

Political Awareness and Engagement among Latinas/os at an Urban, Commuter College Campus

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Abstract

Political engagement among Latina/o youth is lower than that of other ethnic groups. Overall, college student political engagement increased during the 2008 presidential election. This study interviewed 17 Latina/o women and men during this presidential election season. This study found that most Latinas/os at Florida International University (FIU), an urban commuter campus, were very knowledgeable of the specific issues during these elections because they had researched information in various media outlets, watched the debates on television, or discussed the issues with friends of family. However, aside from voting, most of the Latinas/os at FIU do not engage in other political activities because they feel it restricts their political attitudes and ideology, they are hesitant about doing specific political activities, or because they are busy with their courses and work.

Introduction

The political engagement of college students is important since they will become our future leaders in a variety of fields and professions once they

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graduate. Nevertheless, college student political engagement peaked in the 1960s, the height of college student involvement with the free speech and civil rights movements, and has waned ever since. With the 2008 presidential elections, a new wave of young people including college students became involved in politics. Moreover, many started implementing nontraditional methods of political participation by incorporating social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. However, a current review of the literature reveals that Latina/o youth between 15 and 25 years old tend to be less involved in political activities than other ethnic groups.

Overall, college students are more likely to vote than those not in college (Bernstein, 2005). However, college students are less politically engaged than adults (Bernstein, 2005). Some reasons why college students might be politically disengaged include cynicism because of the “banality of the political process” (Dalton & Crosby, 2008, p.2) and a lack of political knowledge. Hollander and Longo (2008) find that the millennial generation, or those born after 1982, are not apathetic and are highly involved in different types of engagement, but “reject the language of ‘politics’” (p.2).

Other research suggests that women who have a “higher awareness of gender inequality tend to be more politically engaged than their peers” (Bernstein, 2005, p.307). And there has been an increase by both women and men in the use of technology especially since the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Obama became popular at the time because of his multiracial background and community organizing skills (Hollander & Longo, 2008).

Recent studies indicate that specific political engagement programming at college increases the political knowledge and activities of college students. Klofstad (2010) found that college students who engaged in “civic talk,” or discussions about politics and civic participation, were more likely to be involved in civic activities three years after they had discussed these with their peers. Schamber and Mahoney (2008) found that college students taking a first-year general education class that focused on political knowledge and social justice while working in their communities made significant progress in these two areas at the end of the course. Additionally, the researchers found that a community-based curriculum “can foster in students the political knowledge of a community advocate who seeks to evaluate social policies through critically discerning value-based judgments” (p.93). In their study of political engagement programs (PEP) at different college programs and co-curricular activities in the U.S., Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) found that these: resulted in

political learning, did not change students' political ideology or party affiliation, and that significant learning gains were made by students not interested in political issues.

Overall, however, Latina/o youth have the lowest levels of political participation compared to other ethnic groups. According to Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, and Marcelo (2006), 67% of Latinas/os are "disengaged" from political and civic engagement (p.20). For example, according to Marcelo, Lopez, and Kirby (2007), Latinas/os between 15 to 25 years old are least likely than other ethnic groups to: regularly volunteer for non-political groups, volunteer in the last 12 months, be involved in community problem solving, and raise money for charity. Additionally, they are least likely to regularly vote, persuade others in an election, display a campaign button or sign, regularly vote for political candidates or groups, or be a member of a group involve in politics. These young Latinas/os also have negative views about politics such as not believing that voting is an expression of their choice or that it can affect the outcome of an election. Thus, for this study, Latinas/os at an urban, commuter college campus were interviewed to determine their political awareness and engagement as well as the impact of the college on their political activities.

Methodology

Since the focus of this qualitative study is to ascertain how Latina/o college students perceived their own political engagement on and off campus, a phenomenological perspective was undertaken. Phenomenology focuses on "how (authors' emphasis) members of the social world apprehend and act upon objects of their experience as if they were things separate and distinct from themselves" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p.485). The goal of the researcher then is to "[reduce] data gathered as lengthy interviews describing the shared experiences of several informants to a central meaning, or 'essence' of the experience" (McCaslin & Scott, 2003, p.449). According to Knoche and Zamboanaga (2006), "phenomenology relates to what is directly experienced before an individual starts to contextualize and interpret their feelings and responses in light of past events" and it "is not critical instead it is grounded in subjectivity based on lived experience" (p.139).

