Latin American Immigrants: Political Assimilation and Children

In understanding what factors play a role in cultural assimilation of a group, specifically in Latin American immigrants, it is important to understand how Latin American immigrants are affected after they arrive in America. What are the driving factors in their participation, both socially and politically? We know that Latin American immigrants rely on social capital (i.e., various social networks that provide immigrants with important resources once they reach the United States) in order to excel in their new environments. These networks of contacts provide new immigrants with both social and employment opportunities. In a similar way, having children might provide immigrants with resources that could make political participation more likely. For example, children educated in the United States’ education system may provide their immigrant parents with a forum for participation, through PTA or parent-teacher conferences, etc. Parents with children in school are more likely to be engaged in the community and, therefore, will likely be more inclined to participate and assimilate politically. I hypothesize that Latin American immigrants who have children who have studied through the American education system will be better politically assimilated than those immigrants that have no such children.

Thee null hypothesis would suggest that there is no relationship between children and the political assimilation of Latin American immigrant parents. The causal mechanism at work here suggests that children (IV) affect political assimilation, as measured by party identification (DV), in Latin American immigrants. I also account for other possible variables at play in my hypothesis by controlling for the education level and location of the parent, as well as household income, how frequently the respondent watches the news, how often the respondent reads the newspaper, how often the respondent attends religious services, gender, and age of respondent.

In what follows, I will discuss relevant studies previously conducted that relate to the role of children in Latin American immigrant households. I rely on the Latino National Survey (LNS) that is a dataset of 8, 634 computer-assisted telephone interviews of Latinos in the United States (61% of which are foreign-born) conducted in 2006. I will use the findings from this data to run a two-step analysis. I will first conduct a cross-tabulation analysis to measure the effect of the children of immigrants on political assimilation as measured by levels of partisan identification of the immigrant parents, while controlling for two levels of education – more education or less education. I will then conduct an OLS regression analysis of other controlling factors in order to determine what actually contributes to the political assimilation of these respondents and if children really do act as influencers. Based on the results of this cross-tabulation analysis, I find that the influence of children has an effect on the political assimilation of their parents, but only at levels of lower parental education. My findings from the OLS regression, however, differ in that the inverse affect is shown. Having children, according to my analysis, may diminish parents’ political assimilation, rather than encourage it.

With an interest in Latin American immigrants’ political inclination, it is first important to understand what motivates this demographic socially. Children are great motivators of parents, both in social and a political context (Jones-Correa 2001; Wong and Tseng 2008). If one is to argue that political participation of Latin American immigrants is a reflection of the political engagement of the immigrants’ children, one must consider the role of the child in the Latin American household. Since children are such strong motivators for parents, the role of children in the home provides a foundational understanding of how parents make decisions and, therefore, become politically assimilated (Wilkin, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach 2009).

It is understood that non-immigrant children, with parents born in the United States, are heavily influenced by their parents’ political inclinations (McDevitt 2006). Children learn from their parents; their political assimilation is somewhat inevitable. In the case of the children of immigrants, however, it can be argued that children must act as their own political motivators (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002; McDevitt 2006). Children of immigrants are not inevitably versed in the American political system as non-immigrant children would be; their parents, depending on the location and extent of education, may not have the knowledge of American politics to educate their children with (Wong and Tseng 2008). It has been observed that in American households, the children of immigrants who view the media and who are educated will be more likely to engage in political conversation and “storytelling” in the home (Katz, and Ball-Rokeach 2009; McDevitt and Chaffee 2002). Children are automatically, through education and media influence, politically assimilated. They then turn that political inclination into household dialogue.

The same idea is applicable to Latin American immigrants to the United States; children act as a strong influence for their parents’ political action and assimilation. In order to appreciate this idea, it is important to unfold the identity and role children take on in a Latin American immigrant household. In Latin American households, children are crucial to families’ being operational (Orellana 2003). The children of immigrants find themselves responsible for translating and interpreting for their immigrant parents; these children are also far more exposed to American culture than their parents (Orellana 2003; Wong and Tseng 2008). Immigrant parents tend to rely on their children for both social and political assimilation in the United States. The children of immigrants tend to break the language barrier between their parents and American social and political society (Orellans 2003).

The children of immigrants in the United States are expected to uphold traditional household roles, as well as adopt new ones in terms of the social education of their parents. In a traditional, non-immigrant household, it is often the parents who shape the political action of their children. Studies in the immigration of Latin Americans to the United States argue for a reversal of this model – that the children are the ones who influence their parents’ civic engagement and political assimilation (Wong and Tseng 2008; McDevitt 2008; Wilkin, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach 2009).

Research examines that in a Latin American immigrant household, the children have much responsibility in providing opportunity for the success of the family (Orellana 2003). Children bring their experiences in American society and politics into the household (Katz, and Ball-Rokeach 2009; McDevitt and Chaffee 2002). Current studies also reflect the idea that the children of immigrants in the United States are increasingly susceptible to political influence from media sources and from the America education system (Wilkin, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach 2009). Because Latin American immigrant children find personal responsibility in providing opportunity for their immigrant parents, the children of immigrants often take part in “trickle-up influence” (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002; Wong and Tseng 2008).

Leal says that those who understand politics better are more likely to politically assimilate (2002). Applying this theory to what is known about Latin American immigrants and their children, it can be concluded that because children introduce American culture into Latin American immigrant households, they also introduce dialogue about political and party identification. Children act as brokers between American politics and their parents; the children of immigrants aid in their parents’ understanding of politics. According to Leal, Latin American immigrants with children – and, by association, access to American social and political life – are more likely to politically assimilate or identify with a specific political party (2002).

