

Becoming white: the importance of history in explaining Trump's Latinx fanbase

The history of marginalised groups' political behaviour in the United States is very peculiar, and perfectly exemplifies how fickle racial categories are. The sign 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs' still hung from shop walls and pub windows a mere 50 years ago. Seen as a "Catholic race", inherently "simian, bestial, lazy and riotous", the notoriously fair-skinned Irish were, for a long time, excluded from the club of whiteness.



Pub poster (public domain)

The Irish first travelled to the US *en masse* in the wake of the Great Famine of 1845. Since their arrival, their presence in the United States was feared and avidly opposed by the nativist, Protestant Know-Nothing movement. In cities across the States, the Irish were heavily geographically and socially marginalised. When Black people moved to urban centres in the North in the years following the legal end of chattel slavery in 1865, they settled into areas similar to the Irish, started on similarly low-paying jobs and occupied similar housing. With their communities threatened first by nativist movements, then by the sudden increased presence of Black people, the Irish formed gangs in retaliation and eventually used these gangs to infiltrate institutions of authority.

Richard Daley was President of the Hamburgs and Chicago Mayor. In Philadelphia, under William "Bull" McMullen, leader of the Killers, the police force became 76% Irish. In New York City, Irish gangsters ensured that Fernando Wood was elected mayor and within 5 years the NYC fire department was 75% Irish as well. This allowed the Irish to conveniently continue their rivalry with Black people systematically and with less trouble. Through their positions, they were able to enforce white supremacy with the intention of clearing a space for themselves within it, at which they ultimately succeeded.

Italians in the US were not always white either. When they began streaming into the States in the late 1800s they were undesirable neighbours due to popular perception defining them as poor, dirty, mafia criminals; official statutory documents listed "Italian" as a separate race from white. Anti-Italian sentiment through the 1900s sparked increases in KKK membership and compounded growth of the nativist movement. The 1924 National Origins Act reduced Italian immigration by 98%. After the Great

Depression, the government handed out low interest loans to everyone — except Italians and Black people. After Pearl Harbour, Roosevelt even declared Italian Americans to be “enemy combatants” and the US government began rounding up and displacing them and Japanese Americans alike.

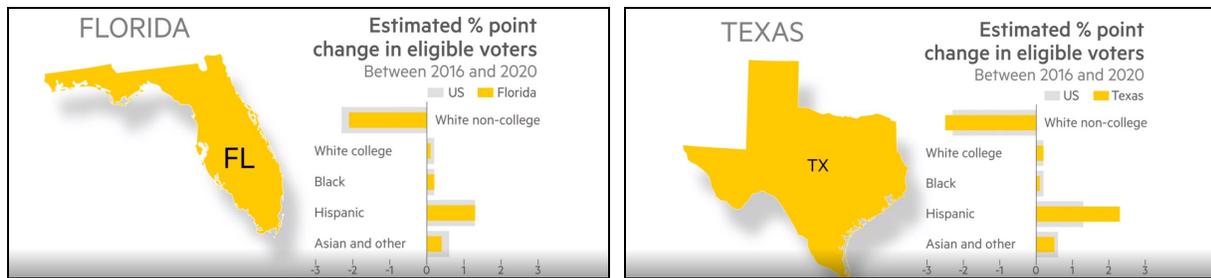
Oddly, many Italians still practiced Jim Crow and exclusively voted for politicians who supported it. Othering Black people served as a convenience to them in rendering themselves a worthy part of whiteness. Italian Americans actively signed up to fight for the US forces in WWII, in many cases with the explicit intention of changing their nefarious perception. Upon their return, they refused to live near and attend the same schools as Black people — thus, Black communities were further ghettoised by redlining policies and a refusal to offer Black veterans the low-interest mortgages offered to all other veterans, Italians and Irish included. Catholic Germans, Jewish immigrants and some East European groups like the Polish followed a very similar model.

If I haven't lost you yet, this is where it all becomes relevant.

Throughout President Trump's time in the political spotlight, we have seen a multitude of disparaging comments made about members of the Latinx community. Upon announcing his presidential candidacy in 2015, he infamously referred to Mexicans and 'Hispanics' as “drug-dealers, rapists and murderers” who, “like the blacks” are “too stupid” to vote for him... whilst labelling them all “criminals” and “killers”, and the “dangers on the border”. He has generically deemed Mexico's institutions to be corrupt, fiscally irresponsible, and untrustworthy, and its inhabitants to be “killing us (the U.S.) on trade and jobs.”

Trump's disdain for Latinx people does not only come across in his rhetoric. In addition to his insistence on building his ill-famed wall, in 2019 he announced a “crackdown” on illegal immigration, increasing the number and rate of ‘removals’. That year, ICE raids across the U.S. displaced over 250,000 ‘aliens’ from their homes, separated them from their children, and placed them in overcrowded containment facilities. ICE targets undocumented immigrants across the country, over 70% of whom are Latinx — with Mexicans making up over 50% of all undocumented immigrants alone. In 2019, Trump also hawkishly tightened US sanctions on Cuba, which his predecessor had fought hard to roll back, putting fuel on the fire that was (and sadly still is) the deteriorating Cuban economy.

