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“He begins by targeting Mexicans and he will end with Puerto Ricans”: unpacking Florida Puerto Ricans’ politics of immigration

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Puerto Ricans in Florida make sense of the immigration debate, how they formulate their position on the debate, and how their immigration attitudes impact their political choices. I draw on 75 in-depth interviews I conducted in Orlando, Florida during the 2016 presidential election. I find most respondents express supportive attitudes toward undocumented immigration, yet, *how* they articulate their position is telling. Specifically, respondents deploy mainstream narratives of immigrant deservingness/undeservingness; and a coalescing of Latino group consciousness, and in some instances a sense of connected political futures, influence their views. I also find Puerto Ricans’ immigration views provide insight into their 2016 vote for president. This study contributes to immigration, race, and Latino scholarship by uncovering nuance and complexity of Latinos’ contemporary politics. In doing so, it captures the emergence of a different strand of *Latinidad* and Latino politics in the largest swing state of the U.S.

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KEYWORDS Immigration politics; immigration policy; racialization; Latinos; Florida; elections

Introduction

Republican candidate Donald Trump made an anti-immigrant position the centrepiece of his campaign when he launched his presidential bid summer of 2015. He specifically disparaged Mexican and Latin American immigrants as “rapists” and as introducing “drugs” and “crime” into the U.S. While public commentators debated Donald Trump’s rise during the Republican primaries and his eventual election, scholars emphasize his rhetoric and appeal are not unique to this particular social, economic, and political

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moment, rather it fits into a history of nativism in the U.S. (Manza and Crowley 2018). As demonstrated by much of the political and public discourse during the 2016 presidential election cycle, contemporary nativism is not simply an anti-foreign sentiment, it's a racialized nativism that targets Latin American immigrants and Latinos more broadly (Sánchez 1997). These attitudes are part of broader social and political responses to post-1965 immigration.¹

Since 1965, 59 million immigrants arrived in the U.S. and in contrast to previous migrations, contemporary immigrants originate in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia (Lopez, Passel, and Rohal 2015). In fact, including immigrant-and US-born generations, the Latino population grew by nearly 50 million from 1965 to 2015, making Latinos the largest minority group today. Undocumented immigration is also an important component of contemporary immigration—in 2014, there were an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. (Passel and Cohn 2016). While undocumented immigrants originate from various countries, U.S. immigration policies and economic forces have produced a sizable undocumented Mexican population. Consequently, the growth of the Latino population over the past five decades, as well as the proportion of undocumented immigrants that originate in Latin America, have made Mexican/Latin American immigrants the focus of the immigration debate.

Given the growth of the Latino population and because the issue of immigration is often connected to Latinos, social scientists have examined Latinos' politics of immigration. This body of work provides important insight into attitude trends, predictors of, and factors influencing Latinos' immigration politics; nonetheless, what remains underexamined is *how* Latinos formulate their immigration attitudes and how their attitudes influence their political choices (Sanchez 2006). This study contributes to race, immigration, and Latino scholarship by providing the first qualitative examination of Florida Puerto Ricans' immigration attitudes. Studying immigration attitudes in Florida is important because it is home to the third largest Latino population and third largest Latino electorate in the U.S.; moreover, Latino politics in the state has historically been conservative (Noe-Bustamante 2020). However, the migration of over 1-million Puerto Ricans to Florida has critical implications for Latino politics at the state and national level, yet Puerto Ricans' political views in the largest swing state of the U.S. remain largely unexamined.

I draw on 75 in-depth interviews conducted in Orlando, Florida during the 2016 presidential election process² to better understand how Puerto Ricans make sense of the immigration debate, how they formulate their position on the debate, and how their immigration attitudes may impact their political choices. While I find most respondents express favourable attitudes toward undocumented immigration, analysis of their narratives reveals two important themes: 1) respondents adopt and deploy mainstream notions of immigrant deservingness and undeservingness; and 2) a coalescing of Latino

group consciousness, and in some instances a sense of connected political futures, shape their views. Immigration also emerges as a salient election issue, such that, respondents' immigration views provide insight into their presidential voting preferences. I argue Puerto Ricans' immigration attitudes are a political product (Beltrán 2010) of the multiple forms of structural exclusion—colonial citizenship, neoliberal immigration regime, and Latino racialization—that have conditioned the political and social position of Puerto Ricans and Latinos in the U.S. By making structure³ a central component of the analysis, this study brings into focus how group histories, current socio-political forces, and contextual dynamics converge and (re)shape contemporary Latino politics in the largest swing state of the U.S.

Literature

Puerto Ricans and the politics of colonialism, racialization, and exclusion

Although the United States is often referred to as “a nation of immigrants,” scholars challenge this myth by centring the colonial and racial underpinnings of the U.S. (Glenn 2015; Jung 2015). Puerto Ricans also fit into U.S. colonial legacies and contemporary colonial realities. As part of hegemonic expansion in the Americas, the U.S. invaded and acquired Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898. The Supreme Court solidified a colonial incorporation by creating the *unincorporated territory* category, which allowed Congress to bring Puerto Rico under the domain of the United States without extending the U.S. constitution to Puerto Rico (Burnett and Marshall 2001). The U.S. Congress also created various colonial citizenships for Puerto Ricans that granted them inferior political memberships and rights (Meléndez 2013; Venator-Santiago 2013). These institutional decisions were guided by beliefs that Puerto Ricans were unfit to become part of the U.S. because they were racially inferior, uncivilized, and had a backwards culture (Baldoz and Ayala 2013; Font-Guzmán 2013). Today, Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory that “belong[s] to the United States, but is not part of the United States” (Meléndez 2013, 116). Moreover, Island-born Puerto Ricans have a revocable statutory birthright U.S. citizenship, which is inferior to the more durable constitutional U.S. citizenship granted to stateside-born individuals (Venator-Santiago 2013; Smith 2017). While Puerto Ricans' U.S. citizenship protects them from the immigration system, Island Puerto Ricans lack federal voting rights and voting representation in U.S. Congress. In other words, the racialized logics of the early twentieth century continue to define the current territorial and political status of Puerto Rico and Island Puerto Ricans as separate and unequal.

