

**LATINOS AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE AGE OF  
IMMIGRATION SURVEILLANCE:  
*LA PARTICIPACIÓN POLÍTICA***

by

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## Abstract

How do Latinos mobilize themselves to participate in U.S. presidential elections, even when many are not eligible to vote? How do these processes matter for their understandings of themselves as political beings? My dissertation project examines these questions by providing an in-depth understanding of the contextual realities that Latinos face and the mechanisms by which participation in presidential elections happens in the age of immigration surveillance and enforcement. In this project, I examine the way Latino immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), Spanish-language radio (SLR), and high-profile electoral operatives and activists operate as key mechanisms through which Latinos mobilize themselves to participate electorally. Through case studies, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, content, and discourse analysis, I investigate the dynamics of mobilization within the Latino community. My grounded approach allows me to understand the contextual realities of my interlocutors, to observe first-hand how co-ethnic intermediaries mobilize them, and to unpack and explain how they participate in politics despite many not being eligible to vote. My research reveals that despite the numerous reasons that the undocumented and those with tenuous legal status have to refrain from participating in politics, some are still inclined to engage in electoral work. My community-centered focus has enabled me to document and analyze the mobilization of even the undocumented and how the activities of these mediating entities and community members' engagement with them in turn give meaning to what it means to be Latino.

*Para mis padres, Lupita y Rafael.  
Sin sus sacrificios y amor, este logro no hubiera sido posible.*

We just have to convince other people that they have power. This is what they can do by participating to make change, not only in their community, but many times changing in their own lives. Once they participate, they get their sense of power. And then when a group of people get together, it's collective power.

Dolores Huerta

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Antonio Machado once wrote, “*caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar,*” which reflects the idea that one forges their path as they walk; that one forges their destiny through their actions and choices. Well, this dissertation is not only a byproduct of the choices that I made but also the choices that I stumbled upon in school, the choices that were made by others for me and people who looked like me, and the choices that my parents and ancestors made in different countries and different generations. Regardless of how this path has been forged, these choices have profoundly shaped my worldview, my decision to pursue graduate school, and ultimately, this writing.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 THE CAUCUS

On February 1, 2020, I attended an annual assembly at South Division High School in Milwaukee with an immigrant advocacy organization in Wisconsin. The primary objective of the organization was to address the state of affairs of Latinos and immigrants within the state and at the national level. During this gathering, the executive director urged the organization's members to take action, emphasizing the significance of mobilizing support for political allies who had shown their commitment to immigrant-related issues. Following this, Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes delivered an impassioned message to the organization's members, encouraging them to hold onto hope and take proactive steps leading up to the 2020 general election.

Shortly after the meeting adjourned, I drove nearly four hours to Muscatine, Iowa to witness the first-ever Spanish-language caucuses in the state. For a long time in American politics, the Iowa caucuses have served as an important electoral test for presidential candidates vying for the Oval Office (Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010; Squire 2019). This was no different for Democratic candidates in 2020. However, the Hawkeye state was poised to host its inaugural Spanish-language caucuses on February 3<sup>rd</sup> (Medina 2020). This marked the first

instance of bilingual caucuses in a state where nearly 194,000 Latinos reside and approximately 50,000 were registered to vote (Medina 2020).<sup>1</sup>

The next morning, I woke up early and had breakfast in my room as I watched the sunrise over the Mississippi River. By midday, I made my way over to what seemed to be the hub of Latino mobilization in Muscatine. I was greeted with the smell of “*caldo*”, and a home adorned with a mix of Western and religious decorations, with signs bearing “Texas.”<sup>2</sup> Shortly after my arrival, a warm-hearted Latina woman in her forties greeted me and invited me to eat.

I quickly learned that she was the spouse of the Iowa director of the League of United Latin American Citizens, commonly referred to as LULAC.<sup>3</sup> Both she and her husband were respected Latino figures in the local community and their residence operated as a central point for mobilization efforts within the Latino community in support of the Bernie Sanders campaign. In Muscatine, as in Milwaukee, I was observing the on-the-ground activities of Latinos mobilizing Latinos in the 2020 presidential election. I was in the midst of using fieldwork and a variety of strategies to understand how Latinos work from within their communities to exert political power in the United States. I wanted to know not just what the parties do or what presidential campaigns do, but how a population of marginalized and often invisible people are trying to make their voices heard in contemporary U.S. politics.

In my role as an observer, I witnessed organizers and volunteers diligently prepare canvassing materials, practice canvassing scripts, and others as they trained volunteers on how to

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction of the Spanish-language caucuses was part of a broader effort by the Democratic party in attempts to reduce barriers in participation (Summers 2020). Yet, despite these efforts, barriers to participation persisted, and party officials had trouble finding enough Spanish speakers to run the Spanish-language caucuses (Medina 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Caldo* is generally known as soup in Spanish and is frequently made in the winter months.

<sup>3</sup> LULAC, a Mexican-American civil rights organization, known for its efforts to “integrate its people into the American social and economic mainstream” (Márquez 2014b).

use the “mini-VAN” to canvass voters.<sup>4</sup> Gone were the days when canvassing involved lugging around endless sheets of paper attached to a clipboard. While some volunteers set out to cover their assigned “turf”, others phone banked.<sup>5</sup> Volunteers who were not fully proficient in the Spanish language were usually paired with a Spanish speaker to canvass.

In this capacity, I accompanied a pair of canvassers to understand the context of Latino voters in the city of Muscatine and to observe the efforts to engage Latinos on behalf of various candidates leading up to the caucus. I noticed that other candidates also had their campaign literature on the doors of many of these voters. However, on the day before the caucus, there was a noticeable scarcity of volunteers representing those campaigns actively canvassing the districts that my group was covering. I spotted an individual canvassing on behalf of Pete Buttigieg, who was then the Mayor of South Bend, Indiana.

As volunteers continued their coverage, I recognized the prominence of Latinos in a city with less than 30,000 people. Notably, there were several Latino-owned businesses, including Mexican restaurants, an auto-repair shop with a Spanish-language name, and a *quinceañera* store.<sup>6</sup> These establishments were conveniently situated near what appeared to be city hall and were within a short five-minute drive from the Mississippi River.

On February 3rd, 2020, the long-awaited caucus day arrived. In the morning, community members and organizers gathered at the LULAC director’s residence to prepare. Tasks included canvassing, setting up the caucus site, and arranging transportation. In the afternoon, volunteers

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<sup>4</sup> The VAN is a voter database used primarily by the Democratic Party. In this instance, the “mini-VAN” was what the organizers referred to as having access to a consolidated walk list in the palm of your hand through a cellphone.

<sup>5</sup> Organizers and volunteers often referred to the districts that they would cover in their efforts to talk to voters as “turf.”

<sup>6</sup> A *quinceañera* store usually sells dresses for girls who are looking to celebrate their fifteenth birthday. This tradition has roots in Mexico but is widely celebrated in Latin America and among people of Latin American descent.

made a final push to connect with voters. I joined the canvassers in a neighborhood of mobile homes, where conditions were often distressing with abandoned cars and houses—locating the addresses of Latino voters was a challenge.

As the 7:00 PM cut-off approached, voters arrived, some as early as 6:30 PM. Many were new to the process and were casting their votes for the first time, while others had participated in previous elections, but none had ever caucused in Spanish. They referred to it as “*el caucus*.” Families came together and were directed to the caucus room by a Latino man dressed in a “*guayabera*” who served as the precinct chair.<sup>7</sup> The chair then asked non-voting individuals to step out, and I spoke with some of them. They included people from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, some of whom drove over 40 minutes because this was the closest Spanish-language caucus. During our conversations, some of them told me that they did not know the purpose of the caucus. A man from El Salvador, in the company of his young son, explained to me that he worked in a poultry plant and noted many co-workers had moved into the city post-Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico—indicating potential new voters on the U.S. mainland.<sup>8</sup>

Inside, campaigns made their pitches, and the precinct chair explained the “alignment” process, where voters physically moved into their chosen candidate’s section. For a campaign to remain viable in this caucus, it needed at least 13 supporters. After initial alignment, voters could “realign” based on discussions with campaign representatives. Eventually, only the Sanders campaign met the viability threshold with 74 out of 85 showing support.<sup>9</sup> The caucus process took about 90 minutes, after which results were uploaded, and the event adjourned.

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<sup>7</sup> *Guayaberas* are traditional formal shirts with four pockets, widely worn throughout Latin America, especially on special occasions.

<sup>8</sup> Puerto Ricans on the island are unable to vote for a president in the general elections.

<sup>9</sup> This was my approximate counting of individuals present at the caucus, which I counted twice.

Representatives from other campaigns left, except for the Buttigieg representative who commended Sanders' Latino outreach efforts.

On my way back to Wisconsin, I listened to the radio for results. Two days later, reports indicated Buttigieg led in delegates despite Sanders winning the popular vote (Coltrain 2020). Pundits credited Sanders' turnout to satellite and Spanish-language caucuses aimed at reducing participation barriers and targeting Latino voters (Villa 2020). However, my observations in Iowa suggested that simply implementing changes to reduce barriers to participation was not sufficient on their own to mobilize Latinos for a specific campaign. Respected members of the Latino community, who had strong connections within the broader community, such as the then Iowa state director of LULAC working alongside the Sanders campaign, had been actively engaging voters and their families on the ground for nearly a year leading up to the caucus. The Latinos on the ground were well-versed in the contextual realities of their community, including the labor conditions of Latino poultry plant workers, the migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the mainland after Hurricane Maria, and the awareness that many in their community couldn't vote due to their legal status, but had eligible voters in their families.

This was not unique to Iowa; it extended to Wisconsin and various states across the nation. Latinos and various community-based organizations were making concerted efforts to engage a diverse spectrum of Latinos in the lead-up to the election. In many of these locations, even a small percentage of Latino participation could have a significant impact on the outcome of an election. The political parties recognized this and dedicated significant resources in capturing the Latino vote. But my observations in Iowa revealed that the real action in contemporary U.S. politics with respect to Latinos comes from Latinos themselves. In particular, my fieldwork illuminated the crucial role played by Latino intermediaries with deep roots in their



community, whether through organizations or as influential leaders. These intermediaries were instrumental in mobilizing fellow co-ethnics. Given this insight and following my initial observations in Iowa, I wanted to know more about the mechanisms through which co-ethnic intermediaries within the Latino community contributed to the mobilization of Latinos. I wanted to understand what that meant for Latinos leading up to the presidential election.

That is what this dissertation seeks to do. This dissertation aims to expand our understanding of how this happens among Latinos. In other words, I explore how Latinos are animated to participate in the political process, and more specifically, in elections. To improve and refine our current understanding of Latino political behavior, I look beyond partisanship and interrogate the processes and mechanisms that further facilitate this mobilization among voting-eligible and non-voting-eligible Latinos. Specifically, I examine the role of intermediaries that serve primarily Latino co-ethnics such as immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), Spanish-language radio (SLRs), and high-profile Latino electoral operatives and activists.<sup>10</sup>

In three separate, yet related, examinations, I study aspects of how this occurs as mediated by co-ethnic intermediaries in different places. In the first study, I examine how immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) foster participation even among those ineligible to vote and how they construct identity in the course of doing so. In the second study, I examine how Spanish-language radio encourages participation and how this varies regionally. In the final examination, I explore the role of high-profile undocumented and non-voting eligible Latinos serving as electoral operatives within political parties, the on-the-ground operations to mobilize Latinos from both high-profile electoral operatives and the rank-and-file members of the IAO,

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<sup>10</sup> While there are many organizations that aim to mobilize Latinos, I chose immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) to study how even that are ineligible to vote participate in this process.

and the gaps in the infrastructure of Latino political participation in the U.S. during presidential elections. Overall, these examinations reveal understudied aspects of Latino political behavior—that is, the intragroup variation of participation among Latinos. My goal in examining these entities is to comprehend how they mobilize Latinos individually and collectively.

## 1.2 Precarious Nature of Connection to Politics in the U.S.

To understand Latinos, and by extension, their mobilization into U.S. politics, we have to understand the precarious nature of their connection to politics in the U.S. and abroad. In the U.S., the history of Latinos has been shaped by exclusion in diverse ways. Historically, Latinos have been relegated as second-class citizens and their experiences in the U.S. have been racialized as “other” (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Márquez 2003). For example, in 1954, Operation Wetback mass deported Latino U.S. citizens despite having the legal right to be in their country (J. R. García 1980; K. L. Hernández 2006). Not only were Latinos subject to mass deportation like Operation Wetback, but they were often prevented and deterred from voting via barriers such as poll taxes in places like Texas (Márquez 2014a; Nimmo and McCleskey 1969).<sup>11</sup> For other Latinos in U.S. territories like Puerto Rico, casting a vote in presidential elections was and continues to be denied (Fuentes-Rohwer 2008). To relegate U.S. citizen Latinos as “other” in their home country not only reproduces their conditional citizenship in the U.S. (Masuoka and Junn 2013) but erases the fact that many Latinos have been in the U.S. for generations, especially in places like the Southwest and Puerto Rico.

For Latinos who were born outside of the U.S. and have made the U.S. their home, experiences with politics vary widely. For some, their social and political experiences influence

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<sup>11</sup> This was also true for many other ethnoracial individuals in the United States.

their engagement in politics (Li and Jones 2020; Portes, Escobar, and Renelinda 2009; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Conversely, for others, their integration and incorporation in U.S. politics may be limited or virtually non-existent on behalf of political parties, which can result in missed opportunities for engaging a new segment of the electorate.<sup>12</sup> Others may have been brought here as children or youth, have been socialized in the U.S., and may possess a temporary status that grants a reprieve from deportation and a work permit, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).<sup>13</sup> Finally, for those with various non-citizen statuses, venturing into the realm of politics can pose distinct risks, including the potential threat of deportation (A. S. García 2021; Rosales, Enriquez, and Nájera 2021).

In the contemporary era, Latinos continue to be subjects of racialization. Voting-eligible Latinos have been targets of voter suppression efforts (Ortegon 2022) and since the turn of the century, the expansion of immigration enforcement and surveillance has uniquely affected Latinos (Getrich 2013; D. M. Hernández 2008; Nichols, LeBrón, and Pedraza 2018). One of the implications that come with Latinos making up a large share of the unauthorized population is the ways in which the group, as a collective, is racialized into unauthorized and criminal categories (Provine and Doty 2011).<sup>14</sup> In the age of immigration surveillance and detention, this becomes important to consider as there have been efforts to legalize apprehending individuals on the suspicion of being undocumented. To illustrate, the former Governor of Arizona, Raúl Castro was questioned by police about his legal status and asked for his “identity papers” as he traveled

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<sup>12</sup> To my knowledge, the political parties have not actively done this in the past, but rather support local groups on the ground. The Republican Party has launched a program aimed at helping immigrants naturalize within their minority community centers. See (<https://www.axios.com/2022/07/14/republican-party-immigrant-naturalization-test-program>). Also see, (<https://www.axios.com/2022/07/20/immigration-naturalized-citizens-voters-elections>).

<sup>13</sup> Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a program that upon eligibility provides temporary protection from deportation and a work permit in the United States.

<sup>14</sup> See (profiles of the unauthorized population in the U.S.: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>).

Arizona despite being the top executive of the state and a U.S. citizen.<sup>15</sup> This is merely one example that helps illustrate the experiences of Latinos, including U.S. citizens.

Latinos' experiences with racialization, surveillance, and criminalization are not new. Yet, the manifestations of how this happens for Latinos have changed over time. Today, asking Latinos for their "identity papers" often happens at the municipal level and sometimes at the state level, depending on immigration enforcement policies enacted in the region, such as 287(g) or SB4 in Texas.<sup>16</sup> These policies deputize local police to act on behalf of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) and grant them the right to inquire about legal status based on the suspicion that someone may be undocumented, regardless of whether they are the Governor of Arizona or not.

While scholars know much about the effects of these types of policies on the lives of Latinos (Arriaga 2017, 2023; A. S. Garcia 2019; Getrich 2013; D. M. Hernández 2008; Nichols, LeBrón, and Pedraza 2018), we understand very little about how surveillance shapes or influences the strategies that Latinos take when attempting to mobilize co-ethnics in elections. If the Governor of Arizona is not absolved from racialization, perhaps Latinos trying to get out the vote in their communities, are not either.

### **1.3 Elections Research and Latino Mobilization**

In electoral research, it is held that elections matter for a host of reasons (e.g., democracy, choice of leaders, approval of policies, etc.). Among these, scholars contend that campaigns serve as a conduit for conveying information regarding candidates' stances on issues and the

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<sup>15</sup> See (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/us/arizona-immigration-new-nativists.html>).

<sup>16</sup> For a breakdown of SB4 in Texas, see (<https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SB-4-five-questions.pdf>).

state of the economy (Henderson 2014; Holbrook 2002). Not only do campaigns impart this type of information, but they also convey important details about candidates, such as their character, personality, and qualifications for office (Bartels 2002; Bittner and Peterson 2018; Popkin 2012). This collective effort is ultimately aimed at persuading citizens to exercise their right to vote.

One of the limitations of elections research is that much of it focuses on what messages, conditions, and how candidates mobilize individuals (Bimber and Davis 2003; Caldeira, Clausen, and Patterson 1990; Henderson 2014; Holbrook 2002; Jerit 2004; Key Jr. 1964; Morris 2018; Popkin 2012; Rossini et al. 2018). Yet, this body of literature often overlooks the environments in which different groups reside, particularly ethnoracial minorities, and what that means for their potential mobilization. In this project, I take into account the contexts under which Latinos live and look inside the community to understand their connection to presidential politics.

One benefit of looking at this mobilization process from inside the Latino community is that we obtain a closer look at how people perceive their roles as political actors in this process. Another benefit is that we can gain knowledge on how people see themselves in the realm of politics, which is essential for understanding why people behave the ways they do (Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Miller et al. 1981; Stokes 2003; Verba and Nie 1972). It is important to note that Latinos in the U.S. have historical precedents for this type of mobilization, as demonstrated by the “Viva Kennedy” clubs led primarily by Mexican-Americans. These clubs were primarily organized by grassroots entities and played a pivotal role in securing Texas for John F. Kennedy during his presidential campaign (DeCoursey 2019; I. M. García 2000; Márquez 2014a; Pantoja 2016). Today, we continue to witness how mobilizing a few thousand Latinos in closely contested states can contribute to a candidate’s path to victory.

Generally, campaigns categorize the population into staunch supporters, strong

opponents, and potentially persuadable and mobilizable people. Campaigns then serve to activate different segments of these groups of people (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Finkel 1993; Kramer 1970). This is no different when it comes to Latinos as the primary purpose of campaigns is to influence the behavior of citizens and turn them out to the polls. To achieve this goal, campaigns employ a range of tactics. Yet, campaigns often have not approached Latinos as a group with diverse preferences despite their heterogeneity (de la Garza and DeSipio 2005; de la Garza, DeSipio, and Leal 2010a; Subervi-Velez 2009) and the current infrastructure to mobilize Latinos has yet to produce the returns that it has the potential to as a participation gap persists (Bergad and Jr 2020).

Given the existing political mobilization framework and the ongoing disparities in Latino participation, scholars ought to explore alternative explanations for how Latinos are mobilized and by whom. If important and effective attempts to gain political power are not being generated from outside of the Latino community, perhaps looking from within the Latino community will reveal how and in which ways Latinos are mobilized to participate.

## **1.4 Contextual Realities**

Many ethnoracial groups in the U.S. have been subject to surveillance in their communities, and as scholars have found (A. S. Garcia 2019; Lerman and Weaver 2014), this understanding of surveillance has the ability to shape the ways in which these communities navigate their daily lives and participate in politics. For Latinos, we know less about place-based indicators such as immigration surveillance and how it may influence political participation. For example, in a study of Latinos in California, Garcia (2019) found that unauthorized Latinos do adapt their behavior to avoid interactions with local enforcement as they understand that an interaction with local enforcement can lead to an apprehension by ICE. These findings, along

with anecdotal experiences, point to a gap in the literature that has yet to explain how awareness or actual immigration surveillance in Latino communities affects Latino electoral participation.

The experiences of Latinos across diverse communities are important to understand because the scholarship has found that members who experience increased surveillance in their communities hold different attitudes and participate differently in politics (Burch 2016; Cohen and Dawson 1993; Lerman and Weaver 2014). Since experiences with surveillance have the ability to influence socialization and shape the worldview of members of the group, it becomes important to understand these experiences under different contexts and for diverse ethnoracial groups at different times in American politics.

Apart from regional considerations regarding immigration surveillance and enforcement, Latinos of diverse backgrounds are clustered in different parts of the country (Farley and Haaga 2005; Gómez 2000). Thus, it makes sense to resort to local Latino intermediaries to mobilize the broader group. Not only do these co-ethnic intermediaries possess the cultural, political, and social capital needed to understand pressing issues facing Latinos in those regions, but they often help bring resources to the group (Vega, Brody, and Cummins 2016) which the parties often do not do.<sup>17</sup> By tapping into Latinos that they serve, including those ineligible to vote, they can help move potential voters to the polls at a lower cost to the parties.

With this in mind, I suggest that Latino intermediaries—in this case, immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), Spanish-language radio (SLR), and high-profile electoral operatives and activists—are able to influence participation through a bottom-up approach where intermediaries not only understand the limitations of participation held by members that possess diverse legal

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<sup>17</sup> In this dissertation, I follow Putnam's definition that social capital is the "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995, 66). Here, individuals and organizations use these features and leverage them as tools to mobilize their communities including vulnerable members.

statuses, but they also understand the unique contextual factors faced by the most vulnerable of members in the group—regionally and nationally. The intermediaries thus serve as both socializing and mobilizing agents that provide information that members may not possess (e.g., an understanding of the political process) in a language they understand and in culturally relevant ways and resources. Further, I assume that co-ethnic intermediaries have in-depth knowledge of external “forces” (Verba and Nie 1972) such as place-based surveillance that may shape how they inform and mobilize Latinos to participate in elections.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.5 Theoretical Grounding

If the context of immigration surveillance is likely to dampen Latino participation and Latinos are seldomly descriptively represented at the federal level, especially among presidential candidates, then who else animates Latinos to participate? For some, participating is potentially dangerous, for others, there is little motivation to become involved when you do not see yourself represented in government or when there are barriers in place preventing you from participating. Given the absence of Latino representation among viable presidential candidates, there is little reason to believe that Latinos are motivated to participate in presidential elections because they share a descriptive characteristic (Pitkin 1967) with the nominees—such as being Latino, for example. These characteristics have been found to be influential in mobilizing the Latino community, particularly in state and local-level elections (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Barreto 2010). At the state and local levels, Latino candidates and officeholders have cued shared

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<sup>18</sup> This knowledge need not be policy specific. Here, I conceptualize this type of knowledge as coming from a personal or collective standpoint.



descriptive traits in a variety of ways. Usually, candidates have done this by cueing surnames and their language skills (Barreto 2010) to signal to Latinos that they are one of them. Certainly, candidates may use these cues to engage Latinos at the state and local level—where more Latinos tend to run for office—but it is unlikely that Latinos will pick up co-ethnic cues from presidential candidates when they do not share these traits with them.

Following these observations, I build off of Barreto's (2010) and Ramírez's (2013) frameworks of shared ethnicity and mobilizing opportunities to expand and explain Latino mobilization and participation during presidential elections in the age of immigration surveillance. On the one hand, Barreto's theory argues that candidate traits matter among aspirants for elected office because of the "(1) diminishing role of political parties, (2) the rise of candidate-centered elections, (3) candidate appeals for groups of voters, (4) media focus of ethnicity of candidates, and the (5) continuing lack of minority representation" (Barreto 2010, 31). On the other hand, Ramirez (2013) suggests that Latinos can be mobilized based on state-specific contexts and proactively or reactively in response to real or perceived threats to the group (Ramírez 2013, 8–9). I expand on these frameworks and suggest that absent a presidential candidate sharing these traits Latinos will look for ethnic cues across intermediaries in presidential elections. Further, I suggest that Latinos can be mobilized by intermediaries that share these traits in proactive or reactive ways given the political climate and perceived or real threat to members of the group.

Specifically, I suggest that Latinos will look for the following cues across intermediaries in presidential elections: (1) shared Latino traits, (2) co-ethnic intermediary relationships with presidential candidates (e.g., high-profile activists, immigrant advocacy organizations, and ethnic media), (3) understanding of perceived or real threats to the Latino community (e.g., immigration

surveillance and detention), and (4) the possession of a diversity of support among Latinos.

These intermediary cues can in turn help promote political participation among Latinos which I conceptualize as based on the range of possibilities available to individuals conditional on their legal status.

In this dissertation, I define political participation as occurring on a continuum that includes both formal and informal participation in elections. As conventionally understood, formal participation entails casting votes and donating to campaigns. Informal participation includes a broad set of activities that do not entail casting votes or donating to campaigns. These include activities such as: phone-banking, wearing campaign stickers, registering others to vote, volunteering for candidates, liking or following a political campaign, door-to-door canvassing, among others (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

When considering the participation of Latinos, I conceptualize participation as being constrained by the legal status of the individual.<sup>19</sup> For example, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) establishes that a legal permanent resident (LPR) cannot vote but can donate to federal campaigns. In addition to donating to campaigns, an LPR can engage in other electoral activities that do not entail casting a vote on election day. In turn, those who are unauthorized in the country, are not legally allowed to donate to a federal campaign, but they can engage in most other electoral activities by giving their time to help mobilize co-ethnics. In the table below, I illustrate the range of activities that people can engage in based on their legal status.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This may be applicable to other immigrant-based ethnoracial groups where members may be in similar positions as Latinos.

<sup>20</sup> This is not an exhaustive list but serves as an illustration.

**Table 1.1: Political Participation in Presidential Elections Conditional on Legal Status**

	Undocumented/ Unauthorized	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)/Temporary Protected Status Holders	Legal Permanent Resident (LPR)	U.S. Citizens
Volunteer to perform electoral activities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Legally donate to federal campaigns	No	No	Yes	Yes
Legally work on campaigns	No	Yes, recipients are granted work permits under these statuses	Yes, legally allowed to work in the U.S.	Yes
Cast a vote	No	No	No	Yes

In this vein, I argue that co-ethnic intermediaries are perhaps more likely to understand the different ways in which members of the group can participate. Additionally, I argue that it may be more likely that co-ethnic intermediaries are aware of place-based contextual factors, such as immigration surveillance, that can affect mobilization in their communities. Understanding how this functions for Latinos can inform how co-ethnic intermediaries cue, appeal to, and motivate Latinos to participate in presidential elections.

## 1.6 Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of three separate, yet related, chapters that aim to understand *how* Latinos mobilize themselves in presidential elections as mediated by co-ethnic

intermediaries. Each empirical chapter examines this question from a different angle and with different methodologies that together provides a holistic and nuanced understanding of how mobilization is being done.

In Chapter 2, I examine how immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) mobilize Latinos to participate and how they construct identity in the course of doing so. Using case studies, semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and participant observation with IAOs, I aim to understand what is important about the culture at these organizations that help foster participation, even among those ineligible to vote. My findings indicate that IAOs carefully consider the ways in which their Latino identity could subject them to immigration surveillance as they attempt to mobilize their community. Yet, despite this barrier, IAOs find distinct ways to create a culture of inclusion and engage their members by identifying activities that empower them, incorporate them into the political process, and keep even the most vulnerable of their members safe. Additionally, IAOs train and develop leaders, both volunteers and paid staff, whether undocumented or legally residing in the U.S., who remain active year-round. During election seasons, they draw from their membership base, leveraging their collective social capital (Putnam 1995) to involve others and build to scale by expanding their community relationships and their relationships with other key American institutions (e.g., the Democratic Party). Further, they serve as liaisons for other primary Latino institutions such as Spanish-language radio and other key community-based organizations (e.g., Latino-serving organizations and coalitional partners) whom they often collaborate with.

In Chapter 3, I examine how Spanish-language radio (SLR) promotes political participation in presidential elections. Considering the role of SLR in mobilizing millions of Latinos onto the streets in the wake of anti-immigrant legislation in 2006, I examine if the radio

encourages Latinos to participate in elections. To examine this, I use discourse analysis from seven radio stations across three states: Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Texas, semi-structured interviews with radio DJs from regional stations, and participant observations at regional radio stations. Thus far, my findings suggest that SLR stations can operate similarly to immigrant advocacy organizations and less like commercial media (e.g., in some regions of the country) by offering airtime to respected local leaders who are active in Latino communities to encourage Latino engagement in elections. My findings also suggest that DJs are actively discussing public affairs through a Latino lens while expressing clear partisan preferences on air. In some regions of the country, with greater diversity within the Latino population, there is on-air pushback from listeners regarding messaging broadcast by DJs indicating diversity in Latino preferences among listeners. This is important to understand because although radio listenership may be declining among other ethnoracial groups in the U.S., SLR continues to serve as an important outlet among Latinos in the U.S.

Chapter 4 explores the role of undocumented and non-voting eligible Latinos in mobilizing voting-eligible co-ethnics. I pay special attention to the ways in which non-citizens participate in mobilizing co-ethnics and the gaps in the infrastructure of Latino mobilization in presidential elections. I conduct elite interviews with high-profile Latinos who served as national outreach directors and surrogates of presidential candidates, interview rank-and-file IAO members who engaged in relational organizing and conduct participant observation with IAOs. This in-depth analysis allows us to observe the range of activities that Latinos, including those with tenuous legal statuses, engage in despite being unable to cast a vote.

Specifically, I find that high-profile activists who served as directors and surrogates may not have been able to vote but participate in other meaningful ways such as helping shape the

candidates' platforms on policy areas such as immigration. Among the rank-and-file at IAOs, I find that ineligible voters were able to tap into their networks to find newly eligible voters and voters that may not be otherwise found via traditional voter databases. Additionally, I find that IAOs engaged ineligible voters with presidential candidates and running mates by taking them to the candidates directly to ask policy-related questions.

I also find that both those working at the top (e.g., within campaigns as directors) and those at the grassroots level (e.g., the rank-and-file) understood that to build a scalable Latino base, they needed to engage the full spectrum of Latinos, which they did to the best of their availability. This is important because while this group of people can typically engage in many of the same activities as other U.S. citizens and those legally residing in the U.S., they may be potentially overlooked as volunteers and paid electoral staff by operatives who do not understand participation conditional on legal status. However, despite operatives and grassroots organizers efforts to grow a Latino political base, they faced disadvantages within the existing mobilization infrastructure, including issues such as access to accurate voter data on Latinos, limited access to physical spaces for community engagement in electoral activities, and a smaller pool of Latinos who engage in this type of activity as their primary form of seasonal employment.

## Chapter 2

# THE CONSTRUCTION OF LATINO IDENTITY IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

*“Giselle Vera, 18, recruited more than a dozen of her friends at her Catholic school who cast their first-ever ballots. They did this in honor of her uncle who had been arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement for a minor driving infraction about six weeks before Election Day. He was one of dozens of people picked up in the largest raid in the state in decades. Because it was so close to a major election, however, many Latinos believe the raid was meant to intimidate mixed-status immigrant families.”*

- Christine Neumann-Ortiz 2020<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, the Latino community confronted unique challenges. Politicians and nativist groups took actions aimed at punishing Latinos and obstructing their participation. Specifically, they employed efforts to suppress Latino voters. For example, in Wisconsin, the state legislature promoted initiatives that hindered voting by mail, and in places like Texas, attempts to purge state voter rolls would have disproportionately impacted Latinos.<sup>22</sup> At the national level, Latinos and other marginalized communities encountered endeavors to suppress their vote that spanned the range from challenges to voter registration and on-the-day voting.

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<sup>21</sup> See (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/opinion/election-wisconsin-latinos.html>)

<sup>22</sup> See (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/13/democrats-fear-november-wisconsin-voting-spectacle-179585>); see also (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/racist-voter-suppression-texas-laws-keep-latinos-ballot-box-groups-n1241862>).

Apart from facing voting challenges, Latinos and immigrants navigated a hostile political landscape where the COVID-19 pandemic's impact fell heavily on the members of these communities. Not only did Latinos bear the brunt of COVID-19, but they were also subjected to racialization that fueled xenophobia (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020). This was exacerbated by specific policies enacted, such as the rescinding of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) within the first year of the Donald Trump administration, the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy leading to family separations at the border, and the nationwide expansion of 287(g) agreements.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the pandemic's repercussions were felt in Wisconsin, where state legislators attributed the COVID-19 outbreak to Latinos in different regions of the state.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, across the nation, large sectors of the Latino and migrant community were excluded from government relief funds despite being frontline and essential workers.<sup>25</sup> In addition mixed-status families struggled to secure federal relief funds for their U.S. citizen children due to the absence of social security numbers.<sup>26</sup> These challenges are among the issues confronted by the Latino community, and while they are seldom discussed by presidential candidates, they are well

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<sup>23</sup> DACA, an executive order passed under former President Obama, gives eligible undocumented individuals a reprieve from deportation and a renewable work permit every two years. Under the zero-tolerance policy, the children of adults who entered the country unlawfully—or seeking asylum—were taken into federal custody. The 287(g) policy deputizes local and state police enforcement to act on behalf of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). See (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/rapidly-expanding-287g-program-suffers-lack-transparency/>).

<sup>24</sup> See (<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2020/06/11/vos-says-immigrant-culture-blame-covid-19-outbreak-racine-county/5338362002/>).

<sup>25</sup> See (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/covid19-immigrants-shut-out-federal-relief>); see also (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/latinos-face-disproportionate-health-economic-impacts-covid-19/>).

<sup>26</sup> Mixed-status families are conceptualized as having at least one family member who is unauthorized—does not need to live in the same household. A 2017 report suggests that over 16.7 million people in the country have at least one unauthorized family member (Mathema 2017). See (<https://www.vox.com/2020/5/6/21248074/immigrant-citizen-spouse-children-coronavirus-stimulus-checks>); see also (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/mixed-status-families-ineligible-pandemic-stimulus-checks>).



recognized by individuals connected to the Latino community and intermediary institutions, such as immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs).<sup>27</sup>

At the same time that Latinos face many challenges to participating politically, they have the potential to wield significant political power. In 2021, the Latino population in the U.S. surpassed 62 million, and this population's composition has changed in various ways.<sup>28</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, approximately four out of five Latinos in the nation are U.S. citizens, while the share of Latino immigrants has been in decline.<sup>29</sup> This demographic shift indicates a majority of current and future voting-eligible Latinos. Beyond the realm of potential and future Latino voters, there are many Latinos that comprise the unauthorized population in the U.S. In 2019, reports indicated that the U.S. was home to an estimated 11 million unauthorized migrants, with a predominant majority originating from Latin America.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the potential political influence of Latinos is not a given. Scholars have debated the extent to which Latinos wield political power relative to their population share (Beltrán 2010; Barreto and Segura 2014). Others suggest that Latinos, in certain regions, show significant political influence, but this varies from state to state (Ramírez 2013). In some places, like Wisconsin, the presence and growth in the voting-eligible Latino population has the potential to swing an election compared to a state like California, where Latinos already compose a large majority of the state's population. Despite these contextual differences, Latinos, more broadly, remain an afterthought in presidential elections. Furthermore, when considering

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<sup>27</sup> Not to be confused with ethnic organizations (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008).

<sup>28</sup> See (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/23/key-facts-about-u-s-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/>).

<sup>29</sup> See (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/23/key-facts-about-u-s-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/>).

<sup>30</sup> These figures come from an analysis from the Migration Policy Institute (Profile of the Unauthorized Population - US 2019). They use U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015 – 2019 American Community Survey. Other sources that relied on U.S. Census Bureau and ACS data also came up with similar estimates.

the larger picture, Latinos consistently exhibit lower voting rates compared to similarly situated groups (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Fraga 2018; Ramirez 2007), with many unable to vote due to their legal status.

In the next section, I review the extant literature on Latinos and elections and Latino political behavior. I begin by describing how presidential candidates have attempted to garner support for their campaigns by using cultural appeals toward Latinos. I follow by reviewing how Latinos have traditionally participated, or lack thereof, in elections. Then, I discuss the case selection of Wisconsin as a primary case study and Texas as a comparison case study to answer the questions that I posit in this chapter. I review data and methods, present my findings, and discuss the implications of this work on our understanding of Latino political behavior and elections in the U.S. more broadly.

## **2.2 Presidential Candidate Outreach on Latinos and Latino Political Preferences**

Presidential campaign strategy to date shows the political parties are aware of the potential political force of the Latino electorate. A brief look back at some of these tactics demonstrates, however, just how rudimentary their mobilizing efforts have been. In 1976, during a campaign trail stop in San Antonio, then-President Gerald Ford resorted to eating a *tamal* as part of his endeavors to court Latinos. This cultural appeal took an unexpected turn when President Ford proceeded to consume the *tamal* incorrectly by leaving the corn husk on. This incident, later dubbed the “Great Tamale Incident of 1976” represents just one in the litany of cultural tactics employed by presidential candidates to persuade Latinos to participate in elections. Within the array of cultural appeals, we have observed non-Latino candidates parading with *mariachis*, speaking broken Spanish during presidential debates, host cultural events like *bailes* (dances),

among other strategies (Subervi-Velez 2009). These appeals typically overlook important heterogeneity and nuance among Latinos, likely blunting their effectiveness.

The extant literature on Latino politics reveals that prior to 1988, electoral outreach seldom included Latinos, and they were not fully integrated into general campaign outreach efforts until the year 2000 (de la Garza and DeSipio 2005). Before the year 2000, campaigns did not seriously or meaningfully incorporate Latinos into their strategies. Those earlier efforts became known as “*taco politics*” (de la Garza and DeSipio 2005; de la Garza, DeSipio, and Leal 2010) as Latinos were mostly considered an afterthought in presidential campaigns. Since then, six general elections have taken place, including the 2000 general election, and the extent to which campaigns meaningfully integrate Latinos into their strategies remains questionable.

Presidential campaigns to date have typically used a one-size-fits-all approach to mobilize Latinos. They tend to paint Latinos as a homogeneous group when it is evident that there is a multitude of differences to consider in participation and electoral preferences among the group based on factors like nativity, language, class, education, geography, legal status, etc. (Abrajano 2010; Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Barreto and Segura 2014; de la Garza and DeSipio 2005; Beltrán 2010; Hero 1992).

The preferences exhibited by Latinos at the polls highlight these differences. For example, in both the 2020 and 2016 presidential elections, Latinos favored Democratic candidates by a ratio of 2-1. Their backing for the Democratic Party has vacillated between 62 to 65 percent since the turn of the century.<sup>31</sup> These percentages suggest to the parties that Latinos can potentially be mobilized one way or another, more so than other ethnoracial groups (e.g., African Americans, who have overwhelmingly supported the Democratic Party (White and Laird

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<sup>31</sup> See (<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/389093/hispanic-americans-party-updated-analysis.aspx>).

2020)). Moreover, these percentages indicate the potential for the Republican Party to engage Latinos in their mobilization efforts, and for the Democratic Party to improve upon their current strategies for mobilizing this group in order to bolster their support.

Despite the diversity among Latinos, they are not generally approached by their nationality; they are approached by their membership in the pan-ethnic group and with the notion that the pan-ethnic group shares a sense of linked fate (Dawson 1994; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010). Further, campaigns have typically extended their approach to Latinos in a formal manner, akin to how they approach Anglos, but in Spanish and often with limited symbolic significance (DeSipio 1996). For the most part, presidential candidates have not, or have only minimally, employed Spanish in their outreach—sometimes not enough to effectively connect with members of the Latino community. Strategic use of language to reach out to Latinos has been seen in cases like that of George W. Bush, who campaigned using Spanish and challenged opponents to follow suit (de la Garza and DeSipio 2005), and the few candidates who have spoken Spanish and were of Latino origin faced criticism from other Latino candidates regarding their fluency in the language. For instance, during a 2016 Republican presidential debate, Marco Rubio questioned Ted Cruz’s ability to speak Spanish and comprehend his remarks on the rescission of DACA.

