

Book Review

Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity and Politics in Los Angeles

Lisa Garcia Bedolla

Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005

293pp. Paperback

ISBN 0 5202 4369 2

Latino Political Power

Kim Geron

Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005

247pp. Paperback

ISBN 1 5882 6321 5

These two books by political scientists Lisa Garcia Bedolla and Kim Geron represent the trend of increasing methodological and theoretical complexity in the study of the Latino political experience in the United States. Garcia Bedolla uses participant observation and ethnography to describe the nuances of place and identity in the political engagement of two Latino communities in Los Angeles. Geron, uses interviews and case studies to reveal patterns in Latino political behavior at the national and local level. Despite the long historical presence of Latinos in the United States, conceptual, methodological and outright biases had prevented the cogent development of the understanding of Latino political behavior. These two books indicate that the study of Latino politics is beginning to emerge as a distinct discipline, with important conceptual, methodological contributions.

Some of the early work exploring Latino political behavior was embedded in the racialized biases that permeated social

science approaches to the overall study of Latinos. Somewhat ironically, this early research on Latino political behavior and attitudes came from Anthropology and not from political science or sociology. Anthropologists were trying to make sense of the cultural reasons behind Mexican American perceived political passivity. Their approach and conceptual framework were rooted in the ideology of the “Mexican Problem” (Gonzalez and Fernandez, 2003). As anthropologist Martha Menchaca (1994) illustrated, Mexican Americans were perceived as passive, present-time oriented, apolitical. Their culture was described as fatalistic and leading to factionalism and extremely suspicious behavior. This ideology was given further legitimacy with the debate among social scientists over the causes for Mexican, and Puerto Rican poverty, fueled by the work of Oscar Lewis, particularly, his 1966 study, *La Vida*. *La Vida* won the national book award and made common sense the idea that Latinos were powerless and poor because of a dysfunctional culture. In this case, participant observation and ethnography as the tools of a sympathetic liberal social scientist yielded further fuel to the notion of dysfunctional culture.

However, frameworks and concepts are more than just tools, they are also part of the lenses through which social scientists look at society. These traditional perspectives looked at Mexican and Puerto Rican culture from the perspective of etics (outsider), despite the fact that they flowed out of participant observation and ethnography.



But sometimes, the racial identity of the observant, or being too close to the subject will shape a distorting perspective of the community. For example, Arthur Rubel (1966) argued that the failure of South Texas Mexican Americans in developing formal and informal organizations that could impact political institutions was due to a dysfunction in the Mexican kinship structure. In the same area, the observer failed to see the rising Chicano movement. The concepts and methodologies utilized to make sense of the seeming state of disempowerment within the Latino communities missed the rise of the Chicano Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s. These methodological and conceptual lenses rendered opaque social dynamics that were developing in the arena of observation. However, the use of the same methods (ethnography and participant observation) with a different conceptual framework provided Garcia Bedolla a perspective that straddled the borders of an etic (outsider) and emic (insider) perspective, rendering a clearer perspective of Latino political engagement.

In *Fluid Borders*, Garcia Bedolla conducted 100 in-depth, semi-structured interviews during the summer of 1996 and winter 1996–1997 based on what was known in traditional political science about the relationship between social economic status and political behavior. She chose the predominantly working class, first-generation immigrant community of East Los Angeles and compared it with Montebello, a new middle class, second- and third-generation Latino community. She was trying to make sense of the patterns that were significant in the rise of Latino political behavior in East Los Angeles and the City of Montebello during the large-scale protests against proposition 187 in 1994. She also tried to discover what

factors led to the continued political engagement of these two groups. Proposition 187 was designed to disenfranchise undocumented immigrants by excluding them from having access to education, health and other social services in California. The xenophobia and anti-immigrant climate gave rise to organizing within the Mexican American and Latino immigrant community. Its most visible expression was the student walkouts and large marches of immigrants throughout Los Angeles.

One of the many important insights provided by *Fluid Borders* is the careful development of a theoretical framework, built on a keen understanding of Latino culture and experience. Rather, than limiting its perspective to what traditional social science has labeled as “political”, Garcia Bedolla highlights the role of organizing by women and renders their role within the Latino community visible and important. Many Latinas would not label their work as explicitly “political” but as part of their life as women and mothers. It is here where the role of the researcher straddles the etic/emic dimension and as a social scientist understands the political dimension of the community work done by women. For many Latinas, “politics” is the macro world of white-dominated politics, not the work done around issues of education, their families and the policies that impact them at the local level.

Another important insight in this work is that it theoretically clarifies the relational character of identity while adding the significance of social context in how identity operates. Identity is situational and fluid, and understanding the dialectic of social context and identity leads to a more nuanced understanding of its role in Latino politics. Identity and political behavior are not

uncontested in the study of Latino politics, but this work clearly indicates a method to better understand its role in shaping Latino political engagement. It also calls for more comparative studies that explore the ways in which class, gender and the architecture of neighborhoods shape or enhances political engagement.

Previous work has found that the density and quality of the network of ethnic political, cultural, social organizations positively impact mobilization of ethnic voters. For example, while traditional political mobilization theory would argue that socioeconomic status is related to higher levels of political engagement, Garcia Bedolla's research challenges this assumption, by showing that there is greater political engagement at different levels within the working class community of East Los Angeles than in the middle class Latino community of Montebello.