The colonial relationship and citizenship set in motion various Puerto Rican migrations to the U.S. throughout the twentieth century (García-Colón 2020). These migrations are the foundation of historic Puerto Rican communities in the Northeast and Midwest, which became the locus of Puerto Rican political activism, including their participation in the creation of the official Hispanic category/group (Ramos-Zayas 2004; Mora 2014). However, the most prominent Puerto Rican migratory movement is currently underway. Since 2010, over half-a-million Puerto Ricans have migrated to the U.S. and different from previous migrations, Florida is Puerto Ricans' primary destination. In fact, Florida (1,190,891) has surpassed New York (1,096,823) as the state with the largest Puerto Rican population (U.S. Census Bureau 2019).

As a historically Southern and conservative state, legacies of white supremacy, racial exclusion, and republican ideologies are features of Florida's racial and political landscape. Today, as a result of extensive contemporary migrations and neoliberal economic forces, South Florida is an ethnoracially diverse region and commonly perceived as a hemispheric Latin American/Caribbean capital (Aranda, Sallie Hughes, and Sabogal 2014). Moreover, Latinos are the largest group in Miami and Cubans specifically have dominated cultural, economic, and political spheres for decades (Portes and Stepick 1993; Aranda, Sallie Hughes, and Sabogal 2014). Yet Central and North Florida are contextually distinct. Not only do they lack the migration histories of South Florida, in terms of racial and political paradigms, they are more reminiscent of Southern states. In other words, geography, race, and politics intersect in Florida such that "the farther north you go, the more in the south you are" (Delerme 2020; Silver 2020, 8). In fact, Valle (2019a) finds that in Central Florida, despite their citizen status, Puerto Ricans' experience erasure from the "American" national imaginary as they are presumed foreign and unrightfully present. Valle contends these experiences stem from Puerto Ricans' *colonial racialized citizenship*, which is constituted by an unequal citizen status, the historic racialization that constructed Puerto Ricans as inferior racial others, and the broader racialization of Latinos as foreign and removable. Nonetheless, the implications of occupying this political and social position for Puerto Ricans' politics and political relationship to Latinos in Florida are largely unexamined.

Latin American immigrants and the politics of (un)deservingness

Over 20 million immigrants arrived in the U.S. from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean since 1965. They have encountered an immigration context that constructs immigrant deservingness and undeservingness at various levels. Today's seemingly race-neutral immigration laws promote notions of worthiness via merit-based criteria that emphasize immigrants' human capital, socioeconomic status, and economic resources. While policy

also allows for eligibility based on family reunification, immigrants who use this provision, largely from the global south, are often accused of setting in motion undesired “chain migration” (Masuoka and Junn 2013; The White House, U.S. Government 2017). The contemporary immigration system concurrently reinforces immigrant undeservingness via the production of immigrant “illegality” and “criminality” (De Genova 2004; Abrego 2014). These constructions are rooted in post-1965 immigration laws that limit pathways to legalization; criminalize and punitively punish immigration-related violations; expand immigration policing to state and local agencies; and implement immigrant detention practices comparable to criminal imprisonment (Vázquez 2015; Armenta 2017).

Latinos are disproportionately affected by the contemporary immigration regime. Immigration laws limit Latin American immigrants’ access to legalization neglecting the ways in which U.S. political, military, and economic interventions in Latin American and Caribbean nations have contributed to displacement and U.S.-bound migrations (Abrego 2014; Gonzales 2014). The immigration system also disregards the role of U.S. capitalism, which profits from a cheap and disposable immigrant labour force (De Genova 2004). Regardless of legal status or nativity, Latinos are subjected to increased State surveillance and Latin American immigrants are overwhelmingly apprehended, detained, and removed (Vázquez 2015; Armenta 2017). This is exacerbated by political discourse and mainstream media representations that conflate Latin American immigrants with criminality and that alarm of an undocumented immigrant invasion at the U.S.-Mexico border (Santa Ana 2002; Chavez 2013). Ultimately, these forces have resulted in a racialized illegality, that is, Latinos “despite their actual legal or citizenship statuses ... have come to be equated with undocumented immigration and undocumented immigrants, and all the criminal implications thereof, because of their perceived racial and cultural attributes” (Zepeda-Millán 2017, 21).

While dominant narratives about immigration emphasize Latino immigrants’ “illegality” and “criminality,” there are important nuances in the construction of *undocumented immigrant deservingness*. The law creates distinctions that define a subset of the undocumented as more “worthy”—those that are self-reliant and economically self-sufficient, goal-oriented, unthreatening, moral—and others as “unworthy”—those that are unproductive, dependent on the State, criminal, and immoral (Ong 2003; Berger 2009). The legalization process leads to internalizing and reaffirming these neoliberal ideals of worthiness as immigrants seek to conform to the socio-legal profile of deserving immigrants (Lakhani 2013; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016). Social movements also contribute to notions of an earned citizenship. They deploy framing strategies that emphasize deserving undocumented immigrants’ rootedness in the U.S., their economic utility, law abiding behaviours, and compatible family values (Gonzales 2014; Nicholls and Uitermark 2019).