Latino presidential candidates, such as Bill Richardson, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Julián Castro, have intentionally used their ethnoracial background and linguistic skills to symbolically incorporate Latinos into their campaign strategies. They have also shared other salient experiences with the Latino community. However, the limited number of Latino candidates hinders the observation of how co-ethnic characteristics mobilize Latinos at the presidential level. In the absence of viable Latino candidates in presidential elections and due to

party strategists' lack of understanding of mobilizing Latinos, questions arise regarding the cues and methods through which Latinos are mobilized and by whom.

### **2.3 Theoretical Framework**

Certainly, there is evidence that Latino identity has become meaningful in the age of anti-Latino and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Latinos and migrants have actively mobilized en masse against perceived threats to their community through legislative measures such as HR4437 and SB1070 (Barreto et al. 2009; Zepeda-Millan 2017). Insights from the literature on identity further reveal that individuals tend to act in the interest of the group they feel they belong to (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In the context of Latinos during the Trump era, it is conceivable that the nativist rhetoric and legislative actions (e.g., including executive orders on the border, rescission of DACA, etc.) motivated members of this group to participate in ways that they had not prior as driven by the perceived threats to members of the group (Dawson 1994; Huddy 2003; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010).

Further, scholars examining Latino politics contend that ethnicity matters for reasons such as commonalities in shared language and cultural heritage (Abrajano 2010; Hero 1992). Additionally, scholars have found that Latinos possess diverse political preferences and should not be categorized as a monolith (de la Garza and Cortina 2007; Barreto and Nuño 2011; Ocampo et al. 2021; Leal et al. 2005). In other words, the Democratic Party does not always receive overwhelming support from Latinos despite the tendency to view Latinos as a monolithic group. It is also important to note that Latinos do not universally share a sense of “linked fate” (Dawson 1994; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010) like some other ethnoracial groups, such as African Americans, that tend to vote overwhelmingly for the Democratic Party. But when it comes to

Latino political participation and Latinos voting for co-ethnic candidates in elections, Barreto (2010) argues that ethnicity is “an important component” to consider—regardless of party.

Mainly, his theory of Latino political behavior suggests that:

“(1) Latinos share a Latin American heritage and culture, including the prevalence of Spanish; (2) they draw on a shared immigrant experience; (3) continued discrimination against Latinos highlights their commonality; (4) ethnic candidates typically focus on co-ethnics as their base, reinforcing the bond; and (5) the presence on the ballot of a candidate with a Spanish surname cues known traits.” (Barreto, 19)

Although the focus here is not whether or not Latinos vote for other co-ethnics, this theory can help us understand the importance of co-ethnics reaching out to members of their group to participate in elections. In this case, I argue that IAOs focus on co-ethnics as their base, cue to their membership that they stand for and with Latinos—usually well before general elections are underway—and share the remaining components of Barreto’s theory of Latino political behavior. The nature of the work that IAOs usually engage in is already rooted in the day-to-day struggles of members of this community—nationally, regionally, and locally. Thus, IAOs might have a different understanding of what works best in turning their community out more broadly.

Finally, the literature also indicates that people are most effectively mobilized when they are contacted by peers or community members, presumably people with whom they share an identity. In an examination of local Get Out the Vote efforts, Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2003), found that mobilization campaigns conducted by local non-partisan organizations increased the probability of participation in elections. Expanding on this research, Bedolla and Michelson (2012) focused on ethnoracial communities in California and found an increase in participation among Latinos when contacted by local organizations whose primary focus was on issues pertinent to Latinos. Given these findings, it is critical to understand how co-ethnic entities in other states where the Latino population and organizational landscape differ engage in

mobilizing members of their community during presidential elections—questions that I explore in various chapters of this dissertation. Depending on the state, targeting a traditionally unengaged electorate and recruiting non-voting eligible members to assist in mobilizing eligible voters within their community could potentially swing the outcome of an election.

While national campaigns tend to appeal to Latinos in a one-size-fits-all method, the on-the-ground reality is that mobilization is community-specific. Presidential campaigns do not fine-tune these strategies to align with specific communities; instead, it is the local community itself that takes on this responsibility. This one-size-fits-all approach undertaken by presidential campaigns can potentially miss engaging Latinos who have not traditionally participated in politics due in part to the assumption that the non-voting eligible will not engage due to their legal status. However, when we look closely at the way Latino communities are mobilizing themselves, we can find that IAOs use an array of strategies to mobilize Latinos that would remain hidden otherwise. We observe that IAOs tap into unexplored segments of the community while also involving members who are not eligible to vote in the process—this I also find among some high-profile Latino electoral operatives in Chapter 4. While the primary goal in any election is to mobilize those eligible to vote, IAOs often go beyond this to include the excluded. This stems from their recognition to create long-term political capital. This dynamic varies across states depending on activists' calculations about how soon Latino influence can be decisive in elections.

## 2.4 *¿Cómo Pueden Participar?*

For the purposes of this chapter, I define participation as engaging in the full range of electoral activities. This includes voting, legally donating money to federal campaigns, legally working on campaigns, volunteering to perform electoral activities, among others. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the roles of mediating institutions, which I call co-ethnic intermediaries, as facilitating participation in presidential elections. This examination enhances our understanding of Latino participation by providing an in-depth study of IAOs and by further examining how Latinos mobilize themselves. This approach helps provide additional insights into the study of Latino political behavior in a way that is not often captured using traditional survey methods. Furthermore, this research investigates a mechanism that few social scientists have examined on alternate mobilization strategies of Latinos in presidential elections. In some places, these alternate modes of mobilization will not only lay the groundwork for a much larger and engaged Latino electorate but have the potential to tip an election.

And yet, many Latinos actively participate in presidential elections, extending beyond mere voting. How do they engage? How do individuals without the right to vote manage to partake, even in light of the associated risks for those without citizenship? Existent literature demonstrates that individuals with higher levels of education, income, occupation, and other socio-economic indicators are more likely to participate in politics and vote (Lindquist 1964; Scott and Acock 1979; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). However, how do certain Latinos participate despite the larger participation costs for them? How are these Latinos animated to participate and how is identity constructed in the course of doing so?



In this chapter, I add an important element to this debate and argue that in addition to analyzing presidential candidates' attempts to mobilize Latinos, we stop overlooking how Latinos mobilize themselves to participate in presidential elections. While Latinos can be—and have been—mobilized in a multitude of ways, this chapter examines how mediating entities like immigrant advocacy organizations (hereinafter, IAOs) influence political participation in elections among the Latino community. Specifically, this chapter provides an answer to this question by examining how IAOs construct identity leading up to and during the 2020 presidential election and what it means for Latino political participation.

## 2.5 Data and Methodology

### **Overview of Case Studies: Wisconsin and Texas**

To understand how Latinos mobilize themselves in presidential elections, I adopt an in-depth examination of the 2020 presidential election in Wisconsin and Texas. In this chapter, Wisconsin serves as a primary case study and Texas as a comparison case. This in-depth examination aims to fill gaps in our current understanding of Latinos in the U.S. Usually, the literature on Latino political behavior has focused on Latinos in traditional receiving areas and states such as Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, and Texas. And scholars of Latino politics have begun to examine Latino political behavior in the U.S. South where the Latino population has significantly increased (Jones 2020; Odem and Lacy 2009; Winders 2005). Yet, less literature has considered the role of Latinos in the Midwest where the Latino population is also increasing and where their potential mobilization (Ramírez 2013) can flip a swing state in one direction or the other.

Wisconsin, in comparison to traditional receiving states, has a growing Latino population, a history of immigrant organizing, and has been able to mobilize Latinos in masse.<sup>32</sup> Thus, examining Wisconsin as a case study allows us to understand how IAOs can mobilize Latinos in places that we might otherwise expect Latinos to not be mobilized (Zepeda-Millan 2017) in comparison to states like Texas that are well-established, and how their strategies are similar or different when mobilizing members of the same demographic.

Further, Latinos have recently surpassed Blacks as the largest ethnoracial group in the state. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the Latino population rose by 7.6 percent, and currently, there are approximately 447,290 Latinos across Wisconsin—including migrants and the undocumented.<sup>33</sup> In addition to being the fastest growing group, Latinos work in industries that are deemed essential. For example, Latinos make up approximately 40% of the labor force in the dairy industry, and prior to the 2020 presidential election, many were ordered to continue to work during a global pandemic because their jobs were deemed essential.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, Latinos in Wisconsin vary from those in states that have well-established communities, like in Texas, simply because the context differs.

In Texas, a traditional receiving state and a place where Latinos have been politically incorporated, there are contextual differences that can influence how mediating entities like IAOs mobilize members and construct Latino identity within their community during presidential elections. For example, in Texas, IAOs must consider the geographical proximity to

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<sup>32</sup> See (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/day-without-latinos-thousands-protest-immigration-crackdown-wisconsin-n720286>); see also (<https://www.vox.com/2016/2/19/11062488/wisconsin-anti-immigrant-protest>).

<sup>33</sup> See (<https://www.tmj4.com/news/local-news/latin-hispanic-population-is-now-wisconsins-largest-minority-group>).

<sup>34</sup> See (<https://www.jsonline.com/in-depth/news/special-reports/dairy-crisis/2019/11/12/wisconsin-dairy-farms-rely-immigrant-workers-undocumented-laborers/2570288001/>). Former President Trump signed an Executive Order under the Defense Production Act that kept meat packing plants open during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic.

the U.S. border, the growing number of Latinos from different regions in Latin America, the expansion of 287(g) across the state through SB4 legislation, in addition to all the barriers and challenges that Latinos are already presented with regarding their mobilization in electoral politics.<sup>35</sup> Selecting a state like Texas as a comparison study allows me to compare how IAOs under slightly different circumstances engage in or selectively engage in mobilizing the full range of Latinos during presidential elections. And so, examining how Latinos are mobilized in places like Wisconsin is important because there is a need to mobilize a largely democratic electorate in a closely divided state. In a place like Wisconsin, turning out votes and overall participation from the community—that would otherwise be untapped—could help sway the election for either party. In the context of Texas, this may not be the case, and if it is not the case, then how do members of these communities manage to participate, especially those who are not able to vote, despite the potential obstacles they might face?<sup>36</sup>

Through this in-depth analysis, we gain insight into the dynamics of mobilization efforts carried out by community organizations within these regions, and what these efforts mean for the broader incorporation and impact of Latinos in electoral politics. These case studies serve as vehicles for expanding our comprehension of Latino involvement in presidential elections, focusing particularly on specific locations such as Wisconsin and Texas. While there is a substantial body of research on Latino participation in areas with significant Latino populations, less research exists on Latino political participation in regions of the United States where Latinos

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<sup>35</sup> This, of course, is not unique to Texas, but in comparison to Wisconsin, there is more heterogeneity across nationalities of members within this group across the state. In May of 2017, Texas passed a statewide law known as SB4, that allowed police to inquire about legal status and required local police enforcement to cooperate with Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Collingwood and O'Brien Gonzalez 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Prior to COVID-19, I planned to include North Carolina as a third case study. North Carolina has a growing Latino population and varies on the dimension of immigration surveillance. Relative to Wisconsin and Texas, North Carolina, at the time, had more 287(g) agreements than Wisconsin and fewer 287(g) agreements than Texas. I collected data from North Carolina for another part of the dissertation project on Spanish-language radio.

do not have a historical connection or compose a significant portion of the population. By examining a case where we know less about Latino mobilization during elections and a state where we know more about Latino mobilization, these case studies offer the prospect of illuminating the array of strategies employed by IAOs to incorporate Latinos into electoral politics.

### **Methodology**

This chapter relies on the qualitative data of two statewide IAOs located in Wisconsin and Texas. I use semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis to provide an in-depth examination on the ways in which Latinos mobilize themselves and construct identity during presidential elections. In total, I interview 25 subjects between both IAOs with most subjects in Wisconsin. I conduct several in-person and online visits to IAO field sites as part of my participant observation. Finally, I analyze the social media content from the IAOs leading up to and post the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

This methodological approach aims to reach a demographic that is hard for traditional quantitative survey approaches to capture, and consequently, hardly reached by academia (Jackson 2021). While exit polls and survey-based methods generally capture the voting behavior of Latinos, Latinos in general tend to be undersampled, and those who are not eligible to vote may be almost invisible in these data. Because of the vulnerability of members of this community, it is likely that they, or members of their family, prefer not to participate in traditional surveys—due to leaving a paper trail or other susceptibilities that deal with their legal status—and even then, many surveys in American politics are not intended to capture their demographic. Hence,

“for vulnerable populations whose political life worlds remain under-investigated, these potential blindspots of quantitative research, like the interlocking nature of marginalization and the impossibility of holding heuristics like race, gender, sexuality,

and class in isolation from one another, foster gaps in our knowledge about the fullness of the American political system.” (Jackson, 2)

To grasp why and how Latinos mobilize themselves to participate in a full range of electoral activities, it is necessary to observe their behaviors in other, more direct ways. Here, I examine what participation looks like in specific places (Cramer 2016; Cramer Walsh 2012) and how co-ethnics influence this process instead of examining what factors predict Latinos’ political participation.

Understanding specific contexts can provide scholars with insights into the dynamics that can influence or impede participation in elections. For instance, consider two Latinos living in the same state, facing similar surveillance conditions, and sharing a comparable socioeconomic status. Despite these similarities, they exhibit different levels of engagement in the election. One possible reason for this divergence could be that their differing worldviews on participation result in different conceptions of the risk of participating. Thus, this approach is appropriate because it helps us uncover Latino community members' understandings of why it is in their best interest to participate despite the dangers it can present to some, like the undocumented. My grounded approach allows me to understand my interview subjects' contextual realities, observe first-hand how co-ethnic intermediaries mobilize them, and unpack and explain how Latinos participate in politics despite not being eligible to vote.

I designed my study with IAOs as my cases, nested within specific states. The case selection for this examination began with seeking variation across a few dimensions. I selected states that varied in Latino population, varied regionally, and varied in immigration surveillance formally via 287(g) agreements and perceived surveillance.<sup>37</sup> Apart from the demographic and

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<sup>37</sup> Through 287(g) agreements, law enforcement is deputized to act on behalf of Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). Despite not having a formal 287(g) agreement with Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE), there are communities that perceive to be surveilled by immigration enforcement.

contextual factors, including variation along the dimension of immigration surveillance is important as Latinos, regardless of their status, have been ascribed with members of the group that are unauthorized (Cisneros 2012). This is important to consider when it comes to the ways in which Latinos mobilize and co-construct identities because they must take these considerations into account when informing their strategies or ensuring their safety in mobilizing members of their community.

According to Voto Latino, a non-profit 501(c)(4) organization, there are 12 million Latinos in the U.S. who are eligible to vote but are not yet registered to do so.<sup>38</sup> In the states selected for this examination, the Latino populations eligible to vote vary widely.

**Table 2.1: Unregistered Eligible Latino Voters and Reported Registered Voters in the State**

	Wisconsin	% of Total WI State Population	Texas	% of Total TX State Population
Unregistered Eligible Latino Voters	184,094	3.1%	3,866,327	13.3%
Total Latinos in the State	447,290	7.6%	11,441,717	39.3%
Reported Registered Voters in the State <sup>39</sup>	3,834,164	65.1%	16,955,519	58.2%

Source: Voto Latino (data based on 2020 state-level voter file data provided by Target Smart modeled by Civis Analytics), the 2020 U.S. Census, and U.S. Election Assistance Commission

In Wisconsin, there are approximately 184,094 unregistered voting eligible Latinos out of 447,290 Latinos in the state.<sup>40</sup> In a place like Wisconsin, an election can be decided by a narrow

<sup>38</sup> Voto Latino estimated these figures using “2020 state-level voter file data provided by Target Smart and modeled race provided by Civis Analytics” according to their website. See (<https://votolatino.org/understand-the-vote/>).

<sup>39</sup> See ([https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_library/files/2020\\_EAVS\\_Report\\_Final\\_508c.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/document_library/files/2020_EAVS_Report_Final_508c.pdf)).

<sup>40</sup> Voto Latino reported 184,094 unregistered voting-eligible Latinos and the U.S. Census reports that there were 447,290 thousand Latinos in Wisconsin in 2020. See (<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/race-and-ethnicity-in-the-united-state-2010-and-2020-census.html>).

margin of votes—as we saw in 2020 when the Democratic Party won Wisconsin by a bit more than 20,000 votes. In a state like Texas, turning out voting eligible Latino voters during presidential elections is perhaps less impactful at the federal level in the short-term, but in the long-term, Latinos, especially young ones, among other key demographics, are projected to shift presidential elections as potential voters turn 18 (Contreras 2023). Further, Latinos—those eligible to naturalize—have the capacity to become voter-eligible, and those non-voting eligible can help mobilize those they know that can cast a vote.

For example, in Wisconsin, it is reported that there are at least, 107,162 foreign-born 159,011 non-citizen Latinos. In Texas, there are approximately 3,191,256 foreign-born Latinos and 2,991,903 non-citizens across the state.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 2.2: Foreign-born and Non-citizen Latinos in Wisconsin and Texas**

	Wisconsin	% of Total WI Population	Texas	% of Total TX Population
Foreign-born Latinos <sup>42</sup>	113,649	1.9%	3,248,559	11.1%
Non-citizen Latinos <sup>43</sup>	51,000	0.9%	1,537,000	5.3%

Source: Migration Policy Institute tabulations of the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) 2015-2019, 2021 and the Decennial Census, and the U.S. 2020 Census<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> The Migration Policy Institute compiled State Immigration Data Profiles using 2021 U.S. Census Bureau data. See (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/WI>). Non-citizens include all ethnoracial groups. I disaggregate these figures by region on Table 2.

<sup>42</sup> The foreign-born Latino population captures foreign-born Latinos of diverse legal statuses that are legally authorized to be in the U.S.

<sup>43</sup> The Migration Policy Institute disaggregates these figures by regions of the world. I add Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America to approximate a figure of non-citizen Latinos in these states. Of course, not all people within these regions identify as Latino or are Spanish-speaking, however, most are. This is an approximation based on the data available.

<sup>44</sup> These are approximate figures. See (<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/race-and-ethnicity-in-the-united-state-2010-and-2020-census.html>).

These figures and the IAOs' strategies in mobilization are important to comprehend because of the significance of voting and incorporating an underrepresented group. Our understanding tends to narrowly focus on eligible Latino voters but to grasp how this happens for Latinos across the spectrum, a broader perspective is necessary. This is fundamental as Latinos continue to change the demographics of the country.

All states in the Midwest have experienced growth in the Latino population from 2010 through 2020. In some states, this change has been as little as 15 percent and as high as 148 percent. Relative to the percentage in the total state population, Latinos in the Midwest range anywhere from four to 13 percent—apart from Illinois. In states like Wisconsin, Latinos are closer to nearing double-digits in their state population share. Similarly, the Latino population share across the Midwest is comparable to some states in the South, where Latinos are receiving greater attention due to their potential influence in elections (e.g., Georgia and North Carolina), yet the scholarly literature has paid less attention to these demographics in the Midwest.



Table 2.3: Latinos in the Midwest and Change in Population

State	2010	2020	% in Change From 2010 - 2020	% in Total State Population
<b>Illinois</b>	2,027,578	2,337,410	15.3%	18.2%
<b>Indiana</b>	389,707	554,191	42.2%	8.2%
<b>Iowa</b>	151,544	215,986	42.5%	6.8%
<b>Kansas</b>	300,042	382,603	27.5%	13%
<b>Michigan</b>	436,358	564,422	29.3%	5.6%
<b>Minnesota</b>	250,258	345,640	38.1%	6.1%
<b>Missouri</b>	212,470	303,068	42.6%	4.9%
<b>Nebraska</b>	167,405	234,715	40.2%	12%
<b>North Dakota</b>	13,467	33,412	148.1%	4.3%
<b>Ohio</b>	354,674	521,308	47%	4.4%
<b>South Dakota</b>	22,119	38,741	75.1%	4.4%
<b>Wisconsin</b>	336,056	447,290	33.1%	7.6%

Source: American Community Survey, U.S. Census<sup>45</sup>

These figures pale in comparison to the Latino population in traditional receiving states where Latinos make up at least 18 percent and close to 50 percent of the total state population.

However, many states that are considered pivotal states in contemporary presidential elections are centered in a few states where the Latino population is slowly increasing. Of the seven battleground states, at least five are in the Midwest. These include Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

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<sup>45</sup> See (<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/race-and-ethnicity-in-the-united-state-2010-and-2020-census.html>).

**Table 2.4: Latinos in Traditional Receiving States**

<b>State</b>	<b>Population in 2020</b>	<b>% in Total State Population</b>
Arizona	2,192,253	30.7%
California	15,579,652	39.4%
Colorado	1,263,390	21.9%
Florida	5,697,240	26.5%
Illinois	2,337,410	18.2%
Nevada	890,257	28.7%
New Jersey	2,002,575	21.6%
New Mexico	1,010,811	47.7%
New York	3,948,032	19.5%
Texas	11,441,717	39.3%

Source: The 2020 U.S. Census<sup>46</sup>

The Latino population growth and mobilization in traditional receiving states has also become instrumental in recent electoral victories (e.g., Arizona). Yet, we ought to examine both traditional receiving states and states in regions where the Latino population is smaller, such as states in the Midwest. This will allow for useful comparisons and paint a picture of possibility on the potential of Latino mobilization. Therefore, engaging traditionally marginalized voters and noncitizens in mobilizing co-ethnics has the potential to influence the outcomes of closely contested states like Wisconsin.

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<sup>46</sup> See (<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/race-and-ethnicity-in-the-united-state-2010-and-2020-census.html>).

### **Immigrant Advocacy Organizations (IAOs)**

When examining IAOs and the ways in which they mobilize Latinos, one must consider their non-profit 501(c)(3) or advocacy 501(c)(4) status. That is, how can the organization engage in electoral mobilization when non-profits are non-partisan? To clarify, 501(c)(3) organizations cannot endorse candidates or engage in political campaigns, but they can run voter registration efforts. They can also engage in information and education campaigns. Further, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization can have a 501(c)(4) branch, under which endorsing candidates is allowed. When an IAO has both designations, they must be strategic about how they can invest their limited resources to support a candidate and maximize voter participation while still retaining funds that will allow them to continue the many other services they provide to their community. Depending on the financial or political circumstances, an IAO may choose to endorse local candidates over national candidates or none at all. Once the IAOs decide whether they will endorse candidates or not, the respective 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) branches begin their efforts to register and mobilize as many Latinos to the polls as they can.

The two statewide IAOs in this study are similar in structure. Both organizations have chapters in several cities across the state, they provide legal services, both have been active in their respective states for over 19 years, they are member-led, and serve and strongly advocate for the migrant and working-class community. The majority of the work conducted by both organizations is done through their non-profit branch and under their 501(c)(3) Internal Revenue Code designation, which limits the ways that they can engage in certain political activities. For example, under a 501(c)(3) designation, IAOs are unable to endorse political candidates. However, both organizations also have an advocacy wing. Under their advocacy wing, they are able to engage in activities like endorsing political candidates during elections. The advocacy

wings of the organizations follow a 501(c)(4) Internal Revenue Code designation and are usually named the same as the organization followed by a term like “Action” afterward.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

One of the methodological approaches used in this examination is semi-structured interviews. I select this approach over traditional surveys in consideration of the potential vulnerability of subjects and their reluctance to take surveys. In this study, I am interested in how the full range of Latinos mobilizes one another, including those that are unauthorized to be here. Traditional surveys of American politics, like the American National Election Study (ANES), often do not include key members of the Latino demographic that are meant to be captured here. Further, traditional surveys, often do not reach the hardly-reached (Jackson 2021) often due to additional barriers that underrepresented or marginalized groups face—usually outside of the control of those disseminating these surveys. For Latinos, these barriers could span the range of surveys not being administered in their first language, reluctance to participate if they believe that their information could risk an eventual deportation, lack of access to reliable internet, surveys being administered to just U.S. citizens, among other barriers. This informed my decision to employ semi-structured interviews among Latinos—following the institutional review board (IRB) guidelines—along with two other methods found in this chapter to capture as much diversity in legal statuses among my subjects as possible.

To select the groups in this study, I resorted to identifying IAOs that self-identified as statewide and had at least three active chapters across the state. Then, I further investigated if the groups engaged in different types of political engagement ahead of elections. For example, I investigated if they both had 501(c)(4) branches—this IRS designation allows them to endorse political candidates—in addition to their 501(c)(3) status—which does not allow them to endorse

political candidates. Once I determined that the IAOs were similar in structure, I reached out to staff at the organizations that would allow me to interview the full range of members, staff, and the board of directors at the IAOs using a snowball sampling technique.

Due to the limitations presented by COVID-19, I conducted virtual interviews with electoral staff and volunteers at the two statewide IAOs. I used the online platform WebEx as approved by the university institutional review board. In total, I conducted 25 interviews with members of IAOs in Wisconsin and Texas. These interviews were conducted prior to and after the election based on the interview subjects' availability.<sup>47</sup> The majority of interviews were with staff, members, board members, and volunteers in Wisconsin. The interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. Most interviews were conducted in English, with only a few conducted in Spanish.<sup>48</sup> Each immigrant advocacy organization (IAO) had at least three chapters across the state—mostly in urban centers—and both had a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) designations in their organization.<sup>49</sup> One of them had several designations to their organization.<sup>50</sup>

The interview subject's legal status ranged from DACA beneficiaries to Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), and U.S. citizens. There were no undocumented interview subjects without a legal work permit interviewed. Close to half of my interview subjects were non-voting eligible, and the others were voting-eligible Latinos. Further, most interview subjects were Mexican or of Mexican descent, several belonged to mixed-status families, and some had experiences of family

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<sup>47</sup> Reaching potential interview subjects during Covid presented challenges in and of itself.

<sup>48</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the interview findings are in English. If in Spanish, the translations of the communication are conducted by me.

<sup>49</sup> The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) defines a 501(c)(4) as, "social welfare organizations: civic leagues or organizations not organized for profit but operated exclusively for the promotion of social welfare" and are not tax-deductible ("Types of Organizations Exempt under Section 501(c)(4)" 2022). Whereas a 501(c)(3) is considered a "charitable organization" and are restricted in their "lobbying and political activities." They are considered tax-deductible ("Exemption Requirements – 501(c)(3) Organizations" 2022).

<sup>50</sup> The diverse designations 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), 501(c)(5), etc. limit or allow organizations to engage in different activities. For the purposes of this chapter, I only examine the 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) branches of the organizations.

members being deported. In general, the interview subjects had a range of life and social experiences. The interview subjects also spanned a range of roles they had within the IAOs. Some were political directors, campaign managers, logistics coordinators, religious pastors, board members, or had other roles. The majority of the interview subjects were less than 30 years old, and all were Latino.<sup>51</sup>

**Table 2.5: Interview Subject Characteristics by Legal Status (18+)**

Undocumented (without temporary protection)	Tenuous Legal Status (DACA, TPS)	Legal Permanent Resident (LPR)	U.S. Citizen	Unknown <sup>52</sup>
0	9	3	10	3

I designed the semi-structured interviews with questions that allowed me to listen to my interview subjects' contextual realities. In the interviews, I asked subjects questions about their upbringing, perceptions of the organization that they were collaborating with, their understanding of immigration surveillance in their communities, and their understanding of Latinos' participation, or reluctance to participate, in electoral politics. Upon finalizing the interviews, I wrote detailed memos noting the patterns that I observed (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2013) as I read through the transcripts. Once the memos were completed, I reorganized the memos thematically. I compared these patterns to the patterns that I noticed in other forms of data that I collected.

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<sup>51</sup> I did not interview members at IAOs that were under 18 years old.

<sup>52</sup> Some subjects preferred not to state their legal status during the interviews. Other subjects brought up their legal status and when legal status was unclear, I probed or asked directly if appropriate.

## Participant Observation

The second methodological approach used in this examination is that of participant observation. The utility of participant observation as an approach is that it can allow the researcher to observe and listen to the ways in which subjects interact in their groups as naturally as possible. As Cramer Walsh (2009) puts it, “in this method, the researcher is enough of a participant that she has access to the people she wishes to study and is allowed to remain in the setting in which they meet, but she is mainly an observer.” (171) To understand the relationship and culture that the IAOs had with Latinos in their community, I engaged in participant observation to supplement the semi-structured interviews that I collected throughout this study.

Due to COVID-19, I conducted both in-person and virtual participant observations with IAOs—during and after the 2020 general election. Given that Latinos were especially impacted by COVID-19, the IAOs were cautious of how they conducted gatherings with their members.<sup>53</sup> The IAOs in this study, in both Wisconsin and Texas, transitioned to alternative forms of meeting with members and different forms of civic engagement, which I witnessed through fieldwork.

I participated in virtual workshops and trainings with both organizations. I also observed important events (e.g., annual luncheons and galas) that the organizations held post-election. Through these interactions, I met with members and staff at the organization and obtained a deeper understanding of the community in which the chapters were located. In Wisconsin, I conducted participant observation in person and online. In Texas, I took part in gatherings, conducted some virtual participant observation, and traveled to some of their organizational sites

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<sup>53</sup> See (<https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2021/07/15/for-u-s-latinos-covid-19-has-taken-a-personal-and-financial-toll/#:~:text=Hispanics%20have%20been%20at%20a,for%20Disease%20Control%20and%20Prevention.>)

to better understand the communities in which their members lived.<sup>54</sup> I also met with some of their staff during these visits.

Engaging in participant observation allowed me to obtain a better sense of the culture that was fostered within the organizations and why it matters for the ways in which they mobilize Latinos in their respective communities. Once I compiled these observations, I followed the protocol that I used post-interviews. I wrote detailed memos about the site visits and compared the similarities and differences across the IAOs.

### **Content Analysis**

In addition to semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I analyzed social media content from the IAOs Facebook pages.<sup>55</sup> I sought to observe how the IAOs disseminated messages to IAO members and other community members. This allowed me to examine if what I was observing in the interviews and participant observation aligned with broader patterns found among the two other approaches.

At the time of my fieldwork, the IAOs' main source of communication with its members was through Facebook and WhatsApp.<sup>56</sup> These platforms were heavily relied on by the IAOs during the early stages of COVID-19 and leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. For both IAOs, I captured screenshots of Facebook posts to gauge how the organization appealed to its members. During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Facebook became one of the only ways that the organizations engaged Latinos since they could not meet in person. I archived these

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<sup>54</sup> I traveled to two cities in Texas and on one occasion met with a staff member that was comfortable talking with me in-person. At the time, various COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted and vaccines were readily available across the country.

<sup>55</sup> I analyzed data from both their 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) Facebook pages.

<sup>56</sup> I do not analyze the content found within the WhatsApp groups in this study. WhatsApp was mostly used to communicate details about meeting times and other leadership activities. Only one of the two statewide organizations used this platform heavily.



posts, which were usually photos, and coded the language used and imagery found within the posts. Among the IAO's social media content were also short video clips that were geared toward the Facebook followers of the group. These ranged from 14 seconds to less than one minute.

Moreover, I examined both IAO's Facebook Lives in addition to the posts themselves. Specifically, I analyzed the content of the advocacy wing of the organization, the 501(c)(4), and how they engaged with their members via Facebook Live. The content analyzed for both organizations spanned from September 1, 2020 through December 18, 2020.

## **2.6 Findings**

The semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and participant observation revealed that Latinos do consider the role of legal status when they attempt to engage co-ethnics in presidential elections. Mainly, I find that regional differences matter to an extent for the ways in which IAOs engage their membership or lack thereof. Despite efforts to incorporate Latinos into electoral politics on behalf of the IAOs, the groups had to consider the ways in which their targets of mobilization identity as Latinos can subject them to different forms of surveillance as they practice political participation. This not only informed their mobilizing strategies, but also their practices of inclusion and creation of identity within the organization. The IAOs found different political opportunities to engage Latinos through salient events and moments leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election such as the U.S. Census and COVID-19.

Generally, the IAOs I examined focused on providing legal services and fostering civic participation among the most vulnerable of their members—specifically, the undocumented and those in the process of adjusting their legal status. Often, the majority of these individuals are of Latin American origin. One approach employed by these IAOs to recruit individuals for electoral

mobilization efforts involved tapping into a pool of individuals who have previously sought their services, often related to migrant or labor rights. From there, IAOs took on the task of extending invitations to new members and encouraging those who were less actively involved to participate in their electoral activities. Through these efforts, the IAOs work not only attended to the needs of vulnerable populations in this country but also aimed to politicize and facilitate the civic incorporation of both citizen and non-citizen Latinos. This civic incorporation is the first step in political incorporation.

One way in which the IAOs prepared to incorporate Latinos ahead of the 2020 presidential election was by engaging them in the 2020 U.S. Census. Both IAOs in this study actively encouraged their membership to fill out the census despite being non-citizens. For those without an adjusted legal status, filling out the census was frightening as the community believed that the government would use this information to find them and their families. As the pandemic worsened, the IAOs became some of the main sources of information for an already vulnerable community. As the community learned to adapt to the pandemic, so did the IAOs. Not only did they have to change the strategies under which they delivered services to these communities, but they also had to temporarily transition to new modes of outreach toward their members and find creative and safe ways to involve them in civic engagement efforts ahead of the election.

Another, and perhaps less intentional circumstance in which IAOs civically engaged Latinos ahead of the 2020 presidential election was through the challenges that were presented to members of this community during the height of COVID-19. Latinos across the country, and in both states of this examination, worked primarily in industries deemed “essential.”<sup>57</sup> In addition to Latinos in this examination working essential jobs, former President Donald Trump, issued an

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<sup>57</sup> The main industries in which IAO members worked in were meat-packing, construction, and service.

executive order that required industries like meat-packing plants to remain open.<sup>58</sup> Some of these plants did not provide their workers with proper personal protective equipment (PPE) which resulted in several workers contracting COVID-19.<sup>59</sup> As the pandemic continued and people became unemployed or laid off, workers and families lost incomes that they relied upon. In the case of IAO members in this study, many were left without government relief because of their legal status. In response to being excluded from government aid, these organizations stepped up for their members and created mutual aid funds to help assist them financially in their time of need. Both IAOs in this study created mutual aid funds for IAO members, who were mostly Latino.

This is just one of the ways in which IAOs included communities that were legally vulnerable during a year in which an important general election took place. Aiding members in ways the government did not may have signaled to members that their IAO was willing to step up and advocate for them. In addition, these moments of assistance were opportunities to engage Latinos politically in ways that could help improve their living conditions in the U.S.

### 2.6.1 Values and Inclusion Within IAOs

One salient theme across the IAOs in this examination was how they created and cultivated a culture of inclusion with their members. In particular, I observed these patterns in leadership trainings and general meetings. Each meeting and training began with social movement music from Latin America or Latin American music, like *cumbias*.<sup>60</sup> The messaging in these songs focused on themes of comradery, struggle, migration, and people power. For example, some of

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<sup>58</sup> Meatpacking plants were required to remain open under the Defense Production Act—an executive order signed by former President, Donald Trump.

<sup>59</sup> This was the case for workers in Wisconsin. These workers eventually became IAO members.

<sup>60</sup> *Cumbias*, are a genre of music played widely throughout Latin America.

the lyrics of the songs that I heard spoke about “*la lucha*” (the struggle), which is usually in reference to overcoming the daily struggles one faces or faced by the collective. Other songs had lyrics that said, “*es el pueblo el que se escucha*” (it is the village that you can hear) and “*se escucha fuerte, resuena fuerte... todas las voces unidas en la lucha*” (it is heard loudly, it resonates loudly... all of the voices united in the fight) in reference to the power of collective action.

In this instance, the IAO used music and language as an organizing tool to empower their members, make people feel included, and to remind them of the potential power of working together. This is important as it demonstrates that IAOs make a connection with the communities that they serve in unique ways. Thus, illustrating what happens at these meetings helps us paint a picture of how the IAOs do this and not just the services that IAOs tend to provide. Here, the IAOs understand that they can connect Latinos through music and language because most Latinos share historical, linguistic, and cultural similarities, despite the heterogeneity among the group.

Further, creating a culture of inclusion helped IAOs motivate and incentivize Latinos to participate politically. For example, the beginning of the leadership and general membership meetings helped set the tone for the topics that were being discussed that day. My observations indicated that even in light of a global pandemic, the IAOs adapted to the realities of their members, who were at a disadvantage given the industries in which many of the members worked. Despite these disadvantages, the IAOs strived for inclusion in culture and in practice.

Generally, members trickled into the room and the facilitators encouraged members to talk to each other or give shoutouts noting where they were joining from.<sup>61</sup> Once enough people joined, the facilitators welcomed their members using gender-inclusive language, like “*Todes*” (everyone).<sup>62</sup> The members would often refer to each other as “*compañeros, compañeras*” (brothers, sisters) during the meetings.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the facilitators made sure to remind participants that they take care of themselves and attend to their needs during the meetings. When in person, some of these individuals assisted with their children and would take breaks to ensure that they were doing well. The majority of the virtual meetings featured closed captioning and interpretation options—for those who needed additional assistance throughout the meeting.

Another way in which the IAOs set the tone for their gatherings was through collective agreements, which they called “*acuerdos colectivos*” and prayer. These “*acuerdos*” were created by and for the members and implied more than just an agreement. The term implied an understanding and a commitment to respect their peers by adhering to the collective rules that they set.

The process of creating the agreements was facilitated by a staff member and sometimes the executive director. The agreements included time agreements for which members spoke, although this varied by organization and chapter. For example, in larger chapters, members were allocated around just two minutes to share to ensure that others had time to speak. Other agreements included, “*un paso adelante, un paso atras*” which translates to, step up and step

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<sup>61</sup> The members would trickle into the rooms in person or online, depending on the format of the meeting. The meeting facilitators would encourage members to use the Zoom chat feature to send out shoutouts to fellow members.

<sup>62</sup> Because Spanish is a gendered language, some people have resorted to switching the gendered endings by using a variation of “x, e, @” etc., to make the terms are gender inclusive. There is some contention within the Latino community about these practices.

<sup>63</sup> This is a variation of the words: brother, sister, fellows, comrades, etc.

back. The members created this agreement acknowledging that they would be conscientious of their participation and make room for others to also speak up. In some instances, members started their gatherings with a prayer. First, a member offered to say a collective prayer and the facilitator would ask the members if they agreed to begin the meeting with prayer—acknowledging the diversity in religious preferences among the group. After obtaining membership approval to lead a prayer, the member would ask everyone to “*inclinarse las cabezas*” (bow their heads), and the prayer would begin. In the prayer, the member asked for guidance and retention of everything they learn and to bless the individuals that are guiding and teaching them.

Moreover, the global pandemic presented additional challenges for the ways in which IAOs stayed connected to their members. One of the challenges was overcoming the technological differences among their membership. The membership appeared to be active on social media like Facebook and was familiar with WhatsApp—since many members use these forms of social media—but appeared to struggle with navigating platforms like Zoom. As virtual gatherings began, there were PowerPoint slides that guided members on how to use Zoom throughout the meeting. The guide described how to use Zoom—and its different functions—from their phones. This indicated to me that perhaps many of the members do not have access to computers or that many of the members are not familiar with using computers, but at the very least had access to a smartphone. Another way in which members stayed connected to each other was through regional WhatsApp groups. There were also separate WhatsApp groups for members that were involved in statewide IAO committees. The WhatsApp groups were a common practice across chapters in Texas where the geographical distance from people within their chapters was often greater than among people in Wisconsin. These practices indicated to

me that IAOs were cognizant of the technological challenges within their membership, yet intentionally met them where they were at by guiding and connecting them in ways that they were familiar with.

