Does Ethnicity Matter? Descriptive Representation in Legislatures and Political Alienation Among Latinos*

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Objective. This article uses a political empowerment approach to explore the effect that descriptive representation in legislatures has on levels of political alienation among Latinos. Methods. Using data from the 1997 Tomás Rivera Policy Institute post-election survey carried out in California and Texas, supplemented with data on the ethnicity of legislators serving each respondent, we test this political empowerment thesis. Results. The presence of Latino representatives in the state assembly, state senate, and/or U.S. House is associated with lower levels of political alienation among Latino constituents. The effect is modest, and we find that other factors—demographic, political, and ethnic-specific—also exert powerful influences on levels of political alienation among Latinos. Conclusions. Although finding modest evidence for the political empowerment thesis, descriptive representation alone is not a panacea for creating politically engaged personas among Latinos.

Representative democracies require their citizenries to possess certain “democratic” orientations in order to ensure systemic stability (Almond and Verba, 1965; Dahl, 1961). One potential threat to that stability is political alienation, a term signifying some degree of individual discontent or disconnect from the political process (Citrin et al., 1975), “a social condition in which citizens have or feel minimal connection with the exercise of political power” (Reef and Knoke, 1999). The importance of this orientation is its strong connection with anti-democratic behaviors. At best, politically alienated individuals tune out of politics. At worst, it may lead to more aggressive political activities such as protests, riots, or even terrorism (Muller, Jukam, and Seligson, 1982; Wright, 1976; Schwartz, 1973).

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1The terms political alienation, normlessness, and estrangement are used interchangeably here.

SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY, Volume 84, Number 2, June 2003
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Although a generally well-explored phenomenon, few scholars have systematically explored alienation among African-Americans (Abramson, 1972, 1983; Long, 1978; Rodgers, 1974), and even fewer have done so among Latinos (Michelson, 2000). In this article, we fill this gap by exploring the contextual and individual-level determinants of political alienation among the Latino electorate. We employ a political empowerment model, which gauges the effect descriptive representation has on constituents’ political behaviors and orientations (Gay, 2001; Gilliam and Kaufman, 1998; Gilliam, 1996; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990). We ask if the presence of one or more co-ethnic representatives in legislative office reduces levels of political alienation among the Latinos so represented.

Political Alienation Literature

Political alienation is an amorphous concept that encompasses several distinct attitudes or dimensions. Among these dimensions are such mental states as powerlessness, normlessness, cynicism, meaninglessness, negativism, estrangement, value rejection, anomie, and distrust (Reef and Knoke, 1999; Citrin et al., 1975; Finifter, 1970). In this effort, we focus on political normlessness, that is, the belief that government officials are violating long-standing norms or rules in an effort to serve some narrow interest (Finifter, 1970:390). Simply stated, individuals who believe government officials are corrupt or likely to “sell out” to more powerful interests will feel alienated from the system, and generally less empowered.

Contemporary political alienation research is geared toward identifying the causes and political consequences of each dimension and exploring it among underrepresented groups (Reef and Knoke, 1999; Weatherford, 1990). Citrin et al.’s (1975) study provides the most detailed account of the general determinants of political alienation. They identify both “personal” and “political” sources of political alienation, the former including a person’s income, education, age, race, and sex. Much of the research shows that working- and lower-class respondents in general manifest greater political alienation (e.g., Wright, 1976; Finifter, 1970; Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl, 1961), higher levels of education are inversely related to political estrangement (Finifter, 1970), while age has mixed effects (Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl, 1961; Wright, 1976). Finally, researchers find that African-Americans, women, and Latinos are more politically inefficacious than white males (Michelson, 2000; Abramson, 1972, 1983; Long, 1978; Citrin et al., 1975).

Footnote 2:
Finifter (1970:392) develops a normlessness scale based on 10 questions. Among them is a question that mirrors our question, which asks: “One sometimes hears that some people or groups have so much influence over the way government is run that the interests of the majority are ignored. Do you agree or disagree that there are such groups?” The TRPI survey question asks respondents: “Would you say that government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all?”
In addition to these personal sources, political sources also play a role. For example, higher levels of political participation reduce alienation (Finifter, 1970), while disapproval of how government is handling one or more policy issues contributes to feelings of political estrangement (Citrin et al., 1975). Contextual factors such as the ideological leanings and partisan identification of a representative also play a key role. Finally, and central to our article, researchers have found that descriptive representation is inversely related to political estrangement among African-Americans (Howell and Fagan, 1988; Abramson, 1972, 1983; Abney and Hutcheson, 1981; Long, 1978; Rodgers, 1974).