And media often highlight undocumented students' merit emphasizing their acculturation and educational achievements, civic engagement, and future professional contributions (Huber 2015; Patler and Gonzales 2015). While intended to counter stigmatizing anti-immigrant arguments, these framing strategies reinforce distinctions between "good" and "bad" thus removable immigrants (Gonzales 2014; Nicholls and Uitermark 2019). Overall, these constructions bolster and reify the good/deserving-bad/undeserving undocumented immigrant binary with deservingness contingent on embodying an ideal neoliberal citizen (Ong 2003; Berger 2009).

Latinos and the politics of immigration

At 60 million, Latinos account for 18-percent of the U.S population (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Latinos' demographic growth and salience as voters has sparked interest in their political attitudes, particularly their position on the issue of immigration. Research finds Latinos are more likely to express favourable views and support inclusive policies for undocumented immigrants relative to other ethnoracial groups (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Sanchez and Vargas 2016) yet a notable proportion of Latinos also support restrictionist immigration policies (de la Garza et al. 1992; Hood, Morris, and Shirkey 1997; Binder, Polinard, and Wrinkle 1997; Uhlaner and Chris Garcia 2002). Drawing on quantitative analyses, one body of work identifies important predictors (i.e. demographic, socioeconomic, and temporal) of Latinos' immigration attitudes often situating findings within assimilation processes (de la Garza et al. 1992; Binder, Polinard, and Wrinkle 1997; Hood, Morris, and Shirkey 1997; Uhlaner and Chris Garcia 2002; Branton 2007; Rouse, Wilkinson, and Garand 2010; Vega and Ortiz 2018).

Others emphasize group identity is important for understanding Latinos' immigration attitudes. This work uses concepts of group consciousness and linked-fate to assess whether a collective identity emerges and shapes Latinos' position on issues. Analyses find a nativist and restrictionist sociopolitical context promotes a Latino group consciousness (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Vega and Ortiz 2018), and Latino group consciousness is correlated with more supportive views on immigration (Stokes 2003; Sanchez 2006; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Vega and Ortiz 2018). In fact, Latinos are more likely to support and engage in contentious politics when they perceive anti-immigrant sentiment *as* anti-Latino sentiment and when they feel their individual fates are linked to the larger Latino group (Pallares and Flores-González 2010; Zepeda-Millán 2017; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2019).

Analysis of the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS) found that overall, Puerto Ricans' views on immigration-related issues are positive, however, their immigration attitudes are less favourable than those of other Latino national-origin groups; Fraga et al. (2012) suggest these findings may be

explained by Puerto Ricans' "special status" vis-à-vis immigration (368). Similarly, Sanchez (2006) finds "Caribbean Latinos"⁴ are least likely to support maintaining or increasing immigration levels to the U.S; he proposes this may result from Caribbean Latinos' perception of newer immigrants as potential economic competitors. Yet Puerto Ricans have meaningfully supported contemporary immigration issues. Rodríguez-Muñíz (2010) found that during the 2006 immigrant rights mobilizations, Puerto Rican activists in Chicago created important bridges between Puerto Rican and Latino residents. They did so by articulating a politicized panethnic group identity that recognized cultural and political distinctiveness at the national-origin level and invoked shared histories of colonial oppression and socioeconomic marginalization.

Now in Florida, Puerto Ricans have settled in a distinct and important political context. With 29 electoral votes, Florida is the largest swing state in the U.S. and Latinos are critical to Florida politics. Florida has the largest Latino electorate among all battleground states and the third-largest Latino electorate (3.1-million) in the U.S. behind California and Texas (Noe-Bustamante 2020). Florida's Latino population and electorate has historically been dominated by Cubans, and in contrast to other U.S. Latinos, majority of Cubans identify as Republican. In other words, Latino politics in Florida has historically been conservative. Additionally, Cuban political influence and power is reflected in their presence at all levels of state government—a position achieved by the Republican party's receptiveness to run Cuban candidates, the Cuban community's bloc voting and high electoral turnout, and Cubans' highly-developed political organizational infrastructure. While Cubans' allegiance to Republicans is connected to the party's hardline stance on U.S.-Cuba relations, Cubans' capitalist interests and antisocialist position are also important links⁵ (García Bedolla 2014). Moreover, Cubans have reliably voted for Republican presidential candidates, including, Donald Trump; in fact, large proportions of Florida Cubans supported Donald Trump's immigration and racial politics (Grenier and Lai 2020).

However, the arrival of over 1-million Puerto Ricans in Florida is altering Latino politics in the state. Puerto Ricans are now the second-largest Latino group and the Puerto Rican electorate (27%) trails just behind Cubans (29%) (Noe-Bustamante 2020). While Puerto Rican politics in traditional stateside destinations has leaned democratic, Puerto Ricans' political experiences and views in their new destination, as well as the political affinities Puerto Ricans develop with other Florida Latinos, remain understudied. This study contributes to filling this gap in Latino politics knowledge by examining Puerto Ricans' politics of immigration during the critical 2016 presidential election. Specifically, it investigates: How do Florida Puerto Ricans make sense of the undocumented immigration debate? How do they formulate their position on the debate? How may Puerto Ricans'

immigration attitudes influence their political behaviour in the largest swing state of the nation?