During an interview, one IAO member described the cultural differences in spaces between the IAO and the party.<sup>64</sup> This individual had previous experience volunteering for the Democratic Party in efforts to turn out the vote. He described his experience navigating those spaces and compared it to his experience at the IAO:

Fernando:

“So like, we go to the party [Democratic Party], there's, you know, there's an agenda. Everyone needs to shut the f—up. And then we all take turns talking. It's just like, it's just so it's too formal, you know? And I can't stand formal, to be honest with you. The more, the more I realized, how, whitewashed I have been, the more I'm just like, yeah, this is formal. Like, this is formal for white people. This isn't formal for me [self-described as Latino]. You know what I mean? So like, they [white people] define what, what was appropriate and not appropriate. So when they [in reference to white people] come to these spaces [IAOs], you know, when white people come through [to the IAO], to like [the name of the IAO], it always cracks me up. Because like, they'll come. And then there's like people running in and out and they're talking to [the executive director] and me. And like, we're like having conversations and like, you know, people would just come in and we're just like, oh yeah. You know? Hold on a second, fam [family], we gotta take care of this person real quick. You know? And like, they might think it's rude, but like, we also have like, we're, we're not just like an electoral machine, you know? We are also community-based. And then there's like parties [at the IAO] going on. And people were like, always kinda like confused, like, Oh, there's like a, like a party going on? I'm like, yeah, you want it? You want something to drink? So it's just different. It's just so much different. Everybody. It's just like, people are encouraged to talk more because it's just so more, it's such more of a relaxed environment. I don't know. It's just more welcoming, you know what I'm saying?”

In describing his experience volunteering for the Democratic Party, and other organizations, he shared the differences he observed across spaces. To him, the formality of a meeting differs. For

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<sup>64</sup> In this instance, the interview subject was referring to the Democratic Party.

Fernando, what was formal to whites was not what was necessarily formal to him and presumably Latinos, since he mobilizes Latinos. Throughout the interview, he also shared that he felt that the party was “all about the numbers” whereas with the IAO it is mostly “about the quality.”<sup>65</sup> He proceeded to talk about the spaces being a “different culture altogether.” To him, his experiences with the party felt more “transactional” in comparison to his experiences with the IAO which to him felt more like “family.” As Fernando explained, meeting goals (e.g., contacting a certain number of voters) was important, but the relationships that they built with members of their community were what mattered the most. Turning out the vote was important to him and the IAO, but it was not the only end goal for IAOs. table

Collectively, the IAOs’ values reflected practicing a culture of care and inclusion. They valued the decisions their members made to create spaces for themselves in agreement with each other. They used music that resonated with their struggles and their culture to engage them during the gatherings. They spoke to each other with respect and to an extent shared power horizontally, as indicated by practices cultivated within the organizations. They encouraged each other to take care of themselves and one another. They respected their differences in age, socioeconomic status, educational background, access to technology, and access to childcare as they gathered. The observations during these gatherings revealed how IAOs interacted with and valued their membership. Understanding the culture within these organizations provides crucial insight on how they activated their membership into political action leading up to the election.

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<sup>65</sup> He was speaking in reference to the Democratic Party.



## 2.6.2 Integrating the Marginalized During the General Election

The culture that I observed during the IAO gatherings suggests that IAOs were intent on including the marginalized. This may have been in part a strategic decision in order to mobilize people politically, but it appeared to be a mere matter of gathering people generally in ways they knew best. While there were occasions when the IAO engaged its members with the Democratic Party, these were relatively less frequent.<sup>66</sup> To illustrate, one of the IAOs hosted an electoral art build that resembled a block party, encouraging both their members and the broader community to utilize their influence on social media to rally Latinos for the final election push. In the course of doing so, elements of Latino identity and ethnic cues were employed (Barreto 2010).

In Wisconsin, the IAO held an in-person art build in October of 2020—a few weeks before the general election. The art build was held outside of the main location of the IAO. The IAO was located on the Southside of Milwaukee, which is primarily Latino. On this block, there were beauty supply stores, cashed check establishments, and several ethnic stores which indicated the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of the neighborhood. To hold an art build in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, where they also offer their services, is indicative of the IAOs efforts to conduct intentional community-based outreach where their members were at.

At the art build, attendees were required to wear facemasks to protect one another and encouraged to wear other PPE. The art build resembled what many of us would think of when we think of a block party. There were many tables spread around and members and volunteers were able to inquire about voter information, pick up art supplies, work on banners, screen print, and interact. There was also live music that resembled the music played in traditional gatherings,

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<sup>66</sup> Some IAO members were involved in “*Latinos por Biden*” committees in representation of the IAO.

“*paleteros*” (Mexican popsicle vendors), street vendors that sold ethnic snacks (e.g., fried wheat pinwheels that are common in Mexico), and welcoming IAO members.

During the art build, many IAO members and volunteers proudly wore their IAO shirts. These ranged from May Day shirts to several IAO campaign shirts that the organization had worked on throughout the years. Others wore shirts that read, “*Migration is Beautiful*” displaying a butterfly that has often been used in the immigrant rights movement. Others had shirts that read “*No Walls*” displaying a brick wall being torn down in reference to the U.S. border. At another table, there was a volunteer with voting information and a shirt that promoted voting via the IAO. At this table, there was election literature, hand sanitizer, gloves, signs in English and Spanish that read, “*Voter Information*” and “*Informacion para los Votantes.*” This table was located in front of a Trump campaign office, where stickers on the window read “*Latinos for Trump,*” “*Women for Trump,*” among other identities for Trump.

Those who attended the art build were diverse in age, gender, ethnicity, and race. Many were Latino, but non-Latino allies were also helping with this effort. A young Latina woman painted a banner that read, “*estoy votando*” (I am voting). An elder Latina woman painted another banner that also read, “*estoy votando*”, but it also included a brown hand holding a ballot, cueing to the specific role and potential power of the “brown” vote. Although these banners read “I am voting,” the participants painting them need not necessarily be U.S. citizens or eligible to vote. Others painted banners that read, “BIDEN HARRIS” in the shape of their campaign logo and “*Si se puede*” underneath—a slogan created by Dolores Huerta during her time in the farmworkers’ movement and still widely used today.

On the other end of the block, there were young Latinos screen printing posters with the “*Migration is Beautiful*” and a butterfly. Inside the butterfly, there were outlines of “the

Americas” (i.e., North, Central, and South America). Nearby there were others that screen printed posters that read, “*Voto para mis padres*” (I vote for my parents). This was an indication of the awareness within the Latino community that not everyone is eligible to vote, yet one could cast a vote with those in your family that are unable to vote with the election in mind. Apart from messages surrounding voting for others, migration, campaign logos, and general voting art; there were individuals that worked on a banner that read, “*Botemos a Trump*” (let’s get rid of Trump).

Finally, there were members that decided to express their motivation for participating by using a whiteboard despite being ineligible to vote. Two members stood behind a banner that read, “I am voting.” The individuals posing for the photo held this board where one of them wrote, “*¡Si se puede! (atop) followed by, “Soy (person’s name) No tengo derecho a voto, pero organizare a muchos votantes, mi familia ya esta lista a votar Biden Harris.”* This translates to, “Yes, we can! I am (person’s name) I do not have the right to vote, but I will organize many voters and my family is ready to vote Biden Harris.” In this message, the individual acknowledged that they cannot officially vote, yet they have the agency to mobilize and empower those in their community who can vote, to vote.

When it came to general campaign materials, the IAOs had different approaches. In Wisconsin, the IAO membership endorsed the Biden and Harris nomination partly due to Wisconsin’s battleground nature and because Kamala Harris took the time to meet with the IAO and hear their demands. In Texas, the IAO decided not to endorse a presidential candidate, in part due to the candidate’s not meeting with their organization, and in part due to the IAO

membership feeling their vote in Texas did not matter as much as in a battleground state. They did, however, still mobilize their membership to vote against Trump.<sup>67</sup>

The imagery, phrases, and campaign materials reflected the IAOs' decisions and included elements of Latino identity. For example, the Wisconsin IAO had campaign materials that reflected their membership and values. One yard sign read, "*Votemos para proteger nuestras familias y comunidades. Votemos por Biden y Harris*" (Let's vote to protect our families and communities. Let's vote for Biden and Harris). This yard sign depicted a family with a brown skin tone. Another yard sign read, "*El voto es poder*" (voting is power) and "*Votemos por Biden y Harris*" (Let's vote for Biden and Harris) with an outline of the state of Wisconsin, and inside of the outline a Puerto Rican flag. One poster read, "*Juntos Somos Mas Fuertes*" (Together we are Stronger). This poster demonstrated the diversity and included brown, Black, and white people. It included students (as depicted by a graduation cap and gown and backpacks), a dark-skinned woman wearing a hijab, a white man in farmer clothing, among others. The poster read, "Election Day: November 3<sup>rd</sup>. To make a plan visit IAO website" in both English and Spanish. This poster demonstrated other values of inclusion as demonstrated by the IAO in their day-to-day coalition building with other marginalized communities across the state. Apart from their posters and yard signs, they had t-shirts that read "*El voto es poder*" (voting is power) and "*Voten Biden y Harris*" (Vote Biden and Harris). They also had posters, stickers (a variation of regular and bumper), and literature from the Biden and Harris campaign. While the majority of the campaign materials included elements of Latino identity, the IAO was intentional on

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<sup>67</sup> These were decisions made by IAO committees and the general membership through a vetting process. Each state had its own process and despite the Texas IAO not officially endorsing a candidate, they actively organized against Trump—as were others in the Wisconsin IAO. In this study, I did not hear any respondents support Donald Trump.

depicting unity across underrepresented communities across Wisconsin. This was not only evident in the campaign materials, but also in the IAO mobilization efforts.<sup>68</sup>

With respect to the Texas IAO, I did not observe diversity in physical election-related material. The bulk of election-related content focused on the importance of voting and on occasions pointed to elements of Latino identity. For example, one social media post that was repeatedly used read:

“This is the last week to early vote—let’s keep breaking voting records, Texas! Here’s what you have to do → For ANYONE who has early voted, has yet to vote but plans to, or can’t vote but can commit to talking to their friends to vote, simply fill out our commitment to vote and we will mail you a FREE Texas sticker! ... OUR VOICE. OUR POWER. OUR VOTE. COMMIT TO VOTE AND WE’LL MAIL YOU A FREE STICKER!”

The sticker was an outline of the state of Texas and inside of the outline, there was a *sarape* pattern with the word, “*Tejas*” (Texas in Spanish).<sup>69</sup> The cues to Latino identity used here were through language and the *sarape* sticker.

Other themes found within the Wisconsin IAO were: 1) a rejection of Trump’s racism, 2) the power and responsibility of citizenship, 3) the importance of defeating Trump, 4) support for the Biden and Harris ticket, 5) the importance of holding the Democratic Party (and Biden) accountable (in the case that he won), 6) Black and brown coalition building, 7) voting for those other than yourself (i.e. those ineligible to vote), 8) the power of the youth, and 9) Latinos’ role in the election (their power and their support). Despite the Wisconsin IAO endorsing the Biden and Harris ticket, the organization and membership expressed that this was their “best option” and “best chance” at defeating Trump. For example, one *Vocera* who is ineligible to vote, said:

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<sup>68</sup> *Voceros/as* were not all Latinos and there were members assigned to sit on committees that represented the IAO with the Democratic Party. This will be further discussed on my chapter about the “*Infrastructure of Latino Mobilization*.”

<sup>69</sup> A colorful rectangular clothing garment commonly associated with people from Latin America. In this case, the pattern of the *sarape* is mostly associated with Mexican culture.

“while he (Biden) is not the savior, he is the candidate that is walking with us.”<sup>70</sup> Another member (from the student branch of the IAO), also ineligible to vote, insisted that Biden and Harris were their best shot to get immigration reform accomplished.

There were a variety of members participating in these efforts who were ineligible to vote. Some were ineligible to vote because of their legal status and others were ineligible to vote because they were under 18, and some were ineligible for both reasons. Despite these members' ineligibility to vote, they displayed a sophisticated understanding of politics and motivation to participate. Although they might be ineligible to vote now, they have the potential to become voters someday and will have obtained the social capital to engage in politics in ways that many people who have the privilege to participate do not.

One particular way in which Wisconsin integrated members and volunteers in their efforts were through their “*Vocero/Vocera*” program. This was a relational organizing program that was used widely throughout their electoral mobilization efforts.<sup>71</sup> Becoming a *Vocero* or a *Vocera* was open to everyone regardless of whether you were eligible to vote. This program was available via a mobile application called “empower.” The idea behind this program is relational, meaning that participants in the program recruited people within their own networks with whom they had an existing relationship—I cover the on-the-ground operations of this program in Chapter 4.<sup>72</sup> The *Vocero* program was unique in that members self-identified as such when they spoke about elections or the importance of voting and participating as shared by the volunteer in

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<sup>70</sup> People within the organization who were helping mobilize Latinxs (and others) call themselves *Voceros/as*. It is the name of their relational electoral program.

<sup>71</sup> The Texas IAO also used relational organizing, but they did not have a program like the “*Voceros/as*.” The major difference is that the program in Wisconsin captures metrics on the amount of people reached, etc.

<sup>72</sup> I intend to get into the mechanics of the *Vocero/a* program in the “Infrastructure of Latino Mobilization” chapter.

the example above. This program is relatively new yet has been instrumental in helping mobilize Latinos in Wisconsin that may have otherwise not been targeted during elections.

Both IAOs in this examination intentionally took their members to the party, in this case, the Democratic Party. In Wisconsin, the IAO took a handful of members—each representing different demographics within their membership—to meet with Kamala Harris on a visit she had in Milwaukee prior to the general election. Among those present were the executive director, a board member, an essential worker (from the IAO essential worker network), and a student member (from the IAO youth branch). This was a private meeting that the IAO had with now Vice-President Harris, where members were able to directly ask what the administration planned to do for people like them—many of whom were ineligible to vote or undocumented. In Texas, the IAO also took its members to the party. For example, members of the Texas IAO were able to attend a presidential debate and one member asked the candidates a question about immigration policy. In these moments, eligibility to vote did not prohibit people from being able to participate in presidential elections.

### **2.6.3 Participating in Elections in the Era of the *Polimigra***

One salient theme across the behaviors of the IAOs in both states was their understanding and awareness of immigration surveillance and the ways in which it manifested across their communities. While matters of immigration are usually handled at the federal level, the enforcement has become increasingly local. The ways in which interior immigration enforcement manifests across communities is yet to be well-documented by scholars (A. S. Garcia 2019, 17), but is often discussed by advocacy groups whose members interact with these institutions with more frequency. One may measure the level of immigration surveillance in a state by counting

the number of 287(g) agreements per county (among other metrics). At the local level, sheriffs choose to have their county participate in the 287(g) agreement and police become deputized to act on behalf of ICE. Despite having formal agreements in place, like 287(g), we do not know much about the diverse ways in which surveillance actually happens in communities. For example, in Wisconsin, only one county (e.g., Waukesha County) held a formal 287(g) agreement. Despite only having one county with a 287(g) agreement there were instances of several immigration raids (e.g., throughout the past decade) that IAOs were familiar with. The raids spanned a range from municipal courthouse raids—where those paying a citation and accompanying others were apprehended by ICE (Zambo 2013)—to a statewide raid where 83 individuals were detained (Garza 2018), to individual raids. In Texas, statewide law (SB4) “requires local Texas law enforcement officers comply with ICE detainer requests and prohibits any Texas town or county or agency from limiting their assistance to ICE or Border Patrol” (SB4 Community Advisory, n.d.).<sup>73</sup> Apart from SB4 being in effect, Texas is a border state which means that based on how close one is to the border there is a possibility that one could interact with more than one agency at a time. In this case, the other agency was Customs Border Patrol (CBP).

This type of understanding and awareness around immigration enforcement and surveillance was important because IAOs knew their approaches during general elections had to be carefully thought out. By this, I mean that *Voceros* in Wisconsin were given “Know Your Rights” trainings prior to canvassing in case they encountered issues with local enforcement. In a New York Times article, the executive director explained that their *Vocero* approach was also appropriate for their community because one never knows if those knocking at your door are ICE

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<sup>73</sup> At the time of this writing SB4 was still in effect.



agents (Neumann-Ortiz 2020). This awareness demonstrates that the IAO knows that even if you are being canvassed because you are eligible to vote, there exists the possibility that others in your household do not (e.g., you belong to a mixed-status household). Their program allowed those legally vulnerable to participate in presidential elections from the comfort of their home if they chose to do so.<sup>74</sup>

Across both IAOs, staff had diverse experiences with immigration surveillance—directly and indirectly. For example, some of the Texas IAO staff described personal experiences where they encountered different instances of profiling on behalf of immigration enforcement agencies. One staff member discussed her experience canvassing within the 100-mile radius of the border.<sup>75</sup> She described being approached by CBP because it was “suspicious” to knock on doors in that community. Another staff member, a U.S. citizen, described being “kidnapped” by ICE because they did not believe that she was a U.S. citizen. She described being apprehended for three days until she was able to contact her family and provide paperwork that she was, in fact, a U.S. citizen. While not directly related to this presidential election, these experiences on behalf of the staff at this IAO, point to differences in participating and existing as Latinos in places like Texas. Latinos participating with the Wisconsin IAO did not have these types of experiences but generally perceived the targeting of Latinos in their community as racially charged. For example, one staff member was fully aware of the discretionary power held by his county sheriff to collaborate with ICE. At the city level, the sheriff told him that it was not in his interest to target the migrant community—the interview subject asked him directly at a meeting they had. At the county level, this staff member felt that Latinos pulled over near the highway were being racially

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<sup>74</sup> I will discuss these dynamics in detail in a chapter that focuses on the infrastructure of Latino mobilization.

<sup>75</sup> This particular experience was during a different election.

profiled, many of whom he knew were undocumented because he asserted that the sheriff was “racist.”<sup>76</sup> This individual also knew of a well-known community member that had been apprehended by ICE. In this instance, the staff member asserted that this individual had been targeted and followed because of his involvement with the community. This individual was eventually deported. These experiences are important to understand as they relate to Latino mobilization efforts because Latinos have to take into account these types of interactions with institutions when they plan to mobilize their communities.

While the IAO in Texas did not endorse a presidential candidate, they did endorse several local candidates that aligned with their views on immigration surveillance and labor conditions. They hosted several virtual “*charlas*” (talks) that spoke about the state of affairs particularly as it related to the “*polimigra*.” The word itself combines the words police and “*la migra*.”<sup>77</sup> In the “*charlas*” IAO members experiences with immigration enforcement were uplifted. For example, a member shared that her negative experience with “*la polimigra*” is what motivated her to become involved in her community and in the sheriff’s race. Another member, whom sat on the civic engagement committee and was involved in electoral decisions, made a pitch for voting and encouraged viewers of the “*charla*” to support political candidates that will make their neighborhoods safer. Through the “*charlas*” members shared both their common experiences with harassment and their fears of future harassment and deportation. By encouraging members to support the candidates that they endorsed at the local level, they demonstrated a sense of group consciousness and reinforced the importance of group ties as it related to the issues facing Latinos in those communities.

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<sup>76</sup> He further expressed that this was an issue that had been ongoing in his community—as expressed by other migrants who had been continuously pulled over.

<sup>77</sup> In the Latino community, immigration officials are often referred to as *la migra*.

At the end of the “*charla*” there were several short clips that were titled, “Hard work”, “Make a plan to vote”, and “*Los jornaleros te invitan a que votes*” (the laborers invite you to vote). These clips were centered around the idea that voting is power and that the 2020 election will decide the future of immigrant families. While candidates at the national level were not endorsed, the “*charla*” and clips depicted an urgency to participate in the 2020 elections.

Moreover, the content from the Texas IAO primarily focused on divestment from police, local law enforcement cooperation with ICE, family separation, systemic problems of police brutality, the importance of the census, know your rights information, and the importance of voting. The themes of immigration surveillance and enforcement manifested differently in Texas than they did in Wisconsin, which was expected given the statewide and county-level legislation in place. In terms of local-level endorsements, the IAOs included messaging that was in support of low-wage workers and immigrants in Texas (e.g., Wendy Davis). For example, the IAO posted messaging that cued that candidates stood against SB4 in Texas (e.g., Pooja Smith). Other posts endorsed sheriffs with a commitment to welcoming immigrants instead of committing to allocate more money toward immigration enforcement (e.g., Mike Renck). Other candidate endorsements included messages that they stood with everyone regardless of their immigration status (e.g., Jimmy Flannagan). Despite not endorsing a presidential candidate, the IAO posted content on election day that read, “*pronto llegara el dia de justicia y por ello hay que votar*” (soon the day of justice will come and for that, we must vote). This message was accompanied by a Latina woman singing in Spanish. The messaging on election day suggested that there has been much injustice, which perhaps alludes to the anti-immigrant hostility endured by Latinos prior to the election.

Although the Texas IAO did not endorse a presidential candidate, they endorsed local candidates with accommodating views towards immigrant communities and facilitated member engagement in the political process—regionally and nationally. In both cases, the IAOs understood that some of their members were voter-eligible while others were not—or at least not yet. By facilitating the socialization process in ways that demonstrated cultural sensitivities (e.g., cuing Latino identity), the IAOs mobilized some to vote and those that were ineligible to vote to engage those that could. While mobilization to the polls is important in and of itself, winning may not be the only metric we use when we gauge the successful mobilization of Latinos.<sup>78</sup>

## 2.7 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter contributes to our understanding of Latino electoral mobilization and immigrant incorporation in a few ways. First, it allows us to understand the role of mediating entities, like IAOs, in mobilizing Latinos to participate in presidential elections. In this chapter we see that IAOs go beyond the conventional roles of service provision intended to assist migrant communities. They proactively involve these individuals in the political process irrespective of their legal status. They also educate and integrate them fostering an understanding that their participation in this process could lead to tangible policy changes in the near future, such as ending a 287(g) agreement in their county, comprehensive immigration reform, or a halt to mass detention. This political education plays an important role when engaging these individuals in electoral politics. Second, this chapter allows us to understand the ways in which non-voting eligible Latinos participate beyond simple voting behavior. That is, Latinos, regardless of their legal status, can participate in a range of electoral activities such as phone-banking, wearing

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<sup>78</sup> I will discuss this further in “The Infrastructure of Latino Mobilization” chapter/article.

campaign stickers, following political campaigns, registering others to vote, and volunteering for candidates. Engaging in this range of activities can still help mobilize others in meaningful ways. While this chapter focuses on IAOs, Chapter 4 delves into other ways non-citizens engage in electoral activities.

Third, this chapter provides us insight into the diverse contextual realities of Latinos. For example, Latinos in Wisconsin and Texas experience immigration surveillance and enforcement in different ways. This manifested differently in their daily lives and was important when it came to mobilizing themselves and others during elections. In practice, this looked like ensuring members or “*Voceros*” knew their rights through “Know your Rights Trainings.” It also meant that IAOs included legally vulnerable members from the comfort of their homes via phonebanks and as *Voceros* while simultaneously considering their contextual realities as undocumented people.

By taking a close look at the IAOs investigated for this chapter, we are able to have a better understanding of how IAOs integrate Latinos and other marginalized communities in ways that few examinations have studied. Despite the vast literature on Latino and immigrant political behavior (Gonzales 2008; Jones-Correa 1998; J. Wong 2006) few are able to capture what it is about IAOs that makes them effective at mobilizing even the ineligible to vote. In turn, understanding what the IAOs do within their organization allows us to observe how they go about these processes with their membership.

My findings illustrated some of the ways in which the IAOs set the tone and culture in their gatherings. This was important because they adapted to their members and met them where they were at. What they said to each other in gatherings and meetings communicated their values and those values were reflected in their approaches when it came time to engage in electoral

efforts. For example, the inclusion of traditionally marginalized members of the community was a priority. The imagery, phrases, and words used across their electoral efforts often demonstrated an attempt to include all members of the broad Latino community in their efforts. They cued co-ethnic identity through language and depicted individuals who “looked like them” or used markers like national flags (e.g., Puerto Rico) in their artwork. Moreover, those grounded in the day-to-day work in the community did not convey this ethic of inclusion by using stereotypes. They did not parade around with mariachis. Instead, they created artwork that resembled the members of their community (e.g., essential workers, students, Latinos), used important symbols (e.g., the monarch butterfly), slogans that cued Latino identity and support for the Democratic ticket, and created communal events to invite Latinos, and allies, to participate.

During this unique time of a pandemic, IAOs continued to provide information about the U.S. Census, signed people up, and were there for their members when COVID-19 struck. They were also there for their community when the government left many of these families on their own because they did not qualify for a stimulus check. In fact, the IAOs created mutual aid funds and distributed what they could to families. In the months leading up to the election, IAOs also helped organize workers against employers when they were intimidated by no-match letters from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) after demanding PPE on the job site.<sup>79</sup> Many of these individuals later became directly involved in electoral activities where they were able to share their experiences (e.g., the meeting with Kamala Harris).

Both of the IAOs examined in this chapter actively transported their members to directly engage with the political party. One of the IAOs arranged a meeting between its members and Kamala Harris, while the other organized their attendance at a presidential debate. Despite the

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<sup>79</sup> This tactic is often used by employers to intimidate workers from seeking action in the workplace, especially if they suspect that they are undocumented (Gomberg-Munoz and Nussbaum-Barberena 2011).

party potentially viewing these interactions with community members or even Wisconsinites as inconsequential, as evidenced by the way candidate Hillary Clinton did not campaign personally in Wisconsin in 2016, it is important for parties to acknowledge the pivotal role played by intermediary organizations like IAOs in mobilizing Latino participation. These entities often possess a direct connection to the wider challenges of the community and have insights into the most effective ways to connect with other Latinos in their region, as was the case with one of the IAOs and their implementation of a relational voter program, covered in-depth in Chapter 4. In battleground states like Wisconsin, this has the potential to flip a state, even if it is by a slim margin. In Wisconsin, for instance, the IAO conducted over 20,000 conversations with individuals who pledged to vote for the Democratic Party, and the state was won in 2020 by less than 21,000 votes.

Finally, this chapter demonstrates that the field of political behavior needs more in-depth analyses of Latino organizations that are working to mobilize Latinos, particularly in less-studied places like the Midwest. Also, we ought to further consider the diversity in participation among Latinos, particularly along the dimensions of legal status. Incorporating Latinos even when they are not eligible to vote has the potential to build their notions of efficacy and desires to naturalize—if that possibility becomes available to them (e.g., naturalization options become available to them, or immigration reform is passed). There is a place for non-citizens to participate meaningfully in democracy even when they are unable to vote—as we will see in the next chapters of this dissertation.

## Chapter 3

### LA RADIO: ¿MOVILIZANDO EL VOTO LATINO?

*“Si usted vio el debate, ya se dio cuenta que esta pero verdaderamente patas pa’rriba el gobierno. Necesitamos un cambio y usted puede ayudar a lograrlo!”<sup>80</sup>*

– Eric Johnson and DJ Gallo, 2020

“On May 21, 2007, Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico formally announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. Notably, Richardson did not declare his intentions in his home state of New Mexico; rather the announcement was made over the airwaves of La Raza (97.9 FM), a Los Angeles-based Spanish-language radio station. To a syndicated listenership of nearly three million, Governor Richardson, in his native Spanish, explained to radio show host El Cucuy (“The Bogeyman”), *“Con orgullo, espero ser el primer presidente latino de los Estados Unidos: (“With pride, I hope to be the first Latino president of the United States”)*.

- Casillas (2014; 1)

### 3.1 Introduction

To date, Bill Richardson has been the only Latino politician to announce his candidacy for the presidency on Spanish-language radio (SLR), and very few have used SLR to speak directly to the Latino electorate. Richardson, along with former President Barack Obama, were interviewed a few times by prominent Latino DJs on SLR. However, this is not typically the norm for political figures, as many do not speak the language themselves or simply do not interview with SLR.<sup>81</sup> Given that political candidates, including those running for the presidency, and politicians in the U.S. generally do not communicate directly with the Spanish-speaking and

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<sup>80</sup> Translation is my own, “If you saw the debate, you already realized that the government is truly upside down. We need change and you can help make it happen.” Data from the on-air transmission of WYMY-FM on October 1, 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Former President Barack Obama interviewed in English while on-air.



bilingual audiences through the airwaves, there is limited understanding of the dynamics of Spanish-language radio, including the content broadcast during elections and the individuals delivering electoral messaging to Latinos.<sup>82</sup>

This is important to understand because mass media plays a key role in the everyday lives of people, providing access to news, entertainment, and global events through various broadcast and interpersonal platforms like smartphones, televisions, and radios (Noll 2007; Schulz 2014). In the context of U.S. elections, mass media facilitates informing the public about candidates, their platforms, key election events such as debates and forums, and facilitates the transmission of campaign propaganda to the U.S. public (Dunaway and Graber 2022; Goldenberg and Traugott 1987; Kelley 1962; Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2005; Valentino 2001). Furthermore, the mass media, in the U.S. and elsewhere, serves as a cornerstone in maintaining the integrity of democratic institutions and representative democracy (Carey 1993; Bucy and Gregson 2001; Schudson 2002; Arthur 2010). However, disparities in access to information via mass media persist, influenced by factors like language preference or cultural identity, particularly for marginalized communities with diverse linguistic backgrounds (Bronheim, Soto, and Anthony 2015; De Jesus and Xiao 2012; Kusters et al. 2023; Steel Fisher et al. 2022). While mass media delivers information predominantly in English, certain ethnoracial groups, such as Latinos, may prefer alternative language options that niche media platforms, such as Spanish-language radio, can provide.

The diversity among Latinos, both as a group and geographically, highlights the need for gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics of niche media platforms, such as Spanish-language radio, in public affairs and elections—areas of study that we know less about. These

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<sup>82</sup> I am referring specifically to Spanish-language radio and not Spanish-language television. Further, I view SLR as a co-ethnic intermediary in this dissertation.

insights also emphasize the need to consider place-based happenings and the role of Latinos in the regions we study, including the on-air messaging directed at them. For instance, what occurs in Texas or North Carolina may differ from broadcasts in a mid-size city in Wisconsin, reflecting the diverse Latino compositions and potentially varying partisan preferences in these areas.

As I argued and demonstrated in the previous chapter, contextual differences matter in how IAOs incorporate Latinos of all legal statuses in their electoral work and how they help construct political identities in places like Wisconsin and Texas. While IAO messaging and encouragement for participation were similar across both states in terms of cultural inclusion, IAOs tailored their approaches based on real or perceived levels of immigration surveillance. If regional organizations adapt their messaging and strategies to engage Latinos in politics, it should be no different for Spanish-language radio. But how does Spanish-language radio accomplish this, and what can we expect to hear?

This chapter builds on these insights and aims to address this gap in the scholarship by delving into the nature and contours of Spanish-language radio, particularly its role in presidential elections. To date, much of our understanding of Spanish-language radio, Latinos, and politics focuses on non-electoral Latino participation in the context of H.R. 4437 (Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Ramírez 2011, 2013; Zepeda-Millan 2017) and other restrictive immigration policies (e.g., SB 1070, Proposition 187) (Campbell 2011; Jacobson 2008; Nill 2011; Su 2019; Wallace 2014). Yet, we lack an understanding of the role of Spanish-language radio and its role in fostering political engagement among Latinos during elections in contemporary times.

Spanish-language radio has played a unique role in socializing and politicizing the Latino community in the United States (Casillas 2014; Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Ramírez

2011, 2013; Zepeda-Millan 2017) and continues to do so. I begin this chapter with an overview of Spanish-language radio in the U.S. and its role on political behavior. Then, I explore how Spanish-language radio motivates Latinos to participate politically, and if such encouragement varies across regions. Further, I investigate the extent to which these stations and Spanish-language radio communications promote participation. Do stations and DJs continue to collaborate with Latino organizations as they did following H.R. 4437? What role do broadcast ads play compared to the role of hosts and other radio content? Drawing on original data, this chapter examines SLR operations across selected states and stations, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for Latino socialization and mobilization during elections. As such, this chapter offers insights into the contours of Spanish-language radio and its role in presidential elections in the U.S.

## **3.2 Spanish-language Radio in the United States**

### **History**

The early stages of Spanish-language radio in the United States initially involved purchasing airtime from English radio stations during off-peak hours to reach English-speaking audiences (Albarran 2009; Albarran and Hutton 2009; Paxman 2018). Shows featuring Spanish-language programming were often sourced from Latin America rather than produced by Latinos within the U.S. (Casillas 2014). However, as Latinos gained access to more airtime, they diversified their programming to address topics relevant to U.S. Latino communities.

The U.S. government's efforts to assimilate immigrants, including Mexicans, prompted initiatives aimed at Americanizing them, which were put into action through state-led campaigns and policies (Barrett 1992; Galindo 2011; M. T. Garcia 1978; Nuys 2002). Despite limited

airtime, Spanish-language radio DJs began discussing public affairs and politics as early as the 1920s. Pedro González, regarded as the first Spanish-language DJ in the U.S., used his platform to resist initiatives like Operation Wetback, which led to the deportation of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (Casillas 2014; J. R. García 1980; K. L. Hernández 2006). Gonzalez's role not only challenged the conventional norms of radio hosts but also pushed back against nativist policies, a trend that would later be seen among contemporary Latino DJs. In this capacity, Gonzalez offered alternative perspectives to mainstream political discourse, which was often presented in English and from an Anglo-centric lens. Although such social and political discourse was unconventional and often discouraged at the time, it laid the groundwork for the role of Spanish-language radio in contemporary times (Casillas 2014).

Facing constraints on programming autonomy, Latinos sought alternative solutions. However, it wasn't until the 1940s that Raul Cortez, a Latino, acquired a radio station in San Antonio, Texas, becoming the first Latino-owned full-time Spanish-language radio station in the U.S. (A. Albarran 2009; Schement and Flores 1977). Subsequently, the number of Spanish-language radio stations, both Latino and non-Latino-owned, grew, leading to a boom in Spanish-language radio from the 1980s to the early 2000s (D. A. B. Albarran and Hutton 2009; Castañeda Paredes 2003). Throughout this period and continuing to the present, influential radio personalities have risen within the Latino community (Casillas 2022), assuming the role of intermediaries between Latinos and institutions, such as political parties, striving to reach them.

### **Spanish-language Radio and the “*Mega Marchas*”**

In 2005, Representative James “Jim” Sensenbrenner, of Wisconsin's 5<sup>th</sup> congressional district,

proposed H.R. 4437.<sup>83</sup> This bill pushed for restrictive immigration policies and was intended to criminalize the unlawful presence of the undocumented, make it a felony for those living in the United States under these legal statuses, and increase border security, among other measures to punish individuals with these legal statuses (Barreto et al. 2009; Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Pantoja, Menjívar, and Magaña 2008; Silber Mohamed 2010). In December of 2005, H.R. 4437 passed the House of Representatives with strong support from the Republican Party and some backing from Democrats resulting in a 239-182 vote (Vargas 2006). In the ensuing months, Latinos, a group that would have been primarily affected by harsh immigration policies such as the Sensenbrenner bill became politically activated and took to the streets *en masse* (Barreto et al. 2009; Benjamin-Alvarado, DeSipio, and Montoya 2009; Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Silber Mohamed 2010).

The *mega marchas* of 2006, mobilized millions of Latinos across the country in response to proposed anti-immigrant legislation and Spanish-language media played an important role in this process (Barreto et al. 2009; Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008). In particular, Spanish-language radio, and key disk jockeys, along with local immigrant advocacy organizations and activists, helped mobilize Latinos across the country (Barreto et al. 2009; Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Zepeda-Millan 2017). Radio DJs like Eduardo *El Piolín* Sotelo, Renan *El Cucuy* Almendárez Coello, Ricardo *El Mandril* Sanchez, and countless others scattered across the country were instrumental in these efforts as they actively encouraged listeners through their widely syndicated shows to participate in *las marchas*. In addition to actively encouraging their radio audience to participate in *las marchas* they collaborated with local advocacy organizations and activists to inform and mobilize listeners (Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Zepeda-

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<sup>83</sup> Also known as the Sensenbrenner bill.

Millan 2017). In practice, this looked like giving local activists and organizations airtime to promote their cause (Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Zepeda-Millan 2017).

Zepeda-Millán's account in "*Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, and Activism*" (2017) well-documents the role of organizations and activists in collaboration with Spanish-language radio in 2006. During his fieldwork, he notes that the tactics used to mobilize Latinos in response to H.R. 4437 were not entirely new but that similar tactics had also been used in response to previous restrictive immigrant legislative proposals such as Proposition 187 in California in 1994, which has also been documented by other scholars (Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008).<sup>84</sup>

### **Spanish-language Radio and Latino Group Threat**

This begs the question, are Latinos still being mobilized by Spanish-language radio despite the passage of a decade and a half? If they are, then how are local DJs and organizations contributing to this endeavor? What does the on-air rallying of Latinos sound like during presidential elections?

The 2020 presidential election presents a unique opportunity to examine what this discourse sounded like on Spanish-language radio. While H.R. 4437 and Proposition 187 were legislative proposals, at the state and federal level, the presidency of Donald Trump, and potential re-election presented different challenges to Latinos in the U.S. (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020). At the time, legislative proposals like H.R. 4437 were more viable in a moment in time when gridlock did not prevail in Congress (Kane 2018); however, the policy-making norm in contemporary times has shifted towards increased use of executive unilateral action (Cooper

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<sup>84</sup> In 1994, the state of California passed ballot-initiative Proposition 187. The initiative restricted undocumented immigrants from accessing many public services across the state.

2014; Driesen 2018). At the state and local level, efforts to pass restrictive immigration laws, such as 287(g) and statewide copycat laws, have occurred with greater frequency across the U.S. (Arrocha 2011; Nguyen and Gill 2016; Pham 2018; Wallace 2014) and increased under Trump (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020; Pham 2018). Federally, the Trump administration implemented various restrictive immigration policies, including the controversial zero-tolerance policy that led to the separation of children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border (de la Peña, Pineda, and Punskey 2019), as well as attempts to rescind DACA and end TPS (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020).

Regarding xenophobic rhetoric and policies, especially those targeting Latinos and immigrants, the research indicates heightened political involvement among Latinos due to perceived group threat (Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura 2001; Pantoja and Segura 2003). Additionally, research suggests that Latinos may often share a perception of a Latino-linked fate, particularly along the dimensions of pan-ethnicity, immigration, and race (Sanchez and Masuoka 2010).<sup>85</sup> If increased anti-immigrant and anti-Latino discourse and policies prompt Latinos to engage politically, coupled with a perception of a Latino-linked fate, it is also probable that Latinos will amplify their attention to these issues and the potential re-election of Trump through the Spanish-language airwaves.

*¿A que venimos? A triunfar: SLR connection to the community and reach*<sup>86</sup>

Radio DJs, particularly those on Spanish-language radio stations, often share parallel life experiences with their listeners. Many DJs have migrated to the United States, worked in various

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<sup>85</sup> Sanchez and Masuoka (2010) suggest that the notion of “linked fate” functions differently for Latinos given the diverging historical trajectories among the pan ethnic group. Whereas Dawson’s (1994) idea of linked fate, among African Americans, is conceptualized as sharing a similar historical trajectory across the group.

<sup>86</sup> The phrase is used to reference coming to the United States to “succeed.”

blue and brown-collar jobs, faced discrimination, and navigated the complexities of adjusting their immigration status. On air, DJs fulfill numerous roles as conveyors of information, champions of social justice, intermediaries, companions, and entertainers. They frequently employ distinctive phrases that set them apart from their competitors and are often considered influential figures within their communities. For instance, *El Piolin*, a nationally syndicated host, frequently motivates his audience with the phrase: "*¿A que venimos? A triunfar!*" while others may offer their own uplifting messages to accompany their often, legally and economically vulnerable listeners during their day (Casillas 2014, 2022, 2022).