A total of 17 students at FIU were interviewed for this study. FIU is a large, urban university with a predominantly Hispanic student population located in Miami, Florida, a Hispanic-majority city. It is a Hispanic Serving Institution founded in 1972 with a current population of 44,000 students making

it one of the 25 largest universities in the U.S. (Florida International University, 2011). At the time of this study, FIU had a total of 33,885 students: 52% were Hispanic and 21% were non-Hispanic White. Most of the students at FIU are older than traditionally aged college students and most commute to campus. For this study, 17 (10 women and 7 men) Latina/o students were interviewed until saturation. Saturation “entails bringing new participants continually into the study until the data is complete, as indicated by data replication or redundancy” (Bowen, 2008, p.140). Students were recruited using the snowball sampling technique where interviewed students were asked to identify other Latino students interested in this study. Graduate research assistants in the Master of Science in Higher Education program were asked to identify Latina/o students in their respective assistantship sites willing to participate in the study (residence halls, service learning, student government, etc.). Interviews began August 25, 2008 and continued until December 15, 2008.

All students identified themselves as Latino/Hispanic or their country of origin, and all students had been at FIU for at least one year. Both individual and focus group interviews were solicited to minimize bias and groupthink and to maximize consistency between students’ answers. Two focus groups of 3 students each and one focus group of 4 students were undertaken. All other interviews were individual student interviews. Interview questions were based on the political science literature on political participation describe above. The specific questions included:

- 1) did you or will you vote in the upcoming 2008 presidential elections;
- 2) where do you get your political information from?;
- 3) are you involved in political activities on and/or off campus?, and
- 4) do family, friends, and the university influence your political knowledge and activities?

There are several limitations to this study, including the fact that the interviews were done at FIU, whose demographic characteristics are unique in the Southeast, and interviews were limited to 17 students not representative of the entire institution nor representative of the Latina/o population as a whole at other colleges and universities. Therefore, generalizations of other Latina/o students at this institution or others in the U.S. cannot be made.

The interviews for this study were digitally voice recorded and handwritten notes were also taken. While being recorded, students were asked to invent a name for themselves to be used in the recording and transcripts and

notes. Transcripts have been initially coded for common themes using Microsoft Word. Transcripts were coded separately by the principle investigator and a graduate research assistant. Questions were further detailed to solicit specific information after the initial interviews were found to be deficient in details concerning ethnic identity. All coding themes from each student were compared to each other to discern common themes. Additionally, member check was performed by contacting students to review their transcripts.

The main themes that emerged after interviewing Latino students at FIU include are categorized into two interrelated groups: 1) Political Awareness and 2) Political Engagement. Political Awareness themes include heightened information gathering during the 2008 presidential election, and consolidation of specific issues to vote on. Political Engagement themes include student belief that politics are important, and student belief that political engagement is unnecessary. The following sections of the paper use the words of students to exemplify the key themes in our findings.

Political Information: Heightened Information and Consolidation

Steve recently began “paying attention” to the news outlets like CNN, newspapers, and the Internet because of the 2008 presidential elections. Amelia during the presidential elections got her political information from various sources such as the Internet, television, at the university, and radio. For example, by listening to the radio, Amelia surmised that trust was an important issue during the presidential election:

For Obama’s ideas, the first thing that I think is that when you’re...none of them has said what they’re gonna do; like all their political campaign, it’s attacking the other one, especially Obama, like I hear the that a lot. So I live in Miami Beach, so it’s kind of, long way to come here. So I hit the radio, and every five minutes, it’s Obama, Obama attacking McCain, Obama saying that McCain did this, Obama saying...and I haven’t heard so far, one, well, actually yes, one, only one between five. Like one of five, it’s McCain and the other four are Obama attacking McCain. So I don’t think that that is a good approach. Like for me, you don’t have to buy the people; you have to actually make the people trust you and that’s what Obama hasn’t done for me.

Additionally, during the presidential campaign, Amelia got information from both presidential candidates at booths set up in the Student Center.

Elise got her presidential election information from Google searches and CNN. She also watched the primary debates and decided to vote on Obama because of how he answered a question about illegal immigration:

Obama was kind of like indecisive on that and I kind of liked it just because if you did do it, you could use that information against the people that tried so hard, you know, to come to this country for opportunities. But then if you didn't do it, there's always that risk of like running national security threats and stuff like that and just the fact that he said that he would need more educated knowledge to making like, a decision about that was something that I really liked about him.