**Descriptive Representation and Politically Engaged Personas**

Descriptive representation refers to circumstances in which a citizen shares ascriptive characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and so forth with his or her representative (Pitkin, 1967). The 1965 Voting Rights Act and its subsequent amendments and court interpretations dramatically increased the number of African-American and Latino representatives holding office (Lublin, 1997; Grofman, Handley, and Niemi, 1992). Scholars have explored the policy outputs resulting from increased descriptive representation (Canon, 1999; Lublin, 1997; Cameron, Epstein, and O’Halloran, 1996; Hero and Tolbert, 1995; Meier and England, 1984) as well as the behavioral and attitudinal effects they have on constituents (Gay, 2001; Tate, 1993, 2001; Tate and Harsh, 2001; Banducci, Donovan, and Karp, 1999; Gilliam, 1996; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Howell and Fagan, 1988; Abney and Hutcheson, 1981). Our article builds on this latter research. Although earlier work has focused on African-Americans, Latino political similarities (McClain and Stewart, 1999; McClain and Garcia, 1993) suggest that insights from the earlier work can be extended to Latinos.

The “political empowerment” or “political reality” model is the explanation most commonly given to account for why African-Americans feel more estranged than whites from government. It argues that African-Americans are aware of their politically disadvantaged status and therefore tend to be more cynical, alienated, and less trusting toward government (Abramson, 1972, 1983; Long, 1978; Rodgers, 1974). When circumstances change and African-Americans achieve a greater level of representation—specifically through the election of African-American mayors—trust in government and institutions has been shown to increase among the group (Howell and Fagan, 1988; Abney and Hutcheson, 1981).

These findings may be suggestive that descriptive representation of Latinos may diminish general feelings of disconnect with the exercise of political power among Latino constituents. Descriptive representatives by appearance alone, statements, or symbolic gestures send cues to their
co-ethnic constituents that they will be more responsive to their needs (Gilliam, 1996; Tate, 1993, 2001; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson, 1989). The result is a constituency more empowered to participate in politics. More recent research has shown that descriptive representation increases voter participation, trust, political knowledge, and efficacy among African-Americans (Banducci, Donovan, and Karp, 1999; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990) and, among Latinos, turnout (Barreto, Segura, and Woods, 2002). What attitudinal effects might descriptive representation have among Latinos? Specific to our article, will the presence of one or more Latino legislators reduce feelings of political normlessness among Latino constituents?

Our Argument

We argue here that Latino political empowerment, as a consequence of co-ethnic representation, is directly related to lower levels of political normlessness among Latinos. The presence of one or more Latino representatives in various legislative assemblies serves as a heuristic device to their co-ethnic constituents. The cues sent by the election of ethnic representatives to fellow ethnics are that their interests will not be compromised to more powerful interests. This feeling is largely perceptual since few voters take the time to analyze their representative’s vote history or behavior (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Nonetheless, decreases in political alienation should be particularly strong among Latinos who place a higher premium on having Latino representatives. Thus, we test the following hypothesis.

H₁: Latino citizens descriptively represented in legislative bodies will be less likely than other Latino citizens to manifest political alienation.

It might be suggested that co-ethnics in the legislature would be sufficient to reduce alienation even among minority citizens not directly represented by that legislator. This may in fact be the case, but we would still expect between-group comparisons to show that those actually directly represented by fellow Latinos manifest comparatively less alienation. And, in fact, if there is such an indirect “collective” effect (Weissberg, 1978), it would bias our results against our hypothesis by causing us to underestimate the ameliorating effect of Latino legislators on Latino political alienation. We should, therefore, have increased confidence in our findings if they in fact support our central hypothesis.