Methodology

I draw on 75 in-depth interviews with Puerto Ricans in the Orlando metropolitan area (Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford). I conducted interviews during the early stage of the 2016 presidential election from July 2015–February 2016. During this period, there were various contenders for the Democratic and Republican parties' presidential nominee and campaigning for the primary elections and caucuses was in full swing. I collected data in Florida because it now has the largest Puerto Rican community stateside (1,190,891) and Orlando metro is home to one-third of Florida's Puerto Rican population (385,177) (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Moreover, Orlando metro is in the I-4 corridor, a critical swing region for Florida and national politics. This represents an important shift in Puerto Rican migration patterns away from traditional communities in the Northeast and Midwest to new destinations in the U.S. South (DeLorme 2020). Florida also has the fourth largest undocumented population (772,000) in the U.S. and 78-percent of this population originates in Mexico, Central America, and South America. Florida's undocumented population is concentrated (78-percent) in the Southern and Central Florida regions and Central Florida specifically is home to an estimated 149,000 undocumented immigrants (Migration Policy Institute 2019).

I employed snowball sampling to identify respondents. I recruited an initial set of interview respondents ($n = 19$) with the assistance of key informants—established and well-known residents, community/civically-engaged residents, and leaders of local groups and organizations—who had access to distinct social, community, and professional networks. To identify key informants, I mapped out the Puerto Rican/Latino community and identified key figures; I attended various community events and identified recurring and notable attendees; and via referrals from two local social scientists who are familiar with the community. As I conducted interviews, I employed a referral-based system whereby I asked respondents for referrals, each provided 1–3 names, and with consent I contacted referrals for a possible interview ($n = 33$). Third, to further diversify and expand the sample, I recruited respondents at community events (i.e. public/private sector/community-based organization sponsored) and when I volunteered with two local non-profit organizations in voter engagement campaigns ($n = 23$). The second and third recruitment stages reached respondents that were geographically disperse and varied in time of arrival in Florida. Participation eligibility required age 25 or older, birth in Puerto Rico or stateside, parents of Puerto Rican ancestry, and residency in Orlando metropolitan area. Participants were selected to vary in socioeconomic and demographic characteristics to

capture a range of experiences and points of view. Respondents received a \$25 monetary incentive for participation. I assign pseudonyms to protect respondent anonymity.

Sample characteristics are detailed in [Table 1](#). The sample's median age is 43 and slightly over half of respondents are female. About three quarters of respondents were born or raised in Puerto Rico and one quarter were born or raised stateside. Nearly 70-percent of the sample consists of long-term residents (10 years or more of Florida residency); and about 30-percent of respondents arrived more recently within the last five years. The sample is evenly divided between respondents with a college degree or more and those that completed some college or less. About a third of respondents are employed in professions that require a college or advanced degree (i.e. professional and management; education, health, and social services); 37-percent are employed in sales, services, and manufacturing; and 30-percent were either unemployed or not working.

Interviews were conducted by the author in Spanish (49), English (14), and Spanglish (12). Interviews lasted 1–3.5 hours, were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. I used a semi-structured interview questionnaire that covered the following topics: migration history, settlement experiences in Orlando, ethnic/racial/panethnic identities, citizenship and belonging, and political participation and political attitudes. Responses to questions that specifically asked respondents about their general political views and leanings, views on immigration, the most important 2016 election issues, and

Table 1. Interview Sample Characteristics, N = 75.

	% of sample (n)	
Median Age	43	
Gender		
Female	53	(40)
Male	47	(35)
Generation		
PR-born/raised	76	(57)
Stateside-born/raised	24	(18)
Residency in Florida		
Long-term (10 years or more)	69	(52)
Recent-arrival (5 years or less)	31	(23)
Education		
4-year College degree or more	51	(38)
Some College	27	(20)
High School graduate or less	23	(17)
Occupations of Employment		
Professional & Management	25	(19)
Education, Health, & Social Services	7	(5)
Sales & Office	7	(5)
Services	21	(16)
Manufacturing, Transportation, & Construction	9	(7)
Unemployed	9	(7)
Not Working (homemaker, retired, or disability)	21	(16)

preferred presidential candidates particularly inform findings. I analyzed interviews on the platform Dedoose once I completed data collection. I analyzed interviews in the language they were conducted and translate quotes when necessary for inclusion in this manuscript. I used a deductive/inductive analytical strategy guided by theory-driven and data-driven codes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Theory-driven codes (e.g. panethnicity, group consciousness, linked-fate) were generated from pertinent literatures, and data-driven codes (e.g. legalize, taxpayer, hard-working, don't legalize, social burden) were generated through a close-read of interviews whereby emergent themes were identified. Next, I read through interviews and applied the coding scheme; I sorted interview segments by codes, I read and re-read coded excerpts and complete interviews to ensure accurate representation of narratives; I refined coding where appropriate; and I identified prevalent themes.

As a US born/raised Latina and researcher from the University of California, I occupy an insider/outsider status. My biography and family history give me a unique and nuanced perspective on the topics of investigation. During fieldwork, my identity, bilingualism, and cultural frames facilitated navigating Latino public and private spaces and gaining community access and trust. Despite social and cultural likeness, my role as a researcher distinguished me and informed interactions in the field. Moreover, as a sociologist trained in qualitative methods, I collect data systemically, conduct rigorous analyses, and I aim to produce critical knowledges. To further ensure reliability of findings presented here, I engaged in self-reflexivity and analyzed data with an awareness of my subjectivities and predispositions; I also shared and discussed preliminary analyses and manuscript drafts with expert colleagues to illuminate analytical gaps or omissions.

