

## Issue Brief Role of Latin Americans and Biracial People in America

### Key Words:

Latino, Latin American, South American, Chicano, Migrant, Migrant Laborer, Non-Cuban

### Description:

Latin Americans are an ethnic group that spans multiple races and cultures. More so than any other large ethnic group in America the definition of Latino is hard to classify.

### Key Points

- Latin Americans are not readily classified a single racial group
- There is a common misconception that the original liberation movements in South America were representative of all ethnic groups in the respective nations
- The independence of certain nations, Cuba in particular, was tied tightly to the colonial aspirations of the United States.
- The Latin American experience is shaped by many historical and contemporary political factors.
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- The role of “undocumented workers” in the United States has greatly affected the experience of Latin Americans who have been lumped in with so-called “illegal” or “migrant workers”.
- In 2000 there was a serious attempt by the Republicans to gain a significant portion of what is referred to as the “non-Cuban” Latino vote.

### Issues Brief

Latin Americans are not readily classified a single racial group. A majority of Hispanics in the U.S. self-identify as “white” or of “some other race.” For example, both Dominican of African descent and one of pure European ancestry is considered in America. This is a paradox sine in most Latin American nations, there is a clear divide between races and the groups are considered distinct. In many nations, such as Brazil and Cuba, there is a history of discrimination against people of African and indigenous decent, reminiscent of the slavery that resulted in their forced migration from Africa.

There is a common misconception that the original liberation movements in South America were representative of all ethnic groups in the respective nations. The leaders of these movements were well placed enough in the colonial society to cause effective change. Like Simon Bolivar, most were of European and specifically, Spanish, descent. Systems of discrimination from the colonial era remained in place for over a hundred years and in many cases still remain. Many of the people who ended up leading the newly independent nations of Latin America were the descendants of the Spanish colonial authorities and were very comfortable with the colonial status quo. Independence meant

a break with Spain, but no social revolution or improvement of the status of Africans and natives. To this day Evo Morralis is the first indigenous leader of a Latin American nation and there has yet to be a leader of African descent.

Furthermore, the independence of certain nations, Cuba in particular, was tied tightly to the colonial aspirations of the United States. In the case of Cuba, upon ousting the Spanish, the Americans drafted a Cuban constitution that ultimately created an U.S. protectorate. The original constitution of Cuba even contained a clause allowing the United States to re-invade if they found it necessary. Even leaders that are commonly associated with the liberation movements of South America were mostly European. Che Guevara is a prime example of a euro-Argentinean who is a hero to many of the indigenous peoples of South America.

The Latin American experience is shaped by many historical and contemporary political factors. The creation of the United States is linked very closely to the acquisition of large swaths of Spanish-speaking territory during the Mexican American war. The status of the people who lived there was a hotly contested issue. Were they to become Americans, remain Mexican or become stateless people like the American Indians. The later acquisition of Puerto Rico and the enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine contributed to the political course of events in the Spanish-speaking world and resulted in an influx of “Hispanic” immigration to the United States.

For non-Hispanic people of biracial decent, the issue becomes more complicated. In the United States people tend to be placed in one group based on historic factors and, more importantly by the views of people who are not in that group. So that a person is often considered to be a member of a race because the society says they are. In fact it is fight to be classified as of more than one race. Tiger Woods is an example of that. Unlike Latin Americans, historically have not considered themselves outside the group the society has assigned them. “Passing” as another race has historically been a way African-Americans have crossed the racial barrier. Like Latin Americans though, other biracial people have been forced into a racial identity box.

The role of “undocumented workers” in the United States has greatly affected the experience of Latin Americans who have been lumped in with so-called “illegal” or “migrant workers”. What is fascinating about this notion is the fact that they are more often referred to as “migrant workers” than simply as “migrants”. The current debate over “immigration reform” as it is called in the post-ethnic perspective has led to the open discussion of such draconian measures as a “Border Fence”. One of the leading proponents of so-called “immigration reform” is governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico. Richardson is an ironic figure as he himself can be seen as the victim of many outdated dogmas. Most notably Richardson is often referred to as one of the most influential Latinos, or as a prominent minority member of the U.S. government. This assessment of Richardson’s ancestry is deeply flawed, as his father is white and American, thus he is not an immigrant in the traditional sense; his mother is half Spanish and thus European. The instant classification of Richardson as a Latino is a remnant of

the “one-drop rule” under which any ancestry that was not white excluded you from being white.

In an interesting twist on the so-called “Southern Strategy” of the Republican party during the sixties. In 2000 there was a serious attempt by the Republicans to gain a significant portion of what is referred to as the “non-Cuban” Latino vote. The keyword “non-Cuban” is important because it has always been assumed that there is a strong allegiance between Cuban-Americans and the Republican Party on the basis of fierce anti-communism. The wounds of the Bay of Pigs are still fresh in the minds of many Cuban Americans and there is a notion that the Democratic Party does not oppose Castro strongly enough. During the Candidacy of George W. Bush in 2000 there was an attempt to market the candidate as a person who would be receptive to the needs of Latinos in America as a whole. There was a two pronged approach, Bush who supposedly speaks Spanish and who has Hispanic relatives would try to woo Spanish speaking voters personally while the GOP as a whole would try to show themselves to be in touch with Hispanics on so called “traditional values” or so called “family values”. This approach along with the fact that the Elian Gonzales fiasco damaged the standing of the Democratic Party among Cubans did in fact result in a greater number of Latinos voting for Bush. However in the end most of the Latino vote did go to the democrats. It is in Florida that the effects of this strategy can most clearly be felt.

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Caesar Chavez addresses a gathering of workers in 1974. Mr. Chavez was one of the most important political figures in Latin-American history as he was able to lend a voice to immigrant laborers who had previously been unprotected.

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Santa Anna - the Mexican president and warlord who led Mexico's forces against the united states during the Mexican American war of 1846. Though he was not an American the outcome of the skirmish would contribute greatly to America's relationship with it's Spanish speaking population. During this Mexican-American war some notable opponents included Abraham Lincoln who condemned the war as an act of aggression and imperial expansion with his famous "spot resolutions."

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New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, a top proponent of “Immigration reform” who in the 2008 democratic primaries ran mainly on the fact that he was considered tough on “undocumented workers”. He himself is often referred to as Latino or Hispanic. He is a very good example of the complicated role that Latinos have in today’s America.

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This photo of young Elian Gonzales had a devastating effect on the Democratic Party in the eyes of Latin Americans.

Websites

Official website of the united farm workers the union that Caesar Chavez led  
[http://www.ufw.org/\\_page.php?inc=history/07.html&menu=research](http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?inc=history/07.html&menu=research)

Official Bill Richardson website  
<http://www.governor.state.nm.us/index2.php>

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