Since each person enjoys representation in several bodies simultaneously, it is, of course, possible to have more than one co-ethnic representative at a time. For example, a citizen might live in an area with both a Latino state assembly member and a Latino state senator, or even a Latino member of
Congress. To the extent that ethnic representatives reduce alienation from the political system, we would expect the effects to be stronger where a citizen is represented by two or even three co-ethnics.

\[ H_{1a}: \text{The reduction in political alienation among Latino citizens descriptively represented in legislative bodies will be greater when those Latino citizens are concurrently descriptively represented in more legislative offices.} \]

Data and Variables

The data we use allow us to explore both personal and political factors in an effort to explain one dimension of political alienation. To test descriptive representation’s impact on levels of Latino political normlessness, we use data drawn from a 1997 post-election survey conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute.\(^3\) Our overall sample of Latino respondents consists of two randomly drawn samples from high-density Latino counties in California \((n = 403)\) and Texas \((n = 403)\). U.S. citizens who were self-identified as Latinos were interviewed in the months immediately following the 1996 national election. Among other things, respondents were queried about their attitudes on political issues of the day, their voting behavior, and a battery of demographic questions.\(^4\)

To measure alienation, we rely on a question directly assessing the respondent’s belief about who the general beneficiaries of government are. The question was, “Would you say that government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all of the people?” Respondents indicating a belief in the “big interest” notion were coded 1, while those subscribing to a belief that government is run to “benefit all” were coded 0. Respondents who “did not know” were coded as missing. In all, there were 732 valid responses in the two states, almost exactly evenly divided between the two perceptions.

We then coded each survey respondent, by address, into state and federal legislative districts. We then ascertained whether the relevant state assembly...
member, state senator, or member of Congress was Latino. Descriptive Representation Frequency is the total number of times that the relevant representative is Latino for a given respondent, and varies from 0 to 3, with 3 indicating that the respondent is simultaneously represented by Latinos in the state assembly, state senate, and U.S. House. Approximately 71 percent of respondents had at least one Latino representative, while almost 40 percent had three, with Hispanic Texans about twice as likely to be represented by Latino elected officials than Californians. We anticipate that being represented by one or more Latino legislators will lower the level of alienation among Latino citizens, so we would expect a negative coefficient on Descriptive Representation Frequency.

Given the between-state disparity in the distributions on our key independent variable, we also need to control for state in our models, with the dummy variable Texas set to 1 if the respondent was from that state. We would expect that Texas Latinos would be less alienated from the political system, yielding a negative coefficient on Texas. We have two reasons for this expectation. First, earlier work on turnout and sophistication suggested that Latinos in California functioned politically in the mid-1990s in a more ethnically charged and hostile political environment (Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura, 2001). Second, the institutional structure in Texas is such that opportunities for co-ethnic representation are much greater, owing in part to the number of counties and municipalities and in part to the size of the Texas legislature. For example, California has only 80 seats in its assembly but the Texas House of Representatives has 150 (for a smaller population) making it easier for smaller concentrations of Latinos to dominate a district electorate. Texas Latinos, then, are simply far more likely to have experienced the election of co-ethnics, regardless of the ethnicity of their current legislators.

Our remaining predictors fall into three categories: demographic, political, and ethnicity-specific. We include three variables whose presence is specific to the Latino political experience. Latino Representative Power is a survey item asking whether the respondent believes that Latino elected officials have the power to improve the lives of their Latino constituents. The variable ranges from 0 to 3, with higher values an indication that the respondent more strongly agrees that Latino elected officials can change things for the better. Since our key interest is whether ethnic representation reduces alienation, a belief in the efficacy of ethnic representation is a sine qua non of this effect. We expect a negative coefficient on this variable,

Earlier research on the behavioral consequences of descriptive representation has frequently focused on mayors. Mayors vary considerably in their legislative responsibilities—in some constituencies, the mayor is a voting member of the council elected directly, in others the position is largely ceremonial and selected by the council rather than voters, while in still other instances the mayor is a strong executive with the veto power. This variation in role and selection makes it difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at firm expectations regarding the effect on minority behavior should the mayor be a co-ethnic. For this reason, we focus on the three most visible districted legislative offices—members of both chambers of the state’s legislature and members of the U.S. House.
indicating that as belief in the efficacy of Latino officials increases, levels of alienation will decrease. This effect, of course, may well be contingent on whether the respondents has Latino representation, a distinction we will explore in the split-sample analysis.