On a local level, DJs, in conjunction with their radio stations, often actively engage with their communities through various events such as remote broadcasts, festivals, town hall meetings, and radio campaigns. Remote broadcasts can involve covering live events at a client's business or documenting community-led protests. Festivals serve not only as sources of entertainment, often musical, but can also serve as collaborative efforts between local Latino organizations and those seeking to connect with Latino communities. Town hall meetings and radio campaigns may see local DJs participating as panelists, posing questions to political candidates about policies and their impact on Latinos, or organizing fundraising efforts for charity and encouraging Latino voter turnout.

Despite the profit-driven nature of commercial radio stations, community-building efforts remain important in understanding the role and potential influence of DJs (Casillas 2022) on electoral mobilization. At the national level, syndicated DJs reach audiences across regional and smaller market Spanish-language radio stations, integrating their shows into local programming. Conversely, regional and local DJs often host their own morning shows, offering context-specific content that resonates with their communities. In regional and smaller radio markets, DJs may



serve as key sources of regional media, providing listeners with content relevant to their localities in their language and fostering a deeper sense of connection within their communities.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous regional Spanish-language radio stations took the initiative to provide Latino communities with vital local information. In Madison, Wisconsin, WLMV 1480, known as *La Movida*, spearheaded a comprehensive on-air session aimed at equipping Latinos with crucial resources and information, irrespective of their legal status. Topics covered included updates on the pandemic, details about the U.S. census, how to safely report domestic abuse, and information on early voting. Originally scheduled for two hours, the session was extended to three due to the high volume of calls and engagement from listeners.<sup>87</sup> During this time, over 37 percent of Latinos reported increased radio listening during the pandemic (Flores 2020). This trend may have been particularly pronounced in regions where radio served as the primary source of regional news and information accessible in Spanish.

Among Latinos, Spanish-language radio stations have a large reach even with the expansion of social media. Despite the changing listening habits in the U.S. because of the advancement of technology, radio is still broadly accessible (Casillas 2014) and reaches at least 95 percent of the population every week (Nielsen 2019). Among Latinos, radio reaches 95 to 97 percent of the population monthly (Nielsen 2023).<sup>88</sup> This preference for radio among Latinos may be influenced by factors such as localized information and entertainment available in their

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<sup>87</sup> Depending on the station ownership, radio programmers tend to have discretion over decisions like this one to extend coverage and move radio programming around. This coverage received recognition by TIME Magazine for helping bridge the information gap between the Latino community and public health in a time of uncertainty. I helped facilitate this on-air broadcast.

<sup>88</sup> A Nielsen report (2023) shows that radio had the highest monthly reach among Latinos relative to the total U.S. population.

preferred language, as well as the free and widespread accessibility both at home and on the go.

**Table 3.1: Monthly Reach Percent Among the U.S. Population**

	Hispanic 18+	Hispanic 18-34	Hispanic 35-49	Hispanic 50+
Radio	95%	92%	97%	97%
Live+time-shifted TV	87%	79%	89%	95%
Smartphone	89%	92%	91%	82%
TV-connected devices	88%	89%	92%	81%
PC	68%	71%	73%	58%
Tablet	54%	51%	61%	52%

Source: Nielsen NPOWER, Nielsen RADAR, Nielsen Total Media Fusion - Q4 2022 in Nielsen Audio Today 2023 “How America listens client report, June 2023

To date, much research in political science regarding elections and Spanish-language media has centered on the role of television and outreach to Latinos (Marisa Abrajano 2010; Subervi-Velez 2009). Comparatively, less attention has been given to the role of Spanish-language radio. By failing to adequately consider the role of Spanish-language radio on Latino outreach, despite its extensive reach of up to 97 percent of the Latino population monthly, our understanding of media impact on Latino mobilization remains limited. Existing research has primarily focused on Spanish-language radio’s involvement in protest politics, particularly evident during the 2006 mega marches (Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Zepeda-Millan 2017). In this line of research, studies revealed the influential role of radio DJs like *El Piolín* in rallying Latinos to participate in political activism, particularly in protesting against anti-immigrant legislation like H.R. 4437. Additionally, many of these DJs, alongside community-based organizations, have played important roles in socializing and facilitating the political

incorporation of Latinos into U.S. politics through on-air segments, commentary, and interviews.<sup>89</sup>

If radio personalities such as *El Piolín* were capable of motivating listeners to engage in politics and public affairs broadly, then investigating how DJs achieve this within the context of presidential politics merits attention. How does Spanish-language radio motivate its audience to participate despite the diverse legal statuses within the community? Are there distinctive approaches that Spanish-language radio employs to encourage audience involvement in these processes? How does the medium of radio help shape the role of Latinos in presidential elections? I illuminate the answers to these questions by examining how this is done along with other co-ethnic intermediaries to influence Latino political participation.

### 3.3 Latinos, Mass Media, and Elections

While politicians and candidates have convenient access to the American public through mainstream English media, particularly those targeting the general market, their engagement with Spanish-language media is less common due to linguistic barriers. It was not until 2008 that presidential primary debates started being aired on major Spanish-language television networks like Univision (Eshbaugh-Soha and Balarezo 2014). Over the years and decades, various presidential candidates and U.S. presidents such as Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, George H.W. Bush, Jeb Bush, and others, have been featured on interviews in these networks.<sup>90</sup> Usually, when candidates and presidents receive coverage on these

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<sup>89</sup> *El Piolín* featured a special segment where radio listeners were invited to answer citizenship questions similar to those asked on a U.S. citizenship test. This on-air contest was named, “Who wants to be a Citizen?” (Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Gorman and Delson 2007)

<sup>90</sup> Presidents and presidential candidates included here appeared in interviews with Univision from 1990 – 2023. The majority of interviews were conducted by journalists, but some appeared on American Spanish-language

platforms, they attract additional attention from Spanish-language media when visiting states along the U.S.–Mexico border (Eshbaugh-Soha and Balarezo 2014). Beyond coverage of candidates on the campaign trail or while in office, a large portion of candidates’ Latino communication efforts are directed toward campaign advertisements on Spanish-language television (Abrajano 2010). Broadly, studies on election coverage in Latino-based media have focused on the role of television (Alexandre and Reh binder 2008; Constantakis-Valdés 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha and Balarezo 2014; Hale, Olsen, and Fowler 2008), with earlier research exploring election coverage in Latino newspapers (Subervi-Velez et al. 2008).<sup>91</sup>

In the U.S., most Latinos are bilingual (Abrajano and Panagopoulos 2011), can carry conversations in Spanish, and among the group, Spanglish is widely used (Lopez 2023). While they have the choice between accessing general English-language or Spanish-language media, Latino-focused coverage within English-language media remains limited (Chávez 2015). When tuning into Spanish-language media, Latinos frequently seek commentary through the lens of Latinos (Alexandre and Reh binder 2008; Subervi-Velez 2009), because the content is likely relevant to their lives, and display a strong inclination for radio consumption (Nielsen 2023). Moreover, in specific regions of the country, Latinos heavily depend on the limited Spanish-language outlets, such as radio, for their primary sources of information in a familiar language (Castañeda Paredes 2003).

Rarely do party candidates appear on Spanish-language radio, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. However, in 2007, Bill Richardson, the governor of New Mexico and a Latino presidential hopeful, recognized the influence of Spanish-language radio and announced his

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entertainment pop culture news shows as well. The majority of interviews were conducted in English, except for the interview with Jeb Bush who is fluent in Spanish.

<sup>91</sup> Contemporary ad spending occurs mostly on television, radio, and through digital platforms.

candidacy on the broadcast of *La Raza* with *El Cucuy* (Casillas 2014). And during his presidency, Barack Obama participated in several interviews with renowned DJs, including *El Piolin* and the popular afternoon show, *Erazno y La Chokolata*.<sup>92</sup> These examples help illustrate the few prominent politicians who have directly engaged with Spanish-language radio to connect with Latinos. At the local level, politicians and aspiring candidates may have a different approach to engaging with the Latino community in their area.

### 3.4 Data and Methodology

My scope of research in this investigation is Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Texas. Despite former President Trump's pledges to ramp up interior immigration enforcement (American Immigration Council 2017), bolster border security at the U.S.-Mexico border (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020; Clua-Losada 2022), and targeting of Latinos during his reelection campaign (Canizales and Vallejo 2021); the implementation of interior immigration policies largely lies with individual states and jurisdictions (T. K. Wong 2012). Latinos, aside from encountering scapegoating and nativist policies as outlined by Trump, also expressed concerns about healthcare, the impacts of COVID-19, and employment issues affecting their communities before the general election (Dominguez-Villegas and Tomaskovic-Devey 2020; Zamarripa and Roque 2021).

If we consider the saying, "all politics is local" and consider the role of SLR and DJs as advocates and allies for the legally and economically vulnerable (Casillas 2014), while also serving as information conduits, it becomes evident that examining local or regional radio

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<sup>92</sup> See

([https://www.google.com/search?q=Piolin+entrevista+con+barack+obama&oq=Piolin+entrevista+con+barack+obama&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyCQgAEEUYORigATIHCQEQRigATIHCQIRirAtIBCTEwODU0ajBqN6gCALAACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:03b9dd98,vid:\\_WtJQoKFrI0,st:0](https://www.google.com/search?q=Piolin+entrevista+con+barack+obama&oq=Piolin+entrevista+con+barack+obama&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyCQgAEEUYORigATIHCQEQRigATIHCQIRirAtIBCTEwODU0ajBqN6gCALAACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:03b9dd98,vid:_WtJQoKFrI0,st:0)) and ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6J6x\\_BbMg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6J6x_BbMg)).

stations in these states can offer valuable insights into the discourse surrounding policies affecting Latinos at the local and federal level.<sup>93</sup> Previous scholarship also highlights SLR’s outspokenness on issues related to “*la migra*” (immigration enforcement) (Casillas 2014), with these states showcasing differing levels of immigration surveillance, as demonstrated by local enforcement agreements such as 287(g). Moreover, one of these states shares a border with Mexico, while another serves as a new immigrant destination state (Terrazas 2011). Additionally, at least two of these states are deemed competitive or battleground states, and all harbor diverse Latino populations (Tippett 2021; Ura 2023; U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

**Table 3.2: 287(g) Participation per State in 2020<sup>94</sup>**

<b>State</b>	<b>Counties Participating in 287(g) Agreements Before Presidential Election</b>	<b>Total Counties per State</b>
<b>Wisconsin</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Texas</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>254</b>

Source: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Census Bureau

## Methodology

Although technological progress has facilitated the use of tools like artificial intelligence for capturing and transcribing audio from radio broadcasts, these advancements are not as readily accessible for analyzing U.S.-Spanish-language radio.<sup>95</sup> While national shows are typically

<sup>93</sup> Trounstein (2009) discusses the importance of studying local politics to help inform our understanding of national politics. In this context, understanding local or regional radio and how specific localities talk about federal policies in their own backyard is important to understand when examining niche radio.

<sup>94</sup> In future iterations of this research, I will include a metric that allows me to capture the total share of Latinos per state that are covered by 287(g) counties.

<sup>95</sup> RadioTalk, for example, is a “large scale corpus of talk radio transcripts.” RadioTalk has mostly been used to analyze talk radio in English.

available in podcast form, the same cannot be said for most regional and local radio programs. Bearing this in mind, I employ diverse approaches to comprehensively understand the role of SLR.

In preparation for the 2020 elections, I contacted radio station programmers to find out if they broadcast their shows live. Many do not. While national shows are often available as podcasts on popular streaming platforms, this is less common for local or regional broadcasts unless they are sponsored by a client. Since stations do not generally have their broadcasts available, I engaged in an extensive data collection effort. I collected data before and after the 2020 presidential election across eight regional radio platforms by making audio recordings of broadcasts while streaming them online.

This enabled me to capture discussion surrounding the election prior to the defeat of Trump and during the beginning of his contestation of the election results. Additionally, I collected broadcast radio advertisements to better understand the messaging reaching Latinos from political candidates, interest groups, and voter information sources. To gain insight into the daily operations of SLR, I conducted participant observation at regional radio stations from November 2021 through February 2023. Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with various regional radio hosts during my visits to inquire about their perceptions of their role in this process. Through this combination of methods, I was able to comprehensively examine SLR, uncovering insights into its nature and unique characteristics.

### **Discourse Analysis**

To understand the nature of SLR and its role in engaging Latinos in electoral participation, I examined the discourse of regional radio programs. Specifically, at the regional level, I analyzed the content of programs aired by local stations in three states: Wisconsin, North

Carolina, and Texas. Within these states, I analyzed radio shows broadcast in cities including Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Raleigh, Charlotte, Houston, and Dallas. I manually recorded live broadcasts aired Monday through Friday between October 1<sup>st</sup> and December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020. To access these broadcasts, I downloaded radio station applications or radio streaming platforms such as TuneIn to listen to and record the live broadcasts.<sup>96</sup> The selected stations predominantly followed the Mexican Regional format, with one station in the Spanish Tropical format.<sup>97</sup>

**Table 3.3: Characteristics of Spanish-Language Radio Stations and Cities (2020)**

<b>Station</b>	<b>Show</b>	<b>Radio Format</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>City Population</b>	<b>Percent People of Color in City</b>	<b>Percent of Latinos in City</b>	<b>Median Household Income in City</b>
<b>WLMV</b>	Wicho y La Bola	Mexican Regional	Madison, WI	259,680	26.4%	7%	\$65,332
<b>WAUN-FM</b>	El Show Electrificante con Gabby Gamboa	Mexican Regional	Green Bay, WI	104,578	31.3%	15.8%	\$49,251
<b>WDDW</b>	JC BOY	Mexican Regional	Milwaukee, WI	590,157	64.9%	19%	\$41,838
<b>KMVK-FM</b>	El Chiquilin todas las Mañanas	Mexican Regional	Dallas, TX	1,343,573	71%	41.8%	\$52,580
<b>K283CH</b>	El Desmorning Show	Mexican Regional	Houston, TX	2,320,268	75.6%	45%	\$52,338
<b>WYMY-FM</b>	El Despertador	Mexican Regional	Raleigh, NC	474,069	46.9%	11.2%	\$67,266
<b>WOLS-FM</b>	Los Hijos de la Mañana	Mexican Regional	Charlotte, NC	885,708	58.5%	14.3%	\$62,817
<b>WGSP-FM</b>	La Voz	Spanish Tropical	Charlotte, NC	885,708	58.5%	14.3%	\$62,817

Sources: Radio Station Websites and the U.S. Census

<sup>96</sup> TuneIn is a global streaming application that includes access to several radio stations across the U.S.

<sup>97</sup> Mexican regional is the most popular format in SLR (Nielsen 2014).



Typically, the radio programs aired between 5 A.M. through 3 P.M. According to Nielsen (2014), these were peak times for Latino listenership.<sup>98</sup> The majority of the programs I analyzed were morning shows, with few exceptions.<sup>99</sup> Employing a purposive sampling strategy (Patton 2002; Ritchie et al. 2013; Suri 2011), I selected “information-rich” cases selecting shows that can offer deep insights into the research questions posed here rather than generalizable findings, guided by industry insights (Nielsen 2014). Based on this approach, I chose specific dates and times to record the shows. Following this, I selected available Spanish-language radio stations in Wisconsin, given its smaller radio market, and SLRs in larger cities in North Carolina and Texas. Then, I tuned in during the times suggested by the industry and captured recordings of each show up to the first hour and a half of airtime.<sup>100</sup> Within this timeframe, there were approximately 54 shows per station and around 432 shows overall.<sup>101</sup>

The majority of these shows offered a blend of news and entertainment content. They featured diverse segments covering topics ranging from horoscopes, and sports to popular culture, news updates, and regional DJ interjections. The duration of these interjections varied, typically lasting anywhere from one to several minutes, depending on the DJ’s style. While the frequency of DJ interjections varied across stations, there were usually at least two per hour. Additionally, regional stations often incorporated at least one nationally syndicated show into their programming lineup each day. For instance, in Milwaukee, WDDW, also known as “*La Gran D*,” aired “*El Bueno, La Mala, y El Feo*” from 5 AM to 10 AM, followed by a mix of

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<sup>98</sup> In their report, they suggest that Latinos tune into radio the most during their morning commute from 6 A.M. to 10 A.M. and during the day from 10 A.M. to 3 P.M.

<sup>99</sup> Radio stations in mid-size or smaller markets often rely on nationally syndicated shows to fill in airtime. When this was the case, I resorted to collecting data for a show that included local DJs, usually a mid-day show.

<sup>100</sup> When available, not all shows ran this long.

<sup>101</sup> While performing data cleaning, I noticed that some show files were defective. I made a record of this in my data files, noting the few instances of defects.

national and regional shows throughout the day. The regional DJ took the airwaves from 12 PM to 4 PM. These programs diverged from traditional talk shows, as noted by Berry and Sobieraj (2011) in their analysis of English-language talk radio. All the radio shows included in this analysis featured a mix of music, entertainment, DJ banter, and interjections. All were broadcasted on FM stations.<sup>102</sup>

Prior to the data analysis, I manually cleaned all data files, retaining only the on-air discourse of radio DJs and all radio advertisements.<sup>103</sup> Once the data was cleaned, the audio from individual shows typically ranged from 20 to 50 minutes in length, including radio advertisements. Following the data-cleaning process, I listened to each show and composed detailed memos outlining the overall operations and communications of each station.

### **Radio Advertisements/Spots**

In addition to capturing the audio of the regional shows, I also recorded the on-air advertisements, commonly referred to as spots, within the same timeframe. In essence, my data encompasses radio advertisements aired on regional SLR from October 1, 2020 – December 15, 2020. The radio spots about elections were categorized into four types: (1) political campaign advertisements, (2) issue or non-candidate political advertising, (3) general non-partisan voter information, and (4) general non-partisan election advertising. The duration of these spots ranged from 30 seconds to one minute and a half. During the listening process, I took notes on their sponsors, messaging or appeals employed to target Latino audiences and their frequency.

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<sup>102</sup> I do not analyze AM stations in this analysis for consistency across radio formats in the analysis. Additionally, not all states have Spanish-language AM stations.

<sup>103</sup> The only station that I did not have local radio spots for was KMVK-FM. I used TuneIn radio for this show and noticed that the TuneIn radio gave me local spots, which were not located in Texas. All other stations included their local spots.

Table 3.4: Radio Spot Typology

Radio Spot Type	Characteristics/Differences	Example
Candidate Political Campaign Advertisement	Ad usually includes a candidate sponsored message and a variation of “this message is endorsed by X political candidate/I’m X candidate and I support this message”	“We are the ones who get up early every day to keep the economy going. Those of us who harvest the fruits to feed our country and those of us who cook too... I’m Joe Biden and I approve this message”
Partisan Issue or Non-Candidate Political Advertising	Ad usually includes a 501(c)(4) sponsored message and a variation of “this message is brought to you by X 501(c)(4)/PAC and not endorsed by any political candidate...”	“Hello, I’m Dolores Huerta. I have fought for Latino civil rights my entire life. Your voice and your vote are very important in this election... And I have learned that we have tremendous power if we vote together. Let’s vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Yes, we can! ... this message was brought to you by...”
General Non-Partisan Voter Information	Ad usually is sponsored by local government or 501(c)(3) non-profit, relays general voting information, and does not endorse any political candidate	“... Look, bring me your cell phone, write MCP to [number] and the moms with power will send you information by text. They will tell you where and how to register!
General Non-Partisan Election Advertising	Ad is usually sponsored by a 501(c)(3)/non-profit, does not endorse a political candidate, but messaging demonstrates preferences for or against a political candidate, and usually includes voter information	“...How much did you pay in taxes last year? And what benefits did you receive in return? Trump abuses the system and because of him we have lost thousands of lives this year. Latinos in North Carolina can change the outcome of the elections. Register and vote early at [website]...”

### Participant Observation

To further understand the dynamics of SLR within Latino communities, I conducted participant observation at several of the Spanish-language radio stations and in their corresponding

communities. I use my brief prior experience as an on-air Spanish-language host to establish connections with some hosts and stations ahead of the 2020 general election. Consequently, I was invited to co-organize a Spanish-language radio conference, granting me access to numerous stations and programmers nationwide. These spanned media markets of varying sizes, including top-rated hosts mentioned earlier in this study.

Between November 2021 and February 2023, I visited five out of eight radio stations and observed the radio shows of five stations in this study.<sup>104</sup> These observations occurred following the lifting of various COVID-19 restrictions. I attended radio shows and, whenever possible, events in which the radio stations were involved in cities such as Madison, Milwaukee, Green Bay, Dallas, and Houston. I attended radio shows generally between 5 A.M. to 3 P.M. on the days when I visited the stations. Whenever possible, I also visited local Latino businesses and organizations in the area to gauge the Latino demographic composition of the specific areas served by the stations. On occasions, these stations collaborated with these entities for specific events or festivals, broadcasting remotely from the locations or events.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

After most radio shows, I interviewed Spanish-language radio hosts, many of whom also served as radio programmers at their stations. Some hosts worked independently on-air, while others collaborated with colleagues. In total, I interviewed nine hosts. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, with one conducted online. All interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. Through these interviews, I sought to understand how the DJs perceived themselves and

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<sup>104</sup> The radio show aired in Milwaukee, Wisconsin was moved to a remote broadcast during COVID-19 and was still broadcast remotely when I requested to visit the station.

their role within the community. Subsequently, I reviewed the audio recordings and transcripts, creating memos that captured the DJs' perceptions of themselves in this context.

**Table 3.5: Interview Subject Characteristics**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Show Type</b>	<b>Show Length</b>	<b>Radio Market Size</b>
Male	Morning Show	5 AM – 10 AM	Large
Female	Midday Show	1 PM – 3 PM	Small
Female	Midday Show	1 PM – 3 PM	Small
Female	Morning Show	6 AM – 10 AM	Midsize
Male	Midday Show	12 PM – 1 PM	Midsize
Male	Morning Show	6 AM – 10 AM	Midsize
Male	Morning Show	6 AM – 10 AM	Midsize
Female	Morning Show	6 AM – 10 AM	Midsize
Male	Morning Show	6 AM – 9AM	Small

## **3.5 Findings**

### **3.5.1 Radio Structure and Radio Communications**

One of the primary objectives Spanish-language radio stations is to cultivate a connection with listeners who tune in regularly. This often occurs during daily commutes, facilitated by terrestrial transmitters commonly found in cars or via smartphone applications, as well as through established community relationships. How radio shows and DJs achieve this rapport vary

depending on the stations and other factors, such as their for-profit or non-profit status, but the ultimate aim is to retain listeners and foster engagements with the show and stations. In this analysis, all stations were for-profit.

As evidenced in analyses of national-level SLR, DJs frequently address an audience that predominantly identifies as working-class and often experiences legal and economic vulnerability (Casillas 2011, 2014, 2022). At the regional level, local DJs recognize that their audience shares similarities with those discussed in national SLR analyses. For instance, in this study, many regional DJs greeted their audience with messages that largely resonated with working-class identities, occasionally referencing other identities such as religious background or legal status. During these on-air interactions, DJs also extended greetings to those at home, typically women, who hosts portrayed as fulfilling traditional gender roles such as preparing children for school or packing lunch for their spouses as they embarked on their commutes. In addition to greeting their audience, DJs frequently included brief motivational messages to inspire their listeners. For example, in North Carolina, one radio show greeted its audience with:

Locutor Uno: [Música de fondo “Hay que bonita es esta vida”] Buenos días amigos oyentes de [show matutino].<sup>105</sup> 6:15 minutos de la mañana. Hoy ya tenemos seis días [aplauzo y pista de un arrullo de gallo] del mes de octubre. El mes de la herencia hispana...

DJ One: [Background music “This life is so beautiful”] Good morning listener friends of [morning show]. Six and 15 minutes in the morning. Today, we already have six days [cheering and rooster coo track] of the month of October. Hispanic heritage month.

Locutor Dos: Muy, muy, muy, pero muy buenos días [al otro locutor], para usted, para el todopoderoso, para nuestros oyentes. Que como decimos a cada mañana, se conectan con nosotros a través de [show matutino] a través de todas nuestras plataformas acá en Charlotte, en los condados de Carolina del Norte, en Estados Unidos, en el mundo. Todos los que nos escuchan a esta hora, un cordial saludo...

DJ Two: Very, very, very, very good morning [to DJ one], to you, to the almighty, to our listeners. As we say every morning, they connect with us through [morning show] through all our platforms here in Charlotte, in the counties of North Carolina, in the United States, in the world. Everyone who is listening to us at this time, a cordial greeting.

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<sup>105</sup> The background intro song that this morning radio show plays is Colombian artist, Jorge Celedón’s, “Esta Vida.”

Locutor Uno: ... gracias por permitirnos a ustedes acompañarles. Si van a su trabajo, si están saliendo, los que ya regresaron y cumplieron su jornada de media noche y tienen que manejar mientras nos escuchan, aquellos que se están alistando... y las que están también en casita preparándose para darle ahí su burrita, decimos nosotros, o preparando su lonche, ... al motorcito de esa casa... el que tiene que salir cada día buscar el pan de cada día, como dicen, o el que sale a buscar la chuleta o la que sale a buscar la chuleta...

DJ One: ... thank you for allowing us to accompany you. If you're going to work, if you're leaving work, those who have already returned and completed their midnight shift and have to drive while listening to us, those who are getting ready... and those who are also at home preparing to give them their "burrito" (a variation of a breakfast burrito), as we say" or preparing their lunch... for the little motor of that house... the one who has to go out every day to look for their daily bread, as they say, or the one who goes out to look for the pork chop [referring to men and women as also being breadwinners and working]"

Along with extending greetings to their listeners, most shows followed a similar structure in their programming.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the majority of shows on SLR featured a variety of segments covering news, sports, traffic reports, horoscopes, historical events, entertainment, and radio advertisements. These segments are curated to cater to the cultural and informational needs of Latinos. In this analysis, few segments were outsourced to radio show preparation, aiding stations in structuring their on-air programming by complementing DJ interjections. To illustrate, regional SLR may incorporate pre-recorded news segments from sources like CNN, while others had the capability to produce their own news segments through their media company, as observed in two stations in North Carolina. Often, DJs themselves covered many segments on-air. Radio spots ranged from purchased advertisements from various clients to public service announcements (PSAs).

Regarding overall radio communication in this analysis, the on-air banter involving DJs, callers, and radio spots were not always isolated. At times, on-air discussions included respected Latino community leaders from regional immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), city and county employees, attorneys, prominent activists, and sometimes, these organizations also aired radio advertisements. Additionally, the on-air discussions and radio spots revealed regional

differences in Latino concerns across various policy areas such as immigration, COVID-19, and the presidential elections. Finally, this analysis revealed regional differences in electoral efforts to engage Latinos through radio spots, mainly on behalf of campaigns, organizations, and entities that aimed to provide voter information to Latinos.

### **Presidential Elections Talk**

In theory, a Trump re-election in 2020 would have posed a comparable, if not greater, threat to Latinos than the 2006 anti-immigrant bill H.R. 4437. Given this type of collective threat, one would expect DJs, even at the regional level, to work towards mobilizing as many Latinos as possible. Among the states analyzed Wisconsin exhibited the highest political engagement across the airwaves through radio advertisements and on-air discussions, followed by North Carolina, while Texas demonstrated the least political discourse among the three.

Considering the targeting of Latinos and immigrants by then-President Trump, it was unsurprising that DJs expressed their disapproval of him when discussing matters related to him or his policies on air. For instance, many DJs used a variety of pejorative nicknames that played on his last name and made references to his hair. These included *El Trompas*, *El Anarajado*, *El Trumpulini*, *El Pelos de Elote*, and *Pelos de Cotorra*.<sup>106</sup> Others chose not to use any nicknames but still expressed their disapproval of the former president and his policies other ways on air. This on-air commentary typically revolved around topics such as the general elections, his handling of COVID-19, and immigration policies.

Regarding elections, radio stations and DJs employed various forms of talk, interjections, and on-air banter with co-hosts, as well as special segments dedicated to election-related topics

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<sup>106</sup> These were all used as on-air nicknames for Trump. The English translations include variations such as: the big lips, the orange one, the little Trump (referencing Benito Mussolini), corn hair, and parrot hair.



featuring immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), call-in segments, and interviews with community leaders, city officials, and executive directors. Through this, they disseminated key electoral information to Latinos ahead of the general election and assessed Latino public opinion within their communities. DJs commonly sought the opinion of their audience on the likely winner between then-President Trump and then-former Vice President Joe Biden. Not only did DJs solicit the viewpoint of their audience, but they also expressed their own perspectives on the matter while engaging in efforts that could help foster a sense of American identity among Latinos.

For example, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, a radio station in North Carolina aired the U.S. national anthem during its broadcast, encouraging listeners to head to the polls. While this practice is relatively uncommon on SLR in the U.S., it is a regular occurrence on radio stations in numerous Latin American countries such as Mexico and Colombia. These countries often have laws mandating the playing of the national anthem at least twice daily to cultivate and reinforce national identity and patriotism.<sup>107</sup> Although not required by U.S. law, this practice persists in many Latin American countries, potentially resonating with listeners who are familiar with it. While the anthem was only played on one station in this analysis, it can be seen as an effort by DJs to foster American patriotism on election day.

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<sup>107</sup> For example, in Mexico, the “*Ley Federal de Telecomunicaciones y Radiodifusión*” (Federal Telecommunications and Broadcasting Law) establishes that the national anthem be played twice per day, at 6hrs and 24hrs. In the early days of broadcasting, programming did not run 24/7. To fill airtime, many broadcast organizations, would air their national anthems, including the U.S., or signed on and off with the national anthem. This practice has changed in many countries, except when mandated by law, as 24/7 programming has become more widely available.

## On-air Banter

DJs predominantly engaged in on-air banter covering topics such as COVID-19, immigration policies, elections and other areas of interest or entertainment. When discussing COVID-19, the on-air banter ranged from the handling of the pandemic by Donald Trump and local governments to its implications for Latinos. This included discussions on whether Latinos would receive or encounter difficulties accessing additional stimulus checks and the impact of the pandemic on Latino families.

Similarly, discussions on immigration policy varied across regions, with some areas focusing on specific politics relevant to different Latino groups. For instance, in North Carolina, it was not uncommon to have DJs frequently address policies like Temporary Protected Status (TPS). However, policies such as DACA, “*carga publica*” (public charge), and the immigrant caravans were more widely discussed across all stations.<sup>108</sup> This type of public affairs talk and on-air banter often intersected with discussions related to the general election. For example, a station in North Carolina reported on Trump’s cancellation of negotiations for additional financial relief for American families amid the pandemic.

Locutor Uno: ... *pero fíjate todo en trending topic ajá que está resulta que trump canceló negociaciones para la nueva ayuda de los 1200 USD. El presidente rechazó el plan de 2.2 billones de dólares para la nueva ayuda...*  
 [locutores hablan entre si]

DJ One: ... but look at everything on the trending topic, it turns out that Trump canceled negotiations for the new aid of 1,200 USD. The president rejected the \$2.2 trillion plan for new aid...  
 [DJs talk to each other]

Locutor Uno: ... *pues saben que dijo el desgraciadito?*  
 DJ One: ... well do you know what the unfortunate guy said?

Locutores: *Que dijo?*  
 DJs: What did he say?

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<sup>108</sup> Public charge refers to the assessment conducted by immigration authorities to determine if an applicant for legal permanent residency is anticipated to rely on government assistance, including past or present use of public benefits.

Locutor Uno: *Ahora sí discúlpame Donald Trump pero estás bien*

DJ One: Now excuse me Donald Trump but you're fine [play on words that do not mean he is fine]

Locutor Dos: *Bien mal de la cabeza*

DJ Two: Sick in the head

Locutor Uno: *Si yo gano después de que yo gane no ya gana no dijo después de que yo gane las elecciones este 3 de noviembre retomaré este plan y este estímulo que además será muchísimo mejor así qué fue eso poca campaña*

DJ One: If I win, after I win, no, he won't, he didn't say, after I win the elections this November 3, I will resume this plan and this stimulus, which will also be much better, so what was that, little campaign?

Locutor Tres: *Ya casi casi te compra tu voto. Casi casi.*

DJ Three: He almost buys you your vote. Very nearly.

Locutor Dos: *Ahora sí fue así ahora sí fue directa la flecha y ahí se va a llevar no solamente el voto de sus seguidores los los americanos los Anglos o así no sino que también el de los latinos que reciben el cheque.*

DJ Two: Now it was like that, now the arrow was direct and it will take not only the vote of his followers, the Americans, the Anglos or so, but also that of the Latinos who receive the check.

Locutor Tres: *Fíjate!*

DJ Three: Notice!

Locutores: *Porque muchos latinos se está beneficiando con ese cheque y la verdad que que bien. O sea hasta cierto punto sí te llega un dinerito.*

DJs: Because many Latinos are benefitting from that check and the truth is that it is good. In other words, to a certain extent, you do get a little money.

Locutor Tres: *Aprovechalo, aprovechalo.*

DJ Three: Take advantage of it, take advantage of it.

During this discussion, DJs not only informed the public about the news regarding Trump but also contextualized it within the lead-up to the 2020 general election, speculating on Trump's motives to secure votes. They drew comparisons between Trump's statements on stimulus checks and the concept of vote buying. This perspective offered an interesting on-air take, particularly considering the relatively limited discussion of electoral malpractices such as vote buying or mistrust in the U.S. electoral process. Such distrust and electoral malpractice have been more prevalent and well-documented in many regions across Latin America (Carreras and İrepoğlu 2013; Monsiváis-Carrillo 2022), from which both DJs and listeners likely originate.

Further, DJs on this station engaged in discussions about what they would do if they were running for president of the United States. They explored various policy ideas, including

solutions to poverty, addressing public insecurity, job creation, gender equality, and combatting racism, advocating for the avoidance of such racist presidents in the future (“*no tener a presidentes tan racistas*”). While such discussions were not as common among other DJs, some did invite listeners to share their thoughts on topics related to racism. For instance, on one occasion, DJs in Texas encouraged listeners to share their experiences with discrimination, although the discussion was not directly linked to the general election.

In Wisconsin, a DJ reminded listeners that it was election day. He proceeded to share the basic voter requirements and informed his audience about same-day voter registration options. He also emphasized that if they were unable to vote, they likely knew of someone who could and encouraged them to remind others. While stations and DJs typically avoid endorsing specific candidates and expressing their political preferences, on this occasion, the DJ made a recommendation on behalf of the station. The DJ engaged in a passionate on-air discussion advocating for voting for the Democrats and to remove Trump from the White House. Furthermore, the DJ likened Trump to Italy’s Mussolini, labeling him as a fascist and racist. The DJ went on to criticize the Republican Party for deviating from its past principles and Fox News for disseminating falsehoods. He concluded by informing his audience that Joe Biden pledged to raise taxes for those earning over \$400,000 per year, clarifying that this would not affect those who were not considered wealthy. Specifically, the DJ stated:

*“Raza, muy buenos días... Hoy martes, 3 de noviembre. Día de elecciones, el día de hoy. Si usted tiene el derecho de votar, usted pues tiene que ser obviamente ciudadano estadounidense. Ósea, citizen, como el reloj. Entonces el día de hoy es el día de las elecciones en estados unidos. Si usted conoce a alguien que primero haya nacido aquí en estado unidos o es estadounidense ósea ciudadano naturalizado. Bueno pues, y tiene mayor de 18 años de edad. Primero, tiene que ser ciudadano estadounidense o naturalizado, o haber nacido aquí en el país. Uno. Dos, ser mayor de 18 años de edad. Y de ahí, tiene el derecho de votar en cualquier parte del país. Obviamente, enfocado en donde este registrado. Si no se ha registrado e incluso se puede registrar para votar el día de hoy. Si usted conoce a alguien, sobrino, sobrina, nieto, tío, tía, abuelita, abuelito, que ya son ciudadanos. Dígales que es importante que salga a votar. Y que salga a votar por [pausa] sabe por quién. Aquí, les vamos a recomendar, que salgan a votar por los demócratas. En esta ocasión, más que nada, por Joe Biden. Porque tenemos que sacar a Trump de la casa blanca. Es*

*importantísimo que ya al anaranjado, o al 45, o al Trumpulini, como le digo yo, como Mussolini, fascista, racista, tantísimas cosas, hay que sacarlos.”*

“Raza, very good morning... Today Tuesday, November 3rd. Election day, today. If you have the right to vote, you, obviously have to be a U.S. citizen. I mean, citizen, like the watch. So today is election day in the United States. If you know someone who was, first, born here in the United States or is an American, that is, a naturalized citizen. Well then, and is over 18 years of age. First, you have to be a US citizen or naturalized, or have been born here in the country. One. Two, be over 18 years of age. And from there, you have the right to vote anywhere in the country. Obviously, focused on where you are registered. If you have not registered, you can even register to vote today. If you know someone, nephew, niece, grandson, uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, who are already citizens tell them that it is important that they go out and vote. And go out and vote for [pause] you know for who? Here, we are going to recommend that you go out and vote for the Democrats. On this occasion, more than anything, for Joe Biden. Because we have to get Trump out of the white house. It is very important that the orange one, or the 45, or the Trumpulini, as I say, like Mussolini, fascist, racist, so many things, we have to remove them.”

*“Si usted conoce a alguien que tiene el derecho a votar. Dígale que salga a votar por Joe Biden. No se crea de tanta, ósea, esto es increíble, tantísimas mentiras, que dice el Trompas, que han hecho, que dicen los republicanos. Los republicanos hoy en día, lamentablemente, no es el mismo partido republicano de hace 5 años, de hace 6 años, de hace 8 años, de hace 10 años, no.”*

“If you know someone who has the right to vote. Tell him to go out and vote for Joe Biden. Don't believe so many, I mean, this is incredible, so many lies that the *Trompas* says, that they have done, that the Republicans say. The Republicans today, unfortunately, are not the same Republican Party as they were 5 years ago, 6 years ago, 8 years ago, 10 years ago, no.”

*“Lamentablemente, el partido republicano, hoy en día vive bajo pura mentira. Son, pero, buenísimos, y eso es la cultura, esa es la actitud y el comportamiento que Donald J. Trump ha inculcado en el partido republicano. Ser más, y lamentablemente, hay mucho, que les diré, simpatizante republicano que se la cree de toda a todas. Que vive en un universo alternativo bajo pura mentira, principalmente, bajo las mentiras de Fox News. Guau, es increíble la verdad, ¡eh! Entonces, aquí le recomendamos que salga a votar por Joe Biden y Kamala Harris. No se crea de tantísimas mentiras. Primero, de que va a aumentar los impuestos, Joe Biden. Si, va a aumentar los impuestos, no lo puede negar. Él lo ha dicho abiertamente que va a aumentar los impuestos. ¿Pero sabe para quien va a aumentar los impuestos? Para las personas que ganen más de \$400,000 dólares por año. Ósea, a la gente con dinero. A los ricos. Lo que quiere es que ya los ricos paguen su parte...”*

“Unfortunately, the Republican Party today lives under pure lies. They are, but, very good, and that is the culture, that is the attitude and behavior that Donald J. Trump has instilled in the Republican Party. Be more, and unfortunately, there is a lot, I will tell you, Republican sympathizers who believe it all. Who live in an alternative universe under pure lies, mainly, under the lies of Fox News. Wow, it's really incredible, huh! So, here we recommend that you go out and vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Don't believe so many lies. First, Joe Biden is going to raise taxes. Yes, he is going to increase taxes, he cannot deny it. He has openly said that he is going to raise taxes. But do you know for whom you are going to increase taxes? For people who earn more than \$400,000 per year. I mean, people with money. To the rich. What he wants is for the rich to pay his share...”

*“¿Ósea, los que ganan más paguen menos... y el pueblo trabajador debería pagar más impuestos? ... bueno no se crean de las mentiras de Trompas!”*

“That is, those who earn more pay less... and working people should pay more taxes? ... well, don't believe *Trompas'* lies!”