Georgia gets her political information from the radio, news, presidential debates on television and her mother and father who she says tries to persuade her who she should pick as candidate. She also watches *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* because they make politics "funny." In this presidential election she would have voted for McCain (she is a non-citizen) because he had "more experience" and seemed more "honest" and "genuine." If she could vote, she would have chosen to register as an Independent.

Rosa gets much of her political information from her parents and grandmother:

My mother has taught me well that a great quote is that you need to know your past before, because if you don't have a past, you don't have a future. And she did her best to teach me about what happened in Cuba and to understand and see the clues of, in case that happens again.

What is surprising about the above quotes is how critical and thoughtful the students are concerning who they are choosing to vote for. Additionally, they do not relying on one single source of information, but they look at multiple sources of information in order to make an knowledgeable decision. They also listen to their families for opinions on the candidates, but do not rely solely upon them for information.

Political Engagement: Important AND Unnecessary

Even though Amelia was gathering information about the presidential candidates, she believes it is not important to be politically involved on campus because she can express her ideas freely without having to belong to a specific

organization:

It's not like, if you belong to this party you're able to express yourself. No, you can express it independently; you can express it as a Democrat, or you can express yourself as a Republican. Like, you don't have to be of that particular belief in order for you to actually say what you think or do what you want to do.

Elise will vote for the first time in a presidential election and the only other time she has voted has been in local elections. She thinks being involved in political activities is important so that you are aware of the issues, however, she does not involve herself with political organizations because it would restrict her political "ideology:"

Because I tend to think that if you're in a political organization you have to like, agree with, at least, you know, more than half of your ideologies and I feel like I could agree in some points, but not in all points and for myself to limit myself to one specific ideology you know, it's just not something I think is fair on my part.

Georgia thinks it is important to have a political say, but not in political activities such as "campaigning:"

Well I mean I think participating in anything that you believe in is important, you know, because that's what you believe in. If you don't support someone or something, then what you believe in, then what are you supporting? So I mean, even if it's just wearing a shirt, 'cause, I hate campaigning. I mean, I hate, like going to people. Even if it's just wearing a shirt and letting people out there know that you believe in this even if you don't.

Ignacio who is Cuban American has voted in the past for mayors and gubernatorial candidates and was a registered Republican until recently. For example, he voted for Obama during the 2008 presidential election which surprised him:

I voted for Barack Obama. It was the first time that I decided to change my political views being that I'm into speech communication and I analyzed the issues that were affecting me in terms of paying for university and I believe that Barack Obama had a better, I guess, platform for education rather than using a platform that was already...was not working.

Additionally, Ignacio belongs to the Democratic Club on campus and thinks it is important being politically active because it is “neighbors helping neighbors.”

Even though Jessica believes it is important to be politically active, she is not involved in any political activities on or off campus and only votes. She said she was too busy on focusing on furthering her career. She also stated that she did not like discussing politics because “there was so much information” coming from different venues and people and she did not know what information or who was “right.”

Stephanie does not participate in political activities on or off campus, although, since she did not have health insurance because it was expensive, she did manage to vote for Obama because of his policies towards establishing health care for all at the time. She thought that participating in political activities was important, but that she could not at the moment because she was busy with her courses.

Juan, Teaneck, and Mambi agree that being involved politically is important especially at HSI. Juan thinks there should be more political activities on campus. Teaneck believes that it is not about venues so much as it is about students’ overall lack of interests in politics. Mambi believes that students at a “university should be learning to be an intellectual, people skills, everything and learn about politics.”

Natasha thinks being politically active is important even though she herself does not participate:

I think it’s important because, we’ve become a little apathetic towards things, like, becoming active and we need people that are more informed. I’m informed myself; I’m just a little hesitant to be a part of it. But, I think it would be nice to keep people away from being in their own bubble the whole time, and realizing what’s actually out there as an option, and what is really true and what is false.

Most students above state that political discussions and activities were important for them, but that it was not necessary to belong to a specific political organization or group to do this. Additionally, other students said it was important, but that they were too busy to participate or discuss politics. Nevertheless, most students agree that political discussions and activities were important because it makes one more knowledgeable as well as helps out communities. These students’ reasons for participating and not participating

because it undermines the traditional notion that college students since the 1960s have become apathetic when it comes to politics. The students above are conscientious of the importance of political discussions and activities even though they might not participate in traditional venues such as specific political party organizations.