The second ethnic-specific variable is U.S. Born, coded 1 if the citizen is native and 0 if the respondent is naturalized. Earlier work suggested that naturalized citizens have higher opinions of political institutions and more trust in the political system, while native-born citizens are less enthused (Uhlaner and Garcia, 2002; de la Garza et al., 1992). Other research suggests that as immigrants assimilate, their level of trust in the system, as well as in the society more broadly, goes down (Portes, 1984; Portes, Parker, and Cobas, 1980). Consequently, we anticipate a positive coefficient on U.S. Born, suggesting that natives are more alienated.

The final ethnic variable is Spanish Media, a five-point scale (ranging from 0 to 4) reflecting the respondent’s use of English- or Spanish-language media, with highest values representing exclusively Spanish-language media usage. Although our priors are not strong, we expect that the coefficient on this variable would be negative, indicating less alienation among those who use more Spanish media and less English media. Since English-language media usage would be indicative of greater assimilation, our expectations are consistent with the previously mentioned literature showing that assimilation is generally associated with lower levels of trust.

We also code for six political variables, all of which are well grounded in the literature and for which our expectations are clear. Political Interest captures the respondent’s self-reported levels of political attentiveness and should be negatively associated with alienation. Alienated citizens are unlikely to invest the time and resources in paying attention. Social Capital is a dichotomy capturing whether the respondent belongs to any civic and volunteer organizations and should also be negatively associated with alienation. Internal Efficacy measures the respondent’s perception of his or her ability to understand and engage the political system and, likewise, should be negatively related to alienation. Democrat is a dummy variable coding for political party (with all non-Democrats coded 0), while Strength of Party measures the self-reported degree of partisan identification on a four-point scale. Although we have no specific expectations about partisan preference, we do expect strong partisanship to be inversely associated with alienation, since alienated citizens are unlikely to have strong attachments to either of the extant political coalitions.

Political Knowledge is also a four-point scale that captures the respondent’s knowledge of the U.S. political system using three questions.6 High values

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6Respondents are asked to correctly identify the political ideology of Henry Cisneros and Newt Gingrich, and the party with the majority in the House of Representatives. Although the first two are not, strictly speaking, factual, we think they accurately capture political knowledge-in-use, and we code “conservative” for Gingrich, and “liberal” for Cisneros, as “correct” responses.
indicate more knowledge. Whether this will be positively or negatively associated with alienation is an interesting question. Expectations would be driven largely by researcher beliefs—a cynic would expect information to be positively related to alienation, whereas an optimist would expect the reverse. Political Knowledge may, of course, interact with our key variable Descriptive Representation Frequency, a notion we will explore later in the article.

The last group of predictors is demographic. High School Graduate is coded 1 if the respondent completed high school, and 0 otherwise. Much like the Political Knowledge variable, expectations on education are endogenous to beliefs about the political system. The dummy variable is used in lieu of a more continuous one because of a significant paucity of variation beyond the category of high school graduate (driven by the comparatively low levels of education among Latinos as a group). Age is the respondent’s chronological age and should be negatively associated with alienation, as older respondents, and especially older Latinos, tend to be more involved and attuned to politics. Finally, Home Ownership is a dummy variable that is being used as a proxy for income. Income is correlated with education and had the highest nonresponse rate in the survey. Its inclusion, then, is costly in terms of the number of cases lost. Since higher-income persons are generally less alienated from the system, owing to their favorable material circumstances, we would expect that homeowners would be less likely to manifest the alienation we are studying.

Testing and Results

We used these predictors to model political alienation. We use logistic regression. Column 1 in Table 1 reports the logit coefficients for the general model (with robust Huber-White corrected standard errors in parentheses); Column 2 reports estimated changes in the predicted probabilities given a fixed change in the independent variable from its minimum to its maximum values, holding all others constant at their mean.\(^7\)

Overall, the model correctly predicts 62.3 percent of the cases and yields a proportional reduction of error (PRE-Goodman and Kruskal’s tau-c) of 0.246, meaning the model eliminates about 25 percent of the error over the null (which, for tau-c, is random but proportional assignment). Diagnostics revealed no difficulties. There is no evidence of heteroskedasticity, and any potential problems of this sort were avoided through the use of the Huber-White corrected errors. Similarly, multicollinearity is not a problem. Pairwise correlations between the independent variables never reach the conventional level of concern. Only the correlation between Strength of

\(^7\)We use CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2001; King, Tomz, and Wittenberg, 2000) to estimate these changes.
Party and Democrat comes close, and the exclusion of either does not appreciably change the results for the other.

