

Leaving Tradition Behind

Latinos in the great American melting pot

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Family values. Culture wars. Moral decline. All are familiar cultural touchstones that reflect the tangible angst over the changes in American families that have taken place in recent decades—and a feeling that, somehow, relationships between spouses, parents and children could be stronger, healthier and more satisfying.

The latest survey project by *The Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University approached this debate from a new angle by looking at questions of morality and family through the prism of a largely unexplored American population—Latinos.

As Latinos prepare to overtake African Americans as the nation's largest minority group, it is important to understand how the continuing growth and empowerment of this population—commonly thought to have its own distinctive sensibility about family—is altering the contours of public opinion on issues of morality and family responsibility.

Last summer, *Post/Kaiser/Harvard* interviewed 2,417 Latinos, in their choice of English or Spanish, along with 2,197 non-Latinos. The survey included interviews with large samples of Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Central and South Americans, among them 1,478 foreign-born Latinos. The survey covered a breadth of topics, from government to financial concerns to hot policy topics. Some of the most striking findings, however, were in the arena of values.

It is usually immigrants themselves who are under the researcher's microscope. Do Americans perceive the newcomers as hardworking or lazy, economic boons or burdens, different or the same?

We asked the Latino immigrants in our survey to turn the tables and evaluate the state of values and family life in their

adopted country. Their impressions were strikingly in tune with those of native-born Americans.

Asked to compare the United States with their native countries, a significant majority of Latino immigrants praised this country for the quality of its schools, the policies in place for the poor, for job opportunities and for America's vaunted political freedoms.

But ratings of family unity in the US conveyed a clear disappointment. Fully half the Latino immigrants surveyed said families were stronger in the countries they came from. Only one in four said the US had more family unity. Foreign-born Latinos also split in rating the moral values of American society: a third said their native societies had a stronger moral fiber, a third preferred the US on this dimension, and a final third saw no difference.

In this sense, immigrants—despite their otherwise positive evaluations of America—blend into the mainstream political discourse: the US is vulnerable when it comes to values, and even people new to the country recognize it.

The perception, perhaps a stereotype, of people of Latin descent is that they place a high priority on family unity. It is a perception that is widely held. About four in ten whites interviewed in a follow-up survey said that Latinos are more family-oriented than whites as a group, and nearly all the rest said the two groups were comparable on this front. Virtually no one thought Latinos were *less* family oriented than whites.

Stereotypes, in this case, are true. Some of the starkest attitudinal differences between Latinos and the average American are in the area of family responsibilities and family structures. In general, Latinos continue to value the tighter knit families of tradition and feel a greater responsibility to keep family members under one roof.

Three in four Hispanics told interviewers that it is better for young people to live in their parents' homes until they get married, compared to 45% of Americans overall. About two in three said elderly parents should live with their adult children, compared to about half of the total population. And Latinos were more likely to judge relatives to be more important in their lives than friends (two-thirds said they believed this strongly, compared to 40% of Americans in general).

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On values issues more entwined with public policy, such as abortion, conventional wisdom has it that most Latinos hold more conservative positions. Our survey showed that this is sometimes true, and sometimes not.

On a trio of “life” issues, the predominantly Catholic Hispanic population did, indeed, stand out from the general population: the majority said abortion should be illegal and opposed doctor-assisted suicide, and only a bare majority supported the death penalty in cases of murder. The general population, on the other hand, was divided on abortion, leaned toward favoring doctor-assisted suicide, and was overwhelmingly pro-death penalty.

But on two issues at the heart of the culture wars of the last decade, Latinos were not different. Latinos were no more likely than the rest of America to find having children out of wedlock unacceptable (about half did). On the issue of homosexuality, the majority found it unacceptable, but in numbers no greater than the rest of the nation.

How united are Latinos on these issues? The first place to look for differences within the Latino population is by national background, an analysis all too often limited by small sample sizes.

The results here were somewhat uneven, a mixture of cultural and political influences expressed through value positions.

On matters of family responsibility, Puerto Ricans stood out as somewhat less traditional on some but not all measures. Puerto Ricans were the least likely to say that the husband should rule the roost, that children should live at home until marriage, and that older parents should live with their adult children.

When it came to the trio of “life” issues which distinguished Latinos as a group from the rest of the population, ethnic patterns were more complicated. Cubans stood out in their strong support for the death penalty, while Mexicans and Central and South Americans expressed their cultural conservatism in being the most strongly pro-life on the abortion issue and the most strongly opposed to physician-assisted suicide. There were, however, almost no significant differences on morality issues, such as homosexuality or having children outside of marriage.

