membership in the dominant society into that of a member of a minority group that is denied the full benefits of such membership.

Another reason to expect the less acculturated to be more trusting is that they may be idealizing what they do not have: they may be more trusting of American government because they are not a part of it. This may be the result of eagerness to belong: Mexican American children generally begin with highly favorable orientations to the political system. On many dimensions their perceptions are even more supportive than are those of Anglos. These may result from compartmentalization - the sense of belonging to two separate cultures, each with its own unique set of values and beliefs.

Finally, more acculturated Puerto Ricans may be less trusting of American government because they have higher expectations. Those who have not yet become incorporated into the majority culture may be more content with their current status, while those who have been assimilated may expect more than the government is delivering.

The Chicago Context

Many of the data used in this study are from a series of public opinion polls of the Chicago Latino community. The political experience of Puerto Ricans in Chicago is distinct from that of Puerto Ricans in other cities. The Chicago Latino Experience is characterized by a strong sense of community and a high degree of political mobilization. The Chicago Latino Experience is also characterized by a high degree of political activism, with many Latino groups playing an active role in the political process.

The Current Study

Data for this study come from the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) and from our series of public opinion polls of the Chicago Latino community. The LNPS, conducted in 1989–1990, surveyed Latinos and Anglos living in 40 metropolitan areas throughout the continental United States, including 589 Puerto Ricans. Some have criticized the LNPS for various reasons, including a lack of representativeness of Latino groups in the U.S., and is cited by numerous researchers (for specific critiques, see e.g., Fraga et al. 1994).

We conducted the Chicago polls in February-March 1997, November 1998, and March 1999. Surveys were conducted in the three major Latino neighborhoods of Chicago: Pilsen, Little Village, and Logan Square/Humboldt Park. The 1998 survey was an exit poll, conducted in person at election sites. For the exit poll, 1990 U.S. Census data for the tracts corresponding to the three Latino neighborhoods were...
Empirical Results

Overall levels of political trust for Puerto Ricans in different samples are shown in Table 1. This includes Puerto Rican respondents pooled from the 1978–1998 NES, the three pooled Chicago surveys, and the LNPS. For comparison, responses from 1998 NES whites and LNPS Anglos are also included. The results show that Puerto Ricans are less trusting than Anglos, with most believing that government can be trusted only some of the time or even never, that the government wastes a lot of tax money, and that quite a few people running the government are crooked.

Levels of political trust by place of birth are displayed in Table 2. This includes Puerto Rican respondents pooled from the 1997–1999 NES. The NES data were not representative of the Puerto Rican population in the Chicago area, and this limits the study’s ability to generalize from the Chicago sample. The NES data were not representative of the Puerto Rican population in the Chicago area, and this limits the study’s ability to generalize from the Chicago sample. The NES data were not representative of the Puerto Rican population in the Chicago area, and this limits the study’s ability to generalize from the Chicago sample. The NES data were not representative of the Puerto Rican population in the Chicago area, and this limits the study’s ability to generalize from the Chicago sample. The NES data were not representative of the Puerto Rican population in the Chicago area, and this limits the study’s ability to generalize from the Chicago sample. The NES data were not representative of the Puerto Rican population in the Chicago area, and this limits the study’s ability to generalize from the Chicago sample.

Table 1
Trust Survey Item Responses (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NES</th>
<th>Chicago LNPS</th>
<th>NES Whites</th>
<th>Puerto Ricans</th>
<th>Puerto Ricans</th>
<th>Puerto Ricans</th>
<th>LNPS Anglos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YOU CAN TRUST THE GOVERNMENT TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT</td>
<td>just about always</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>most of the time</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>only some of the time</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNMENT IS PRETTY MUCH RUN...</td>
<td>by big interests</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for all</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GOVERNMENT WASTES...</td>
<td>a lot of tax money</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>some tax money</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not very much</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEOPLE RUNNING THE GOVERNMENT ARE CROOKED</td>
<td>quite a few</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not very many</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hardly any</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-squared: 13.570** Somer’s d: -.183**
Chi-squared: 4.634* Somer’s d: .112*
Chi-squared: 3.529 Somer’s d: -.032
Chi-squared: 6.714* Somer’s d: .100

N: 153 193 149 147

p.10; *p .05; **p .01.

Table 2
Trust Survey Item Responses by Place of Birth (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>58.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>by big interests</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for all</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GOVERNMENT WASTES...</td>
<td>a lot of tax money</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>some tax money</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not very much</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hardly any</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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Chi-squared: 4.634* Somer’s d: .112*
Chi-squared: 7.187** Somer’s d: .128**
Chi-squared: 3.529 Somer’s d: -.032
Chi-squared: 6.714* Somer’s d: .100

N: 153 193 149 147

p.10; *p .05; **p .01.

boundaries for each of the 12 census tracts were compared with boundaries for Chicago voting precincts. In cases where there was an overlap of more than one precinct, one was chosen at random. This resulted in a list of twelve polling places, which were targeted for the exit polls. Polls are open in general elections from 3:15 to 7:15 p.m. Two interviewers were assigned to every location. Interviewers were given questionnaires in both English and Spanish and told to approach voters in either language, using their best judgment as to the language the voter preferred. Interviewers were told to try to approach every voter; if polling became too heavy to allow this, they were to begin approaching every second or third voter, choosing whom to begin with by flipping a coin.