Descriptive Representation Frequency is negatively and significantly associated with alienation, per our first hypothesis. Looking at changes in
predicted probabilities, we can see that the probability of offering the alienated response (that politics is run for the benefit of a few) declines by almost 9 percent (or 0.0898) when we move from respondents without co-ethnic representation to respondents with Latinos representing them in the three legislative offices.

To test Hypothesis 1a—that the effects are additive across several layers of representation—we first estimated differences in predicted probabilities for each change in the value of Descriptive Representation Frequency. A change from 0 to 1 reduced the probability of alienated responses by 0.0293, from 1 to 2 reduced the probability by 0.0296, and from 2 to 3 by 0.0294. Although the shift from 1 to 2 is slightly larger than the others, these results suggest that the effect of co-ethnic representation is, in fact, cumulative across multiple opportunities and not implicit in a single Latino legislator or a particular threshold. In short, the more layers of co-ethnic representation enjoyed by the respondent, the less likely that respondent is to offer alienated attitudes toward government.\footnote{Similarly, replicating the analysis presented in Table 1 using only a single legislative office suggests that the effects of co-ethnic representation in the state assembly and the U.S. House are approximately the same, while the effect of state senate co-ethnic representation is somewhat smaller. Results available from the authors.}

The total effect of co-ethnic representation, however, is not as large as several other important predictors. Belief in the effectiveness of Latino elected officials (Latino Representative Power) is also negatively associated with alienation and, across the range of values, produces over a 19.5 percent decline in the probability of offering an alienated response. Similarly, Internal Efficacy, Spanish Media usage, Age, and living in Texas are also negatively associated with alienation, with impacts greater than that of Descriptive Representation Frequency. Each of these findings is consistent with our earlier expectations. And the last finding, on the between-states differences, is consistent with our expectations regarding the effect of institutional variations between the states and with earlier work showing that Latinos in California in the 1990s felt more besieged politically.

By contrast, Political Knowledge is positively associated with alienation, meaning that the more the respondent knows about politics, the more alienated from government. This finding is consistent with the cynic’s view that familiarity with American politics is much associated with contempt and consistent with research by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) that greater levels of political knowledge were associated with negative evaluations of Congress. This knowledge measure is, in fact, the single strongest effect in the model. Moving from the lowest to highest levels of knowledge increases the likelihood of offering the alienated response by over 22.4 percent.

One possibility is that the sophistication and co-ethnic representation are interacting. That is, it is those most informed about politics who are better
aware of co-ethnic representation or the lack thereof. Interacting continuous predictors results in insurmountable collinearity problems, so to test this possibility, we replicated the analysis in Table 1 for two subsamples, those with the lowest level of information (Political Knowledge = 0) and those with the highest level of information (Political Knowledge = 3). The results show a clear relationship between political information and the relationship between co-ethnic representation and alienation. For the uninformed group, the coefficient on Descriptive Representation Frequency was insignificantly different from 0, whereas for the most informed respondents, the coefficient was sizable, significant, in the anticipated direction, and yielded an estimated decline in the predicted probability of almost 27 percent (0.2695). This suggests that the reactions of the politically informed are really driving our results—those with high levels of information are more alienated from the system but also more responsive to the ameliorating effects of co-ethnic representation.

The initial findings, then, are encouraging. The frequency of descriptive representation is associated with a significant though modest decline in alienation, and many of the other predictors had significant impact. One possibility is that difference between having a co-ethnic legislator and not having one is being absorbed a bit by those other predictors. To examine the robustness of the remaining relationships, we divide the data into two subsamples, those with co-ethnic representation (Descriptive Representation Frequency > 0) and those without (Descriptive Representation Frequency = 0), and rerun the models on these subsamples.

Column 1 of Table 2 reports the results for respondents represented by Latinos (with Column 2 providing changes in predicted probabilities). The results are largely in the same direction as in the full sample estimation, although the smaller n has reduced the significance level of some. Age, Spanish Media, Political Knowledge, Latino Representative Power, Internal Efficacy, and Texas remain the strongest predictors and in the same direction as before. The model correctly predicts 62.7 percent of all cases and PRE (tau-c) is 0.250, slightly better than for the full sample.