This work provides an additional level of understanding to the role of racialized identities and political behavior. Having a positive racial identity leads to a more active sense of agency and therefore of political engagement. Also, East Los Angeles respondents have a greater sense of collective membership than Montebello residents. At times, assimilation into middle class culture with its high sense of individualism cuts the link that strengthens political engagement. Moreover, the researcher found a less positive racial identity among the group of Montebello respondents. Having a positive racial identity is linked to a sense of collective membership and the feeling that the individual can effect social change in her/his midst. Parallel to what other studies like the Latino National Political Survey (conducted between 1989 and 1990) evidenced, third-generation plus, English monolingual

Latinos, which are more common in middle class Montebello, are less engaged than foreign-born, first-generation Latinos. Voting and registration data from the United States census have also indicated that naturalized, foreign-born Latinos have higher rates of electoral participation than native-born Latinos. *Fluid Borders* begins to lay the foundation for understanding this political phenomenon.

Garcia Bedolla's research provides useful tools for activists and researchers alike. It provides additional evidence that ethnic organizing works (Marquez, 2003; Rodriguez, 2005), and that even when the organizing is not explicitly political, it leads to Latinos' political engagement. We also learn that reconnecting youth with Chicano and Latino history increases positive evaluations of their racial identity and therefore creates a more political sense of agency. This work calls for another look at political socialization research among Latinos, and for politicizing those social networks in which Latinos are embedded, especially since political parties have shifted in their role and are failing to mobilize ethnic voters as they once did.

Kim Geron's book *Latino Political Power* provides us with a snapshot of what is taking place within Latinos electoral politics at the national level. Based on case studies of political incorporation, she conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with 40 community leaders in Watsonville and Salinas, California, as well as a mail random survey of 112 Latino-elected officials in 2001–2001. One of the many strengths of this book is that it provides us a glimpse of a broad cross-section of Latino political scenarios across the United States and insights into the patterns and modes of incorporation of Latinos into various political systems across

the country. It also includes a description of the role of legal organizations in the process to increase Latinos' access to power and describes the different strategies utilized by various Latino politicians to achieve electoral victories. We learn that there is not one singular event which leads to political incorporation, but that usually there are a series of events that trigger a process. Geron's work also emphasizes the role of community organizations, a fact that is validated by Garcia Bedolla's grassroots work in Los Angeles.

White liberals' role in facilitating the ascent of African Americans to elected positions has not been as visible in Latino politics. In spite of the high level of segregation and Latinos' increasing population, biracial coalitions with white Liberals are not as common as usually assumed, even in significant instances, such as Salinas, California and Miami, Florida.

One important contribution of *Latino Political Power* is that it substantiates the positive impact that the election of Latinos has had in shaping public policy that benefits Latinos. Although local governments cannot make significant impact of the structure of labor markets and wage inequality, they have been able to implement housing, public employment, educational and other policies that have helped the Latino community. However, Geron raises the important issue of Latino elected officials' accountability to the community that elected them – a link that can only be maintained if grassroots community organizations remain engaged with the political process after the election.

One interesting factor which makes the issue of accountability more important is that Latino-elected officials tend to be socially distant from their constituencies. They tend to be second and third generation,

and are more likely to be monolingual English. Similarly, they usually have higher rates of education and a higher income than the communities they represent. While most politicians come from a working class background, the world of politics has an impressive power to re-socialize and individualize politicians. This makes the issue of accountability and the mechanisms established to maintain that connection even more important.

In conclusion, both *Fluid Borders* and *Latino Political Power* present us with two different perspectives of Latino political life, one from the grassroots that reveals the relationship between local grassroots political action, place and racial identity; and another that provides a macro perspectives into the world of Latino electoral politics. Both remind us of the need for more comparative work that builds on the patterns revealed by Garcia Bedolla and Geron. The recent work of Carlos Vargas-Ramos (2003) indicates that although Puerto Ricans have very high levels of electoral participation in the island, it declines dramatically once they come to the mainland. The answer may lie in the process of racialization and the kind of racial identity that develops and/or some other structural factors that might also explain the low level of electoral participation of Latinos in the United States. Bedolla and Geron's books provide a useful way of looking at the political experience of a group that could determine the nature of American politics in this century.

References

- Gonzalez, Gilbert and Raul Fernandez. 2003. *A Century of Chicano History*. New York: Routledge.

- Marquez, Benjamin.** 2003. *Constructing Identities in Mexican American Political Organizations*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Menchaca, Martha.** 1994. Latino Political Attitudes and Behaviors in Five Neighborhoods. In *Barrio Ballots: Latino Politics in the 1990 Elections*, eds. Rodolfo O de la Garza *et al.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rodriguez, Victor M.** 2005. *Latino Politics in the United States: Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender in the Mexican American and Puerto Rican Experience*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Press.
- Rubel, Arthur.** 1966. *Across the Tracks: Mexican Americans in a Texas City*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Vargas-Ramos, Carlos.** 2003. The Political Participation of Puerto Rican in New York. *CENTRO Journal* XV(1): 41–71.

Victor M. Rodriguez
California State University, CA

Latino Studies (2007) 5, 137–141. doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600233