The 1997 and 1999 surveys were conducted by telephone, using professional random-number telephone lists, generated for the census tracts and corresponding to the three neighborhoods. Interviews were conducted from 4:30 to 8 p.m. during weekdays and from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends. Up to three attempts were made to contact a respondent at each telephone number. The first screening question asked about national origin; if the respondent was not Latino, the interview was terminated. In order to sample equal numbers of men and women, interviewers were asked to speak to a person of the opposite sex from the one whom they had just completed interviewing. Interviewers were thus encouraged to sample equal numbers of men and women. Interviewers were asked to select a respondent at each telephone number if the respondent was not Latino. The interview was conducted as soon as possible after the respondent agreed to participate. Interviewers were told to spend no more than 8 minutes with each respondent. The telephone numbers were generated from the telephone books of the three neighborhoods. Interviewers were told to approach any voter in the neighborhood who was answerable in English or Spanish.

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There are clear and consistent differences in feelings of political trust between mainland-born and island-born Puerto Ricans. Using the two branches of acculturation theory currently dominating the literature, classic assimilation theory and ethnic competition theory, helps us to understand why these differences exist. Using classic assimilation theory, mainland-born Puerto Ricans have learned to be like non-Puerto Ricans. Using ethnic competition theory, on the other hand, suggests that mainland-born Puerto Ricans have learned over time not to be like non-Puerto Ricans, but have learned that they are part of a racialized and discriminated-against ethnic group. In other words, they are cynical about government because they have developed a group consciousness as members of an embattled minority.

Island-born Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, while still cynical in an absolute sense, are less cynical than their mainland-born co-ethnics. They have developed opinions about American government as a procedural system, rather than as a system that is corrupt.

While we cannot distinguish which acculturation model best fits the Puerto Rican community, the two models are still useful in describing how Puerto Ricans are being incorporated into mainstream American society, and in clarifying that there is something important about acculturation that influences political behavior.

The sources of these differences are unclear. Fraga et al. (1994) note that there are "sharp cultural differences" between the two groups, and that the community itself distinguishes island-born from mainland-born members. Island-born Puerto Ricans tend to be of much lower socioeconomic status; this different status may influence their life experiences in ways that are reflected in surveys of political attitudes. Island-born Puerto Ricans are more likely to maintain ties to the island, and are less likely to participate in local (U.S.) politics. These individuals are therefore less likely to be attentive to or involved in mainland politics, which may shield them from the various scandals and misdeeds usually blamed for increasing cynicism. A final possibility is that island-born Puerto Ricans are more likely to have received their education outside of the United States.

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Similar gaps distinguish island-born and mainland-born Puerto Ricans on the other political trust questions. Respondents born on the mainland are more likely to think that the government is pretty much crooked, and that the government is pretty much a waste of money. There are statistically significant differences in feelings of trust as measured by both LNPS questions and three out of four of the Chicago questions.

The Chicago and LNPS data were then analyzed using Logit and Ordered Logit, as appropriate for each dependent variable (trust item), in order to control for socioeconomic characteristics that might be associated with levels of trust, i.e., income and education. These results are shown in Table 3.
in Puerto Rico than on the mainland, and that there is something distinctive about the educational experience on the mainland that decreases trust in government. Regardless of the source of these differences, the fact that Puerto Ricans born outside of the mainland have more trust in government has important implications for immigration policy and the national conversation. Island-born Puerto Ricans are more trusting of government than are mainland-born Puerto Ricans reinforces that argument.

Second, these findings undercut the arguments made by some opposed to statehood for Puerto Rico that Puerto Ricans are somehow not suited for full inclusion in American political society. These findings provide evidence that Puerto Ricans are eligible for fuller inclusion in the U.S. polity, and that statehood for Puerto Rico would not destabilize the political arena.

NOTES
1 Not all existing research finds important behavioral consequences in the lack of trust. Muller, Jukam, and Seligson (1982), for example, fail to find a relationship between cynicism and anti-system behavior.
2 While the social capital literature focuses on social trust rather than political trust, other work shows that the two concepts are closely linked (Lane 1959; Levi 1996; Brehm and Rahn 1997).
3 It should be noted that survey respondents 9/11/01 reported a dramatic increase in the level of trust in government, but this finding is not an exception. It continues a longer trend of increased levels of trust in government. For example, Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn (2001) find that the origins and consequences of public trust in government: A time series analysis.

REFERENCES

Puerto Rico would not deserve the political arena.