Columns 3 and 4 report results for respondents not represented by Latinos, along with changes in predicted probabilities. Note that belief about the power of Latino elected officials to change things falls to insignificance. This is not surprising since these respondents are not represented by co-ethnics and, therefore, their level of alienation is not driven by their beliefs concerning the efficacy of Latino legislators. By contrast, partisanship, which had heretofore not had much effect, comes into the model. It is the only predictor that reaches conventional levels of significance (although Political Knowledge comes very close). Democrats appear to be more alienated than non-Democrats, with a probability 0.1722 higher of offering an alienated response. The loss of significance in beliefs

9Results available from the authors.
TABLE 2
Logit Estimates for Predictors of Individual Manifestations of Political Alienation Among California and Texas Latinos, by Descriptive Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Descriptive Representation Frequency &gt; 0</th>
<th>Descriptive Representation Frequency = 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logit Coefficients (Robust Standard Errors)</td>
<td>First Difference in Predicted Probabilities (Min → Max)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Latino Representative Power</strong></td>
<td>-0.264* (0.117)</td>
<td>-0.1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spanish Media</strong></td>
<td>-0.183* (0.098)</td>
<td>-0.1755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. Born</strong></td>
<td>0.067 (0.248)</td>
<td>0.0178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Interest</strong></td>
<td>0.146 (0.123)</td>
<td>0.1106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Capital</strong></td>
<td>-0.038 (0.217)</td>
<td>-0.0113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Efficacy</strong></td>
<td>-0.316** (0.108)</td>
<td>-0.2288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democrat</strong></td>
<td>-0.245 (0.328)</td>
<td>-0.0592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strength of Party</strong></td>
<td>0.062 (0.160)</td>
<td>0.0431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.297**</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.012*</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>0.182</td>
<td>0.221</td>
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<td>Home Owner</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>-0.642**</td>
<td>0.225</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.477**</td>
<td>0.559</td>
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<table>
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<td>N</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi²</td>
<td>45.44</td>
<td>13.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi² sign.</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.4208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPC</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE (tau-c)</td>
<td>0.250</td>
<td>0.166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One tailed probabilities: \(^* p < 0.075, ^{*} p < 0.05, ^{{}*} p < 0.01, ^{{}*}{} p < 0.001.\)
about the effectiveness of co-ethnic representatives, coupled with the emergence of partisanship as a driving factor, suggests that in the absence of ethnic representation as a cue, partisanship is the facet of representation that affects levels of alienation. This model does not perform as well as earlier specifications, correctly predicting 59.7 percent with the PRE (tau-c) a comparatively smaller 0.166.

**Are Latino Representatives Better?**

We assumed from the outset that respondents would place some value on having co-ethnic representation. Specifically, we would not expect *Descriptive Representation Frequency* to lower political alienation unless respondents attributed a value to co-ethnic representation greater than the value placed on other representatives. Fortunately, we have a measure in the data concerning the respondents’ beliefs in this regard.

Table 3 reports cross-tabulations between our measure of *Descriptive Representation* and two other variables: *Latino Representative Power* and the respondent’s beliefs about whether Latinos better represent Latinos (with 1 indicating agreement or strong agreement and 0 the reverse). In addition to cell frequencies, Table 3 also reports column percents.

As noted in Table 3, the shares of respondents who believe co-ethnic representation is either better or effective are unaffected by whether or not they actually *are* represented by a co-ethnic. About 75 percent of the respondents in both groups agreed with the assessment that co-ethnic representatives could be effective in improving the lot of their constituencies, and about 65 percent of both groups assess that co-ethnic representatives do a better job in this regard than others. But in neither instance were these perceptions endogenous to whether or not the respondent was already represented by a Latino. In fact, the distributions within each category are an almost textbook example of statistical independence, and the chi-square in each instance is clearly insignificant.10

These results are interesting in their own right and should give us pause regarding the interpretation of our earlier findings. Whether or not someone actually is descriptively represented has no effect on his or her assessment of descriptive representation—which is not exactly a ringing endorsement for the concept. We would conclude, then, that while there is some evidence that descriptively represented folks are less alienated from the political system, those same folks do not appear to put appreciably more (or less) stock in the importance of that descriptive representation.