## Segments

### *Voces de la Comunidad Rumbo a las Elecciones 2020*

One radio station in Wisconsin featured a dedicated on-air segment titled “*Voces de la Comunidad, Rumbo a las Elecciones 2020*” (Community Voices, Heading to the 2020 Elections) in collaboration with an immigrant advocacy organization (IAO). This segment aired at least seven times from October 1, 2020 to November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, with an average duration of approximately ten minutes per airing.<sup>109</sup> During each segment, a different member of the IAO shared their reasons for engaging in Latino mobilization efforts leading up to the election. While the DJ facilitated the conversation and posed follow-up questions, the majority of the interactions involved IAO members from various parts of Wisconsin sharing diverse Latino experiences. Participants in these segments discussed feeling marginalized as second-class citizens, encountering racism, being unable to vote, experiencing 287(g) policies in their counties, lacking proper protective gear (PPE) as frontline workers, advocating for policies such as Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), and meeting with Kamala Harris.<sup>110</sup>

For instance, a Puerto Rican woman took the airwaves to underscore the significance of the Puerto Rican vote. She discussed her involvement with a statewide IAO emphasizing that “*aquí los racistas siempre van a salir a votar*” (here the racists are always going to go out to vote) and expressing frustration over the treatment of Puerto Ricans as “*ciudadanos de segunda-clase*” (second-class citizens).<sup>111</sup> Another woman, prompted by the DJ, shared accounts of racism

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<sup>109</sup> This is just taking into account the data collected for this analysis and not considering any additional airtime across other times not recorded here.

<sup>110</sup> Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) was proposed during the Obama administration and would have provided eligible undocumented individuals reprieve from deportation and a work permit. It was deadlocked by Supreme Court deadlocked in 2016.

<sup>111</sup> These members were involved with the IAO that is the primary case study in the “Construction of Identity” chapter in this dissertation. When on-air, they state that they are with the C4 wing of the organization.

in Green Bay, sharing instances of harassment directed at Latinos to discourage them from voting. Despite these challenges, she emphasized the importance of Latino participation, even for those unable to vote, as they could influence others who can. On another occasion, a member, who was an immigrant and a union representative, engaged in an on-air discussion about collective bargaining and working conditions, addressing issues that resonated with Latino listeners. Another member recounted his conversation with Kamala Harris, detailing the tangible impact of 287(g) policies on their life, given that he resided in a county where the policy was in place. Lastly, a member expressed, “*muchos de nosotros no podemos votar... pero mucho repercute en nosotros... es un orgullo tener la oportunidad de explicar el procedimiento...*” (many of us cannot vote... but it has a lot of impact on us... it is an honor to have the opportunity to explain the procedure), highlighting the significance of civic engagement despite voting limitations due to their legal status.

These on-air discussions shed light on the diverse Latino experiences throughout the state and the various motivations that drive different community members to encourage fellow Latinos to vote. Despite many of these individuals being unable to vote themselves, they recognize that the ways in which their communities experience racism, the impact of policies deputizing police to act as ICE, the working conditions endured by Latino frontline workers, and the enduring sense of second-class citizenship experienced by some, irrespective of their birthplace within the U.S. Whether or not these individuals had the ability to vote, they, along with the DJs, served as a bridge to the broader Latino community who may otherwise feel disconnected from the political process. Through these segments, they encouraged listeners to integrate themselves into this process and participate regardless of their legal status.

## Call-ins

In North Carolina, DJs often sought Latino public opinion on the elections. Sometimes, they initiated discussions by opening the phone lines, while other times, they encouraged listeners to share their views via WhatsApp through voice or text messages. On one occasion, a listener voiced frustration to the DJs about the station airing a Joe Biden commercial. This led to a heated exchange where the caller expressed that Joe Biden had not done anything for 51 years. For example:

**Radioescucha:** *Además les voy a decir otra cosita. Lo que yo no sé cómo tienen un comercial en la radio sobre Biden.*

**Caller:** I'm also going to tell you something else. What I don't know is how you have a commercial on the radio about Biden.

**Locutor Uno:** *[interviene] ¡Él lo pagó!*

**DJ One:** [interjects] He paid for it!

**Radioescucha:** *[agravado] Jamás en mi vida, 51 años, 51 años en el senado, ni cuando estaba Reagan. Aquí, aquí, yo vi a Biden... Nunca, nunca [molesto], no hay un inmigrante aquí que me diga que conoció a Biden antes que Obama lo cogía [como vicepresidente]. Lleva 51 años, 51 años [molesto] en el senado. No lleva tres, cuatro, años como Trump. 51 años y 51 años no ha hecho nada! Ahora va a hacer todo [sarcásticamente], ahora va a dar reforma migratoria, va a curar la gente del COVID, va a dar trabajo a todo el mundo... ahí déjense de mentiras ya... por eso es que se metieron cuatro años llorando. ¡Se metieron cuatro años llorando y no tenían a nadie y ahora se van a meter cuatro años más [los Demócratas]! Prepárense, prepárense [tono de advertencia] no se metan los años esos llorando que Donald Trump es el presidente en este país de nuevo. Acuérdense lo estoy diciendo lo mismo que les dije cuando el presidente Donald Trump...*

**Caller:** [aggravated] Never in my life, 51 years, 51 years in the Senate, not even when Reagan was there. Here, here, I saw Biden... Never, never [annoyed], there is not an immigrant here who tells me that he met Biden before Obama took him [as vice president]. He has been in the Senate for 51 years, 51 years [annoyed]. He hasn't been like Trump for three, four, years. 51 years and 51 years has done nothing! Now he is going to do everything [sarcastically], now he is going to provide immigration reform, he is going to cure people from COVID, he is going to give work to everyone... stop lying now... that is why they spent four years crying. They spent four years crying and had no one and now [the Democrats] are going to spend four more years! Get ready, get ready [warning tone] don't spend those years crying that Donald Trump is the president of this country again. Remember, I'm saying the same thing I told you when President Donald Trump...

**Locutor Dos:** *[se une al aire] Si Joaquín, pues, lo que usted dice es referente a ...*

**DJ Two:** [joins the air] Yes Joaquín, well, what you say is referring to...

**Locutor Uno:** *¿ya terminaste?*

*[Ambos locutores hablando por encima del otro]*

**DJ One:** Are you done?

[Both announcers speaking over each other]



**Locutor Uno:** *A ver, dime, a sus 51 años, [se corrige], a sus 73 años, ¿dime qué ha hecho [en referencia a Donald Trump]?*

*[El radioescucha al aire y el locutor están debatiendo. El radioescucha defiende a Trump y dice que el no es el que ha estado en el cargo durante 50 años como Biden.]*

**DJ One:** Let's see, tell me, at 51 years old, [corrects himself], at 73 years old, tell me what he has done [referring to Donald Trump]?

*[The caller and DJ One seem to be in a heated debate at this point. The caller defends Trump by saying that he has not been in office for 50 years like Biden.]*

**Locutor Uno:** *[molesto] Sabes que ha hecho? Te voy a contar lo que ha hecho. Les está quitando el TPS a 350,000 y que equivale como a un millón y medio de familias. Está quitando el DACA a 900,000 que equivale como a un millón y medio de personas. Está tratando de dejar afuera a 3 millones de personas, fácilmente que ya están aquí [suma a los grupos que menciona], que trabajan, que tienen permiso, que han sido entrenados, entonces ¿dime que le ha ofrecido Donald Trump a la comunidad Hispana e inmigrante?*

**DJ One:** [annoyed] Do you know what he did? I'll tell you what he's done. He is taking away TPS from 350,000, which is equivalent to about one and a half million families. He is removing DACA from 900,000, which is equivalent to about a million and a half people. He is trying to leave out 3 million people, who are easily already here [adds to the groups he mentions], who work, who have permission, who have been trained, so tell me what has Donald Trump offered to the Hispanic and immigrant community?

**Radioescucha:** *Yo te lo voy a contestar, facilito, te lo voy a contestar. Eso está más que fácil. Yo te traigo a mi casa porque tu tienes problemas. ¿Cuándo ya arreglaste tu casa te digo, ahora pa' tu casa donde esta lo malo? [referente a 'cuando los problemas se han resuelto en tu casa, regrésate']*

**Caller:** I'm going to answer it for you, it's easy, I'm going to answer it for you. That's more than easy. I bring you to my house because you have problems. When you fix your house, I tell you, now return to your house, where is the bad thing? [referring to 'when the problems have been solved at home, go back']

**Locutor Uno:** *[aun molesto] Ósea, que ahí si te identificas con eso?*

**DJ One:** [annoyed] I mean, do you identify with that?

**Radioescucha:** *[gritando al aire] T-P-S. Permiso temporal de trabajo [hablando incorrectamente de las siglas TPS]. Él no te dijo a ti, en ningún momento, el país te dijo, esto es para que cojas la residencia, ni para que [poco claro] permanente. No te lo dijeron.*

**Caller:** [yelling on air] T-P-S. Temporary work permit [incorrectly speaking of the acronym TPS]. He did not tell you, at any time, the country told you, this is so that you can take residency, nor so that [unclear] permanent. They didn't tell you.

**Locutor Uno:** *[molesto] Ósea, que cuando vas al país. Cuando vas a Honduras y querés poner la base militar ahí si no decir nada, pero mira, ya viene le abogado, nos tocó la puerta [para un show pagado]. A, pero cuando quieren ir a poner bases militares, quieren que voten en la ONU, a favor de sus propuestas, ¿ahí no dicen nada verdad? Hello? [Sarcásticamente] [El locutor estaba insinuando cómo se trata a los latinos e inmigrantes en los EE. UU., pero esperan ser tratados bien cuando quieren poner bases militares y favorecer la política exterior y las posiciones de los EE. UU. en su país de origen.]*

**DJ One:** [annoyed] I mean, when you go to the country. When you go to Honduras and you want to put the military base there, there you don't say anything, but look, the lawyer is coming, he knocked on our door [for a paid show]. But when they want to go and set up military bases, they want them to vote at the UN, in favor of their proposals, they don't say anything there, right? Hello? [Sarcastically] [The announcer was implying how Latinos and immigrants are treated in the US, but they expect to be treated well when they want to put up military bases and favor US foreign policy and positions in their country originally.]

**Locutor Dos:** *[Dicho en broma] Estamos en el primer round, el segundo queda pendiente.*

**DJ Two:** [Said jokingly] We are in the first round, the second is pending.

One of the DJs in this exchange was seemingly upset about not only U.S. policy toward Latinos but also by U.S. foreign policy in his home country of Honduras. The exchange began with a caller expressing dissatisfaction with the paid campaign advertisement from Joe Biden airing on the station, indicating that listeners may be closely paying attention to the overall radio broadcast. This exchange also revealed that DJs, like in this exchange, were clear in their partisan leanings when interacting with callers on air.

On another occasion, a different caller sought insights from the DJs about the latest polling data regarding the Joe Biden and Donald Trump match up. The DJs responded by indicating that, two weeks before the general election, the polls remained unpredictable. They proceeded to share some survey percentages and discussed how the presidential contest was focused on winning “*estados pendulares o estados purpura*” (battleground states or purple states). In response to the caller’s question, the DJs also addressed how even leaders in certain regions, like Arizona’s former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who had implemented restrictive immigration policies, ultimately faced defeat.

### **Social Media and WhatsApp**

In general, all stations examined in this analysis used various social media platforms and WhatsApp as channels for radio listeners to interact with the station and DJs, and vice versa. DJs regularly shared their social media handles and WhatsApp numbers on air, prompting listeners to send shoutouts, song requests, and questions related to on-air discussions. Regarding elections, two radio stations in North Carolina encouraged listeners to share their thoughts on election and policy-related topics. For instance, one station aired callers’ questions from social media and WhatsApp, discussing topics like the uncertainty surrounding policies such as DACA and TPS

leading up to the elections. Additionally, some DJs used their social media platforms to conduct audience “polls”, with listener messages later shared on air.

To illustrate, a North Carolina station prompted its on-air audience to weigh in on the election outcome: Joe Biden or Donald Trump? The DJs then read aloud the responses received from listeners on their platforms, sharing their opinions accordingly. Responses generally ranged from concise single-word answers (e.g., Trump or Biden) to more nuanced messages expressing skepticism about either candidate or asserting that the election outcome would not significantly impact Latino lives. Some expressed optimism, emphasizing the importance of moving forward regardless of the election result.

### **Interviews and Special Shows**

Many stations here conducted multiple interviews with key community leaders, and one station even had its own special show dedicated to public affairs on Friday mornings. DJs interviewed a range of individuals during their regular programming, including lawyers, healthcare professionals, city officials, and others. However, concerning elections, stations primarily interviewed local leaders associated with local or regional organizations, as well as city or county employees. These interviews typically addressed prominent issues affecting Latinos, spanning from concerns about COVID-19 and immigration policy to the content of the ballot and voting procedures.

In Wisconsin, community leaders were featured in special election-related segments. One executive director, along with the statewide IAO that she directed, garnered attention from the *The New York Times* for their initiatives to mobilize Latinos in pivotal battleground states like Wisconsin. On-air, the executive director emphasized the urgency of addressing local-level threats such as 287(g), the challenges surrounding access to adequate healthcare amidst COVID-

19, the precarious state of small businesses, and the significant role of Latinos in shaping the outcome of the general election and exerting political influence statewide.

*Directora ejecutiva: ... miles y miles de nosotros, familias enteras, han sido parte de esta lucha, deshaciéndonos de amenazas que han tenido con los programas como 287(g) aquí en Milwaukee o leyes santuario. Y ahorita nos toca la amenaza más grande y realmente la nación está dependiendo de nuestro trabajo aquí en Wisconsin ... solamente hay unos estados claves para una diferencia y el voto latino ahora que con orgullo las personas reflejen esto. Ahora los latinos en Wisconsin representan el segundo grupo más grande de votantes y después de los anglosajones y nosotros, ya los números que tenemos, fácilmente pueden superar lo que es tradicionalmente la diferencia entre los dos partidos. Que quiere decir que tenemos una potencia, un poder electoral que no solamente para ganar esta elección y deshacernos de esta administración que siempre está sembrando tanto odio hacia nosotros y haciendo tanto daño... no solamente nos queremos deshacer de eso, pero demostrando la fuerza política que todos los ojos vayan todos los ojos están aquí en Wisconsin... de aquí depende entonces tener esa fuerza política quiere decir que estamos en una posición el día después de las elecciones tener un mejor futuro. Tantos años que estamos esperando la reforma migratoria y tenemos que realizar promesas, sabemos que promesas es una cosa y actualizar pero ya hemos visto que hay ahora el apoyo a la comunidad inmigrante, la necesidad de todo lo de tener una respuesta a la conveniencia que va a ayudar a familias con pequeños negocios y ahorita cuánta gente sufriendo y no tienen acceso a exámenes de para el COVID... la gente muriendo, enfermándose, necesitamos un cambio porque realmente vidas están en juego y esta es una administración que está animando a otros con un odio que realmente es peligroso.*

Executive director: ... thousands and thousands of us, entire families, have been part of this fight, getting rid of threats that we've had with programs like 287(g) here in Milwaukee or sanctuary laws. And right now we face the biggest threat and the nation is really depending on our work here in Wisconsin... there are only a few key states for a difference and the Latino vote now that people proudly reflect this. Latinos in Wisconsin now represent the second largest group of voters after whites, and we, given the numbers we have, can easily overcome what is traditionally the difference between the two parties. Which means that we have a power, an electoral power that not only to win this election and get rid of this administration that is always sowing so much hatred towards us and doing so much damage... we not only want to get rid of that, but demonstrating the political strength that all eyes go all eyes are here in Wisconsin... it depends on here, so having that political strength means that we are in a position the day after the elections to have a better future. We have been waiting for immigration reform for so many years and we have to make promises, we know that promises are one thing and fulfilling them another, but we have already seen that there is now support for the immigrant community, the need for everything to have an answer to the coexisting that is going to help families with small businesses and right now how many people are suffering and do not have access to COVID tests... people dying, getting sick, we need a change because lives are really at stake and this is an administration that is encouraging others with a hatred that is really dangerous.

*Locutor: Hoy la gente debe de salir a votar porque si quieren un cambio pues necesitan tomar acción la gente que quiera involucrarse en este trabajo con [IAO]*

DJ: Today people should go out and vote because if they want change, people who want to get involved in this work with [IAO] need to take action.

During another on-air interview in Wisconsin, the DJ engaged with a nationwide progressive Latino organization that lacked a physical presence in the state. The interview began with a

discussion about descriptive representation and the notable disparity between Latino representation in proportion to their population in the U.S. The organization, dedicated to bolstering Latino political engagement and representation across all levels of government, was on-air representing its 501(c)(4), which under this designation permits particular types of organizations to endorse political candidates. During this broadcast, the organization representative expressed the rationale behind the organization's endorsement of Joe Biden and advocated for Latino support among listeners. The DJ and interviewee went on to discuss the significance of understanding the political process and emphasized the importance of Latino involvement in elections.

In North Carolina, on-air interviews with organizations remained non-partisan, refraining from endorsing political candidates on air. In one instance, DJs conducted an interview with a prominent Latina activist based in North Carolina. She was a DACA recipient from El Salvador and co-founder of two grassroots immigrant rights organizations in the region. This community organizer gained recognition primarily for her advocacy against 287(g) policies across the state and was featured extensively in a Netflix documentary series that highlighted Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations in the U.S.

During the interview, DJs praised her for her advocacy work within the community, further demonstrating their political leanings, and her efforts to mobilize Latinos to vote. She encouraged Latinos to actively participate in the election cycle by registering to vote and voting early. Her organization was engaging in voter registration drives in various areas of Charlotte. Despite the focus of the interview on voter registration and early voting encouragement, both the DJs and the community organizer acknowledged members of their community, including herself,

who were unable to vote. For example, one of the DJs asked:

Locutor uno: *Sabemos que en nuestra comunidad hay mucho hispano indocumentado. Pero estos padres de familia que son indocumentados pueden animar a sus hijos que nacieron acá, legalmente. Y si van a cumplir 18, pasando los 18, pueden ejercer el derecho al voto.*

DJ one: We know that in our community there are many undocumented Hispanics. But these parents who are undocumented can encourage their children who were born here, legally. And if they turn 18, after 18, they can exercise the right to vote.

The DJ then proceeded to discuss the youth vote and other insights shared by the organization and the activist. She mentioned that in her experience, during the election, she observed distinct responses from the undocumented and Latino community. Specifically, she noted that Latino voters were casting their ballots for the betterment of their community. She emphasized that they were actively participating in the electoral process and fulfilling their civic responsibility, recognizing it as a privilege that many, like herself, do not have.

In addition to asking about her efforts in mobilizing Latinos before the election, the DJs asked about the key issues she observed as most important to Latinos on the ground. Specifically, they wanted to know which issues were of greatest interest to her organization and were motivating Latinos to participate in North Carolina.

Locutor uno: *... que temas son los que son de interés en la comunidad hispana? ¿Que se esta viendo y porque quieren salir a votar la gente?*

DJ One: ...what topics are of interest in the Hispanic community? What is being seen and why do people want to go out and vote?

Organizadora comunitaria: *... bueno hay mucho. En verdad, nuestra comunidad ahorita mismo, mientras estamos en esta pandemia no están protegidas por muchas de las propuestas que se pasaron. En los primeros meses de la pandemia no hay acceso al seguro médico, emergencia, así que yo diría que realmente las elecciones del senado son muy importantes, la de Tom Tillis y Cal Cunningham, bueno la presidencia [risas], hay mucho que ha ocurrido en términos de inmigración. Y también diría también las carreras del condado. El condado tiene mucha oportunidad para ayudar a personas de bajos recursos que necesitan asistencia con su vivienda...*

Community Organizer: ...well there is a lot. In truth, our community right now, while we are in this pandemic, are not protected by many of the proposals that were passed. In the first months of the pandemic there was no access to health insurance, emergency, so I would say that the Senate elections are really very

important, that of Tom Tillis and Cal Cunningham, and well the presidency [laughs], there is a lot that has happened in terms of immigration. And I would also say the county races as well. The county has many opportunities to help low-income people who need assistance with their housing...

The community organizer highlighted the lack of protection for the Latino community during the pandemic, emphasizing the significance of elections at various government levels.

On separate occasions in North Carolina and Texas, DJs interviewed bilingual Latino employees representing the city or county. These interviews maintained a non-partisan approach and guided Latinos through the voting process. They provided information on early voting, voter registration, and the types of acceptable identifications needed to vote. During these on-air interviews, the employees also acknowledged the presence of individuals in their community who were unable to vote and expressed a commitment to voting on behalf of their relatives. For example, a state employee in Texas stated:

**Locutor Uno:** *Y un mensajito que le quieras dar a la gente para motivarlos para que salgan y voten?*

**DJ One:** And a little message that you want to give to people to motivate them to go out and vote?

**Empleada estatal:** *Que nosotros decimos, verdad, yo especialmente, yo voto, verdad, para aquellas personas que no tienen ese derecho. Yo voto por mis tíos que no pueden hacerlo, por mis tías, por mi abuela. Entonces salgan, verdad, para poder hacer ese cambio, ya que ellos lo quieren, verdad, lo necesitamos. El cambio que que quieran ver, la única manera que se puede hacer, es saliendo a votar.*

**State employee:** That we say, right? I especially, I vote, right, for those people who do not have that right. I vote for my uncles who can't do it, for my aunts, for my grandmother. So go out, right, to be able to make that change, since they want it, right, we need it. The only way you want to see the change is by going out to vote.

**Locutor Uno:** *Exacto, excelente.*

**DJ One:** Exactly, excellent.

**Locutor Dos:** *[Nombre de empleada estatal] muchas gracias por tu llamada. Y bueno señores, qué más quieren, eh? Se las están poniendo ahora sí que de pechito realmente. Ir a votar es 24 horas puedes ir a cualquier hora, vayan a votar porque es muy importante. Si tú quieres un cambio o realmente quiere seguir con el mismo gobierno que ahorita tenemos hay que ir a votar!*

**DJ One:** [Name of state employee] thank you very much for your call. And well gentlemen, what more do you want, huh? They are really putting it in front of you. Going to vote is 24 hours a day, you can go at any time, go vote because it is very important. If you want a change or really want to continue with the same government we have right now, you have to go vote!

The notion of voting on behalf of community members unable to vote was similarly emphasized in the messaging of IAOs, as discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. Although these employees were not officially representing IAOs on air, as they were speaking on behalf of their local government, they employed similar messaging strategies when providing non-partisan voter information to Latinos.

In addition to regular programming and typical on-air discussions, two radio stations in Wisconsin featured a one-hour talk show on Latino public affairs every Friday during the recording period. Hosted by a regional attorney, the show aimed to “*exponer la verdad*” (expose the truth) as per his description. Unlike traditional attorney shows on SLR, this was a broader talk show covering politics. Similar to the other DJs in the analysis, the host addressed various topics such as immigration policies and COVID-19’s impact on Latinos, while also offering extensive critiques of both political parties. Beyond his critique of parties, the show often delved into U.S. history as related to Latinos and Latino voting patterns, openly acknowledging that most Latinos, except Cubans, have low voter turnout rates.

When discussing the elections, the host spoke extensively about Trump’s agenda emphasizing how “*la comunidad de nosotros ahí está en la mira del Trompas*” (our community is there in the sights of Trump). Furthermore, the host provided insight into the real-life implications of Trump’s immigration policies for many Latinos. For instance:

**Locutor:** *Y ahorita el Trompas se está acelerando las redadas de deportación y conocemos un pueblo por aquí y se lo voy a decir aquí por mi programa en el área de Waukesha. Que vergüenza deberían de tener si lo digo yo [locutor] de que les hemos trabajado, les hemos servido y de repente ese lugar es como un veneno para nosotros. Que el pueblo de nosotros vive bajo un trauma si le dan una multa de tráfico no quieren ir a la corte y por por la hostilidad que nos demuestran y muchas de las redadas están ahí a la salida...*

**DJ:** And right now, Trompas is accelerating deportation raids and we know a town here and I'm going to tell you here because of my program in the Waukesha area. How ashamed they should be if I [DJ] say it, that we have worked for them, we have served them and suddenly that place is like poison for us. That our people live under trauma if they get a traffic ticket, they don't want to go to court and because of the hostility, they show us and many of the raids are at the exit [outside of the courthouse]...



the DJ discussed how 287(g) in Wisconsin was part of Trump's broader national immigration agenda, likening participating counties as poison for his community. He elaborated on the fears of many Latinos surrounding court appearances and courthouse raids. Beyond covering the tangible effects of policies affecting Latinos, the DJ addressed the political diversity within the Latino community, including those aligned with the Republican Party. He noted that even if Latinos support the Republican Party, they do not fully fit within the party itself. He expressed, *“el pueblo de nosotros seguimos políticamente huérfanos”* (our community continues to be political orphans). This discussion not only highlighted the diverse political inclinations within the community but continued to emphasize the lack of descriptive representation of Latinos across all levels of government.

### **Post-Elections Talk**

Across all stations, DJs shared election results and emphasized the close race. In the days following the election, the focus shifted to updates from pivotal battleground states. Once Joe Biden was declared winner, DJs from select stations extended congratulations to those who supported Biden and highlighted that SLR helped make this possible, especially in places like Wisconsin. For example, one DJ stated:

*“las radios latinas en Wisconsin... apoyando el movimiento tan grande... motivando a nuestra gente... el estado de Wisconsin azul... se logró... valio la pena...”*

“Latino radio stations in Wisconsin... supporting such a great movement... motivating our people... the state of Wisconsin blue... it was achieved... it was worth it...”

Another DJ from a different location in Wisconsin went on to share what this meant for the country:

*“Hasta el sábado fue cuando se proyectó... quien ganó las elecciones... el ex-vice presidente... felicidades para todas las personas que votaron por el... creo yo que por el bien del país... pues ya se acabaron las mentiras ... lo que pasa que también tenía mucha labia...”*

"It wasn't until Saturday that it was projected... who won the elections... the former vice president... congratulations to all the people who voted for him... I think for the good of the country... well, the lies are over... what happens is that he also had a lot of gab..."

As Trump started to challenge the election results, DJs grabbed the mic and commented on Trump's "*berrinches*" (tantrums), noting that he was:

*"El toxico mayor, el number one... el que va de salida [referente a Trump] se trata de otro episodio... el toxico mayor... el presidente Donald Trump, tan toxico, toxico, toxico..."*

"The biggest toxic, the number one... the one on the way out [referring to Trump] is about another episode... the biggest toxic... President Donald Trump, so toxic, toxic, toxic..."

As Trump continued to claim victory in the election, the DJs invited callers to share their thoughts. However, talk regarding the elections and their results significantly decreased after mid-November.

### 3.5.2 Radio Spots and Elements Used to Appeal to Latinos

In 2020, AdImpact monitored radio expenditures by presidential campaigns and interest groups.<sup>112</sup> The Biden campaign allocated more than \$29 million to radio advertising, while Donald Trump's spending amounted to around \$1.4 million.<sup>113</sup> Predictably, efforts were concentrated in pivotal states, including Wisconsin and North Carolina. In terms of SLR ad spending by format, Spanish Contemporary received roughly \$3.2 million, while Regional Mexican radio approximately \$2.3 million.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> See (<https://adimpact.com/blog/radio-advertising-analysis-of-the-2020-presidential-race/>).

<sup>113</sup> See (<https://adimpact.com/blog/radio-advertising-analysis-of-the-2020-presidential-race/>).

<sup>114</sup> See (<https://adimpact.com/blog/radio-advertising-analysis-of-the-2020-presidential-race/>).

This spending was reflected in the on-air spots found primarily in Wisconsin, followed by North Carolina, and in this analysis, rarely in Texas.<sup>115</sup> The spots generally fell under the following categories: candidate political campaign advertisements, partisan issue or non-candidate political advertising, general non-partisan voter information, and general non-partisan election advertising. These spots covered anything from candidate characteristics, their personality, their history and trajectory in U.S. politics, issue stances, the importance of voting among mixed-status families, voting Trump out, and general voter information.

### **Candidate Political Campaign Advertisements**

Concerning on-air political campaign advertising, the data revealed most spots supporting the Biden/Harris campaign across Wisconsin, with slightly fewer spots in North Carolina. In North Carolina, candidate spots primarily focused on Cal Cunningham's senatorial race against Thom Tillis. Spots featuring Vice-Presidential candidate Kamala Harris highlighted her immigrant background and her support for the Latino community through actions like marching with DREAMers. Additionally, candidates framed voting as a tool against enemies and intolerance and emphasized its role in preserving democracy. Messages targeting Latinos often appealed to their working-class identities, highlighting their contributions as frontline workers who not only help sustain the economy but also democracy.

**Spot 1:** *Estamos batallando enemigos que no podemos ver y otros que vemos demasiado. Pero no somos un pueblo que se rinde. En cuatro años, hemos aprendido a identificar cada mentira. A levantar la voz ante la intolerancia, a no dejar caer a nuestros vecinos. Por nuestra salud, por nuestra democracia, por nuestro futuro, es hora de votar...*

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<sup>115</sup> One issue with the Texas radio stations was that I could not capture the radio ads due to the online streaming setup. Instead of broadcasting the local ads from the Texas station, the streaming service aired commercials targeted to my geographic location.

**Spot 1:** We are battling enemies we cannot see and others we see too much. But we are not a people that gives up. In four years, we have learned to identify every lie. To raise our voices in the face of intolerance, to not let our neighbors fall. For our health, for our democracy, for our future, it is time to vote...

**Spot 2:** Somos los que madrugamos cada día para mantener la economía en marcha. Los que cosechamos los frutos para alimentar a nuestro país y los que cocinamos también. Somos los carpinteros y constructores que armamos la infraestructura y los fundadores de pequeños negocios y grandes empresas. Somos los que nos ponemos al frente para salvar vidas durante tiempos de crisis. Los que nos dedicamos a defender a esta nación alrededor del mundo. Pero somos mucho más, en estas elecciones, somos quienes decidiremos el futuro de nuestra democracia. Está en nuestras manos elegir a Joe Biden. Un candidato que si respeta a nuestras comunidades. Un candidato que sabe bien quien somos...

**Spot 2:** We are the ones who get up early every day to keep the economy going. Those of us who harvest the fruits to feed our country and those of us who cook too. We are the carpenters and builders who put together the infrastructure and the founders of small businesses and large companies. We are the ones who step up to save lives during times of crisis. Those of us who are dedicated to defending this nation around the world. But we are much more, in these elections, we are the ones who will decide the future of our democracy. It is in our hands to elect Joe Biden. A candidate who does respect our communities. A candidate who knows well who we are...

### Partisan Issue or Non-Candidate Political Advertising

When it came to non-candidate political advertising on partisan issues, IAOs, and left-leaning organizations highlighted what was at stake for Latinos. In one spot, national civil rights activist Dolores Huerta urged Latinos to support a leader like Joe Biden, emphasizing his experience and vision for their future. Other spots emphasized that Latinos were shaping the course of history in Wisconsin and encouraged them to vote, emphasizing that critical issues such as healthcare, education, and employment were on the line. For example, Dolores Huerta encouraged Latinos to unite together by:

**Spot 3:** *Hola, soy Dolores Huerta. He luchado por los derechos civiles de los Latinos toda mi vida. Su voz y su voto son muy importantes en esta elección. Hay tantas cosas por las que debemos luchar como nuestra salud, el proveer para nuestras familias y educación de nuestros hijos y por eso es que su voz y su voto son muy importantes. El candidato que elegimos impactara a nuestras familias y nuestras comunidades por los próximos años y por eso es que debemos de elegir a un leader como Joe Biden con la experiencia y la firme visión para nuestro futuro. He pasado mi vida organizando a las personas para que hagan cambios que impacten sus propias vidas. Y he aprendido que tenemos un poder tremendo si votamos juntos. Votemos por Joe Biden y Kamala Harris. ¡Si se puede! ...*

**Spot 3:** Hello, I'm Dolores Huerta. I have fought for Latino civil rights my entire life. Your voice and your vote are very important in this election. There are so many things we must fight for such as our health, providing for our families, and education for our children and that is why your voice and your vote are very important. The candidate we choose will impact our families and our communities for years to come and

that is why we must elect a leader like Joe Biden with the experience and strong vision for our future. I have spent my life organizing people to make changes that impact their own lives. And I have learned that we have tremendous power if we vote together. Let's vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Yes, we can!

...

In a conversation between a daughter and her father, the daughter expressed her excitement about voting. The father, in response, reminds her that he has never had the privilege to vote (being a mixed-status household) and doubts that her vote will make a difference. However, the daughter reassures her father that there is much at stake, and he reminds her that they (her parents) migrated to this country to secure a better future for her.

**Spot 4:**

**Hija:** *Papá, por primera vez voy a tener la oportunidad de votar.*

**Daughter:** Dad, for the first time I'm going to have the opportunity to vote.

**Papa:** *Esta bien hija, nosotros nunca hemos tenido el privilegio de votar, ¿pero crees que tu voto importará?*

**Dad:** Okay hija, we have never had the privilege of voting, but do you think your vote will matter?

**Hija:** *Si, papá, el voto latino determinara la elección presidencial. Debemos elegir a Joe Biden y Kamala Harris porque su administración escuchara a nuestras comunidades y tomaran nuestras demandas en serio. Nuestra salud, el futuro de nuestra educación, y la oportunidad de un buen empleo están en juego.*

**Daughter:** Yes, Dad, the Latino vote will determine the presidential election. We must elect Joe Biden and Kamala Harris because their administration will listen to our communities and take our demands seriously. Our health, the future of our education, and the opportunity for a good job are at stake.

**Papa:** *Tu madre y yo, emigramos a este país y nos hemos sacrificado para que nuestros hijos pudieran tener un futuro mejor. No ha sido fácil. Es por eso que es muy importante votar.*

**Dad:** Your mother and I emigrated to this country and we have sacrificed ourselves so that our children could have a better future. It has not been easy. That is why it is very important to vote.

**Hija:** *Con la ayuda de Biden y Harris podemos crear el futuro por el que se han sacrificado. Ahora es el momento de cambiar la historia...*

**Daughter:** With the help of Biden and Harris we can create the future they have sacrificed for. Now is the time to change history...

In this advertisement by the same IAO, Latinos are reminded that they are shaping history. The ad highlights the past success of the community in voting former Wisconsin governor, Scott Walker, out of office and emphasizes the importance of not sitting idly by during the general

election.

**Spot 5:** *En Wisconsin, los latinos estamos cambiando el rumbo de la historia. Sacamos a Scott Walker, el gobernador republicano que no le importó nuestra gente. Y al principio de este año ganamos elecciones estatales y pusimos a cargo a personas que realmente representan a nuestras comunidades, a pesar de los retos y obstáculos a los que nos enfrentamos. Ya hemos demostrado que cuando nos organizamos y votamos todos ganamos, pero aún hay mucho por hacer y necesitamos asegurarnos de que nuestras voces sigan siendo escuchadas. No podemos esperar a que las cosas cambien, necesitamos votar. Esta elección debemos elegir a un líder con la experiencia, dedicación, y una firme visión para nuestro futuro y el de nuestras familias, votemos por Joe Biden...*

**Spot 5:** In Wisconsin, Latinos are changing the course of history. We took out Scott Walker, the Republican governor who didn't care about our people. And earlier this year we won state elections and put people in charge who truly represent our communities, despite the challenges and obstacles we face. We have already shown that when we organize and vote we all win, but there is still much to do, and we need to ensure that our voices continue to be heard. We can't wait for things to change; we need to vote. This election we must elect a leader with experience, dedication, and a firm vision for our future and that of our families, let's vote for Joe Biden...

### General Non-Partisan Voter Information

General non-partisan voter information was a common feature across stations, providing essential details about voting. These segments were typically sponsored by local government entities and non-profit organizations. For example:

**Spot 6:**

**Mamá:** Oye muchacho, ya te registraste para votar?  
**Mom:** Hey boy, have you registered to vote yet?

**Hijo:** Ay no mami para qué?  
**Son:** Oh no mom, for what?

**Mamá:** Te voy a dar con la chancla si no te registras, después no te quejes de los resultados!  
**Mom:** I'm going to hit you with the flip-flop if you don't register, then don't complain about the results!

**Hijo:** Creo que ya estoy registrado o no sé?  
**Son:** I think I'm already registered or I don't know?

**Mamá:** Mira, tráeme tu celular escribe MCP al [numero] y las mamás con poder te mandaran información por texto. Te dirán dónde y cómo registrarte!  
**Mom:** Look, bring me your cell phone, write MCP to [number] and the moms with power will send you information by text. They will tell you where and how to register!

**Hijo:** Las mamás con poder?  
**Son:** Moms with power?

**Mamá:** Sí, además tienen una página de Facebook, Instagram, y WhatsApp. Y recuerda, escribe MCP al [numero] estas elecciones debemos votar por correo porque es seguro y fácil.

**Mom:** Yes, they also have a Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp page. And remember, write MCP to [number] these elections we must vote by mail because it is safe and easy.

In this spot aired by the group, “*mamás con poder*” (moms with power), a mother humorously threatens her son with a flip flop if he fails to make a plan to vote. She urges him to text the group to arrange his voting plan. Typically, radio spots like these provided voter resources and guidance, assisting listeners in creating their voter plans.

### General Non-Partisan Election Advertising

Finally, general non-partisan election advertising encompassed messages from both regional and national IAOs. These spots refrained from endorsing specific political candidates but instead urged the community to vote. For instance, one spot compared physical exercise to the growth of strength and drew a parallel to voting as a means to strengthen Hispanic influence.

#### Spot 7:

**Amigo 1:** *Tenemos el poder mi amigo [risas]!*

**Friend 1:** We have the power my friend [laughter]!

**Amigo 2:** *Ya se! A mi si me emociona votar. Sobre todo, porque mi voto representa también a mis padres.*

**Friend 2:** I know! I am excited to vote. Above all, because my vote also represents my parents.

**Amigo 1:** *Y a los míos, porque como indocumentados no pueden votar. ¿Cuándo cumpliste 18?*

**Friend 1:** And mine, because as undocumented immigrants they cannot vote. When did you turn 18?

**Amigo 2:** *En marzo! Justo cuando empecé a hacer ejercicio. ¿Y sabes qué?*

**Friend 2:** In March! Just when I started working out. And you know what?

**Amigo 1:** *Que?*

**Friend 1:** What?

**Amigo 2:** *Votar es como hacer ejercicio. Si levanto pesas dos días, no hay impacto. No crece el musculo. Pero si eres constante [interrumpe].*

**Friend 2:** Voting is like exercising. If I lift weights for two days, there is no impact. Muscle doesn't grow. But if you are constant [interrupts].

**Amigo 1:** *El musculo crece!*

**Friend 1:** The muscle grows!

**Amigo 2:** *Exacto! Así es cuando votamos. Si solo votan unos cuantos, pues no se ve ni se siente la fuerza de nuestro voto. ¡Ósea, el músculo hispano!*

**Friend 2:** Exactly! That's how it is when we vote. If only a few vote, then the strength of our vote is not seen or felt. Oh, the Hispanic muscle!

**Amigo 1:** *Guau, eres un genio.*

**Friend 1:** Wow, you are a genius

**Amigo 2:** *Ya se! [risas]*

**Friend 2:** I know! [laughter]

Furthermore, a national organization, purchased multiple ad spots encouraging Latinos in North Carolina to vote Trump out of office. While they did not explicitly endorse Joe Biden, they highlighted that many lives, including many Latinos, were lost during the pandemic due to Trump's actions (Zamarripa and Roque 2021).

**Spot 8:** *Cuánto pagaste de impuestos del año pasado? Y qué beneficios recibiste a cambio? Trump, abusa del sistema y por su culpa hemos perdido miles de vidas este año. Los latinos en Carolina del norte podemos cambiar el resultado de las elecciones. Regístrate y vota temprano en [sitio web]...*

**Spot 8:** How much did you pay in taxes last year? And what benefits did you receive in return? Trump abuses the system and because of him we have lost thousands of lives this year. Latinos in North Carolina can change the outcome of the elections. Register and vote early at [website]...

