

## Public Administration and the Media

SPECIAL SECTION

## Latinos, the Media and Public Administration

Tony Carrizales

With the growing Latino population in America today, there is a simultaneously growing dilemma that often gets overlooked. This dilemma is the lack of understanding and recognition of U.S. Latinos and their diversity.

One perpetuator is the U.S. media, which de-emphasizes the specific characteristics of individuals from Latino populations and groups them into singular terms such as Latino or Hispanic. This presents potential problems for the field of public administration. Both in theory and practice, public administrators often refer to Latino populations by the characteristics that contemporary media highlight for viewers.

This is not to say that some of the prominent characteristics are inappropriately utilized by the field of public administration, but the fact that limited characteristics are often involved when using the term Latino, is inherently flawed.

The media of today has taken to identifying individuals of Latin America or Latin American descent as Latino or Hispanic, overlooking the specific country of origin or generational aspects of the individuals.

In newspaper, news television or internet media, grouping diverse individuals into the singular term of Latino can be expected. Delving any further into the aspects of an individual's background isn't necessary, other than to identify race/ethnic background; beyond this, the true story the media outlet seeks to share is lost or diverted.

Most prominent in today's media stories regarding Latino populations, is immigration. Immigration policy and undocumented residents are both critical aspects for the field of public administration at the national and local levels.

At the national level, elected officials are continually debating federal immigration policy. Latin Americans represent a significant portion of recent immigrants, both documented and undocumented. It is to no surprise that term Latino surfaces in national immigration media stories.

Likewise, at the local level undocumented day laborers have become a key issue amid municipal public administrators. Although Latino is used by the media in reference to these recent immigrants, public administration must understand the issue even further.

Public administration should recognize that recent immigrants come from more than 20 Latin American countries. This is critical in any attempt to address concerns or to formulate national and local policy. An understanding of the relationship between the country of origin and the United States as well as possible reasons of immigration can dictate effective policy.

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In the late 1980s significant migration from Latin America to the United States did not originate in Mexico. Central Americans came in the thousands to the United States, and not always in search of economic opportunities, but for refugee. Puerto Ricans, on the other had, have been citizens of the United States for decades.

In addition to recognizing the differences in country of origin, there are also significant differences among individuals from the same country. Regardless of where one stands on an issue, knowing the difference between Mexican immigrants to the Southwest and Mexican immigrants to the Northeast can help prevent implementing an ineffective national policy on immigration.

Likewise, there are significant differences among immigrant populations from the same country when examined through generations.

Cuban immigrants from the 1960s, 1980s and today all have distinct characteristics, which prohibit each generation of immigrants being grouped under one common label such as political refugees. Mexican immigrants from the past two decades are quite different from Mexican-Americans whose families have been in the United States for many generations.

In addition to immigration policy, political power/influence of Latinos is also a prominent media story. Latinos are characterized as being predominantly democratic in voting. However, there is also emphasis on Latinos as a conservative, family-value driven, population. This only underlines that fact that Latinos, as a group, are quite diverse among their political ideologies, and any attempt to collectively characterize those of Latin American decent by one term is futile.

With variance among country of origin, reason for migration and generation, Latinos have many unique differences that do not warrant a singular term for public administration purposes. This is not to say that the field shouldn't collectively think of issues that are facing Latino populations, however, it should not stop with the term Latino. A further understanding of

the issue should be explored and this typically entails recognizing and understanding Latino diversity.

One example where the Latino dilemma can present a challenge for the field of public administration is amid the concept of a representative bureaucracy. To have a representative bureaucracy at any level of government based on ethnic/racial demographics (or passive representation) would presume similarities in among Latinos for there to be effective active representation. However, the political, economic and even cultural differences of Latinos embody an inherent obstacle for representative bureaucracy in research, theory and practice.

The key aspects of the Latino dilemma outlined above, represent only a portion of the variation among individuals who so often are grouped under the term Latino. Although this can be overlooked amid a media story, it can not and should not be done by the field of public administration. What are some specific questions the field of public administration can ask when Latino populations are involved? The following three questions are a good starting point.

- *What is the country of origin or region from which an individual comes from?* This question is for those emigrating from a Latin American country. As suggested above, there is internal migration in which Latinos are simply relocating within the United States.
- *What is the historic relationship between the local or federal government and the specific region from which Latinos are relocating from?* Understanding the historic reasoning for migration highlights push-pull factors. These economic, political or other key reasons for migration must be taken into consideration during policy formulation or execution.
- *Finally, which generation of Latinos is represented within the issue?* Recent immigrants and second generation Latinos have distinct ideologies, as would be expected with any immigrant population group, but it is often overlooked among Latino populations.

We are familiar with the growth of the Latino population in the United States. What the field of public administration must become familiar with is the vast diversity of Latinos. Over 20 Latin American countries, over 200 years of Latinos in what is today the United States, and one term—Latino.

Looking past media characterizations and oversimplification of the individuals allows for a better understating of Latino diversity which is critical for public administrators who formulate and implement policy.

*ASPA member Tony Carrizales is an assistant professor of public administration at Marist College.*  
E-mail: [Tony.Carrizales@Marist.edu](mailto:Tony.Carrizales@Marist.edu)

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