

Mexican immigrants' politics more diverse than pundits assert, study finds

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In the 2012 presidential election, seven out of 10 Latino immigrants voted for President Obama. As news pundits dissected the defeat of Mitt Romney, they dismissed the Latino vote as unattainable for the Republican Party.

But University of Nebraska-Lincoln [political scientist](#) Sergio Wals says that's not necessarily the case. In a new study published in the journal *Electoral Studies*, Wals found that Mexican immigrants who are more politically invested are center or center-right in their political ideologies.

That means that at least this segment of the Latino electorate is generally more conservative on the political spectrum, he said—despite what electoral trends in U.S. elections have shown.

"If you look at survey data from Mexico, from 25 years ago—which is systematic, good empirical evidence—and you look at the distribution of ideological preferences, it remains fairly stable for the most part. But it has always been heavier on the center, center-right than on the left," he said. "I know there's been a historic trend where anywhere from 60 percent to the current 70-plus percent of the Hispanic vote has gone Democratic, but there are clear exceptions to these national trends."

Wals, an assistant professor of political science, said the parties in power in his home country of Mexico over the last 35 years have implemented right-leaning economic policies. It makes sense, then, that many immigrants come to the United States with more conservative views, he

said.

He points to other factors: "For the most part, you have a fairly conservative population (in Mexico) in moral terms, religious terms and even in the recent economic policy history."

Wals' findings are based on a national survey of 399 Mexican immigrants and a survey-embedded experiment of roughly 1,000 Mexican immigrants in Texas and Indiana.

The participants had been in the United States an average of 17 years. The study found that about 70 percent of Mexican immigrants considered themselves in the same ideological place as they were when they were still living in Mexico.

So what might the findings mean for the future of American politics?

"This is enough evidence for the two parties to take a little pause and take these findings seriously, for the Democratic Party not to take the Latino vote for granted and for Republicans not to think it's a lost cause," Wals said.

"If Republicans were to work on outreach strategies and intelligent ways to incorporate this population into their platforms, I definitely think they would fare a lot better than they have in the past."

Both parties also need to make efforts to better understand the immigrant population, he said.

"'Latinos' is this pan-ethnic label that has been superimposed on a number of groups, (but) there is a wide range of variation and even within national origin, there is a wide variation," Wals said.

In the study, Wals concludes that the political parties need to engage immigrants early on in the immigration process, since the population is "more up-for-grabs than generally depicted in electoral terms."

"It's not that it's a predetermined sort of thing," Wals said. "There is room for adjustment. Those ideologies are an anchor and there's room for adjustment for some of these folks."

Wals said he plans to help explain more about immigrant political ideologies with further research on how ideologies change and how political beliefs translate into choosing a political party, when there is no exact match. He theorizes that this may ultimately explain why center-left [immigrants](#) are less likely to be politically involved.

"Overall, you can see people from the leftist party, the Democratic Revolution Party in Mexico, probably having more chances to become Democrats in the U.S.," he said. "At the same time, it's not a direct translation to the point that people on the left from Mexico actually have much more trouble finding themselves being interested in politics in the U.S. because they might not have a good party match."

More information: go.unl.edu/70j

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