Given this study's qualitative methodological approach, sampling, and sample size, findings are not generalizable to other contexts nor representative of all Puerto Ricans in Florida or the broader Puerto Rican group. Yet this study's qualitative data and analysis provide unique insight into how Puerto Ricans in Central Florida think about the immigration debate, and the experiences, conditions, and social forces that influence how they formulate their political views and political choices. Moreover, it captures how theoretical concepts take shape on-the-ground. In this way, this study contributes to uncovering nuance and explaining complexity of Latinos' contemporary politics.

Findings

Consistent with scholarship that finds Latinos/Puerto Ricans express positive immigration attitudes (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Fraga et al. 2012; Sanchez and Vargas 2016), most respondents (67 out of 75) express a supportive

position on undocumented immigration, including providing a pathway to legalization and citizenship. Small minorities expressed a restrictive position ($n = 4$) and not having a position ($n = 4$). I contend *how* respondents articulate their views provides insight into structural conditions that influence how they understand and formulate their position on immigration. Two main themes emerge: primarily, respondents adopt and deploy mainstream notions of immigrant deservingness and undeservingness; secondarily, a coalescing of Latino group consciousness, and in some instances linked fate, influence their politics of immigration.

Narratives of immigrant (un)deservingness

Most respondents express support for undocumented immigrants by emphasizing deservingness of legalization on the basis of migrants' material contributions to the U.S. and the worthiness of (heteronormative) nuclear families. Luis, a PR-born/raised⁶ 10-year Orlando resident who was unemployed, shared:

I think that when it comes to construction, to the development of the U.S., the majority of people who've labored here are Mexicans ... I've worked with Mexicans and hats off to them, they're truly hardworking ... I have friends who have citizen children but they're not [citizens], I think it would be fair to give them the privilege of belonging to the U.S ... My friends have been sent back to their countries of origin and their families have stayed in the U.S., we collected donations for family members that stayed behind because they lost the breadwinner.

Luis' narrative reflects notions of an earned citizenship based on economic contributions and the value of traditional families (Yukich 2013; Nicholls and Uitermark 2019). He emphasizes Mexican immigrants' worthiness of political inclusion due to their historic role as labourers and work ethic—a perspective that was reinforced as he worked alongside Mexican immigrants in Orlando construction jobs. His view is also shaped by witnessing the consequences of punitive immigration enforcement on mixed status families part of his social network, an experience that captures the broader impacts of the immigration regime on Latino communities despite nativity or citizenship status (Szkupinski, Medina, and Glick 2014).

Kiara, a homemaker born/raised in Puerto Rico and 15-year Orlando resident, also supports providing undocumented immigrants a pathway to legalization and citizenship. The rupturing of immigrant families was critical, which was evident in her discussion of the most important 2016 election issues:

My priorities are the family, the economy, and immigration—all the people who have come from other countries and whose families have been separated, for

me that is very important ... there are children who have been left without parents because they were born in the U.S. but their parents don't have papers or a permit to stay, so they've been separated ... That's very important for me and that is what I will consider the day I cast my vote.

Kiara added gaining first-hand experience into the effects of immigration control when a fellow churchgoing “good,” “hardworking,” with “academically outstanding children” family was deported; a removal she perceived as a loss to her local community and society. While supportive of undocumented immigrants, there are mainstream characteristics of worthiness in Kiara’s narrative, particularly the sanctity of families and the merit of academically oriented youth (Huber 2015; Patler and Gonzales 2015). The significance of immigration as an election issue is also noteworthy. As Puerto Rican, Kiara is protected from the immigration system yet the candidate with a more supportive position on immigration would receive her vote for president. I contend her narrative provides unique insight into how the contemporary context of immigration and immigration policies also impact Puerto Ricans’ political thinking and political behaviour (Pallares and Flores-González 2010; Zepeda-Millán 2017).

Daniel, a PR-born/raised 17-year resident and former Central Florida elected official, provided:

The problem is the existing system not immigrants who are here illegally. Who is harvesting in California—grapes, fruit, livestock, poultry—who is working those jobs? Hispanics. They say that [undocumented immigrants] are stealing money [and] jobs from Americans but that isn't true because none of them want to do that work. Many growers prefer [undocumented immigrants] because they'll work for lower wages and [that] means greater profits for [industry]. They approach the politician [and say], 'I will help with your campaign, but I need you to turn a blind eye on immigration.' That happened for many years, the system that has maintained this situation is to blame.

Daniel challenges dominant narratives that place responsibility onto migrants for their undocumented status by pointing to political and economic forces that create and maintain an expendable class of Latin American labourers for U.S. capitalism. He essentially articulates an understanding of what immigration scholars refer to as the historic “hybrid system of immigration” in the U.S., which simultaneously restricts immigration while leaving the backdoor open granting industries access to undocumented workers (Ngai 2004; Zolberg 2008).

Franky, a Chicago-born/PR-raised 15-year Orlando resident in municipal management, explained undocumented Latin American immigrants contribute to the U.S., “they’re hardworking,” “they’re buying,” and “they’re paying taxes.” He added:

[When] Europe was coming over at the turn of the century ... they were accepted, [they were] given the opportunity of enjoying this country, the American dream ... Is it okay to accept the mass immigration from Anglo-Saxon

communities versus the Hispanic community? ... I hear about building a wall ... what an absurd waste of time, waste of effort to build a 2,000-mile wall ... that would be a monument to the stupidity of man.