After having been so brutally stereotyped, insulted and mistreated by the Trump administration, it comes as a surprise that, relative to his performance in 2016, Latinx support for the incumbent president increased in the 2020 election. Trump gained significant support in Southern Florida, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin.



Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/2b0eba6f-ba33-42e6-b49a-f7e53d67341f>

20 point shift toward Trump

In Arizona, where ICE raids were more common, Biden flipped the state

We cannot pretend the Latinx diaspora is a homogeneous faction of the electorate, and that they behave as a single voting bloc. Since the Nixon administration, the Republican presidential candidate has consistently won a quarter to a third of Latinx votes, most notably Bush winning as many as 40%. Traditional Latinxs tend to be religious, specifically Catholic — 62% of Latinxs in the U.S. are Catholic, compared to 23% of the general public — and quite family-oriented, with conservative views regarding women’s role and abortion policies that align themselves firmly with Republican ideals. But one does wonder why Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican Americans — the same ones Trump so desperately wants out — voted for him to be reelected. Latinxs voting for Trump, after all that he has said and done, is not merely a question of being a loyal Republican. Overly simplistic analyses argue that Latinx Trump supporters are merely “self-hating”, but there must be more to consider.

Exit polls indicate a very significant motivating factor in preferring Trump was his positive impact on their economic situation and overall prioritisation of the economy over other issues. Many Latinx voters, especially on the southern U.S. border, are very successful business owners; some argue they are simply not voting based on identity, but on economic issues instead. This does not seem sufficient in explaining the difference between Black Americans’ and Latinx Americans’ voting patterns, however. They experience very similar average socioeconomic situations, both past and present, with Latinxs averaging at lower educational attainment. It has been made clear by both politicians and electorate behaviour that the issue of racism in the United States is a strongly partisan issue, but it seems more and more apparent that it is Black voters — notably, Black women — who vote in accordance with their racialised identity, which in this election meant a vote for Biden. It therefore remains unclear why members of the Latinx community seem to be so self-sabotaging as to vote for Trump instead - roughly three times as likely as their Black counterparts.



Joe Biden speaks via video link as family and guests attend the funeral service for George Floyd at the Fountain of Praise church on 9 June 2020 in Houston.

Photograph: David J Phillip/AFP/Getty Images

This hardly seems coincidental. The path of many minoritised communities in the United States is one that ultimately led to becoming a “real American” in a white country. In an effort to ‘become’ white, minoritised groups have made a concerted effort to ‘other’ Black people, consolidating their inferiority to claim their own relative superiority. As columnist Michael Harriot points out through his thorough research and argumentation, the path taken by many minoritised groups has been paved, time and time again, at the expense of Black people in America.

“...Whiteness in America has always been about kicking Black people in the face. But they don't do it because they hate us. We are the example...”.

It is an extension of the who-are-your-golfing-buddies-voting-for aspect of political preference and a reflection of a deep-seated desire to avoid being at the bottom of a very real racial hierarchy. In Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Polish fashion, some Latinxs are carving a Latinx-shaped hole into whiteness by, once again, ‘othering’ Black people. Though it may not be an entirely conscious motivator, American Latinxs seem to be making an effort to cast themselves on the *white* side of history.

Perhaps what some may think a symptom of internalised racism, many second or third generation Latinx Americans are very concerned with illegal immigration, leading the process of ‘othering’ to occur within the Latinx community as well. ‘Legal’ Latinxs vote for Trump in an effort to separate themselves from ‘illegal’ Latinxs — another way of confirming one’s legitimacy as an American by excluding outsiders, in the very same way that racist, xenophobic white Americans do. But these people will do little to recognise their Trump-supporting Latinx neighbours as equals anytime soon. We see it in the UK too; no matter how much xenophobic, racist nonsense our revered Home Secretary Priti Patel spouts, a portion of Conservative voters who agree with each and every one of her ideals will still drown her in racial slurs and undermine her position based on nothing other than the colour of her skin.

Though most exit poll data monolithically defines Asian Americans as one singular demographic, catastrophically failing to capture the reality and variety of a continent’s people, such phenomena are not unfamiliar within these communities either. Anti-Black sentiment within the South- and East-Asian

communities is alive and well, and serves to benefit those groups because someone, some unfortunate one, must be at the bottom — or the top would simply not exist.

Perhaps as a result of the 2020 election and its evidentiating Latinx support for Trump, Biden has clearly made an effort to include Latinxs in his administration. In his cabinet we see Miguel Cardona as the new Secretary of Education, Alejandro Mayorkas as Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and Xavier Becerra as Health and Human Services secretary. I hope you will join me in wishing them the greatest success in office. It will be interesting to see whether this will do anything to sway the leanings of Latinx Republicans and Trump-supporters to his side, or whether they will only serve to further polarise the community.

NB: I recognise the problematic nature of utilising Latinx - I do not use it without acknowledgement of its imperialist roots, and my intention is not to erase identities or Chicana-Chicano culture - it merely allows me to be more gender inclusive where I can be. I like Terry Blas's 'Latine', but am not certain it has been as widely used in academic writing, so use the most popular formulation of the word instead. I do not use the term Hispanic, as this refers to Spanish-speaking people or Spanish people, excluding Portuguese speakers and speakers of Latin American Spanish derived languages.

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