The organization also encouraged Latinos to help remove Trump from office, emphasizing that Latinos in North Carolina held the power to influence the election outcome.

**Spot 9:** *Vamos todos juntos a votar en las elecciones tempranas en Carolina del norte, te puedes registrar y votar temprano al mismo tiempo. Vamos a hacernos escuchar, vamos a decidir el futuro de nuestras familias. Vamos a sacar a Donald Trump porque los latinos en Carolina del Norte somos los únicos que podemos cambiar el resultado...*

**Spot 9:** Let's all vote together in the early elections in North Carolina, you can register and vote early at the same time. We are going to make ourselves heard, we are going to decide the future of our families. We are going to remove Donald Trump because Latinos in North Carolina are the only ones who can change the result...

Overall, these advertisements showcased the diverse paid messages reaching Latino audiences across various stations in Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Texas. Besides ads from presidential



campaigns, many were region-specific, while others were sponsored by national organizations aiming to connect with Latino voters from different angles.

### 3.5.3 DJ Perceptions of Themselves and Their Roles

My participant observation for this analysis involved visiting radio stations and sitting in on live radio shows whenever possible. Primarily, I aimed to gain an up-close understanding of what DJs do, their role in mobilizing Latinos, and their promotion of a “Latino-based” or a partisan agenda, if such an agenda existed, and to explore what it looked and sounded like. Some of these shows aired in the early morning, while others fell within the time frame outlined in this chapter. While observing DJs as they went on air, managed the board, and engaged in live ad-libbing, I also had the opportunity to talk to them while they played music and before they returned to the airwaves. On a few occasions, DJs invited me to participate in their on-air broadcasts, usually discussing a random topic of their choosing. Following the conclusion of the show, DJs typically granted me interviews, often immediately after their shows, as they usually left soon afterward.

When interviewing radio industry veterans, discussions typically began with their rich background on radio. Some had been instrumental in establishing the SLR station in their community, while others had witnessed their station’s evolution from AM to FM. Many had been involved long enough to recall their roles in mobilizing during the 2006 *mega marchas*. Often, DJs thought of themselves as a bridge to the community, seeing their role extending beyond mere commercial radio. As one DJ expressed to me:

*Somos una estación de radio comercial, pero nuestro trabajo comunitario muchas veces va más allá. Supera lo comercial... la misión [nombre de la emisora] fue de unir a la comunidad de mantenerla informada al día y hacer esa conexión entre la comunidad latina con el resto. Es decir: negocios, organizaciones, gobierno. Entonces somos ese puente, somos ese vínculo, ese canal que te puede conectar tanto [nombre de la emisora] te puede conectar directamente con la comunidad latina... Entonces somos ese vínculo que puede estar conectado en ambas partes y somos capaces de conectar estas dos, como la audiencia con alguien mas... somos ese puente...*

We are a commercial radio station, but our community work often goes beyond that. It goes beyond the commercial... the mission [name of the station] was to unite the community, keep it informed and make that connection between the Latin community and the rest. That is: businesses, organizations, government. So we are that bridge, we are that link, that channel that can connect you so much [name of the station] can connect you directly with the Latin community... So we are that link that can be connected on both sides and we are able to connect these two, like the audience with someone else... we are that bridge...

another DJ at a different station echoed similar sentiments. She saw her role as extending beyond just bridging institutions but also reaching out to the Anglo community. She remarked:

*“Nosotros nos consideramos una conexión directa entre la comunidad Latina y la comunidad anglosajona. Yo podría decirle que somos un bridge. Yo digo que somos un puente hacia esta comunidad. Cualquier cosa que ellos desconocen. Mucha gente afortunadamente se dirige hacia nosotros, pues ahora si que para contactarnos, para preguntarnos, para saber porque en muchas ocasiones desconfían de algunas organizaciones o no saben de estas organizaciones entonces somos un enlace entre la comunidad latina y la comunidad anglosajona”*

“We consider ourselves a direct connection between the Latino community and the Anglo community. I could say that we are a bridge. I say we are a bridge to this community. Anything they don't know. Fortunately, many people turn to us, because now they do to contact us, to ask us, to know why on many occasions they distrust some organizations or do not know about these organizations, so we are a link between the Latino community and the Anglo-Saxon community.”

that their profession is a link between the Latino and Anglo communities.

For them, this set them apart from general market radio, as SLR stations often stand as the sole station broadcasting in a language familiar to Latinos in their respective regions. In contrast, in English, there might be multiple stations in the same format in the same area. Being the singular SLR in the region, they felt compelled to deliver comprehensive information on local resources and address concerns related to policies, including immigration raids. A DJ in Texas, for instance, informed me that despite initial concerns about ratings dropping during COVID-19, they instead observed an increase because callers were seeking information on resources, and various entities were attempting to connect with Latinos regarding available support.

“Because everybody was wanting to be informed and be informed from somebody that they trust... We had doctors on the air, clinics on the air, we had city officials that were telling us about stuff like you know, they were doing this whole thing... You know everything was trying to let people know that hey we're here for you guys we understand that things are changing but we're here so. If it wouldn't have been radio, I think a lot of people wouldn't have found out.”

In Wisconsin, stations were also coordinating comprehensive on-air roundtables and sessions similar to what stations in Texas were doing. They informed Latinos about accessing various resources, participating in the U.S. Census, and registering to vote. The DJs acknowledged their presence on the airwaves was owed to the Latino community, addressing issues through a Latino perspective (Subervi-Velez 2009) and further building trust. On one occasion, a DJ expressed to me that they were there because of the:

“... people that speak Spanish and the circumstances that they have to deal with on a daily basis in regards to immigration, to ICE, to police pulling people over because they don't have a drivers license. So that's who we're looking out for. For our listeners for our community... we are a part of our community”

When discussing their role in electoral politics or motivating Latinos to vote, many DJs emphasized their impartiality and non-partisanship on air. They explained that legally, they could not take sides or be partisan on air. Although their discourse sometimes revealed their partisan leanings or outright endorsements, DJs are not prohibited from such activities since the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) abolished the fairness doctrine in 1987. The doctrine previously required broadcasters to present contrasting views on issues like policies and parties. However, some DJs in this analysis perceived that they had to present contrasting views on-air and held this was this to be the norm on radio, despite the on-air discussions suggesting otherwise.

Many DJs also conveyed to me that numerous members of their community were unable to vote. Despite this barrier, they still encouraged them to engage in the process. For instance, one DJ explained:

A large portion of the Latino community can't vote, but what we did was, we encouraged them, okay, you can't go out and vote, but you can go out and participate. Grandmothers, you have grandkids that are 18 or older. Go ask them, talk to them... tell them that it's important to go out and vote... a lot of the Mexican community or Latino community have in each house and it's unfortunate, the *gringos*, the white people, the Americans don't understand that there are mixed statuses in a household. Where there can be parents undocumented, the kids are

born here and are U.S. citizens. Or vice versa where the older community, they're legal residents or sometimes they are U.S. citizens, but their kids or grandkids are undocumented. And that's where there are lots of mixed-statuses... so it's trying to get everybody in that family in that household to vote... and we're outreaching to the parents or the grandparents to start teaching their kids getting them involved in voting...

During my interviews, other DJs echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing their efforts to encourage Latinos to mobilize others, regardless of their voting eligibility. This was also reflected in the on-air discourse from their stations. While not all DJs were deeply enthusiastic about politics, they still participated in general voter registration drives with grassroots organizations. One DJ from Texas conveyed to me his involvement in routine electoral efforts, expressing frustration with both parties' perceived lack of action for the Latino community. This DJ had previously been actively engaged during the 2006 *mega marchas* and had served as a DJ for another station included in this analysis at that time.

### **3.6 Discussion and Conclusion**

This study contributes to our understanding of Spanish-language radio and its intersection with Latino politics, offering insight into on-air communications during electoral periods. While concerns about on-air attacks on elected officials, such as Kamala Harris, and the dissemination of misinformation to the Latino community have grown, limited research delves into the broader landscape of SLR in electoral context. Existing scholarship on mass media and Latino politics has primarily focused on Spanish-language television (Marisa Abrajano 2010; Alexandre and Rehbinder 2008; Constantakis-Valdés 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha and Balarezo 2014; Hale, Olsen, and Fowler 2008) and has examined SLR and DJs mostly, at the national level (Casillas 2014,

2022; Félix, Gonzalez, and Ramirez 2008; Zepeda-Millan 2017), with much of this research dating back nearly two decades.<sup>116</sup>

In one of the few edited volumes addressing this line of research, Subervi-Velez (2009) and contributors outlined how Spanish-language mass media influences Latino politics, examining the coverage of elections, candidates, and campaign strategies across different Spanish-language media. While this research provides valuable insights, it primarily focuses on presidential elections spanning from 1984 to 2004. Thus, there is a need for additional research to capture the evolving dynamics of Latinos and Spanish-language mass media in the present day.

This analysis sought to build upon these findings by exploring the role of SLR in promoting political participation among Latinos and encouraging their civic engagement during the 2020 general election, and I find that they are key to Latino empowerment. Today, Latinos continue to be avid consumers of SLR. However, the manifestations of SLR today remain poorly understood.

Primarily, I set out to understand several questions regarding the role of SLR in this chapter. First, I sought to understand how SLR fostered participation across the regions analyzed here and their differences. Second, I explored the collaboration between stations and DJs with Latino or immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) to mobilize a demographic, of which many are unable to vote. Finally, I aimed to analyze the overall on-air discourse of SLR leading up to the elections and the potential re-election of a candidate who both implicitly and explicitly targeted Latinos (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020; Corral 2024).

In summary, my analysis revealed that SLR radio communications, particularly from DJs, often conveyed negative sentiments towards the Trump administration and its policies.

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<sup>116</sup> The *mega marchas* occurred in 2006.

Specifically, on-air discussions expressed disapproval of the threats surrounding DACA, TPS, and the handling of COVID-19. Additionally, the DJs often framed their understanding of U.S. politics within the context of their experiences and knowledge of Latin American politics (e.g., DJs discussing military bases in Honduras and notions of electoral malpractice). While DJs generally avoided endorsing specific candidates, conversations about Trump were often critical. In some instances, DJs' preferences became evident through heated exchanges with callers (e.g., against ending TPS and regarding the Republican Party) or DJ invitations to participate in electoral efforts with left-leaning organizations that endorsed Joe Biden. Only on one occasion did a station explicitly recommend voting for Joe Biden.

In this analysis, all campaign radio spots were exclusively from the Democratic Party, with no Republican Party ads aired during the data collection period. Apart from political campaign ads, partisan issue and advocacy ads conveyed messages suggesting that Democratic candidates, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris had the best interests of Latinos in mind and offered a vision for their future. On the other hand, partisan electoral voter information ads did not usually endorse a particular candidate, but rather they urged voters to vote Trump out of office. Despite being paid communications, interactions between DJs and listeners indicated that listeners perceived these ads as endorsements from the station, even though they were not (e.g., in one exchange, a DJ had to clarify that the radio spot was purchased by the Biden campaign).

Further, it may be the case that DJs often do not perceive themselves as partisan figures, but rather as bridges or intermediaries between institutions and whites. This sentiment was expressed to me during interviews conducted after observing hosts in the booth. However, I observed that their on-air discussions conveyed partisan messaging, specifically leaning toward the Democratic Party. Among the three states analyzed in this study, Wisconsin emerged as the

state with the highest level of activity and mobilization efforts targeting Latinos. This was evident not only in the radio spots aired across the state but also in the unique segments and shows. Wisconsin's approach closely resembled what Zepeda-Millan (2017) observed when community organizers and SLR collaborated to mobilize Latinos against anti-immigrant legislation. In contrast, North Carolina exhibited less of this collaboration, with DJs focusing more on issues relevant to sub-groups of Latinos in the region such as Central Americans. Texas, on the other hand, had the lowest level of engagement with Latinos regarding important election issues. DJs and on-air banter primarily expressed general disapproval of Trump and provided voter information. This was noteworthy considering that Texas is the most closely surveilled state in terms of immigration surveillance among those included in this analysis. Additionally, more on-air discussions about the expansion of immigration surveillance occurred in Wisconsin and North Carolina.

Finally, if certain IAOs can establish close relationships with local and regional SLRs, and if radio DJs exhibit partisan preferences and spread anti-Trump rhetoric on-air, as demonstrated in this chapter, it would be wise for Latino outreach strategists from the opposing party to leverage these acoustic allies within the Latino community. These radio intermediaries not only provide strategic allies, but the DJs already have the cultural capital to understand the varying legal statuses of their community members and how they can participate. By collaborating with IAOs, radio can help parties reach people on the ground and reinforce their outreach efforts toward Latinos in those communities. The extent to which Latino outreach strategists from the opposing party will capitalize on these opportunities, primarily from the top down, remains to be seen.

## Chapter 4

### THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF LATINO MOBILIZATION AND NON-CITIZEN ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S.

*“It would have been completely unheard of for someone running to be the next president of the United States to hire an undocumented person for such a visible role, and to trust that person to advocate for your agenda. – Valentina*

*“I’ve never been in a ballot box. I don’t know what that looks like. I’ve never actually voted for any of the people I’ve worked for and I’ve poured in sweat, blood, tears, hours my livelihood, my body, you know because you go through so much in campaigns and to never be able to have the ability to do that... it’s just like woah. It’s kind of defeating sometimes trying to continue having that momentum” – Emilio*

#### 4.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I explored how co-ethnic intermediaries such as immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) leverage Latino identity to foster community engagement before and during elections. I also learned how they activate and empower their base through organizing campaigns on issues impacting their direct lives (e.g., driver’s licenses, the U.S. Census count, deportation campaigns), as well as through service provision (e.g. legal services), and educational opportunities (e.g., citizenship classes). Not only did I gain insight as to how IAOs did this, but also into the ways that they tapped into their acoustic allies on Spanish-language radio to discuss electoral information through a Latino lens and encourage audience participation in elections. Through this research, I was also able to delve into the dynamics of Spanish-language radio at the regional level to better understand the types of messages Latinos received in specific places.



Building on this foundation, in this chapter, I use insights from previous chapters to understand how Latinos within major party campaigns shape strategies and influence Latino outreach within the party, even if they cannot vote. I will examine how they may collaborate with intermediaries to boost Latino participation, explore whether they have similar strategies to IAOs, and identify what is lacking in the Latino mobilization infrastructure. Additionally, I aim to uncover what these operatives, connected to the Latino community, at various levels, can teach us about Latino mobilization. Finally, this chapter seeks to illuminate the operations of high-profile electoral operatives, the get-out-the-vote operations of IAOs on the ground, and the gaps in the current mobilizing infrastructure from the perspective of Latinos engaged in this work at both the top and grassroots levels.

One major issue that parties and electoral operatives in the U.S. have to contend with leading up to elections is Latino voter turnout. Despite being a key and rapidly growing demographic, Latinos continue to exhibit less voter participation than other ethnic and racial groups (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Fraga 2018; Ramirez 2007). Yet, despite this trend, political parties and pundits persist in speculating about the Latino vote and their electoral impact during whichever election is underway (Aguilera 2020; Escobar 2020; Gamboa 2022). Over the last two decades, political parties have employed various tactics to connect with Latino voters, including the Republican National Committee's (RNC) establishment of minority outreach centers (Fowler 2022; Martin 2013)—many of which have subsequently shut down (Andrea 2024)—as well as the recruitment of prominent Latinos, including non-citizens to serve as top electoral operatives on presidential candidate campaigns (Grullón Paz 2020).

Over the last two decades, the Democratic Party has increasingly sought the expertise of high-profile Latino activists, primarily from the undocumented youth movement, known as

DREAMers, as a possible key to increasing Latino turnout. Presidential hopefuls such as Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Martin O'Malley, Elizabeth Warren, and Amy Klobuchar have brought these activists on board for key Latino outreach positions in their presidential campaigns, despite the fact that many of these individuals were ineligible to vote. While the contributions of DREAMers in advocating for policies like the DREAM Act and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are well-recognized among the American public (Krogstad 2020; Preston 2017), the scope of their influence, especially during presidential elections, remains underexplored in the academic literature.<sup>117</sup>

These efforts, while proactive, have not simplified the challenge of mobilizing Latino voters. Effectively mobilizing Latinos is a complex task that extends beyond the mere presence of political parties in Latino neighborhoods through temporary pop-up centers or showing up merely a few weeks before an election. Political parties can establish deeper connections with Latino communities by incorporating Latinos into their organizational structures and campaign efforts. For example, many Latinos can communicate in the native language of their community members and share cultural ties that provide insights into traditions, values, and references, which can potentially mobilize the community into action. Additionally, individuals with deep community ties and extensive networks might have the capability to enhance party outreach efforts and help establish lasting connections with Latino voters. While some parties may progressively incorporate Latinos, others might choose to abandon such efforts, as seen with the closure of Hispanic Outreach Centers.

To understand how non-citizens, particularly Latinos, influence beyond the ballot box, we need to better understand the contemporary infrastructure of Latino mobilization in U.S.

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<sup>117</sup> As of the time of this writing, I have not found research that focuses on this. Instead, research mainly focuses on other issues related to DACA (e.g., DACA protection, etc.).

elections. That is, what does it look like from the lens of Latino operatives engaging in this work and what are the challenges and opportunities in mobilizing voting-eligible Latinos more broadly? Despite the challenges in turning Latinos out to vote (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Fraga 2018; Ramirez 2007) and the fact that many in the group are not eligible to vote, Latinos, remain active in civic engagement (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; J. Wong 2008) and continue to contribute to a variety of local policy efforts (Arriaga 2023; Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021). Furthermore, programs like DACA, along with various legal and temporary work-eligible statuses (e.g., legal permanent residency, temporary protected status), have broadened not just the economic opportunities for non-citizens, but also political ones, including the capacity to vote in certain local elections (Dahlstrom-Eckman 2024; Iati 2024; Jaimes Pérez 2015; T. K. Wong et al. 2015; T. K. Wong, Abrar, and Jawetz 2018).<sup>118</sup> Such programs and initiatives can empower Latinos to assume unique and influential positions within political campaigns and advocacy that extend beyond the ballot box. To which the question then becomes, how do Latino operatives at the top and grassroots organizers help each other mobilize co-ethnics at both the national and local level? How do these individuals facilitate connections between institutions like political parties with immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs)?

In this chapter, I focus on illustrating the infrastructure of Latino mobilization in presidential elections from the lens of Latinos, both voting-eligible and non-voting-eligible. Primarily, I draw on insights from electoral operatives who were involved in Latino outreach during presidential campaigns, as well as prominent activists connected with immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) that engage Latino communities at the local level throughout the country. Then, I showcase the diverse, and often hidden ways that non-citizens, primarily high-

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<sup>118</sup> Voting in federal and statewide elections for non-citizens is illegal. Non-citizens can vote in select local elections. See (<https://www.usa.gov/who-can-vote>).

profile Latino electoral operatives, exert influence within electoral contexts. Finally, I demonstrate how these individuals mobilize Latino co-ethnics from the top-down and the ground-up.

## **4.2 Strategies for Electoral Participation and Influence: Latinos and Immigrants**

### **Narrative Building**

Stories play an integral role in shaping both our individual and collective identities. Often, we share stories of important life events or challenges with friends and family as a means to connect with one another and strengthen our bonds with our community. Beyond our personal lives, storytelling can serve as an effective tool to rally people together and drive action, especially within social movements.

When we think about storytelling in social movements, organizations, and community spaces, the public narrative model described by Ganz (2011) is a helpful framework. This model posits that people form their identities through a blend of personal and collective stories, which allows them to map their own experiences onto the broader narrative (story) of their community (Ganz 2011). Ganz's (2011) public narrative model is comprised of three main elements: the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now.

**Figure 4.1: Public Narrative Model**



Source: Zac Willette and the author.

Source: Marshall Ganz 2011; Zac Willette and author, n.d.

In the “story of self,” individuals share “the values that define who we are” in the form of lived experiences (Ganz 2011, 283). This narrative evolves into the “story of us,” where these stories, whether singular or shared help define the “us” as a way to “distinguish our community from one another” (Ganz 2011, 285). Through such deliberate storytelling, people co-construct a shared identity (Ganz 2011; Somers 1994). With a collective identity established, the “story of now” takes shape and can steer the actions of the group, manifesting from modest to significant acts. These actions, regardless of their scale, showcase the possibility of change and need not be transformational to be meaningful.

Various social movements (e.g., women’s rights, and civil rights) have adopted storytelling in efforts to promote inclusiveness in the U.S. (Ganz 2011). More recently, we have seen the undocumented youth movement and the broader immigrant rights movement adapt this technique. For example, the undocumented and allies, have diligently used storytelling to push the boundaries of public opinion. To illustrate, in 2010, undocumented youth, primarily college

students coordinated donating blood to local and campus blood drives in efforts to perform “good citizenship” despite their unauthorized status in the country (Contreras 2010).<sup>119</sup> These efforts took place as undocumented youth, otherwise known as DREAMers, ramped up efforts to gain support for the DREAM Act, a congressional bill that would have provided eligible undocumented youth a path toward citizenship.

Within the broader immigrant rights movement, immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), like in Chapter 2, undertake storytelling as a strategy to consolidate their base, influence public opinion, and inspire community engagement. In that chapter, I explored and described how IAOs unify and activate their base, which largely includes Latino citizens and immigrants with varying legal statuses. We also see this type of storytelling among high-profile DREAMers, like those recruited to work on major campaigns in 2016 and 2020, who have shared their personal stories to talk about the collective, Latinos, as they engage in outreach efforts on behalf of their candidate.

Not only do narratives play an important role in shaping Latino political identity, but they can also help cultivate relationships and strengthen community bonds. These narratives and relationships can establish a foundation for connection. As individuals engage in collective action, they can leverage the relationships formed with people who share their values. This approach allows people to strategize from a place of shared values and set tangible goals (e.g., changing a local policy) that can benefit others like themselves.

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<sup>119</sup> See (<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-immigrant-students-give-blood-to-show-citizenship-2010dec03-story.html>).

### **Relational Organizing and Immigrant Political Incorporation**

When considering community organizing, particularly in marginalized and underrepresented groups, one may recall the work of Saul Alinsky. As founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), Alinsky was well-known for implementing the relational organizing model in the IAF. He believed strongly in the power of human connection—interacting, listening, and learning with mutual respect and dignity—as foundational to successful organizing (Staudt 2020, 4). In this vein, IAF considers relationship building to be paramount (Pierson 2001; Robinson and Hanna 1994) and argues that one cannot call upon others to give of themselves without having strong relationships. In practice, this could involve intentional exercises designed to foster relationships, such as one-on-one meetings with other group members. These meetings can help individuals understand the experiences that unite them and uncover their motivations for getting involved.

As part of its organizing strategy, the IAF connects people through shared values and vision, builds their social capital (e.g., leadership development) (Altemose and McCarty 2001), socializes them around political issues, and raises their efficacy (Marquez 1989). This approach helps empower IAF members to envision and work towards improved living conditions and substantive community benefits, like access to resources and influence over policy.

In this sense, the IAF's strategy is centered on “achieving realistic goals in targeted local and state institutions” (Staudt 2020, 6), a process that cannot be achieved without having the necessary resources to train and politicize members. As documented by Marquez (1989) in his study of Mexican-American community organizing in Texas, IAF organizations encouraged the impoverished to analyze their issues “and identify specific solutions to them” (Marquez 1989, 358). This engagement not only politicized members but also equipped them with the necessary tools to influence policies and conditions that impacted both their individual lives and their

communities. Additionally, Marquez (1989) notes that both the IAF and Alinsky's vision portrayed members as active agents of change, capable of realizing their potential.

Although the IAF primarily operates in the Southwest and is mostly religiously affiliated in its democratic efforts, its organizing model is broadly implemented across community and grassroots organizations, social movements, and political campaigns. Among immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) holding only a 501(c)(3) status, this model facilitates mobilization around issue-based campaigns, such as obtaining driver's licenses and securing in-state tuition for the undocumented. IAOs that also possess a 501(c)(4) designation can use this model to drive electoral mobilization endorsing political candidates who can potentially improve the material conditions for their base. This type of strategic organizing and activation, particularly within immigrant-based groups like Latinos, is rarely undertaken by political parties (de Graauw 2008; J. S. Wong 2006). The efforts to build narratives, raise consciousness, and activate both U.S. citizen and non-citizen Latinos can and does occur through IAOs. These organizations, led by local leaders who have developed social capital and diverse networks, can act as a bridge connecting their communities to political institutions, including political parties (Ganz 2011; de Graauw 2008; J. S. Wong 2006).

Scholars examining immigrants, community organizations (e.g., immigrant-serving or immigrant advocacy), and immigrant political engagement often discuss factors like place (e.g., urban vs. rural), race/ethnicity, and organization types (e.g., formal vs informal) as important elements to consider when trying to understand how immigrants are civically and politically incorporated (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). Such organizations often provide services like legal assistance, citizenship preparation, and English language classes, or combine these services with advocacy efforts to advance issue campaigns that meet community needs, as



detailed in Chapter 2. These resources and skills typically support and facilitate the participation of the groups seeking assistance (de Graauw 2008). While many organizations focus on providing services to Latinos, others strive to offer a broader spectrum of resources encompassing service provision, issue advocacy, and partisan organizing. Although relatively few immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs) provide such a comprehensive range of services and advocacy, those that do often act as key intermediaries between political institutions and groups like Latinos.

The role of IAOs, as described in this dissertation, in mobilizing Latinos for the vote, particularly at the state and local levels, mirrors what scholars suggest was once the function of political machines. These machines were more locally focused and actively courted immigrant voters during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (J. S. Wong 2006). Although political parties now tend to overlook local communities in their mobilization strategies (de Graauw 2008; J. S. Wong 2006), in battleground states where the minority vote can be pivotal, it is beneficial to have community-based operatives who are familiar with the operations of IAOs. These relationships can help leverage local networks for the party, especially since the 501(c)(4) status of some IAOs permits such political engagement.<sup>120</sup>

What makes IAOs and leaders from Latino CBOs unique? Mainly, they possess deep social capital and sometimes can offer resources to members of the community. To illustrate, J. S. Wong (2006) explains how these organizations can mobilize these groups in ways that political parties often cannot:

“The transmission of historical knowledge and cultural identity bolsters positive group identity and helps to create a community within the United States that is vital and

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<sup>120</sup> Ongoing research (Marquez and Mjaanes n.d.) has yielded only a few of these types of organizations, which are rare, slowly growing, and warranting future research. I comment on this in the future research section of this dissertation.

anchored rather than bleak and temporary... In the past, political parties provided some of the resources needed to move along that path, but today community organizations appear to have replaced parties as the source of tools that immigrants must acquire to participate in politics... Because leaders have or develop strong social and cultural connections to immigrant communities, they may be more effective in terms of mobilization. They can engage in culturally sensitive strategies and reach out to immigrants in their native language. One community organizer emphasized the importance of linguistic skills and ethnic awareness for achieving successful mobilization... In contrast, for the most part, mainstream political leaders have at best tenuous connections to the local community. (J. S. Wong 2006, 92)

Moreover, J. S. Wong (2006) notes that the staff and leadership of these organizations, who are often from these communities themselves, share lived experiences with their members, maintain extensive social networks with similar organizations, and have earned the trust of the community. These qualities, as suggested by J. S. Wong (2006), typically make these organizations more adept at mobilizing immigrants and immigrant-based groups, including Latinos.

### **Electoral Mobilizing through Grassroots and Relational Approaches**

Although political parties have become less engaged in mobilizing at the local level (de Graauw 2008; J. S. Wong 2006), the implementation of DACA has facilitated the recruitment of prominent Latino leaders with extensive local networks, particularly among IAOs and CBOs. These networks often go beyond Latino-centric organizations, as grassroots groups actively collaborate with coalitional partners across various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although my focus lies on their potential influence within the Latino community, these partnerships often empower Latinos to advocate for their social issues among non-Latino eligible voters, with allies often playing a role in amplifying Latino concerns.

Before DACA, employing an undocumented individual in a high-profile political role such as outreach director or campaign advisor was unprecedented. However, since 2012, there has been a shift in the recruitment practices for Latino outreach at the national level. Those ascending to these leadership positions often possess a deep understanding of the dynamics within IAOs and CBOs that predominantly serve Latino communities, and they use this knowledge to mobilize Latino voters and volunteers for their candidate.

Recent Latino operatives at the national level, frequently trained by IAOs like those discussed in Chapter 2, are well-versed in narrative building, relational organizing, and the collaborative shaping of Latino political identities as active participants of democracy through their roles in campaigns. While the primary aim of working on political campaigns is to mobilize voters, Latino operatives recognize the importance of integrating both top-down and bottom-up relational and grassroots organizing strategies (Rocha 2020). This approach is not entirely new to political campaigns; for instance, Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders effectively employed relational and grassroots strategies, leveraging compelling narratives (e.g., the story of self, us, and now) to activate their supporter base into actions like voting and broader engagement (Ganz 2009; Rocha 2020). Among these candidates, Sanders was well-known for recruiting Latino operatives, including high-profile DACA recipients. Following this trend, several campaigns have adopted similar strategies. Finally, studying the work of these operatives and IAOs can provide invaluable insight into Latino mobilization in the U.S. and reveal both the challenges and opportunities for engagement. It can also help us understand the role of these individuals and organizations in the broader infrastructure of Latino mobilization.

### 4.3 Data and Methodology

To gain a better understanding of the infrastructure of Latino mobilization, I interviewed Latinos involved in these efforts, including high-profile electoral operatives and on-the-ground practitioners. I chose this approach to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with Latino mobilization, as seen by both operatives and organizers. Additionally, I investigated how people at the top sought to establish relationships with those on the ground to carry out these mobilization strategies, despite being ineligible to vote and to understand their influence despite not participating in the voting process.

This entailed two types of sampling methods, purposive and snowball sampling. In this examination, I selected high-profile Latino activists and electoral operatives to better understand their perspectives on Latino mobilization through national strategy, to learn more about how they assess the challenges and opportunities within the wider infrastructure for mobilizing Latinos, and to explore the role of non-citizens in electoral mobilization.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, I employed a snowball sampling technique (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019; Woodley and Lockard 2016) to interview on-the-ground practitioners who were involved in IAO mobilization efforts.

This approach provided direct insights into the activities of my interlocutors at both the national and grassroots levels and allowed me to capture a broad scope of non-citizen influence in this process, particularly among Latinos. Additionally, this approach allowed my interlocutors to express themselves beyond choosing predefined answers, as is common in traditional surveys,

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<sup>121</sup> I selected these individuals by reviewing prominent American newspapers like the New York Times, where many of them were featured for serving candidates in these roles, and by reviewing presidential candidate campaign announcements where their appointments were announced. Then, drawing on my connections as a former community organizer, I contacted them to arrange a formal interview in my capacity as a researcher.

and allowed me to take careful considerations when studying vulnerable demographics (Jackson 2021; Woodley and Lockard 2016).

I conducted interviews with a total of 35 interlocutors, including both high-profile operatives and grassroots organizers and activists. These interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Many of the high-profile interviews took place in person, whereas all IAO-related interviews were carried out online. All interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, spanning from October 2020 to Spring 2024.

### **High-Profile Interviews**

From Fall 2022 to Spring 2024, I interviewed a diverse group of high-profile Latinos, primarily non-citizens or formerly non-citizens, actively engaged in Latino mobilization in the United States. These individuals are recognized leaders in Latino advocacy, policy, and electoral realms, holding roles such as co-founders and directors of national immigrant advocacy organizations, attorneys, philanthropic strategists, political consultants, and board directors of major foundations. Some have also served in the White House, as deputy directors, directors of Latino outreach, Latino press secretaries, and senior advisors to presidential candidates. Their achievements include receiving MacArthur Fellowships, Freedom from Fear Awards, inclusion in Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People list, and distinctions such as being the first undocumented attorney to be admitted to the bar in their state, among other accolades.<sup>122</sup>

The in-person interviews took place across various locations in New York, Washington D.C., and Boston, Massachusetts, primarily at sites chosen by the interlocutors, such as their offices. Occasionally, the conversations extended to their homes over meals (e.g., Peruvian

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<sup>122</sup> These awards, accolades, and distinctions are held by those in my sample.

grilled chicken), at their educational institutions (e.g., Harvard University), and during special events (e.g., the Ohtli Award presentation at the Mexican Consulate in Manhattan, New York). The individuals interviewed were immigrants from or descendants of countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Panama. The majority of the interlocutors identified as male, and each possessed extensive knowledge of the diverse Latino communities across the U.S. The interviews varied in length, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes.

### **Rank-and-File Interviews**

To complement the high-profile Latino interviews in this chapter, I analyzed the interviews of rank-and-file Latinos involved in grassroots mobilization through a Wisconsin immigrant advocacy organization (IAO), as detailed in an earlier chapter. Specifically, I examined the interviews paying particular attention to their understanding of the infrastructure of Latino mobilization, on-the-ground operations, and the role of non-citizens in this process. These interviews were conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions and were approximately 60-90 minutes in length. The rank-and-file interlocutors were predominantly women of Mexican descent or background, aged between 18 to 70 years. Half of the sample were non-citizens, while the other half were U.S. citizens.

## **4.4 Findings**

### **4.4.1 Influence of Non-Voting People in Presidential Elections: From the Top-Down**

Typically, when we think about the targets of mobilization in elections, we think of citizens of a particular country and assume that those organizing those efforts are also citizens. We rarely

consider that the strategies to engage potential voters might come from non-citizens and the influence these individuals may have on voter turnout, in this case, Latinos, within major political parties in the U.S. While it is often overlooked that individuals unable to vote can play an influential role in party and grassroots mobilization and strategies, the activities of these operatives within the Democratic party and IAOs on the ground offer a different perspective in Latino mobilization. For example, beyond the ballot box, non-citizens played influential roles by shaping presidential candidate policy platforms, refining Latino outreach strategies nationwide, participating in high-profile events like the Democratic National Convention as special committee members, and serving as the main liaisons and strategists between the Democratic Party and Latino media.

#### **Shaping Policy on Presidential Campaign Platforms: Immigration Policy**

When discussing electoral impact, the focus often centers on casting a vote for a candidate. However, for many individuals featured in this chapter, voting was not an option. Instead, their influence was exercised through shaping presidential candidates' policy platforms. Several of the operatives interviewed in this chapter gained national recognition through the undocumented youth movement and brought substantial expertise in immigration policy. This extensive experience proved invaluable when candidates tasked their teams with developing their positions on key issues, particularly immigration.

Operatives from the 2016 and 2020 presidential primary campaigns shared with me that their campaign roles enabled them to champion Latino community issues, such as immigration, and how unprecedented that was coming from non-citizen operatives. In one interview, an operative explained how he and a team of colleagues with similar backgrounds were asked by the candidate to draft their ideal immigration policy platform.

To be clear, some of those hired or appointed to serve candidates in these roles were among the most high-profile “DREAMers” in the U.S., seasoned in immigration policy at the local, state, and federal levels. Years before working for this candidate, this operative organized a campaign in his home state of New York, which enabled him to challenge the state to admit him to the New York bar. He became the first undocumented person to practice law in the state. Not only did he and others use their lived experiences, but they also frequently possessed diverse training, in this case, legal expertise, to inform their strategies.

In this case, the operative used his lived experience and legal training to inform his immigration policy suggestions for the candidate and was taken aback by the unexpected opportunity:

"Like that was like that's unheard of, right? It was like a presidential candidate was like [candidate] give us your wishlist. And we did. We were like we're going to do this we're going to do this. And he accepted it right? And it was just, that was the power. Like, okay, this is and just like city government now, like it's about being in this position of power where you can decide not just, not just, funding but also decide the direction of a city, of a nation, and that's what we did with this campaign."

For this operative, drafting the candidate's immigration platform was a powerful demonstration of influence, despite being ineligible to vote. He saw this as an opportunity to shape national policy, similar to his role in local city government. Another operative, who worked for the same candidate during the 2016 and 2020 cycles, viewed her involvement in drafting the platform as a significant achievement. She explained:

"Another thing that you know, I was able to accomplish, and [another operative] did too in 2016, was to be able to influence, and write the immigration policy. That was part of the platform of our candidate and it wasn't even just me it was a group of undocumented people... "



These efforts represented a collaborative push by undocumented individuals and their allies to influence immigration policy within a presidential campaign platform. Throughout the campaign, they were insiders—people who had established trust and were tasked with initiatives that could impact the lives of many Latinos and immigrants. This responsibility was not taken lightly by the operatives. For instance, one operative who worked closely with the candidate shared with me the magnitude of this endeavor:

"And that, for me, got me as close to him [the candidate]. Seeing him every day and... just seeing him and being with him but also for him to rely on myself and the team that I was working with. For him to say [operative's name] I trust you all... to draft my entire immigration policy platform."

While these activities do not involve voting directly, they do involve substantial engagement with the political process. Operatives, especially those with DACA, did not hesitate to seize opportunities to engage in electoral politics, as conveyed to me by those interviewed in this chapter. To illustrate, one operative told me: "That was where the decision about me getting involved in the [candidate's] campaign... not just play an indirect role but not play a direct role where I'm working with a major presidential candidate like [candidate]." While my primary focus in this section is on immigration policy, operatives also discussed their involvement in helping shape other candidate issue areas as well.

### **Broadening the Scope of Participation**

Typically, when we think about who is recruited for campaign work, we think about individuals that can actually vote. However, many individuals highlighted in this chapter were not only influential in directing outreach (e.g., calling the shots) or serving as advisors to candidates, but they also helped broaden the scope of participation. Earlier in this dissertation, I demonstrated that Latinos, including immigrants, can engage in electoral politics in various ways. For instance,

undocumented individuals can make phone calls to voters, those with DACA can work for political candidates or IAOs, legal permanent residents can donate to political campaigns, and U.S. citizens can vote. This understanding of broadening participation among the wider Latino community is important among Latino operatives working within major political parties, as it can help support the development of a more robust infrastructure for Latino mobilization.

Broadening the scope of participation is particularly important given the constraints that many Latinos face—limited time, skills, and resources—which can make participation efforts financially challenging. These limitations, as described by operatives and discussed earlier in this chapter, highlight the need for strategic support to strengthen community involvement without imposing additional financial burdens.

The literature on civic engagement suggests that people participate in politics when they have the time, skills, and resources to do so (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). But what happens when individuals, particularly non-citizen Latinos with intersecting marginal identities, are overlooked by operatives who are unaware of how they can engage in politics? These potential participants will likely remain inactive. In this scenario, operatives who understand the various ways in which Latinos and similarly situated immigrant groups can engage—due to their own legal statuses and community insights—can play an important role. These experiences and insights from those at the top, that is, key operatives, advisors, and directors, can be essential in crafting effective outreach strategies and ensuring authentic engagement with Latino communities.

To illustrate, one operative shared that he included anyone who wanted to participate in the candidate's campaign regardless of their eligibility to vote.

“Regardless of your status, this democracy is open and free to everyone, except for voting... so, like, if, if there’s an opportunity for us to get you involved, we will work hard to get you involved and keep you involved. It doesn’t matter, it didn’t matter to us if you only spoke Spanish, if you didn’t have status, if you had DACA, if you had, if you were a citizen, our goal was everyone is going join this tent and everyone has a role to play if they want to. Or we could find a role for you to do, with the extra bonus if you were able to cast your vote legally then we would definitely heavily expect that and work to make that very easy for you.”

Not only did he convey his understanding that participation on a campaign can extend beyond casting a vote, but he also shared the methods that they used on the campaign trail to encourage individuals with these statuses to engage with the democratic process. He shared:

“We asked if they wanted to be part of the campaign. Do you want to volunteer? Do you want to share your story? Do you want to join us at events? Do you know anyone who we should be in contact with, who? Where do you go for church? Where do you, you know what makes you part of this community? And trying to understand that person through all those other ways. And then, and then, we could, if the relationship was strong enough, then ask them, can we come in and join you? Can you show us?”