Franky contrasts the reception extended to Southern and Eastern European immigrants of the past to that of Latin American immigrants of the present. While Southern and Eastern European immigrants encountered nativists attitudes, they had access to citizenship and over generations they became uncontested Americans (Ngai 2004; Roediger 2007). Yet Franky observes contemporary Latin American immigrants encounter an exclusionary legal context and hostile social and political reception (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). In other words, he recognizes a racialized nativism toward Latin American immigrants (Sánchez 1997), an observation reinforced by punitive immigration policy proposed by candidate Donald Trump.

Although most respondents expressed a supportive position on undocumented immigration emphasizing immigrants' deservingness, a minority of respondents express support by emphasizing mainstream narratives of migrant undeservingness and exclusion. For example, Janelí, a PR-born/Florida-Raised engineer, supports undocumented students "because they came here with their dream to get educated, become someone ... and have a job" however, "the ones that are here and breaking the law, why are you here? It should be on a preferred basis. If you're doing what you're supposed to and working hard, I don't see why you should be sent back." Consistent with framing of undocumented student deservingness, Janelí emphasizes pursuing higher education and social mobility as features of "worthy" immigrants (Huber 2015; Patler and Gonzales 2015); on the other hand, indolence and criminality as characteristic of "unworthy" immigrants (Yukich 2013; Nicholls and Uitermark 2019). Her perception illustrates how institutional discourses that create binary distinctions—deserving goal-oriented students versus undeserving culpable and criminal others—are adopted and deployed by Latinos. A framing that erases the complexity of undocumented immigrants' experiences and the underlying structural forces that produce "illegality" and "criminality."

Raschell, a PR-born/NY-raised retiree who moved to Orlando one year ago, supports legalization and citizenship for undocumented immigrants on the basis of family wellbeing and for humanitarian reasons "but there's a two-sided story to that. I'm talking about families, but when it comes to men that come from [another] country and they've committed murders or abused children, I don't think they should be allowed, that's my opinion." Raschell's narrative captures undocumented immigrant "criminality" is viewed through the lens of violent crimes (e.g. murder and sexual or physical abuse) and is gendered (immigrant men as potential perpetrators). Certainly, her perception reflects immigration enforcement and media representations

that depict immigrant men as criminal, as such, as threats to U.S. society (Chavez 2013; Santa Ana 2002; Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013).

In contrast to most respondents, 4 (out of 75) expressed restrictionist views on immigration. These positions were also framed around narratives of (un)deservingness yet emphasized undocumented immigrants are a burden on the State and society. Belén, a PR-born/raised retiree and 24-year Florida resident, shared the most unsupportive view:

That's a topic I really don't discuss because I have several issues with immigration. Simply because of the immigrant that is not involved in society ... because they're only focused on Mexico and sending everything they can to Mexico and they don't contribute [here]. They don't pay for their children's school, they don't pay for healthcare ... those of us who pay taxes pay for everything, for their children's schools and healthcare, while they are sending things and building houses over there [in Mexico] ... We're talking about making 11 million [undocumented immigrants] citizens? People who have been living here and sending money to Mexico, to all other places, and haven't contributed five cents for this country's economy.

Belén draws on nationalistic and neoliberal discourse to rationalize (Mexican) undocumented immigrant exclusion. Specifically, she articulates their ineligibility for political membership on the basis of what she perceives as their economic *unproductivity* (i.e. redirecting economic resources from the U.S. to Mexico via financial remittances), lacking embeddedness in the U.S. (i.e. orientations toward and housing investments in Mexico), and lacking utilitarian contributions in the U.S. (i.e. not contributing to while consuming public goods) (Nicholls and Uitermark 2019). Similarly, the other three respondents reasoned their restrictionist position by emphasizing undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes, they deplete social services, and they violated the law by crossing the border. These perspectives are significant because they convey the strongest adherence to a neoliberal citizenship, which is premised on ideals of self-sufficiency, full-market participation as producers and consumers, social responsibility, and abiding by the rule of law (Ong 2003; Berger 2009). Moreover, they capture how ideas of neoliberal worthiness are internalized by, and influence a restrictive politics of immigration among, Latino communities.

Narratives of group consciousness and shared political futures

Respondents' position on the immigration debate also reflects a sense of Latino group consciousness. Social scientists define group consciousness as a multidimensional construct measured by panethnic/racial group identity; a recognition of the group's disadvantaged social position; and the perception that collective action is the means to improve the group's social position (Sanchez 2006; Sanchez and Vargas 2016). I find Florida Puerto Ricans express

a Latino group consciousness that coalesces along a panethnic identity, a shared migrant experience, and the perception of a shared structural position with Latinos in the U.S.; the political dimension of this collective identity becomes evident in respondents' position on immigration. For example, Xavi, a PR-born/raised 33-year resident of Orlando employed in logistics, noted the most important issue presidential candidates should address is "immigration, although we Puerto Ricans are not affected by immigration, we do believe our Hispanic and Latino brothers need the immigration issue to be resolved." Similarly, Joel, a PR-born/raised U.S. military veteran and 15-year resident of Orlando, provided:

Number one, support for immigrants, obviously because we're all Latinos, we're Hispanic. That is number one for me ... giving immigrants the same benefits that we Puerto Ricans have, one way or another giving them similar benefits. I understand they come here motivated by the desire to progress like us.

Xavi and Joel's understanding of immigration is telling. First, consistent with other analyses, they articulate the immigration issue as a *Latin American immigrant issue* (Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2019). Second, a sense of panethnic group membership and solidarity informs their position on immigration, which suggests an emerging link between panethnic identity and politics (García Bedolla 2014). Xavi expresses an "emotive" panethnicity along the lines of kinship ties while Joel emphasizes "experiential" connections along comparable experiences of migration (Beltrán 2010, 7). For both respondents, their 2016 election politics is influenced by an awareness of Latinos' stratification along legal statuses and rights.