Implications and Programming Ideas to Increasing Political Engagement Among Latinas/os

The 2008 presidential elections heightened the importance of specific issues for most Latinas/os interviewed for this study. Because of this, they researched information from a variety of resources including news media outlets, on campus debates and political organizations, as well as gathered information from families, friends, and from limited political discussion in the classroom. Thus, most Latinas/os saw the presidential elections as important because of their specific concerns including: immigration, health care, and education. Because of this, all the Latinas/os that were legal citizens voted in the 2008 presidential elections. But the most perplexing finding is the view from most Latinas/os in this study that political knowledge and engagement were important, but at the same time, aside from voting, most Latinas/os disliked political campaigning, choosing a specific political organization to help out, or were just too busy with school and their careers to be involved.

Since these Latinas/os attend an urban, commuter college campus, it is not surprising that some would be too busy to politically participate on campus. However, it is surprising that these students are aware of the importance of political participation, but only according to their constructions of what that should be. Since Hispanic-serving institutions and most other colleges around the country are mainly commuter campuses, it is essential that they build PEP in their curricula particularly for Latinas/os who tend to be less politically knowledgeable and active than other ethnic groups. Klofstad (2010) for example found that civic talk among peer-networks within the classroom had long-term effects that resulted in political engagement three years after. Thus, colleges could implement civic talk across the curriculum for entering cohorts of Latinas/os that would focus especially on issues that they are concerned about such as: immigration, health care, and education. For example, in an English Literature class examining Latina/o authors, civic talk could include discussing the backgrounds of the authors and relate these directly to political issues such as their immigration journeys. In a Mathematics/Statistics course, instructors can

incorporate various statistics concerning number of people who vote, percentage of people who vote on specific issues, specific governmental budget allocations, etc., that would inform Latinas/os about American politics in general. In an American History course Latina/o students could trace the parallels between immigration issues in the 19th Century with immigration issues in the 21st Century.

Similarly, Schamber and Mahoney (2008) found that their students in a first-year general education course focused on community-based learning made significant gains in political knowledge and engagement. Latinas/os in college tend to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and thus, community based learning might make them aware of how they can positively impact their own neighborhoods by incorporating their academic knowledge into political engagement. For example, incoming minority scholarship students at The Pennsylvania State University take a general orientation course that has them incorporate what they learn in their different courses in the surrounding community. Students must present in this course what specific knowledge they are applying in the community and how this knowledge could be expanded in the future. Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) found that PEP resulted in political learning, did not change students' political ideology or party affiliation, and that significant learning gains were made by students not interested in political issues. Therefore, PEP can be implemented across the curriculum without faculty or administrators fearing political indoctrination in the classroom. Whatever methods colleges implement, what is important is that they assess the needs of their distinct Latina/o populations and ensure that a new population of Latina/o college graduates are politically knowledgeable and have sufficient political engagement experience so that they may pass this down to their own children as well as Latina/o communities.

Implications for Future Assessment and Research

Latinas/os are not a homogenous population. There are significant intergroup differences within each Latina/o ethnic group (Torres, 2004). The Spanish language, community and family ties are the general commonalities that Latinas/os share (Torres, 2004). Nevertheless, "these commonalities often overshadow distinct immigration patterns, varying ethnic experiences in the United States, and research findings that are different for particular ethnic groups (Torres, 2004, p.5-6). For example, Chicanas/os at the University of California Los Angeles, Puerto Ricans at the The City University of New York,

and Cuban Americans at FIU are all distinct Latina/o college student ethnic groups with different immigration, language, socioeconomic backgrounds, and rates of higher education attendance. Therefore, it is important for higher education practitioners and researchers to acknowledge these differences based on location and context when it comes to assessing for or researching political knowledge among these groups. Additionally, political knowledge interests may also be different for these groups because of their historical varied histories regarding immigration and citizenship in the U.S. For example, Cuban Americans who make it to U.S. land are allowed to stay while Puerto Ricans are automatic U.S. citizens. Chicanas/os have a long history with the U.S. regarding territories, immigration, and lack of quality education. Thus, for all these groups, political knowledge and concerns are all going to be different and should be taken into account when considering political knowledge programming.

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