Volunteering on the campaign, sharing your story of self, becoming a part of the campaign team, recommending contacts for outreach, and targeting places of worship to disseminate the candidate’s platform to potential Latino voters were all activities that the individuals could participate in, regardless of their legal status.

### **National and Local Latino Outreach Strategies: Plugging in Latinos**

Campaign operatives, ranging from Latino outreach directors to senior roles, consistently aimed to engage Latinos to support their candidate. Their approaches varied widely based on available resources, from financial means to social capital in their pre-existing networks. Operatives adapted their strategies to connect with both broad Latino demographics and specific niche

communities across the United States, using diverse tactical approaches toward potential Latino voters.

For example, one campaign operative with extensive experience in several social movements in the U.S. emphasized the value of leveraging his existing social networks to engage Latino voters and intermediaries effectively. His approach entailed using personal connections to connect his candidate with people on the ground:

"I had, I've been doing the work in this area [grassroots organizing] for a long time so I had a lot of these relationships. So, I knew, that like, if I'm going to Nevada, like, I know, but like Mi Familia Vota person, I know, like, I know there is a strong like CHISPA, like environmental justice Latino group there..."

When reaching diverse leaders, the operative understood that his candidate and his candidate's platform could potentially garner support from Latinos who could be swayed in support for her campaign. For instance, the operative described pitching this as an opportunity to leaders and using one of the candidate's most valuable resources on campaign, time, to connect with key intermediaries:

"For Hispanic Heritage Month... she did a call with you know, leaders from, across the country. So, I was like, cool. Here's an opportunity, like I have, precious resources, her time, who are the folks that like I need to like, who are either supportive or like, could be swayed..."

Another operative leveraged his network in the Latino faith community: "[W]e can't forget about the Latino faith leaders. So that was pretty key in Iowa wherever there was a small little town there was probably one *iglesia* [church] that was doing God's work so trying to connect with the faith and those folks was important..."

At the same time, operatives understood that they did not always have the most resources to leverage, which entailed being strategic about where to best invest. They strategically focused

on where to best allocate resources, such as choosing to concentrate efforts in specific places.

One operative shared their efforts to concentrate on Nevada and Super Tuesday states: "And I'm not going to get to build the most robust thing, so, like where are places that I can focus my attention? So, I really focus on Nevada and then also really starting to focus on some of the Super Tuesday states..." while others engaged in similar efforts in places like Iowa,

"Our idea was 'let's go to every little county in Iowa' –and there's like 99— and then try to make sure to find the Latino community and that was my job. Um, so that was kind of the strategy there. We weren't just banking that we were going to get Latinos in the metro. Like, we had to go out and actually be in community with them."

These efforts to focus on places that could yield more Latino turnout reflect operatives' pragmatic approach to reaching the group despite often limited resources. In some places across the country, these focused efforts can help dictate close races.

Fine-tuning these efforts is not just a matter of where to strategically focus campaign resources, but also understanding the need to adapt campaign strategies to the unique Latino communities across the country. The operatives interviewed here understood that the landscape of Latinos in the U.S. varies culturally and socio-economically based on where you are in the country. For instance, operatives understood that issues that drive Latino voter turnout in Miami differed from those in a small town in Minnesota.

In urban areas like Miami, the strategy differed in that operatives did not have to look for Latinos per se, but rather, what are the issues that Latinos there care about:

"That is very different than Miami. When we went to Miami, there was no looking for Latinos. They're there. So, it's um, the strategy was very different. Then, at that point, it's like what were the issues we cared about? The issues were economy, the issues were education, um also, um, you know, they have a horrible governor, so like, they were putting kids in in in cages, so we went to go see that..."

The strategies did not just focus on urban areas but also tailored their approach to areas with unexpected Latino demographic profiles:

“We’ve analyzed data zip codes, um, you know, you’ll be surprised to hear that the most diverse percentage-wise of any city in Minnesota is not Minneapolis. It’s actually a small little town called Worthington, Minnesota, and God knows middle of nowhere where 44% of the population are BIPOC with a majority Latino. So, it’s like we know, so when we do messaging and targeting we don’t only focus on urban areas.”

Not only did operatives engage with Latinos through culturally aware and localized strategies, but by building relationships, operatives can help create authentic connections, which they prioritized. For instance, instead of having their candidate pander to the Latino community, they thought of: “What are the things that she [candidate] cares about and how do Latino people fit into those issues?” and planned around how to include Latinos with this in mind. The tailored approaches, leveraging of social capital, and localized engagement efforts demonstrate the diverse approaches operatives took when campaigning in Latino communities on limited resources.

### **Participating at the Democratic National Convention**

In 2016, 11-year-old, Karla Ortiz, and her mother, Francisca Ortiz, took the stage at the Democratic National Convention to share a message with Democratic party delegates on immigration policy. As they joined the stage, the screen read “keeping families together” referring to mixed-status and undocumented families in the U.S. Karla, a U.S. citizen, shared her experience of worrying about her undocumented parent’s deportation, and her mother, Francisca, shared her fears about being separated from her U.S.-born daughter. Their speeches were followed by Astrid Silva, a well-known Latina and immigrant activist, who delivered a speech highlighting the dangerous journeys families like her embarked upon to give her an opportunity

at the American dream. Astrid, like many in her situation, faced roadblocks in attempting to obtain higher education. In the speech, she talks about the barriers that people like her face in this country and highlights the fears around mass deportation families like hers and people in her community had at the potential election of Donald Trump into the presidency.

While unconventional at the time, these examples serve as an illustration of how non-citizens and mixed-status Latino families from the immigrant rights movement, took part in narrative building particularly on immigration policy during the 2016 DNC. These examples, albeit more public in nature, demonstrate some ways in which people like the Ortiz family or Astrid can participate in shaping how Latinos become involved in the electoral process despite their ineligibility to vote. Yet, these are not the only ways in which Latinos under these statuses participated at the DNC.

A less public role was that of one of my interlocutors, who was invited to serve as a credentials committee member at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in 2016. Under this role, the interlocutor identified key responsibilities she had at the convention, which included (1) selection and vetting of delegates, (2) voting power (e.g., as related to governance and administration at the convention), (3) ensuring fair representation, and (4) serving as a liaison between Latino media and events happening at the convention.<sup>123</sup>

In this case, the interlocutor was invited to serve in this role by the former chair of the DNC because of her known activism on issues related to the Latino community. Despite being unable to cast a formal ballot in a federal election, she was able to assist in the oversight of the credentialing process at the convention. This opportunity, however, did not emerge of thin air.

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<sup>123</sup> To clarify, this interlocutor did not have voting power in U.S. elections. Further, serving as a liaison between the DNC and Latino media is not a part of the responsibilities of a credential's member at the convention, yet the interlocutor took it upon herself to serve in this capacity to engage Latinos in this process. I cover this in the following section.

This individual, a prominent activist, was consistently engaged in Latino community and public affairs both locally and nationally. Like others, including those in IAOs as discussed in chapter two, she dedicated herself to year-round activism and organizing and transitioned into electoral politics every two and four years. While not everyone involved in this type of work is invited to serve in such a role, she had the unique opportunity to participate in this process.

Under this role, members like her ensure that convention delegates are authorized to participate in selecting the party candidate. The interlocutor's voting power in this role gave her the ability to help resolve disputes at the convention as related to the fairness of delegate representation. That is, she helped ensure that no candidate was unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged and that the outcome of the convention reflected the preferences of the electorate of the party.

Despite her ineligibility to cast a formal ballot, the interlocutor helped provide important democratic oversight and expressed that to me in the interview. For example, she shared:

“So, not being able to vote you know in any election because, yeah, I'm not a citizen is interesting because I feel like I'm so involved. Obviously, but, um, this opportunity made me feel like I was a part of the process of democracy...”

Not only does the interlocutor know that she played an important role, but she helped ensure that the convention served its purpose by serving an oversight role in the party's candidate selection process, which she did not need to be a U.S. citizen to participate in.<sup>124</sup>

### **Latino Media Outreach and Campaign Media Strategy**

Traditionally, when political candidates or parties engage with Latino communities, it has been monolingual and constrained by the limited budget allocated for Latino outreach, primarily

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<sup>124</sup> The interlocutor is a DACA recipient.



channeled into television and radio ad spending (Abrajano 2010). This often leads to missed opportunities for the broader engagement and incorporation of Latinos, including non-citizens, in the electoral process in ways that extend beyond merely disseminating information to voters. For instance, an interlocutor who served on the credentials committee at the DNC in 2016 did more than her “official” duties. She informally assumed the role of liaison between the Democratic Party and Spanish-language media.

On this occasion, the interlocutor, collaborated with local Spanish-language media, primarily television, to communicate the importance of the convention in selecting candidates and to share her personal experiences. As she described to me,

“What I did was I partnered with a local, you know, um, network and sort of like tried to, um, I don't know, try to create, like an open channel to discuss what was happening at the DNC in Spanish...”

“While there’s so many of us that are not able to vote, there are citizens that don’t really see what’s happening behind closed doors, and then, or only see it from, certain, you know, outlets... it was like on FaceBook and a lot of people like to tune in, so what we did was um sort of, have like lives. You know I give like a tour I think it was important like giving a tour of like what the space looks like what is like what are the halls like, What's happening in the hallways is like sort of like visual representation of what is the reality at the DNC...”

Despite these activities not being formally included in the responsibilities of a credentials committee member, they were important in that they helped provide a Latino perspective on the convention (Subervi-Velez 2009)—a viewpoint often overlooked by English-language and mainstream media, similar to radio. These efforts, seen through the lens of a non-citizen actively participating in the electoral process, do more than just communicate information to potential Spanish-speaking or bilingual voters. They make political events and processes like the DNC more accessible to a wider audience by translating the complexities of political conventions into relatable content that addresses the experiences and concerns of Latinos. Engaging Latinos in

this manner is about familiarizing them and integrating them into electoral politics, both in the short and long term.

Beyond the DNC, Latino non-citizens who have worked in various capacities on presidential campaigns stressed the need for developing authentic and culturally competent Spanish-language media strategies as a means to reach and mobilize Latinos. For instance, one electoral operative highlighted the importance of avoiding having their candidate speak Spanish if they were not bilingual or Latino, as such attempts could come across as inauthentic and potentially disrespectful. A few operatives found such approaches to be inappropriate.

Generally, operatives and activists recognized the importance of leveraging media opportunities to bring attention to issues relevant to the Latino community by using national platforms for broader outreach. Some operatives saw these engagements not just as a chance to reach a wider audience but also as a way to spotlight specific initiatives occurring within Latino communities, both nationally and locally. For instance,

"Campaigns are really big windows of opportunity because most things that they do will get covered in some way. The media is very interested in whatever the campaign does. So, thinking about ways that we can leverage this campaign vehicle to either shine a light on people doing incredible work or on issues that the community has been pushing for that has not been seen in a media way."

When operatives shared this strategy with me, they described it as a two-fold strategy, where 1) through the candidate's platform they uplifted people across the country engaging in meaningful work, and 2) they used this as an opportunity to authentically engage with those communities.

To connect authentically, some operatives arranged for their candidates to engage with Spanish-language media, primarily television, even if the candidate did not speak Spanish. One operative explained to me that in advising their candidate on engaging with Spanish-language media, they considered: "What are the things that she cares about and how do Latino people fit

into those issues?” This approach guided how they tailored the candidate’s message for the Latino audience. On another occasion, an operative told me that she advised her candidate to appear on the Spanish-language equivalent of Good Morning America. Following this interview, several other candidates in the race also decided to participate in similar engagements. For example, this operative explained to me,

“And then after [candidate] did it all the other candidates wanted to talk to these outlets and so it became kind of like this domino effect of like, yes, I was working for [candidate], but we made it cool, like, we made it cool to talk to Telemundo and to Univision and to Latino USA and to you know, PEOPLE en Español, and that’s one of the things I feel really proud of.”

When it came to Spanish-language radio, most operatives followed the conventional route of engaging with the usual Spanish-language media spending and targeting Latinos through television and radio ads. However, for many campaigns, this was not the sole method for Latino media outreach. For instance, one operative shared with me their personal approach of seeking out specific Spanish-language radio stations to disseminate their candidate’s political agenda. While most operatives disclosed their campaigns’ investment in radio ads, rarely any mentioned actively participating as surrogates on-air. This stood out to me because I found no surrogates from any presidential campaigns featured on the radio shows that I analyzed in Chapter 3, even in battleground states where I anticipated such engagement.<sup>125</sup> Instead, the on-air presence was composed of IAO members who endorsed particular candidates and of non-citizen activists, such as executive directors of community-based organizations who were promoting voter registration drives and the mobilization of their community. This absence of direct engagement with potential Latino voters in key regions struck me as a missed opportunity for political party

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<sup>125</sup> These are insights from Spanish-language radio stations that I analyzed in Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Texas. These insights may look different in other regions, which I speak about in the concluding chapter.

strategists.

In addition to serving as the candidate's Latino outreach director, they also acted as a surrogate to the Latino community. Instead of having the candidate directly speak on air, the operative, who was well-versed in the candidate's strategy and well-connected to the Latino community through ongoing work outside of the campaign, took the initiative to appear themselves. When I asked more about this approach they told me that it was about: "talking very intentionally, going on some Spanish-language radio stations or speaking specifically to different communities within parts of Florida." This was primarily because the operative believed they were the more suitable messenger to deliver an authentic message in the community's language.

Moreover, the past and ongoing work of these operatives and activists, and those in similar roles, outside of the electoral season, had already demonstrated their commitment to improving the lives of Latinos in this country. Many of these electoral operatives, whether hired or appointed, have helped Latinos and their families secure resources (e.g., mutual aid), services (e.g., legal support), and opportunities (e.g., internships for DACA students previously unavailable). As a strategy, these individuals can leverage their personal and communal accomplishments to vouch for their candidate's commitment to addressing Latino issues whether on-air or in the field.

Finally, one operative shared with me his role in crafting candidates' content across various platforms such as radio, television, and digital platforms, both in Spanish and English. Tailored for the Latino community, these ads centered around three key themes: family, food, and music. Specifically, he explained that these elements are incorporated into the content creation because they are culturally important,

“Something that connects with our community. So, whenever we're writing something we want to make sure that it connects with some, with our community, it makes sense, is able to have an understanding... for example, in the [candidate] campaign, we focus on telling his story, besides everything else the polling was telling us about, we focus on telling his story first, the story of his father coming to America and not knowing any English, again, making that connection with our community...”

While this individual worked on a presidential candidate campaign in the 2020 general election cycle, he has since transitioned to creating and producing advertisements, including those for regional races, which have been broadcast nationwide across radio, television, and digital platforms.

#### **4.4.2 Mobilizing Latinos Through Organizing: From the Ground Up**

One way to think about how Latino operatives at the top connect with grassroots organizations involves engaging with a variety of groups, including immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs). Immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), like those that I discussed in an earlier chapter, established a statewide network during the COVID-19 pandemic and engaged in both partisan and non-partisan Latino mobilization efforts. Depending on the context, Latino operatives can leverage these relationships to mobilize Latino voters.

Many high-profile operatives featured in this study started their careers in similar IAOs or other grassroots organizing roles. In my interviews with these operatives, I outlined the broader challenges within the Latino mobilization infrastructure. However, organizations like the one detailed in Chapter 2 were proactively shaping inclusive narratives, even incorporating undocumented individuals into their activities. These IAOs not only help construct a communal identity but also work to strengthen the Latino mobilization infrastructure within their state.

On a practical level, IAOs, as high-profile operatives, acknowledge their mobilization constraints and actively work to improve their capabilities. For instance, here, the IAO employed

a mix of volunteer and paid electoral workers from the Latino community and developed tailored voter outreach initiatives, such as their relational organizing programs, to engage Latino voters when tools like the Voter Activation Network (VAN) fell short. Further, they cultivated a reliable base of supporters who need not be retrained each election cycle. On the ground, the rank-and-file helped influence local narratives and campaign strategies, which may sometimes be in coordination with prominent Latino electoral operatives. This approach helped promote even the involvement of non-citizens and the mobilization of eligible voters within their community.

### **Relationships**

On the ground, the relationships that IAOs build are based on deep, consistent engagement. For instance, one DACA recipient and rank-and-file mobilizer explained that Latinos in Wisconsin placed greater trust in the IAO, as described in Chapter 2, primarily due to the direct support it provided to individuals like him on various occasions. His involvement with the organization spanned about five years, fluctuating as other life commitments took place, yet he actively participated in the 2020 Census efforts ahead of the general election. Many rank-and-file members like him had engaged with the IAO long before any electoral cycle, participating in initiatives ranging from accessing services for U.S. citizenship to organizing within the IAO's youth chapter on school campuses. This deep-rooted involvement suggests that the IAO had a dependable, cultivated base of leaders ready to mobilize at different times, which contrasted to what operatives described in terms of how political parties often scramble to assemble of new base of volunteers and leaders each election cycle.

The work that these IAOs undertook extended far beyond the few weeks leading up to the election. The rank-and-file were involved in ongoing campaigns that impacted their communities directly, such as helping Latinos fill out the U.S. Census or securing tangible resources. For

example, during the pandemic, this IAO distinguished itself by actively raising funds to provide mutual aid to undocumented families. Not only did they help provide tangible financial resources to members of their base, but they demonstrated their commitment to their community that extended beyond the electoral cycle. This, coupled with their consistent year-round involvement in activities like assisting Latinos fill out the decennial Census and support during labor strikes (e.g., meat-plant workers), has established the IAO as a trusted entity in the Latino community, valued not only for assistance but also as a credible political voice.

When discussing the IAO's efforts to mobilize Latinos compared to those made through the political party, one interlocutor expressed skepticism. During our interview, he believed that a party's efforts might be seen as merely vote-seeking. In contrast, he described that organizations like the IAO with whom he was a mobilizer, or LULAC, and those who share similar life experiences (e.g., co-ethnic traits), are perceived differently. He described that these types of organizations are seen in the community as advocates who understand and prioritize the community's needs and not just electoral gains. These groups, including the IAO, encouraged voting not just as a form of participation but as a step toward meaningful and long-term change in their communities.

### **On-the-Ground Operations through the Immigrant Advocacy Organization (IAO)**

The IAO's current relational voter program, initiated during the 2018 midterm elections, was expanded for the 2020 presidential campaign. During an interview with the political director of the Wisconsin IAO, as described in Chapter 2, he conveyed that their immediate objective was to maximize Latino voter turnout statewide and were working diligently towards this goal.

However, their vision extended beyond just one election cycle; the IAO was committed to fostering long-term empowerment within the Latino community to cultivate sustained political

influence. One way that the IAO is committed to achieving this is by not only empowering the Latino community to vote but also by planning to eventually run their own candidates in local and state elections. By doing so, they aim to build political influence among both the Latino electorate and Latino elected officials who will advocate for their issues across the state.

During the 2020 election, the IAO had over 300 individuals actively working on the ground toward these goals across the state. Further, the organization's 501(c)(4) wing also played an important role in collectively turning out Latinos in Wisconsin, specifically, for the Democratic Party. To facilitate these efforts, they used a special application to monitor Latino voter engagement, complementing more conventional resources like the Voter Activation Network (VAN).

The relational voter program as described to me by an interlocutor, had two distinct categories. These categories were characterized by their roles and responsibilities. For example:

1. Regular [Mobilizers]: These are volunteers who pledge to secure voting commitments from ten individuals within their personal network.
2. Super [Mobilizers]: These individuals receive compensation for their efforts. They not only reach out to ten people in their own circle to obtain voting commitments but also oversee the activities of ten other regular mobilizers. Each of these supervised mobilizers is also dedicated to obtaining voting commitments from ten additional people.

Another interlocutor further described the efforts of the mobilizers. For instance, one component of the mobilizers Get Out the Vote (GOTV) efforts, focused on asking voters two main questions through text and phone calls, which were: 1) what their plans were for voting, and 2) whether they were willing to disclose if they supported Biden/Harris. These questions were part of a broader strategy to ensure participation and, as described to me, the mobilizers often found these interactions more relaxed since they involved people they already knew. This contrasted with the



sometimes-hostile encounters they described when reaching out to strangers when using tools like the Voter Activation Network (VAN).

Along with the relational voter program efforts, the broader GOTV work entailed in-person canvassing and car caravans. The canvassing activities usually took place from Wednesday to Sunday. During these efforts, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the IAOs ensured the proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect their GOTV teams. The IAO conducted numerous training sessions, where those canvassing practiced their scripts with partners. Part of their objectives, along with phone and text banking efforts included securing “voter confirmations”—pledges from individuals to vote for Joe Biden. Relatedly, their car caravans served a dual purpose: they distributed non-partisan voter information, such as voting procedures (facilitated by their 501(c)(3) organization), and also conveyed partisan information to persuade voters on candidate choices (activities conducted by their 501(c)(4)). These voter outreach activities were conducted bilingually, in English and Spanish.

One thing to note about those I interviewed among the rank-and-file in IAO is the diversity among the mobilizers, which included elder Latinos, young people, working-class individuals, college students, the undocumented/DACAmented, and individuals or descendants from different Latin American countries. One essential aspect of mobilizing such a diverse group was finding community members who either had the 1) time or 2) were compensated for their efforts, which is a challenge when trying to mobilize Latinos more broadly because of group’s socioeconomic status and the often-limited resources available to compensate Latinos for electoral work.

For starters, there are different types of activists involved in this process. Some volunteers might be less reliable in engaging consistently, while others are paid to organize

through year-round work in various areas, including elections. Additionally, there are activists who are paid specifically for electoral work during election seasons. Volunteers and sometimes paid activists working seasonally are usually members of the organization and have different levels of commitment to mobilizing Latinos. For instance, a volunteer might only commit to contacting others, while a paid seasonal electoral worker will follow up with the volunteer and their list of “contacts,” ensuring they are registered and have the necessary information to vote. A trained, long-term organizer oversees the process, supervising both the electoral worker and volunteer efforts. As Bedolla and Michelson's (2012) research indicates, volunteers are often less reliable and disciplined, making this supervision essential for greater reliability.

However, even when they found Latinos with time and had the resources to hire them, the task of mobilizing Latinos was inherently arduous. To illustrate, one IAO organizer described the nature of her position as demanding as working a political campaign. She emphasized that she nearly worked 100 hours bi-weekly as the election drew nearer, which to her was intense. Her role included coordinating various elections-related activities such as phone banks, text banks, canvassing efforts, and car caravans.

These efforts, just like those at the national level, included an elaborate media outreach strategy centered on Latinos, primarily Spanish speakers. For example, in our interview, the IAO communications director highlighted their comprehensive Spanish-language media strategy, which primarily targeted Spanish-language radio broadcasts. For the 2020 general election, the IAO crafted radio advertisements that conveyed a blend of 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) messages, ranging from general voting information and non-partisan guidance to overtly partisan communications—as I describe in further detail in Chapter 3. Specifically, the 501(c)(4) messaging creatively crafted narratives akin to “issue-based *telenovelas* (soap operas),” which

were meant to resonate with a Latino audience that grew up watching telenovelas. These ads, which I cover further in Chapter 3, were part of a greater initiative that included collaborations with national advocacy groups. Additionally, the IAO developed original on-air segments allowing members of their voter mobilization program to share personal stories and to motivate electoral engagement among Latinos. Finally, the IAO leveraged its digital channels and used both its 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) Facebook pages to disseminate a mix of non-partisan and partisan voter information, which I cover in Chapter 2.

Throughout the interviews, it was revealed to me that on a daily basis, the team managed to make at least 400 calls to the Latino electorate as part of their operational activities. The political director highlighted that the team had assisted at least 15,000 individuals with voter registration and absentee ballot applications within the state. Furthermore, the communications director noted that more than 1,200 volunteers were actively involved in these digital outreach efforts and that Latino media outreach efforts were supported by an investment exceeding \$800,000 specifically for targeting Latino voters in Spanish. This funding was separate from any resources allocated for targeting Latino voters by the political parties themselves.

#### **4.4.3 State of the Existing Latino Mobilizing Infrastructure: What is Lacking?**

Before the 2020 general election, the Dallas Morning News reported on a study suggesting that Latino voters in Texas face a cyclic challenge: they “don’t vote because they aren’t sought, and they aren’t sought because they don’t vote.”<sup>126</sup> Despite frequent claims that Latino voters are a key focus during elections, the reality often contradicts this, particularly regarding the efforts by

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<sup>126</sup> See (<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2020/09/23/study-says-many-latinos-dont-vote-because-they-arent-sought-and-they-arent-sought-because-they-dont-vote/>).

U.S. political parties to mobilize Latino voters—although, this is getting better. Generally, outreach to Latinos starts just weeks before elections and parties have often failed to treat them as a priority, especially in non-battleground states. This pattern is well-recognized by those working on the ground in political parties and immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), who both acknowledge the current state of Latino voter mobilization in the U.S. and explore the challenges and opportunities involved in engaging this fast-growing demographic.

A prominent theme within this analysis was the lack of a robust infrastructure to organize and mobilize Latinos at scale in the U.S. Across the interviews, operatives, and activists pointed out that the challenges that exist in the electoral and civic engagement infrastructures often do not cater specifically to Latino needs, relying on borrowed or outdated resources, and the general reliance of other groups' resources. Generally, operatives and activists discussed the challenges of mobilizing Latinos thinking about time, resources, space, voter contact tools, funding, and institutional support.

### **Year-round Engagement: Time and Resources**

These individuals have participated in Latino outreach across various movements, from labor and immigrant rights to political campaigns including Barack Obama's 2008 run to the 2020 general elections. Many of these operatives have backgrounds as political and community organizers and emphasize the need for long-term deep-seated organizing efforts to effectively connect with Latino communities, which require substantial time and resources. From their point of view, these strategies are often at odds with typical campaign tactics that prioritize conveying information to voters through marketing (Ganz 2009). To increase Latino engagement, operatives suggested that more investment in time and resources is needed in Latino

communities for authentic engagement. They recommended that campaigns should seek ways to actively involve Latinos and, when feasible, offer them compensation for their efforts.

Consider the 2008 Obama campaign, which pioneered a unique model of organizing and electoral mobilization. According to (Ganz 2009), this model was built around five key organizing principles: narrative, relationship, structure, strategy, and action. Similar to the strategies employed by the IAF and Alinsky, this model used storytelling or narratives (Ganz 2011) as a foundational tool to cultivate strong community bonds, shape political identities, and move people into action—ultimately contributing to Obama’s successful bid for the presidency. Moreover, the use of storytelling (Ganz 2011; 2009), particularly Obama’s emphasis on hope, alongside the organizing model served a dual purpose: 1) to establish a volunteer base dedicated to mobilizing voters in support of Obama, and 2) to inspire voters to turn out for Obama.

This model relied heavily on the involvement of volunteers to expand and reach scale. While this approach successfully mobilized a wide array of volunteers nationwide, it required fine-tuning to better serve Latino communities. An operative, who worked on Latino outreach during the Obama campaign, shared with me that there were insufficient Latinos in leadership roles in the campaign and that the volunteer-driven model was altogether unsustainable in Latino communities without significant investments in resources. To illustrate, the operative reflected on his experiences as a Latino outreach director and the specific challenges of mobilizing Latinos during the campaign:

Operative: “I’d say ... there was not a lot of Latino staff. Like we knew each other, it was a small numbers. That’s changed a lot. The numbers have changed significantly, but at that time, there weren’t very many of us on the campaign. There just weren’t that many people were experienced in doing this kind of work and you know, you were at a moment where you were transitioning to other new techniques like, you know, there was a big dependence on volunteer field, right? The Vaunted Obama Field Program was built on this organizing model that depended very heavily on volunteers. As would be discovered

in later cycles, it's very hard to depend on an all-volunteer model for organizing Latino communities.

KLC: Could you say more about that, please?

Operative: Well, you need to have um you need to have a lot of free time [chuckles] to be able to do that, right? And so, you did get a lot of retirees and such, but in communities where people needed to work to make their living, and often are working more than one job—

KLC: Mhmm.

Operative: The idea that you were going to have, at scale, in those communities that you wanted to be in, enough people who had the means to be spending hours and hours and hours doing this for free that was something of a challenge.

Although the operative highlighted advancements within the Democratic Party since his tenure on the Obama campaign, other operatives interviewed in this chapter discussed a common practice: campaigns frequently do not retain their staff after an election cycle, opting instead to recruit new talent for subsequent cycles. Consequently, valuable insights into Latino mobilization garnered during specific campaigns with particular candidates, as discussed here, are often not transferred from seasoned campaign staff to new leadership and the campaign rank-and-file. Additionally, our conversation shed light on another challenge in Latino mobilization: the recruitment of Latino volunteers.

As research has shown, individuals with more resources, particularly money, are more likely to participate in politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Today, electoral turnout among Latinos remains low, and as a demographic they continue to have a median household income lower than the overall U.S. average (Noe-Bustamante 2023).<sup>127</sup> Beyond their economic

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<sup>127</sup> In 2021, Pew Research reported that the average Latino household income was \$59,000 compared to the U.S. median of \$67,800 (Noe-Bustamante 2023).

disadvantage compared to other ethnoracial groups, Latinos faced increased economic instability both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Sanchez, Sugrue, and Pedroza 2022). Among other factors, this economic vulnerability among Latinos will continue to pose ongoing challenges for the mobilization and recruitment activities targeting the Latino base by political candidates.

In these instances, operatives called for a more sustained investment in Latino engagement, such as year-round efforts, leadership development, and the retention of experienced campaign organizers, to ensure ongoing momentum and build trust within these communities over time. One operative who was involved in the 2020 election cycle explained to me that the current engagement model: "... starts maybe five months before the election with actual money being poured into paid media three months before the election and actually door knocking maybe the last six weeks." Two other operatives from a different campaign, whom I interviewed in their Washington, D.C. office, confirmed this and further explained that Latino outreach necessitates a different approach compared to strategies used with primarily white voters:

"...we're still seen as a demographic that when the infrastructure is built it's built for canvassing they see us [Latinos] as organizers to communicate on the ground but when they [the Democratic Party] look at white voters they spend a lot of money on TV, digital, and radio and mail to reach them in a multi-layered multifaceted approach. Where with us [Latinos] they normally just have us knocking on doors in the last six weeks and they'll buy some Univision and some radio and call it a day..."

The other operative in the room, along with others I spoke to, expressed that efforts on Latino outreach should employ a year-round strategy, involving stakeholders from local communities such as community-based organizations and nonprofits. However, they noted that securing

funding for this type of sustained engagement remains a challenge. For instance, an operative interrupted his colleague to emphasize this point to me:

“...yeah, I cannot agree more. I think it's very limited in many places where there should be more infrastructure available to be able to reach out to Latinos all year round, but there's many difficulties as you know, in regards to investment being continuous, and having an organization or nonprofit that is depending on donors and other ways to be able to get that money many people don't resource to that and at the end of the day it's also just a lack of opportunity then they see when it comes to reaching out to the Latino community again in many places where there should be uh organizations and groups that should be a infrastructure all year round it's just lacking in is is not existing...”

Throughout our conversation, the political operatives frequently mentioned that Latino mobilization often happens in tandem and in collaboration with Latino 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations, similar to those I cover in Chapter 2. While the Democratic Party increased its investments in states like Wisconsin, employing traditional campaign marketing techniques such as radio ads (discussed in chapter three), the IAO that I studied, possessed a robust statewide organizational infrastructure that facilitated direct, on-the-ground efforts to mobilize Latino voters (as detailed in chapters two and three). This strategy was also employed by IAOs in other key battleground states in efforts to activate Latinos in support of the Democratic Party. Yet, despite increased efforts by the party to mobilize Latino voters, operatives believed that the ongoing practice of replacing electoral workers each election cycle is unsustainable, particularly in light of the party's attempts to engage diverse communities.

To illustrate, operatives conveyed their frustration with the party and shared with me that:

"The party in general needs to do a better job in keeping and engaging these people that you hire to do great work and then you let them go. So, when we have someone like Kennia who went through a whole year working for a campaign most likely if it's her first campaign she didn't get paid that much so Kennia would leave and try to get a better job.”



They go on to further express:

“And oftentimes there’s only one of me or two of us, who then keep pressuring the party system to do more. So, A) it’s exhausting, and B) we have to restart the whole wheel with new contacts. Like, there’s no reason why every two years or every four years we have to start from zero so like we have no idea the Latino community exists [sarcastically] but actually keep those long-term people who have built those relationships and not let them go. But yet we prioritize other groups, right, mostly white folks. So, A) the infrastructure has to be year-round; it cannot be the last few months of an election. And second, you have to keep people in place for a long period of time if, you know, no one doubts, oh no we’re not going to organize in the white communities then that should be the same thought process for the Asian, the Hmong, right, the Somali, the English... the Latino. We should be organizing year-round.”

### **Voter Contact Activation and Physical Space**

Operatives and activists not only discussed the importance of year-round engagement, but also highlighted the challenges they face in mobilizing Latinos due to technological limitations. They pointed out that existing tools, such as the Voter Activation Network (VAN) fail to accurately represent the Latino electorate and that they often lack dedicated spaces for mobilization efforts. For instance, one interview underscored the difficulties in identifying and mobilizing Latino voters because of the limitations in current VAN technologies and the data collection methods, like those used in the U.S. Census, that feed into the VAN.

To illustrate, one activist heavily involved in national Latino mobilization efforts shared:

"This could be a whole conversation [about the VAN] but I’ll say that most of the civic engagement work in this country as far as I know and I’m familiar with runs based on what’s called the VAN the voter activation network which is like the general sort of thing. Everyone knows that that system is super archaic."

When I asked what about the VAN was archaic, the organizer explained to me that the VAN struggles to accurately identify Latinos, particularly the various subgroups within the community, such as monolingual English or Spanish speakers, and bilingual individuals. These

shortcomings become apparent when inputting specific data to generate lists of Latino voters, For example,

"In most states I have worked in over the last twenty years they do not have the adequate data systems and filters to even get the Latino last names. So, usually, the only thing they can do is filter names by like a number of words or a number of letters. And the way they do it, it usually basically mixes Italian, Latino, and Portuguese last names. So, you're getting like still a very mixed bag."

This "mixed bag" of voters who may have similar last names but diverse backgrounds stems from the methods the VAN uses to gather voter data, a topic that operatives and organizers see as problematic in its own right. The primary issue, according to him, was not just how the VAN collects data, but rather how Latino voters are classified in the U.S. Census. In this interview, he described this as:

"But there is a way that sort of like the data systems through which Latinos are identified and something as basic as the census comes back to bite us [Latinos] when it comes to using the tools available right now for contacting voters because we become invisible right there because of the categories [through which Latinos are categorized] and it does come back to the data."

The high-profile organizer described what is a common issue among social scientists regarding the classification of Latinos in the U.S. Census (Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007; Telles 2018). The Census categorizes Latinos as an ethnic group and requires them to select their racial background, yet this classification complicates the accurate counting of Latinos in the U.S. (Paredes 2005). While there has been a long-standing debate about how to best count Latinos, (Rodríguez 2009; Strmic-Pawl, Jackson, and Garner 2018) the practical implications in the field especially when generating lists of Latino voters manifests as follows:

"For Latinos, to give you an example, in order for the system to spit out or produce Latino lists it only works with the data that we have in the voter files which depends on the Census [the U.S. Census] which has its own major flaws when it comes to Latinos and other data systems. So, it only works from like the conglomerate data that they're able to put together from all of those things about an individual."

Despite the challenges associated with the VAN, and the overall inadequacy of current data systems in accurately identifying Latino voters, this organizer remained optimistic. When I asked him what he would change if given a magic wand he expressed: "... if I had like a magic wand, I would want to invent the new VAN that is like Latino-centered you know? Like I think many things would change in the world."

On-the-ground organizations, such as the IAO described in Chapter 2, also recognized these systematic limitations, both in data collection via the U.S. Census and the reliance on the VAN. To help address these issues, IAOs like the one featured in this dissertation mobilized Latinos to participate in the census, not only to ensure their communities receive appropriate resources from the government but also to help refine the potential database of Latino voters in the VAN. Moreover, IAOs such as the one in Wisconsin, are aware of the limitations of relying solely on the VAN and in turn, use their own voter contact tools that incorporate a relational approach to complement the VAN and to help improve a Latino voter database in their state—covered earlier in this chapter.

Operatives, activists, and organizers not only face challenges with voter contact tools but also encounter difficulties in accessing physical spaces for their operations. During the interviews, operatives and activists described how they often depend on resources from other groups and borrow spaces through coalition partners to engage Latino voters. In describing their reliance on resources from other groups, interlocutors touched on feelings of non-belonging and

pointed out that, although these groups provide some resources, they are usually not based within their own communities.

For example, an interlocutor recalled using a labor union space to facilitate phone banking and text banking efforts aimed at engaging Latinos voters:

“So, like, but there is no place, no network of organizations that says like we have our VAN and we have like a text banking and a phone banking system and phone banking rooms where you can come and do that. Literally, the way it has worked in some of the more effective organizations where I have worked here, particularly [name of organization], and our partner here was near [organization] which is like the other, like the former ACORN here.<sup>128</sup> We would have to like figure out where were their rooms in the unions [labor unions] that were aligned with us where our members could go and be participants in making phone calls and turning people out for electoral work and have access to the database of calling our people. But the way I saw that, it’s not our infrastructure. It’s not in our offices. It’s not in our neighborhoods. It’s in other people’s offices. We rely on them to open their doors, to want us there, especially when you think of language, to make it accessible to us.”

He also explained that while some labor unions provided physical spaces for their electoral activities, there was minimal effort made to cultivate further relationships with Latinos:

“Like, a lot of my work at [organization], we had people. We would show up to things with 10-20 people to do phone banking to Latino voters. They were like “welcome!” and then it was like “set up your own shop right here. Here is the system and you do it.” They didn’t have a Latino trainer for people how to use the phone. They didn’t even have the scripts in Spanish most of the time. I literally used to have to get butcher paper and I would get my members on one side of the room and like put the butcher paper with like a simplified script in Spanish that they could just follow to do civic engagement work on the phone. Because that, and they were like “we’re welcoming the Latinos” by basically saying like “you can join this large room of coloreds” but there was no active effort to like welcome and engage Latinos to make them feel like they were part of the larger picture. And we were basically isolated. We were in a corner and just had to do our thing and they were like “yay, they’re doing their thing!” and that was it. We were not integrated and so I think all of that to me overall just feels like we have to figure out how... to build that infrastructure in a way that is accessible and culturally relevant, and you know, physically accessible to our people. Um, because that’s not how it works right

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<sup>128</sup> The interlocutor was referring to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which dissolved in the U.S. in the late 2000s.

now.”

While some labor unions provided physical spaces for electoral efforts, the organizer noted that there was generally a lack of initiative to develop deeper relationships or adapt resources to be culturally relevant and accessible for engaging Latinos. Ultimately, these resources continue to be situated primarily outside of Latino communities.

### **Challenges, Institutional Support, and Opportunities**

Outside of resources bypassing Latino communities, operatives shared their thoughts about the ongoing struggle for institutional support and the potential for future opportunities. For example, one operative noted improvements in how the Democratic Party mobilizes Latino voters, yet acknowledged that there is still significant room for improvement. He compared current efforts to his experience from the 2008 campaign, highlighting the advancement of campaign strategies since then.