While it is argued that Latin American immigrant parents’ assimilation politically can be linked to their children’s assimilation in education and language, it can also be argued that children have the opposite affect on parental assimilation. Latin American immigrants with children may, however, lack the resources – time, money, etc. – to fully participate politically. Children, in turn, are a significant drain on these resources. Those with children, compared to those without children, will typically have less time and money to dedicate to political participation, either in terms of voting, gaining information, or identifying with a particular political party. According to current research, children in immigrant households may bring into the household political dialogue, encouraging political conversation in the home and, consequently, a party identity for the parents. On the other hand, children, as a strain on parents’ financial capabilities and leisure time, may prove to work in an opposite way, taking up too much of their parents’ time, diminishing full political assimilation and decreasing the likelihood that their parents will develop a party identification.

H1: In taking into account the current state of the discipline, I hypothesize that children affect political assimilation of Latin American immigrants such that the presence of a school age child in the household will have a positive effect on political assimilation and party identification of the Latin American immigrant parents.

H0: I hypothesize that political assimilation is not affected by the presence of high school age children in the household such that children have no effect on the party identification of their immigrant parents.

**The Data**

The Latino National Survey (LNS) that is a dataset of 8, 634 computer-assisted telephone interviews of Latinos in the United States (61% of which are foreign-born) conducted in 2006.[[1]](#footnote-1) The LNS is a major national telephone survey, which seeks a broad understanding of the qualitative nature of Latino political and social life in America. The survey instrument contained approximately 165 distinct items ranging from demographic descriptions to political attitudes and policy preferences, as well as a variety of social indicators and experiences.1 All Latinos, not just citizens or voters were sampled to be interviewed for approximately 40 minutes on a wide range of political questions, conducted in both English and Spanish.

In order to test my hypothesis, I will conduct a two-step analysis. Frist, with a cross-tabulation analysis controlling for education, and second, with an OLS regression analysis to determine which alternative explanations are significant. I rely on survey questions, presented in both nominal and ordinal terms, to analyze the way Latin American households value the views of their children in terms of political assimilation, by way of party identification. I was able to control for the income of the participant, in order to ensure that children are truly a factor, whether or not the parent is of higher or lower educational proficiency. I collapsed educational responses into “more educated” and “less educated.” Those with a degree above a high school diploma or GED/equivalent I classified as “more educated.”

In order to test the affect of children in Latin American immigrant households on their parents’ political identification, I ran a cross-tabulation analysis and the results are discussed below.

**Table 1.** Less Education

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Does the respondent have a party ID? | Child in high school | No child in high school | Total |
| Yes | 35.6% | 30.9% | 31.8% |
| No | 64.4% | 69.1% | 68.2% |

x2 = .209 (not significant) p = 1.672

**Table 2.** More Education

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Does the respondent have a party ID? | Child in high school | No child in high school | Total |
| Yes | 61.1% | 54.3% | 55.8% |
| No | 38.9% | 45.7% | 44.2% |

x2 = .028 (significant) p = 4.855

In the Tables 1 and 2 above, it is apparent that there is a correlation between children and their parents’ party identification. The effect appears to be more relevant for respondents with less education. We continue to see these effects in Table 2, showing that respondents with more education and no party ID were higher in terms of percentages with no children of high school age. Additionally, the results from Tables 1 and 2, according to the x2 tests, prove that there is a significant difference when controlling for more education, but results when controlling for less education are not significant at all. The relationship between observed and expected data is significant only at higher levels of respondent education.

In accordance with the current state of disciplinary work on a Latin American immigrant children and their roles in the household, the finding here are expected. Because Latin American children, at the high school age (for the purposes of this analysis) play a large role in the social assimilation of their parents, especially in that they bring social and political dialogue into their homes, the findings in Tables 1 and 2 are expected. The correlation between children and party identification, although not significant at the “less educated” level, disproves my null hypothesis. In order to maintain, however, that other factors are not at work here, I must conduct an OLS regression analysis to observe the influence of kids will have on political assimilation.

First, I modified and recoded whether or not the responded had a political party identification into an ordinal scale containing values ranked at “no party identification,” “weak party identification,” “independent party identification,” “not strong party identification,” and “strong party identification.” I was able to recode data from the LNS using responses from multiple questions (PARTYID, STRDPARTN, INDPARTY, and CLOPART from the LNS), which pose respondents to align with a party, and if no party or independent, to specify to which party they lean. Using and analyzing this data, I recoded responses to range based on how strongly the respondent seemed to identify with a particular party, or if they maintained they had no particular leaning. This recoded variable would then remain my Dependent Variable while conducting my OLS regression.

After creating a political party identification scale to act as the Dependent Variable, I accounted for only respondents who have children, along with the education level and location of the respondent, as well as household income, how frequently the respondent watches the news, how often the respondent reads the newspaper, how often the respondent attends religious services, gender, and age of respondent.

**Table 3.** OLS Regression (Coefficients)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Model | B | Sig |
| Constant |  |  |
| Respondent Has Kids | -.121 | .054 |

In Table 3, above, what is significant is that the presence of children proves to have a negative affect on a strong party identification for the parent. Because the Beta coefficient result is a negative number, the OLS regression analysis suggests that children in the household, while all other factors considered remain constant, have the opposite affect as anticipated. Cross-tabulation analysis suggested that children in Latin American households played a significant, positive role at higher levels of education, while OLS regression suggests that children do the opposite. Children of Latin American immigrants may have a significant, negative role in the political assimilation of their parents.

These findings are complementary of the suggestion that children are a strain on parental resources and, therefore, provide parents with less time and money to be politically active. Children, in the case of Latin American immigrant households, immigrants who have children are less likely, because of their commitments to other areas of social assimilation – i.e. child’s education – have less time to devote to developing their own party identification at a strong level.

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1. http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/20862 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)