

Lisa García Bedolla. *Latino Politics*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009. 288 pp.

In *Latino Politics* Lisa García Bedolla accomplishes the very difficult task of providing the appropriate theoretical and historical context to understand Latino politics in the United States. In addition, García Bedolla skillfully asks and answers a series of important questions related to the multiple groups that are usually labeled Latinos. For example, who are Latinos? Why do Latin Americans migrate to the United States? What structural factors affect Latino political behavior? How does Latino agency interact with structural constraints? How has the recent demographic boom affected Latino politics?

Conceptually and methodologically, it is difficult to explain Latino political behavior in terms of ethnic or racial identity because Latinos inhabit a world of their own, with as many contradictions among themselves as similarities that unite them, and which contribute to their respective political behaviors. Thus García Bedolla employs two concepts to explain the political behavior of Mexicanos, Puertorriqueños, Cubanos, Salvadoreños, and Guatemaltecos: agency and structure. These two concepts convey the importance of the self and the context within which the individual must act, and show that Latinos have always found ways to exercise their agency and articulate their political demands, despite a number of formal and informal institutional barriers such as discriminatory electoral laws, citizenship requirements, and linguistic barriers.

García Bedolla provides a clear historical timeline of migration, and discusses the factors that compelled the different groups to migrate at different times and to settle in different parts of the U.S. Although each group exhibits a unique migratory trajectory that thus far has been ignored in contemporary scholarly accounts of Latino politics, García Bedolla reminds us of the shared similarities and divergent processes of their incorporation and assimilation into the U.S. political system. The historical background is extremely useful for understanding how different groups have interacted with a hostile political context upon arrival in the United States, and how they have overcome the various structural challenges that each group has faced. For example, the history of Mexicans in the U.S. goes back long before the U.S. extended beyond its original thirteen colonies, but that history did not insulate them from racial discrimination, social exclusion, and political neglect. Once incorporated into the U.S., Mexicans had to fight for inclusion and to find ways to exercise their agency in an institutional context that did not provide many opportunities to demographically and racially disadvantaged groups.

Demography, however, has become the most important reason why U.S.

politicians are increasingly paying attention to Latinos today. Shortly after becoming the largest minority in the United States, politicians from all political stripes began courting the increasing Latino electorate. Paradoxically, however, Latinos have not been able to realize their electoral potential. That is, at the same time that Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan populations have increased, at the individual level Latinos still face citizenship requirements, linguistic barriers, and lack the socioeconomic status necessary to make their numbers truly count at the ballot box.

Lisa García Bedolla weaves a very interesting and accurate historical narrative that traces the roots of Latinos from their homelands to the United States. She then proceeds to explain how their desire for inclusion and their political potential has interacted with a political context that over time has become more inclusive, but that initially was closed and rejected most as racially inferior. This history of migration and struggle for inclusion is firmly grounded in theory and history that make this text novel in its structure and comprehensive in its coverage.

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