Gustavo, a PR-born/raised truck driver and 10-year Orlando resident, enthusiastically noted "Yes, yes, I have to vote" in the presidential election and added not participating is equivalent to "turning my back on Mexican and Cuban brothers." He specified "migration, for me that is most important" issue elaborating:

They've given liberty to people from Europe ... to live here, why do they want to remove those of us who are from nearby? I understand Mexicans want to come to get ahead ... [Donald Trump] says he wants to build a wall so that they don't enter, why? They're the ones feeding you ... Mexicans are working the fields ... and Puerto Ricans are also in the fields. Why does he have to target them? It's inconceivable, inhumane.

Gustavo's narrative illustrates the ways in which a politics of immigration and racialized illegality that target Latinos, regardless of national-origin or citizenship status (Gonzales 2014; Zepeda-Millán 2017), promotes elements of identity politics among Florida Puerto Ricans. In stating "why do they want to remove *those of us* who come from nearby?" Gustavo conveys a shared im/migrant experience of exclusion as he perceives anti-immigrant sentiments directed towards Latin American immigrants also encompass

Puerto Ricans. An experience and perspective consistent with the historic racialization of Puerto Ricans that legally constructed the Island and them as outsiders (see *Downes v. Bidwell* 1901 in Meléndez 2013), socially constructed them as foreigners, and has subjected them to nativism overtime despite their U.S. citizenship (Vidal-Ortiz 2004; Baldoz and Ayala 2013; Meléndez 2017).

Alaya, a self-employed PR-born/raised 2-year Orlando resident, shared the most important election issue is:

Number one, immigration ... the discrimination towards and abuse of Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Peruvians, everyone ... it will affect us Puerto Ricans due to Donald Trump's stupid comments. He is against Mexicans, but it will affect us, he is a Republican, he is racist ... He begins by targeting Mexicans and he will end with Puerto Ricans ... today he focuses on Mexicans, he will continue with Colombians, with all of us who are immigrants.

Alaya provides insight into how a racialized-nativist and restrictionist context shapes Puerto Ricans' understanding of immigration and of their own political futures in the U.S., even among those recently arrived from Puerto Rico. She predicts Puerto Ricans will be absorbed by the anti-Mexican and anti-Latino rhetoric espoused by candidate Trump, a perspective that captures a sense of political vulnerability and uncertainty despite her non-immigrant background. Consequently, she perceives her fate as a Puerto Rican is connected to that of other Latinos, which in turn influences her policy preferences in 2016. Her narrative illustrates how a Latino group consciousness and linked-fate (Dawson 1994; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Zepeda-Millán 2017) crystalizes between some Puerto Ricans and Latinos in Central Florida. Tellingly, Alaya's sense of vulnerability became reality just a year later with the federal government's delayed, insufficient, and paternalistic response to Hurricane María in Puerto Rico (Rivera and Aranda 2017); State actions that further re-construct and reinforce Puerto Ricans' *devalued* U.S. citizenship (Ramos-Zayas 2004).

In discussing her position on immigration, Jade, a NY-born/raised director of operations and 22-year resident of Orlando, shared:

I subscribe to [Congressman] Luis Gutierrez's argument—what affects any Hispanic, Latin person, is going to affect all of us. The only thing that we [Puerto Ricans] have that is different is that we're born with a little piece of paper [citizenship] that can be taken at any time. There is no guarantee that it's going to be there. The plight is the same, discrimination is discrimination regardless of who it is ... I am all for fixing it [immigration] otherwise we're going to end up with different civil rights and some significant deaths if we continue on this route and allowing conversations that are so divisive within the Republican party. My party [Democrats] is not perfect by any means ... we have our own closeted bigots.

Jade's position on immigration also conveys a sense of linked fate with Latinos. For her, the primary distinction between Puerto Ricans and Latin American immigrants is that Puerto Ricans are colonial citizens, that is, Island-born Puerto Ricans have a statutory citizenship the U.S. Congress can unilaterally revoke. Although Jade has a constitutional citizenship as a stateside-born Puerto Rican, her experience is shaped by the collective racialization of Puerto Ricans by way of a colonial incorporation into the U.S. that assigned an inferior social/political value to Puerto Ricans as a group (Grosfoguel and Georas 2000; Grosfoguel 2003). Like Rodríguez-Muñiz's (2010) findings in Chicago, despite differences in citizenship/legal statuses between Puerto Ricans and Latinos, the perception of a shared experience of discrimination fosters Jade's collective and politicized group identity. Moreover, her narrative captures the role Latino political elites continue to play in the construction of a collective identity and sense of linked fate among Latinos (Beltrán 2010; Mora 2014; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2021).

To further highlight the connection between immigration attitudes and political choices, 40-percent of respondents reported immigration as a top 2016 election issue. All but two of these respondents expressed support for a policy and presidential candidate that would grant undocumented immigrants a path to legalization. For instance, Paola, a PR-born/raised 3-year resident of Orlando who was unemployed, shared:

One [issue] is immigration, immigrants have been suffering for years and they are the ones that work hardest in this country ... Mexicans are living by the sweat of their brow ... At church I have seen people who have lost their husband or son due to deportation and their suffering ... I haven't heard anybody [presidential candidate] defend immigrants yet, when someone does, that will be the candidate that catches my attention.

AJV: So, [Donald] Trump?