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10The findings of no relationships hold up in a multivariate setting. In results not presented, we find that even controlling for a variety of demographic and political predictors, co-ethnic representation appears unrelated to the value assigned to such a phenomenon by the respondents, and is also unrelated to their assessment of *Latino Representative Power*. 
That is, while they generally desire it, achieving descriptive representation does not appear to have increased its value in the minds of those citizens.

**Conclusion**

We began this inquiry by examining the effects of descriptive representation in the state assembly has on levels of political alienation among Latinos. Building on the political empowerment literature, we hypothesized that the presence of one or more Latino legislators would be inversely related to levels of political alienation. The representatives’ ethnicity would act as a cue to co-ethnic constituents that their interests would not be compromised and that they had a voice in the determination of policy.

Results from our data analysis were generally supportive. We find that descriptive representation has a negative, significant, and important effect on political alienation. Descriptively represented Latino citizens are less likely to articulate feelings of political alienation. Furthermore, that effect increases as
the frequency of descriptive representation increases. Citizens with more than one co-ethnic representative show an even lower propensity toward alienation from government.

Other factors—demographic, political, and ethnicity-specific—also appear to exert an effect on political alienation. The most significant predictor, and not entirely unanticipated, was political knowledge. A greater level of political knowledge was positively associated with political alienation, but also appears to interact with the measure of co-ethnic representation. We find that the effect of descriptive representation is strongest among the politically informed, who, we surmise, are more likely to be aware of co-ethnic representation.

An interesting finding from our results was effects of the variable Latino Representative Power. As anticipated, Latino Representative Power was strongly and negatively associated with political alienation. Latinos who express belief in Latino representatives’ abilities to change things for the better were less likely to display alienated personas. Although the split-sample analysis suggested that the ameliorative effect of this belief is confined to citizens who are represented by a Latino representative, the actual belief in the power of Latino representatives to improve the lives of Latinos was not, itself, contingent on having a Latino representative. Being represented by a co-ethnic is not significantly associated with beliefs about whether Latino representatives are effective, or even better than non-Latinos, in representing the interests of Hispanic communities.

Perhaps this last finding should not be surprising, given the earlier work on the effectiveness of Latino representation (Hero and Tolbert, 1995; Welch and Hibbing, 1984). Although there was some disagreement in the earlier findings, Hero and Tolbert find that there is, at best, only modest (and statistically marginal) evidence that Latino descriptive representation has ever been associated with substantive representation, that is, policy outcomes more advantageous to Latinos. In that sense, the results reported in Table 3 are consistent with past findings about the observable political world, even if they are at odds with our expectations.

Furthermore, Hero and Tolbert suggest that there is evidence of substantive representation at the collective level, that is, institutions generally more responsive to Latino concerns. Their finding might explain why first-hand experience with descriptive representation, as captured in Table 3, does not appear to affect a respondent’s appraisal of descriptive representation. In short, descriptive representation might itself be a collective phenomenon (Weissberg, 1978) and have an empowering effect on all Latinos, rather than only on those within the Latino represented districts. Assessing this would require a longitudinal analysis that, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of these data.

Of course, we need to be cautious before generalizing from these results. There are certainly other factors that might affect respondent perceptions for which we cannot account here. For example, the effectiveness of Latino
legislators will certainly be endogenous to whether they are members of the majority party. In both Texas and California, at the time of the survey, this was the case, although majority Democratic control means something different—in ideological terms—in Texas than it does in California. Second, we might expect Latino representatives to be more effective during periods of unified Democratic government, something again missing in both states at the time of the survey but in different ways.

Third, the respondents’ experience with descriptive representation varies widely but is not captured with this data set. If co-ethnic representation improves the connection between citizen and state, that improvement is more likely to be felt after the citizen has had time to assess the effectiveness of the legislator. The effects of descriptive representation, then, should be endogenous to the passage of time, again something for which we cannot control here.

Although further research may shed light on the details and misgivings discussed here, we remain convinced of the logic of our central contention. The presence of co-ethnic representation is clearly more desirable to most Latinos than its complete absence. And while having a co-ethnic legislator is clearly not sufficient to instantly solve all citizen dissatisfactions with the output of the system, it is, perhaps, a necessary condition for improving the legitimacy of the system in the eyes of its minority citizens, and drawing closer connections between those citizens and the actions of government.

REFERENCES