“So, there are certainly more people doing it now. And there are new generations who are bringing the best methods, best practices to doing it, right? Like, um, back then, 2008, um, there was still even not wide adoption of like the best data practices, you know, like using voter file, for things like voter registration. So, since then I think there’s been more sophistication in how these programs are run, and like I said, just even more people to do it. Like more staff who’ve come up and are uh available. Um, I think digital has really opened up lanes to communicate that didn’t just depend on, you know, like the very high barrier to entry that is paid media. So, you know, it was B, right? You’re going to get in tv, mail, things are very expensive, you got a small number of practitioners who are kind of like the experts in doing so. Digital has kind of opened up the ability to communicate in far, in different ways um in places that are culturally competent in language what have you. Um there are just more um there are just more possibilities um to communicate... What hasn’t changed. What hasn’t changed is um it still feels like uh Latinos are fighting to be seen as being at the big kids table. It still feels like a secondary consideration and unfortunately, I think the Latino voters sense that themselves, right? The sense of being taken for granted, um uh the sense that they are not kind of automatically included; it’s kind of like an afterthought. That has not, much to my chagrin, changed to the extent it needs to.”

Another operative mentioned that as he climbed the campaign leadership ranks, appointed by political candidates, he leveraged institutional resources, such as funding, to hire more individuals like himself (e.g., Latinos of diverse backgrounds). He did this through the rank-and-file and across other leadership positions because he understood individual's deep connection with the community and knew that they had the skills needed to help their candidate succeed. His extensive experience as a seasoned electoral operative, knowledgeable in all aspects of campaign operations and specialized outreach (e.g., Latino outreach), enabled him to implement this internal strategy to diversify hires. Further, he actively advocated for his candidate to engage directly with Latino voters during the 2020 cycle. For instance,

“So, I brought that perspective of, don't just think about the Latino community like, ‘help me, help me, I don't know what I'm doing, or I'm dumb, or I don't have any education, or I don't have any agency.’ The Latino community are heavily involved in whatever they do, you just have to ask them. So, we brought that, I brought that sort of perspective and eventually hired more and more Latinos in campaigns as I moved up in ranks... So that notion that if you're not educated or white, you have no role to play, we've been working to dismantle that. And, and, and, if it weren't for me pushing for it or sharing my stories. I brought the elected officials to places they didn't want to go. And that's just part of my job...”

Several operatives from more recent campaign cycles expressed similar sentiments to me and noted their use of institutional resources to hire Latinos across various strategic roles and on-the-ground fieldwork positions.

Beyond these challenges and the slow progress in Latino recognition, operatives noted improvements in the Democratic Party's efforts. This included increased funding and the hiring of more Latino staff at various levels, including leadership, as well as relationship-building with Latino organizations. To illustrate the varying levels of Latino capacity-building across the U.S., an operative shared:

“... it's different from state to state and it's different from org [organization] to org [organization]. So, let's start with states in certain states where there's been lots of investment year in and year out. There's more infrastructure there in the community, so, Nevada, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Arizona, going back to Sheriff Arpaio and all the things that they've done so there's more infrastructure there it's still very lacking...”

The operative was referring to the IAO infrastructure in states like Arizona, where efforts extend beyond 501(c)(3) activities to include 501(c)(4) organizing.<sup>129</sup> This approach helps strengthen the development of the Latino mobilization infrastructure by engaging Latinos civically and electorally across the state. In addition to this type of engagement, there tends to be greater investment in Latinos and other diverse ethnoracial groups in battleground states like Arizona and Wisconsin, as driven by the interests of the party.

When I asked operatives and high-profile Latino organizers what their ideal infrastructure for mobilizing Latinos in the U.S. looked like, one shared:

Operative 1: There would be nonprofits with PACs in every state that were membership-based that had year-round funding to be doing community-based events from how many people give driving classes to help them figure out their healthcare to translation services for new immigrants, to like a community-based what LULAC was way back in the day. Where it's a service side provider that's built trust that also has a PAC that says, if you're going to come be with us, whether you're a Democrat, Republican, we're going to help elect you if you stand with us to get more resources and more things for our community. That's what infrastructure should...

Operative 2: [interjects colleague]: And that hires people from the community, obviously what best way to be able to connect with them if you give them the opportunity and economic incentive to be able to work for them.

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<sup>129</sup> This operative discusses the type of organizing covered in chapter two of this dissertation. While I focus primarily on a case study in Wisconsin and a comparative case study in Texas, similar organizing efforts are occurring in places like Arizona, Oregon, New York, and beyond. In the concluding chapter, I propose future research directions to help scholars explore and understand the activities of IAOs and how to measure their potential influence.

What the operative described to me was a combination of a 501(c)(3) organization, that is membership-based, provides services such as legal assistance and citizenship classes, and also possesses a 501(c)(4) arm—as I describe in Chapter 2. One difference, as described to me here, is the specific suggestion by this operative to establish political action committees (PACs) within these groups.<sup>130</sup> In a previous chapter, I described IAOs as having a 501(c)(4) arm. Unlike PACs, the IAO 501(c)(4) arm is classified under social welfare and advocates for issues relevant to their organization extending beyond merely pooling funds for a political candidate. These activities can include endorsing a political candidate who supports their issue priorities and engaging in activities that support that candidate’s election.<sup>131</sup>

In this vein, some operatives shared their experiences assisting young people post-election to further develop this infrastructure. For example, they shared that:

“[W]e met several groups, young people mainly, who were eager in putting together their C3s [referring to 501(c)(3)] or C4s [referring to 501(c)(4)] and engaging with their community. So, I, think there is hope and I think there's opportunity to be able to see that but it's very slow happening slow...”

These insights aligned with those provided to me by a prominent Latina organizer and former executive director of a nationwide IAO. She emphasized that building power within Latino communities requires time, dedication, resources, and grassroots organizing, with the goal of establishing enduring political influence for Latinos. Specifically, she described her vision for an ideal infrastructure for Latino mobilization:

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<sup>130</sup> Political action committees (PACs) are defined by the IRS as “political organizations” and must file under IRC section 527. Please see (<https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/political-organizations>). This is different than a social welfare 501(c)(4) designation.

<sup>131</sup> The IRS defines “types of organizations exempt under section 501(c)(4)” as: see (<https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/other-non-profits/types-of-organizations-exempt-under-section-501c4>).



“So, you know, I will say like the biggest thing, if I had a magic wand, about infrastructure is like can we have the investment to go to all of these places like where our population is growing. Where our *gente* (people) has been there a long time. Like I think of places like the border areas: in Tejas (Texas), las Cruces, Nuevo Mexico (New Mexico), where Latinos have been there. Many of them, like the border crossed them. But there is no organizing infrastructure. And somehow, I don’t know why the Democratic Party continues to think that things are gonna change. That folks are gonna show up to vote. Or even people in our own progressive movements, they think that somehow people are just gonna show up. It is not going to happen unless there is long-term investment in organizing in these particular areas and developing the leadership of people indigenous to those communities. Because the other thing of also coming from national to to local also like doesn’t work, unless you’re coming to support local efforts that already have like leadership and stuff. It’s really gonna be about, you know, developing that leadership, and part of what I feel like is a challenge in the ecosystem when you look at the infrastructure is that you have groups saying we’re doing organizing, but they’re not doing organizing. You know? Like, I think about Voto Latino. They’re not doing organizing. Their [inaudible] maybe doing other stuff. I don’t know. Marketing, PR, communications, narrative work. They’re doing work but they’re not doing grassroots organizing, but people think they’re doing grassroots organizing, so, when they say “oh we are in this state, this state, this state” like oh Voto Latino has... No, they don’t, because they’re not doing year-round grassroots-based organizing. When you think of places like LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), I mean some of their organizing may be strong in places like Texas, but I don’t know where else. And yet, an organization like LULAC has, um, is influential in in policy-making decisions that people are making about Latinos. UNIDOS, you know, formally NCLR (National Council of La Raza), they’re not doing grassroots organizing. Most of the groups that belong to that network are community service center organizations. And that’s, I’m not saying that that’s a bad thing, I’m just saying services are not gonna save us. It’s gonna be building power, contending for power, and building that grassroots people power campaigns that over time are gonna give us the people that could run for office, are gonna give us the power to hold politicians accountable. And all of that is hard work, it’s busy work, and it’s gonna take a long time. It’s gonna take investment. But I just believe there’s no shortcut to it. If we want to build power, if we want our community to be treated with respect, if we want the Democratic Party to fear the f\*\*\* out of us so they can give us what we need and deserve, we need to build that and there’s no way around it. So, to me, that’s the biggest thing, the biggest game-changer that we could do. And it’s gonna be long, you know, and it’s gonna be like messy and it’s gonna be hard but I think it needs to be done.”

These insights and suggestions tie back into the relational dynamics seen in traditional organizing models and followed closely by a few IAOs, as detailed in Chapter 2. Such models

are particularly embraced by several IAOs and are familiar to many Latino electoral operatives and activists who have honed their skills through these practices in social movements before engaging in Latino outreach campaigns. Mobilizing Latinos involved more than just targeting them with traditional marketing strategies a few weeks before an election. It requires ongoing engagement throughout the year, fostering a meaningful relationship between Latinos and the political party, providing access to resources to indigenous local organizations, supplying partisan information through partisan/political wings (Democratic and Republican), and deliberately broadening participation to build a solid base for either party.

## 4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

I began this chapter by explaining the roles that narrative building, relational organizing, and immigrant incorporation play in the broader infrastructure of Latino mobilization in the U.S., civically and electorally. Then, I examined the role of non-citizens in this process to understand how they can wield influence over the strategies that party candidates take to reach Latinos and how they can serve as a bridge to the broader community. Further, I set out to understand what the gaps in the Latino mobilization infrastructure looked like from the lens of Latino electoral operatives and activists, many of whom were or are current non-citizens, and who have been involved in high-profile campaigns, particularly mobilizing Latinos on behalf of presidential candidates.

Through these interviews, operatives and high-profile activists reveal the challenges in mobilizing an immigrant-based group like Latinos. In this examination, operatives and activists describe the need for year-round engagement when it comes to mobilizing the group. Specifically, operatives and activists call for taking more than the “usual” six weeks ahead of the

election to engage in get-out-the-vote efforts. Additionally, they argue that there be innovation when it comes to the traditional voter contact tools such as the voter activation network (VAN) as it currently is riddled with issues when attempting to contact the group. They also call for additional institutional support from parties where they have a real opportunity to feel that they belong by seeing institutional resources go out toward these outreach efforts, and not merely feeling as if they are an afterthought to the party.

When it comes to understanding how non-citizens, at the top, influence electoral efforts, we observe the various roles they assume to actively engage in the process. While unable to cast a vote, they can help shape issue platforms for candidates as a few did for an immigration platform. Not only do those directly affected help shape an issue platform, but this type of engagement is often informed by the demands of IAOs similar to the one that I examine in this dissertation, which often is part of a larger coalition of similar community-based organizations (CBOs). These operatives and activists engaged in more than just helping shape policy platforms, they also helped broaden the scope of who gets to participate in presidential campaigns. That is, they include other non-citizens who want to become involved and find efforts within the campaign that they can engage in based on their legal status. As expressed to me by a few operatives, they mounted their teams in the field and intentionally hired people like them who were DACA recipients, among other equally qualified candidates. When it came to Latino outreach, operatives, and activists, many of whom were developed as leaders in local and regional IAOs, leveraged their networks to engage and plug local and regional IAOs and CBOs that advocated or serviced the Latino and immigrant communities. In addition to this type of work, they participated in important conventions where the party candidate was selected and served as a liaison between their candidate, the party, and Latinos through their outreach and

engagement with Latino and Spanish-language media. While voting may be the quintessential civic act, non-citizens engaging in these types of efforts are facilitating the participation of eligible Latino citizens in U.S. democracy.

Further, in this study, I illustrate the grassroots or bottom-up efforts that IAOs can employ through a relational strategy in electoral efforts. IAOs with a 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) designation are allowed to engage in both non-partisan and partisan activities, and they can address shortcomings in the current infrastructure of Latino mobilization, such as technological issues with the VAN, by adopting their own relational organizing methods. This can include using digital tools to track their networks and to track voter confirmations. By studying the on-the-ground operations, including relational efforts and traditional voter contact methods, we can better understand how campaigns and various organizations—particularly those focused on advocacy and other community-based groups—make inroads within the Latino community and encourage broader participation in elections. Because IAOs and Latino operatives, whether currently engaged or previously engaged, have experience working within Latino and immigrant communities or are Latino and immigrant themselves, they are uniquely equipped to connect with a diverse range of individuals, including those from mixed-status families or with different legal statuses. Their deep understanding of these communities enables them to serve as a key intermediary between the community and political parties.

## Chapter 5

# CONCLUSION

*“And, you know, it's, it's still. It's so really wild, but like I've worked so, and like many different campaigns and governments and like, have not been able to cast a single ballot. I'm like, I'm begging people to go out to vote and I can't, that's wild.”*

- Alejandro

### 5.1 Overview

Like Alejandro, I encountered many individuals while writing this dissertation who poured their “blood, sweat, and tears,” as one operative put it, into mobilizing their community to vote, despite never having had the chance to vote themselves and potentially never having the opportunity to do so.<sup>132</sup> I heard stories of struggle and unity as Latinos navigated the challenges of keeping their jobs and families safe during a global pandemic. I witnessed dedicated volunteers and paid seasonal electoral workers undertake the arduous task of navigating an under-resourced mobilizing infrastructure and overcoming obstacles such as immigration surveillance, which could have theoretically deterred them from participating in the activities I observed.

I saw vulnerable individuals take on the Democratic Party, striving for positive change, and challenging the party to listen to people like them through IAOs and from within. Whether they transported themselves to a debate, met with a vice-presidential nominee in a battleground

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<sup>132</sup> I use the name of Alejandro as a pseudonym for the operative quoted here. This name was selected from the most common Latino names from the U.S. Census.

state, or decided that the party's candidate did not best represent them—a demographic where many could not vote—they worked within the party in leadership roles to change the profiles of who was able to engage in Latino outreach. They demonstrated what it looked like to have people directly affected by policies, such as immigration, shape the platforms of candidates seeking to win the Latino vote in both primaries and the general election. Additionally, I observed community members, IAOs and SLRs collaborate to inform and engage Latinos in public affairs through a Latino lens during a recent time in U.S. history when Latinos were deliberately racialized and targeted by an administration in derogatory ways, labeled as criminals and rapists, while restrictive immigration policies expanded across the country (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020). Despite all odds against these communities, they push forward.

That was the goal of my dissertation, to gain a deeper understanding of how Latinos, voting-eligible and non-voting-eligible, mobilize each other to participate in presidential elections in the age of heightened immigration surveillance and racialization of Latinos. This study did so by investigating three mechanisms through which Latinos encourage each other to engage in electoral participation: immigrant advocacy organizations (IAOs), Spanish-language radio (SLR), and high-profile electoral operatives and activists. In this dissertation, I examined how these intermediaries, both at the regional and national levels, play key roles in engaging their community in both non-partisan and partisan ways.

What I found is the multitude of ways in which people of diverse legal statuses do participate despite their sometimes constrained participation. Through years-long research, I observed how intermediaries, like those studied here (e.g., IAOs, SLRs, and high-profile operatives), recognize these limitations in their community. Instead of excluding them from the broader project of democracy, they actively invite their participation. They train them to become

leaders in their communities, invite them to participate in partisan and non-partisan electoral efforts on-air, create art builds, and leverage these experiences through year-long organizing and relationships. In turn, these collective efforts help foster a Latino political identity.

Much ink has been devoted to understanding how immigrants are integrated through community-based 501(c)(3) organizations (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008) and how Latinos overall fail to turn out in elections (Fraga 2018). However, this scholarship rarely considers the role of 501(c)(3) organizations in facilitating Latinos' participation in partisan activities through their 501(c)(4) arms. While non-citizens face risks when engaging in politics, there was also organizational support, in this study, for those who chose to participate. These organizations not only provided support but also helped build the political efficacy of members and socialized them into the political process.

One way to build the long-term horizon of Latino political power in the United States is to invest in developing leaders in local communities, including those unable to formally vote through year-round grassroots organizing. While these individuals may be unconventional participants in elections and democracy, their inclusion can help mobilize eligible voters. This approach is well-recognized by intermediaries, particularly IAOs and high-profile electoral operatives and activists, many of whom were unconventional actors themselves. These leaders have often been empowered by regional IAOs, such as those examined in Chapter 2.

To review, the IAOs in Chapter 2 not only helped develop their members' leadership skills and political identities through year-round grassroots organizing addressing everyday issues like lack of proper protective equipment (PPE) or mutual aid funds but also included non-citizens in their efforts—a group of people who may often be overlooked by campaigns. They used art builds, social media messaging, and direct meetings with political parties to convey that

all Latinos can engage in electoral politics, even if they cannot vote. This approach helped build a base of paid workers and volunteers for the election at the time and potential future elections. These workers mobilized their communities to vote on their behalf for elected officials when they do not themselves have formal representation in government.

Even when vulnerable members pushed back against employers, institutions, and policies through year-round grassroots organizing or electoral mobilization efforts, they had to remain vigilant when it came to immigration surveillance, even if many were U.S. citizens. As demonstrated in this study, IAOs provided “*polimigra*” or “know your rights” training before members went into the field. This, I argue, is not a conventional civic engagement experience for most people in the U.S., but has become commonplace for Latinos, who are often treated and relegated as second-class citizens. Outside of the “*polimigra*” context, Latinos, including U.S. citizens, voiced concerns about their second-class citizenship status which motivated their mobilization efforts and was a real concern during on-the-ground organizing.

One way in which Latinos in this study expressed these concerns and other issue priorities during the 2020 election was by utilizing Spanish-language airwaves in their region. As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, IAO members aimed to activate co-ethnics by leveraging Spanish-language radio coverage and spots in their respective regions. In states like Wisconsin, statewide IAOs had the organizational capacity and funds to fill the airwaves with messages and spots from their members, encouraging fellow Latinos to join the relational organizing efforts proposed to uplift Latinos across the state. Latinos heard these messages not only from co-ethnic members in well-organized IAOs but also from the Democratic Party—which invested much airtime on Spanish-language radio—and regional DJs. In contrast, regions without similarly structured IAOs or those not considered battleground states had less on-air activity. In these



areas, radio hosts often encouraged non-partisan election engagement while disapproving of the Trump administration's immigration policies. Despite viewing themselves as neutral communicators, they often displayed clear partisan preferences and on occasion, they featured entities that disseminated non-partisan messaging to Latinos ahead of the elections.

Both IAOs and high-profile electoral operatives recognized the importance of utilizing Spanish-language radio and media to reach Latinos and speak in their "language" or through a Latino lens. Some high-profile operatives visited Spanish-language radio stations in regions like Miami to connect with local Latinos, while others served as Spanish-language media liaisons (e.g., during the Democratic National Convention). These strategies, along with broadening participation to include non-citizens, not only help build a base of Latinos that can be ready to mobilize but also equip community members with long-term mobilization skills.

One way to understand the type of mobilization among IAOs in this project is to compare it to the Viva Kennedy Clubs of the 1960s. As discussed in this dissertation, Mexican-Americans, primarily involved with LULAC, actively mobilized for and endorsed presidential candidate John F. Kennedy through grassroots relational organizing, which helped turn out Mexican-Americans for Kennedy. Although this project did not have a "Viva Kennedy Club" for a specific presidential candidate, high-profile electoral operatives and grassroots organizers engaged in similar efforts to mobilize co-ethnics. They partnered with organizations that went beyond providing services to Latinos, focusing on intentional political engagement and regional influence, such as the IAOs in Chapter 2, and tapped into a pool of people who are often overlooked by political campaign operatives. While the Viva Kennedy Clubs aimed primarily at mobilizing Mexican-Americans, contemporary Latino mobilization efforts target broader pan-ethnic groups. Despite Mexican-Americans being the largest Latino group in the U.S.,

mobilization strategies are fine-tuned for specific regions, especially where Mexican-Americans are not the predominant Latino group, as recognized by operatives and activists.

While the top-down outreach efforts, particularly from the Democratic Party, have improved over time, they require significant time and resources. Those interviewed here, both non-citizens and citizens, highlighted the challenges in mobilizing this complex voter bloc. Latinos are not only large in numbers but also comprise many nationalities with diverse historical backgrounds and legal statuses. Additionally, there are often not enough Latino operatives and field workers to take on the task of broad mobilization. As one operative noted, “Latinos are growing too quickly for operatives and political parties to catch up and mobilize them at scale,” which will remain a challenge in Latino mobilization for some time to come.

To this end, operatives increasingly recognized the need to collaborate with Latino organizations on the ground. Ideally, these organizations would have a structure similar to the IAOs examined in this study, which one operative described as their ideal Latino mobilization infrastructure. The IAO in Wisconsin, for example, had both volunteer and paid operations that political parties could engage with by seeking endorsements. These IAOs took on these efforts because they had been actively engaging Latinos year-round, developing leaders, raising political consciousness on community-relevant issues, and emphasizing the importance of turning out Latino voters for the general elections.

As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, operatives and grassroots organizers understood that not everyone in their community, including themselves, had the right to vote. However, they possessed social capital that provided insights on where to find and how to engage community members who could vote. Their lived experiences gave them these insights, which they leveraged to influence the policy platforms of the candidates they worked for with the goal of

potentially impacting the lives of similarly situated individuals. When considering non-citizen influence, we often think of voting as the most influential act of participation. Yet, these individuals influenced from within, hired people like themselves to work on campaigns, shaped strategies both nationally and locally, and engaged directly with candidates (e.g., at presidential town halls) to mobilize Latinos widely.

## 5.2 Contributions and Implications

### What We Learn from Taking a Deep Dive

What do we learn from taking a deep dive into a community (Cramer 2016) where many individuals may be vulnerable due to their legal status? What makes this in-depth approach unique? Typically, we assume, and research has shown, that non-citizens, including the undocumented, are unlikely to participate in political activities due to the risks involved (A. S. Garcia 2019; Getrich 2021; Saguy and Enriquez 2020). However, for some, participating in the politics of the country they consider home holds important value (Rosales, Enriquez, and Nájera 2021), and this is what I further demonstrate throughout this dissertation.

While other studies turn their focus on and help explain voter behavior and research trends on Latinos (Jones-Correa, Al-Faham, and Cortez 2018; McConnaughy et al. 2010; Michelson 2005), there is less research on how Latinos mobilize their own community for elections when equipped with the necessary resources and support from within. This study sheds light on what these communities actually do in terms of political engagement to turn their people out to the polls and to participate in electoral politics more broadly.

This dissertation, along with similar research and studies examining Latino voter behavior and preferences (M. Abrajano 2010; Leal et al. 2005; McConnaughy et al. 2010;

Michelson 2005; Sadhwani and Mendez 2018), can collectively help us understand what is happening among a range of Latinos, both in terms of their preferences and their mobilizing abilities within the current mobilizing infrastructure. Furthermore, it can help scholars and practitioners understand and identify what remains to be done for Latinos to turn out in elections and feel motivated to participate in democracy.

One step in that direction is to go directly to the community (Jackson 2021) to learn from their perspective what is happening. In this dissertation, this in-depth approach allowed interlocutors to express, in their own words (Cramer 2016), the state of Latino mobilization, their on-the-ground and top-down efforts, and the changes they believe are necessary to move Latinos to the polls. This approach provided an opportunity for those willing to speak to share why they were engaging in the mobilization of their community members regardless of their legal status. Although this examination is not intended to be generalizable for how IAOs or community-based organizations (CBOs) engage Latinos or immigrants in elections more broadly, this study, focused primarily on Wisconsin and Texas, provides insights into how Latinos can be mobilized in both partisan and non-partisan ways ahead of elections in diverse political contexts. For example, federal elections in Wisconsin have different implications for presidential outcomes, whereas, in Texas, local and regional races may have more immediate significance for Latinos in those areas.

Further, this deep dive reveals insights into how to animate Latinos to participate in politics and how to tap into pools of people that could be overlooked by campaigns (e.g., the undocumented, the disenfranchised, etc.). IAOs, and other community-based organizations, play an important role in this work and some politicians are aware of the influence these groups can have. Some presidential candidates have recognized the need to integrate even voter-ineligible

individuals into their campaigns to connect with Latino voters and the community. Including Latinos intentionally in these processes was important as many have felt excluded by political parties. This dual approach—from grassroots efforts to top-level (e.g., presidential campaign operatives)—to make space for community members and bring visibility to those not typically seen as potential volunteers or paid campaign workers proved important for activating Latinos in their respective regions, according to interviewees in this study.

### **Contribution and Implications for Democracy**

This project demonstrates the diverse ways in which Latinos mobilize themselves through their work in IAOs or through political parties. Often, non-citizens and others who are unable to vote (e.g., the disenfranchised) are viewed as non-agentic or as having little agency in political processes. Yet, this project reveals that non-citizens can be unconventional yet meaningful participants in democracy by engaging others in their communities. They do so primarily by expanding political participation, creating cultural and political identities, addressing barriers to participation, promoting long-term political engagement in their communities, and serving as democratic actors in their roles as intermediaries.

To summarize, IAOs and electoral operatives actively included non-voting eligible Latinos in their strategies and engaged them in the political process. They did not overlook them simply because they could not vote. For example, SLR hosts actively encouraged their audience, regardless of status, to participate and engaged with local IAOs and electoral operatives to speak on Latino issues or through a Latino lens in their communities. Intermediaries helped foster a sense of identity and community showing their base or audience that they had agency despite facing exclusion and marginalization. They addressed barriers to participation by tackling language obstacles, lack of information, and fears related to immigration enforcement, providing

resources, training, and information in culturally relevant ways to assist Latinos in participating in elections.

The work of IAOs and SLR often extends beyond immediate electoral cycles, operating year-round. This year-round activity can help foster long-term engagement in the community, which is essential for building a robust democratic culture that meets the needs of Latinos both in the short and long term, according to electoral operatives and activists. This inclusion allows even those without the right to vote to help shape electoral outcomes, particularly in battleground regions, broadening the democratic process by reinforcing the idea that democracy is not solely about voting but also about active civic engagement.

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Research**

In this project, I presented extensive in-depth evidence on the various ways that Latinos mobilize each other to participate, regardless of their legal status, through their own organizations (e.g., IAOs, SLR) or within the political party (e.g., as electoral operatives in the Democratic Party). I demonstrated that these efforts require significant time, hard work, resources, and social capital, and are often met with contextual challenges such as immigration surveillance. Despite these findings, this project has several limitations and raised additional questions that this dissertation alone cannot fully address.

#### **Immigration Surveillance**

In this study, I find qualitative evidence that immigration surveillance matters for how grassroots mobilizing efforts are prepared and executed (e.g., canvassing), as well as the considerations taken during these activities (e.g., risk of profiling and apprehension in areas with

active 287(g) agreements, “know your rights” and “*polimigra*” trainings). However, research should also investigate whether Latinos residing in 287(g) counties vote less compared to those in non-287(g) counties. To date, studies on 287(g) counties have not explored the potential negative impact on Latino voter turnout. Additionally, public information on all counties that have participated in 287(g) policies since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is relatively scarce online. A longitudinal study examining whether these contextual factors affect overall Latino voter turnout in the limited counties where these policies exist could provide a clearer understanding of Latino voter turnout over time, especially in the context of immigration surveillance. This would help determine if immigration surveillance adds to the already numerous reasons for low Latino voter turnout.<sup>133</sup>

### **The Role of IAOs**

To better understand the unique role of different types of IAOs (e.g., 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4)) across the country, several factors must be considered. First, we need to ascertain the number of IAOs similar to those discussed here that exist nationwide. Marquez and Mjaanes's (n.d.) set out to understand the landscape of Latino non-profits and their funding, including those with a 501(c)(4) wing, and found that only 10 out of a sample of 1,197 Latino non-profits had dual designations. They suggest this low number may be due to different reporting mechanisms required by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Another possible explanation could be due to how IAOs perceive themselves, whether primarily as Latino or immigrant advocacy organizations, influencing what they report to the IRS.

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<sup>133</sup> One challenge in conducting this type of study is the limited information on participating 287(g) counties available on the Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) website since the program's inception. Obtaining this information often requires filing a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, which can face indefinite delays, posing an obstacle for scholars engaging in this type of research.

Furthermore, scholars examining these types of questions ought to consider novel ways to measure the organizational capacity of these types of organizations. While some have started mapping out Latino organization types (Marquez and Mjaanes n.d.) and their functions (e.g., services provided), it is necessary to assess their political influence. Do regional and national IAOs wield different levels of political influence? How can we measure this? Additionally, how can we evaluate their electoral impact at the grassroots level? Finally, do similarly structured IAOs in various regions, with different contextual realities (e.g., Southwest, Northeast, etc.), employ similar tactics to mobilize Latinos during elections? If not, how do they differ? Addressing these questions and developing metrics to quantitatively capture qualitative findings can enhance our understanding of the role of IAOs and Latino-based organizations in civic engagement and politics more broadly.

### *La Radio*

While the findings of this analysis may not be generalizable to SLRs nationwide, they offer valuable insights into communications strategies and regional variations within the Latino community. Future research should build upon these insights by examining SLR discourse in regions known for their Republican party support, such as parts of Florida and the Rio Grande Valley. Additionally, research should explore different SLR formats that cater to various sub-national Latino groups and compare the discourse of commercial SLRs with that of community-based radio stations.

One way I plan to analyze some of the suggestions posed above is by trying to understand what the discourse on policies such as the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border sounds like among local SLRs in places where Latinos are more likely to support the GOP. Furthermore, I aim to explore how different Latino audiences and hosts make sense of various



policies and forms of representation (e.g., descriptive vs. substantive). To gauge this, one can listen to the on-air discourse of diverse SLR formats that cater to Latinos from specific regions (e.g., Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America). This type of analysis would allow me to compare how Latinos in the U.S., from different regions in Latin America, understand these policies and representation styles through hosts' commentary and call-in segments. Another way to compare how Latinos, both as hosts and as an audience, perceive their political lives is by comparing the messages between commercial and community-based radio. This comparison can help determine whether the messages and understandings of public affairs are similar or different across these radio formats.

In the near future, I plan to extend the insights from my dissertation on regional radio by comparing it to the discourse from several prominent syndicated Spanish-language radio shows, data that I collected during the same period. This comparison will allow me to observe whether regional national radio disseminate similar election-related discourse and understand the differences between the two. Additionally, this research has provided me with a wide network in the Spanish-language radio industry, enabling me to interview a broader range of DJs at both regional and national levels to understand their perceptions in this process. By delving deeper into these dynamics, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of SLR and political communication within the Latino community in the U.S. This research is essential not only for understanding the role of Latinos in U.S. elections but also for addressing misinformation in the Latino community—topics I plan to pursue as a scholar.

### **Infrastructure of Latino Mobilization and Non-Citizen Participation**

The insights from electoral operatives and activists in Chapter 4 highlighted the limitations of the existent infrastructure for Latino mobilization and the role of non-citizens in

this process. However, these insights also raised new questions. For instance, the rank-and-file members of IAOs were predominantly women, while electoral operatives in director or advisor roles on presidential candidate campaigns were mainly men. This observation warrants further exploration of gender roles among Latinos mobilizing others, whether through a political party or IAOs.

Additionally, future research should include interviews with Latino rank-and-file campaign workers within political parties to compare their experiences with those with the IAO rank-and-file. This comparison can help determine if there are differences in how Latinos are mobilized depending on whether they work with a political party or through an IAO. Addressing these questions and directions in future investigations is necessary to better understand Latino mobilization in the U.S. in the years to come.

## **5.4 Suggestions for Practitioners**

For those aiming to mobilize Latinos during elections, it is important to adopt a multifaceted and culturally informed strategy that addresses the unique challenges faced by this community. While these suggestions may seem obvious to some, political parties, and their campaigns often miss the mark. In what follows, I provide some suggestions that can help those aiming to connect with Latinos in their efforts.

### **Build Authentic Relationships**

First, it is necessary to build authentic relationships with the Latino community. Establishing trust is essential for mobilization and can be achieved through consistent presence and support. This involves engaging with community members and also helping them secure

resources, not just during election cycles, but through a genuine commitment to addressing their diverse needs and concerns. To do this, one might consider collaborating with IAOs (both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4)), CBOs, and SLRs that have likely already established trust and credibility in the Latino community. These organizations likely possess the cultural, social, and sometimes political capital to serve as effective intermediaries.

### **Use Culturally Relevant Materials**

Engage with Latinos using culturally relevant materials and messages and collaborate with media outlets that resonate with Latinos. This includes creating bilingual campaign materials, culturally relevant art and imagery, and addressing salient issues to the community through various channels, such as social media, Spanish-language radio, and television. Spanish-language media, in particular, has a deep reach within the Latino community and can serve as an effective tool to disseminate information and encourage participation.

### **Collaborate with Influential Figures**

When reaching out to individuals, consider collaborating with well-respected community leaders, activists (both local and national), religious leaders, and other influential figures who can serve as trusted messengers and surrogates. These individuals can amplify your message and motivate community members to participate in the electoral process. Sometimes, these individuals are also part of IAOs and CBOs already engaged in mobilization efforts. Work alongside these individuals and organizations to identify and address barriers to participation among Latinos, such as voter suppression efforts (e.g., warnings of vigilantes at polling sites). Provide information on voter registration, polling locations, and general voting rights in Spanish,

and address additional fears related to immigration enforcement by creating supportive environments for political engagement.

### **Inclusive Mobilization Tactics**

Finally, consider inclusive mobilization tactics that emphasize long-term grassroots organizing. These tactics can involve even non-voting eligible Latinos, who, while unable to vote, can participate in various activities to reach a broader network of potential voters and foster a sense of community empowerment. This approach involves not overlooking demographics of people in the country that are unable to vote, organizing beyond electoral cycles, and maintaining continuous community engagement. Such activities not only help build a politically active community but can also build a ready base of members who can engage when needed. By employing grassroots tactics like relational organizing (e.g., door-to-door canvassing and local efforts), practitioners can strive to activate more Latinos to participate in the political process. This comprehensive approach can not only assist in winning elections but also in securing resources for the community and strengthening the democratic process.

## **5.5 *Latinos y El Proceso Democratico* Latinos and the Democratic Process**

The Latinos in this study, regardless of their documentation status, were not just merely instrumental in terms of mobilizing their community to turn out for Democrats. While turning out voters was one of their goals, their efforts teach us much more. They demonstrate that in a democracy where access to participation is unequal, achieving equity requires the concerted efforts of an entire community, the support of allies, resources from diverse sources, and most importantly, time. It takes time to train ordinary people, whether they are meat-packing workers

or service workers, to become respected community leaders. It takes time for blue and brown-collar workers, students, and the undocumented to assert themselves at the table and make powerful people listen to them. They have to come to understand that they possess valuable social capital, are capable of influencing their community, and encouraging U.S. citizens within their community to engage in the democratic process and vote.

What we learn here reveals more than just how disempowered and neglected communities find their strength, build their political identities, and reclaim their power. These individuals teach us how this can be achieved even in an era of heightened immigration surveillance. Their efforts teach us about the nature of contemporary U.S. democracy and show how the investments Latinos make now in empowerment and infrastructure can potentially yield long-term political benefits if others follow their example. Even if many in this study are unable to vote for years to come, the work they have done strengthens other Latinos in their community and helps enrich the democratic fabric of this country by contributing to the building of an inclusive democracy.

## Appendices

## Appendix A:

### Positionality and Access to IAOs - Chapter 2

Following Zepeda-Millán (2017), it is important to note that the primary data used in this study were semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content from the social media sites of the IAOs. I also use important figures from the U.S. Census when possible to help explain the growth and relevance of studying Latinos in understudied places like Wisconsin. Further, the intention behind using diverse methods was to triangulate my evidence when possible and ensure that I was finding similar themes across all sources of data.

Mainly, I conducted these interviews and collected data during a period when researchers, especially those who did not have prior access to these groups, were limited in what they could do due to a global pandemic—COVID-19. Prior to pursuing a PhD, I was a trained community organizer with professional organizing experience at the local, regional, and national levels. As a former community organizer, I established a dense network of individuals that work for community-based organizations (CBOs) across the country. It was through this pre-established network that I obtained access to the organizations selected in this study. My positionality is worth noting because I am aware of the access that my former role granted me. Furthermore, my identity as a Spanish-speaking Latina perhaps afforded me access to people and information that otherwise may not have been shared with me. Alternatively, my gender and status as a U.S. citizen could have also prevented me from having access to certain information—based on how interview subjects viewed me. As a researcher, I acknowledge that I hold a different vantage point than the majority of my interview subjects and that my positionality can affect the research process (Fujii 2018). With these considerations in mind, I encountered little to no pushback in collaborating with organizations and interview subjects.

In Wisconsin, I reached out to local organizers to pitch the idea of collaborating on this research project. The political director then connected me to the executive director of the organization. I created a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) where the organization agreed to collaborate with me contingent that I protect their members' identities and share findings with their organization in return. Upon this agreement, staff created a list of “*Voceros*” (the relational voting program) that I could interview for this project. Mostly, I called those on the list and recruited others from within the organization to have a diverse sample of interview subjects using a snowball sampling technique.

In Texas, I resorted to being virtually introduced to the executive director of the IAO due to COVID-19. The individual that introduced us is well-known among IAOs because she is one of the cofounders of what is now the largest undocumented youth-led organization in the country. Had it not been for her introduction I would perhaps not have had access to collaborating with the Texas IAO precisely because of the vulnerability of its membership. I also created an MOU with this organization. Moreover, this IAO did not have a relational voting program like in Wisconsin, and I also used a snowball sampling technique to recruit interview subjects.

## Appendix B:

### Additional Table - Chapter 3

The table below lists the counties that implemented 287(g) policies across across the three states analyzed. One of the main differences among 287(g) policies lies in the enforcement mode type. For instance, under the “Warrant Service Officer” (WSO) model, a deputized police officer in a county can request your citizenship status if there is a warrant for your arrest. Conversely, in the Jail Enforcement Model (JEM), a deputized officer can inquire about your legal status without a warrant. Typically, these differences are not widely known to the public.

#### Table #

#### 287(g) Participating Counties in North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Texas in 2020

State	County/Jail	Enforcement Model Type	Date 287(g) Enacted	Link to MOU/Agreement
NORTH CAROLINA	Alamance County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-05-21	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Albermarle District Jail	Warrant Service Officer	2020-03-19	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Avery County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-07-23	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Brunswick County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-07-23	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Cabarrus County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-03-11	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Caldwell County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-03-19	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Cleveland County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-01-16	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Duplin County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-06-25	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Gaston County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>



NORTH CAROLINA	Henderson County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Lincoln County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-06-05	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Nash County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-01-29	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Randolph County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-05-21	<a href="#">link</a>
NORTH CAROLINA	Rockingham County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2019-12-31	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Aransas County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>   <a href="#">addendum</a>
TEXAS	Burnet County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2019-11-05	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Calhoun County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-03-13	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Chambers County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	DeWitt County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Galveston County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Goliad County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Jackson County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Kleberg County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-07-31	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Lavaca County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>

TEXAS	Lubbock County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Matagorda County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-03-13	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Montgomery County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>   <a href="#">addendum</a>
TEXAS	Nueces County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>   <a href="#">addendum</a>
TEXAS	Potter County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-03-02	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Refugio County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Rockwall County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	San Patricio County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-09-03	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Smith County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Tarrant County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-16	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Terrell County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Victoria County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Walker County Sheriff's Department	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Waller County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-02-12	<a href="#">link</a>
TEXAS	Wharton County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-09	<a href="#">link</a>

WISCONSIN	Brown County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-10-16	<a href="#">link</a>
WISCONSIN	Fond du Lac County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-06-05	<a href="#">link</a>
WISCONSIN	Manitowoc County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-06-05	<a href="#">link</a>
WISCONSIN	Marquette County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-05-21	<a href="#">link</a>
WISCONSIN	Sheboygan County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-02-27	<a href="#">link</a>
WISCONSIN	Waukesha County Sheriff's Office	Jail Enforcement Model	2020-06-10	<a href="#">link</a>
WISCONSIN	Waushara County Sheriff's Office	Warrant Service Officer	2020-06-08	<a href="#">link</a>

**Source: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement**

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