Paola: No. Let that be clear.

Paola exemplifies how some respondents were evaluating presidential candidates during this early stage in the election process. She conveys presidential candidate appeal and position on immigration are connected, and while still undecided she, like others, was clear Donald Trump was not an option. Like Paola, some of these respondents' political thinking and political decision-making was shaped by witnessing first-hand the impacts of punitive immigration enforcement on immigrant families, others were disturbed by Donald Trump's anti-immigrant/anti-Latino position and perceived it as consequential for Puerto Ricans; and others expressed a sense of political responsibility toward fellow Latinos.

Conclusion

This study finds a majority of respondents support granting undocumented immigrants in the U.S. a pathway to legalization and citizenship. Two themes emerge as Puerto Ricans explain their position on immigration. First, respondents draw on mainstream notions of immigrant deservingness emphasizing undocumented immigrants' merit of inclusion based on their contributions as labourers and taxpayers, moral and family values, and academic orientations. While seemingly supportive, these narratives of deservingness have important implications. Defining characteristics that make undocumented immigrants worthy of legal status and citizenship implies that those who do not possess given attributes are less- or completely undeserving of rights and political membership. Thus, in the process of constructing inclusion for some immigrants, these narratives reinforce the exclusion of others whose vulnerable legal position is a product of broader global and structural inequalities (Gonzales 2014; Nicholls and Uitermark 2019). While the structural sources of narratives of (un)deservingness are various (see Menjívar and Lakhani 2016; Abrego 2014; Gonzales 2014; Patler and Gonzales 2015; Yukich 2013; Nicholls and Uitermark 2019), I demonstrate the ways in which Florida Puerto Ricans adopt and reproduce prevailing narratives as they formulate their position on the immigration debate. I contend this finding demonstrates the durability of broader constructions of immigrant (un)deservingness that are a component of the contemporary neoliberal immigration regime.

Second, Puerto Ricans' immigration attitudes are also explained by a coalescing of a collective Latino identity. Scholars rightfully caution Latinos are not a monolithic group thus it cannot be assumed a Latino identity exists or is salient (Beltrán 2010; García Bedolla 2014). Yet I find some respondents articulate panethnic group belonging and solidarity as they explain their support for undocumented immigrants, and as shown, an identity and solidarity cultivated by a sense of common migrant experiences with Latin American immigrants. Respondents' immigration attitudes also convey the perception of a shared structural position between Puerto Ricans and Latinos in Central Florida. Despite Puerto Ricans' status as U.S. citizens, respondents express a sense of vulnerability in the anti-immigrant/anti-Latino sociopolitical climate of the time. I contend this sense of uncertainty, and at times perceived connected futures, is rooted in Puerto Ricans' position as colonial racialized citizens, which excludes them from an equal and uncontested U.S. citizenship (Valle 2019a), and in racialized nativism and illegality that targets Latinos (Sánchez 1997; Zepeda-Millán 2017) and that subsumes Puerto Ricans despite their historic presence in the U.S.

Overall, I argue Puerto Ricans' immigration attitudes are a political product (Beltrán 2010) of the multiple forms of structural exclusion—colonial

citizenship, neoliberal immigration regime, and Latino racialization—that have conditioned the position of Puerto Ricans and Latinos in the U.S. Further, I contend that to make sense of Puerto Ricans' politics, it is necessary to look beyond the citizen/immigrant binary and instead consider their complex structural location within the U.S. as colonial citizens, migrants, and as a group subjected to multiple racializations—this analytical lens allows us to examine how Puerto Ricans make sense of their political and social locations and their relationship to Latinos and *Latinidad*. In doing so, this study advances race, immigration, and Latino scholarship by bringing into focus how group histories, current sociopolitical forces, and contextual dynamics converge and shape Latinos' contemporary politics.

Lastly, this study has important implications for our understanding of Latino politics in Florida. The Sunshine State has traditionally been a conservative stronghold, a position supported by its large long-standing Cuban community. Unlike other Latin American immigrants, the U.S. government granted Cuban migrants an exceptional political reception including unique immigration privileges (García Bedolla 2014). Despite Puerto Ricans' similarities with Cubans (shared Caribbean origins and entry and legal status privileges in the U.S.) and Cuban's political influence in Florida, it is telling that Puerto Ricans express a Latino group consciousness that *deviates* from Cuban conservative, immigration restrictionist, and race evasive politics and instead, one that aligns with the vulnerabilities of Mexican/Latin American immigrants. I contend Puerto Ricans status inequalities (stemming from a colonial citizenship and forces of racialization), which are particularly amplified in Central Florida and during the 2016 presidential election process, produce a shared experience of exclusion and sense of social proximity with Mexican/Latin American immigrants and marginalized Latinos. Thus, this study captures the emergence of a different strand of *Latinidad* and Latino politics in the largest swing state of the U.S., which has the potential to produce national and international political reverberations.

Notes

1. This article derives substantially from Ariana J. Valle's doctoral dissertation (see Valle 2019b). The dissertation chapter this article draws from is not published elsewhere.
2. U.S. presidential elections consist of various stages that unfold over 18–22 months. For election process details see <https://www.usa.gov/election>.
3. See García Bedolla (2014) for a structural analytical approach to Latino politics.
4. Sanchez (2006) constructs the category "Caribbean Latino," which combines Puerto Rican and Dominican survey respondents.
5. For intra-Cuban political and economic differences see Krogstad (2014) and Portes and Shafer (2007).
6. PR and Island refer to Puerto Rico and its archipelago; NY refers to New York.

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