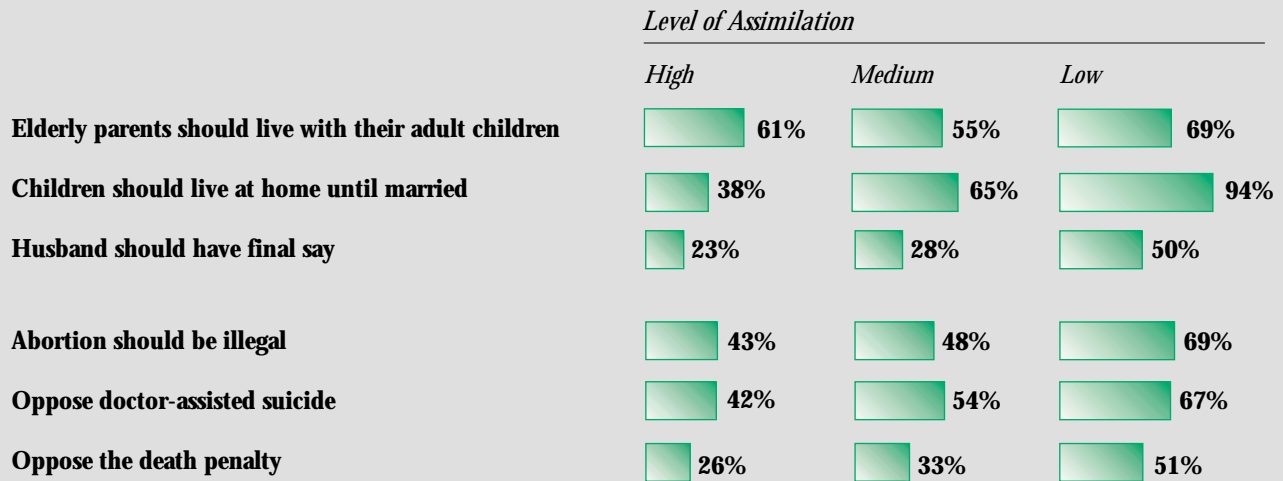
Surprisingly, there were even fewer differences among Latinos when we looked along more familiar demographic fault lines like gender and age. Latino men generally resembled Latino women on questions of family responsibility, equally likely to want to keep children and older parents in the family home as long as possible. Even on the question of whether the husband should have the final say, similarly sized minorities of Latino men and women would cede that role to the husband.

Neither did Latinos’ attitudes differ significantly by age. About the same number of younger people as older believed in supporting their elderly parents. A surprisingly large majority of Latinos in their twenties said that younger people should live at home until they wed (66%, compared to 85% of those aged 55 years and over).

There was only one major difference on the values policy items between age groups, and that was on the question of having children outside marriage. The majority of Latinos under age 30 thought this was acceptable; the majority of those over 55 did not. In terms of income, however, differences were more dramatic, with lower income Latinos holding more traditional views.

Figure 1

Latinos by Assimilation to US Culture



Source: Survey by *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, June 30-August 30, 1999.

Yet, in the end, it was not national background or gender or age or even the gaps by income that intrigued us most or gave us pause in saying that Latinos speak with one voice on values. Instead, it was a personal trait not used in analyzing the opinions of the general population—assimilation.

Assimilation measures the extent to which a person has been integrated into United States mainstream society. Not surprisingly, it tracks closely on the length of time a person has been in the country, as well as the length of time a person's family has been here. In this survey, English language use and proficiency were used as a proxy for assimilation to divide Latinos into three groups, a strategy that has been successfully used in prior research.

The differences across these three groups were striking, the similarities equally powerful.

More than nine in ten in the low assimilation group believed young people should live at home until marriage, compared to only four in ten among the most assimilated group. Half of the least assimilated believed the husband should have the final say in the family, compared to two in ten of the most assimilated. Yet across all three groups, similarly sized majorities believed that older parents should live at home, and large majorities in all three groups thought relatives more important than friends.

Attitudes on critical, values-oriented policy issues shifted radically across the groups. A narrow majority of the least assimilated group opposed the death penalty; a large majority of the most assimilated group supported it. A majority of the least assimilated opposed legal abortion; a majority of the most assimilated supported it. About one in six of the least assimilated said homosexuality was acceptable; twice as many of the most assimilated said so.

In the final analysis, Latinos *do* differ from the mainstream culture when it comes to family responsibilities. But the most crucial distinctions *among* Latinos are those along the lines of assimilation. In later generations, even closely knit Latino families send their children to out-of-state colleges, relocate to take jobs, or respond to subtle pressure exerted by the mainstream culture, all of which likely play a part in their move away from traditional views.

The data, though a snapshot, suggest that when it comes to attitudes about family unity and the values issues that dominate political discourse, the "great American melting pot" still exerts a powerful force.