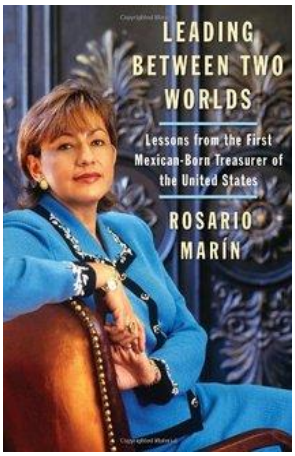
Latinas of the Right: Ethnicity, Assimilation and Twentieth Century Conservatism

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"*Being Latina is who I am and I bring the voice, I believe, of the voiceless"*





"I believe assimilation is the only model that works in a society as diverse as ours. That if each and every group keeps its primary attachment to their ethnic or racial group, its divisive."

In a 1992 C-SPAN interview, Republican icon Linda Chavez stated that as far as diversity was concerned "we need to begin saying it is not your loyalty to your race of your ethnicity that's important, it's your loyalty to the idea of this nation and to that common cultural heritage."[1] A self-proclaimed assimilationist, she argued that a public policy agenda connected to cultural heritage and/or certain racial or ethnic groups failed to meet the needs of a diverse U.S. population. While politicians championed diversity, she encouraged the need to focus more on commonalities. Chavez believed in the importance of getting diverse people to recognize that "they're part of a larger whole."[2] While she proclaimed pride in her heritage, she opposed Latino specific advocacy.

Rosario Marin, a Republican leader who rose to national fame in the early twenty-first century, promoted a different message on identity, race and politics. Marin proudly touted that "being Latina is who I am and I bring the voice, I believe of the voiceless."[3] While she later clarified she represented the broader interests of her constituency, her sense of identity was undoubtedly grounded in her cultural heritage. Both Marin and Chavez were well known conservatives, supporters of Republican administrations—Marin worked for Republican Governor Pete Wilson and Linda Chavez worked for President Reagan's administration. While they were both Republicans and staunch supporters of small government and free market principles, their relationship with ethnicity differed quite drastically. Chavez refused to connect her identity with her politics, while Marin openly discussed her advocacy for U.S. Latinos. The differing viewpoints on ethnicity and politics alluded to a glaringly obvious but often

[1] Linda Chavez, interview by Brian Lamb, *Discussion on Out of the Barrio*, C-SPAN Booknotes, 6 February 1992. In this interview Linda Chavez discussed her new book Out of the Barrio. The interviewer, Brian Lamb, asked her to pretend she was President and to envision how she would convert the policy prescriptions she laid out in her book into reality. The excerpt quoted was part of her response.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Rosario Marin, Latina Lens Interview, Valley PBS 27 February 2009.

disregarded reality: the twenty- first century Latino conservatism was shaped as much by religiosity and commitment to small government, as by racial and ethnic climates. Little attention was paid to the generational distinctions among Latinos, that revealed nuances on a number of issues, especially those related to race and ethnicity.

Historians have offered an array of approaches and explanations for studying women in the conservative movement. While feminists introduced new methods of studying the history of American conservatives by challenging the contemporary literature's focus on white men, very few historians studied conservative women of color, specifically Latinas. Studying non-white female right wing advocates is important to scholarship on conservatism because it highlights the racial, political, and socioeconomic diversity within the U.S. That is, conservative Latinas in many ways challenge the perceived homogeneity of the U.S. Latino community. This research analyzes the political dialogue and controversial national issues centered on race and identity and uncovers how it has complicated conservative Latina identity within the U.S.

Since this research focuses on the identity development of Chavez and Marin, autobiographies, speeches and opinion pieces were especially informative. Autobiographies were essential for they shed light on how each author formed her sense of self, how she viewed the world, and most importantly, how she wanted to be perceived. The speeches and opinion pieces were useful because they revealed Chavez' and Marin's positions on current events. Based on these sources, this paper argues that Chavez and Marin's similar but distinct views of race and identity politics as Latina conservatives are products of intergenerational differences. Linda Chavez's and Rosario Marin's relationship to conservatism was shaped by the historical and political eras of their upbringing. While raised in working-class households, they were part of different Mexican American generations, one which considered assimilation necessary and the other that embraced ethnic heritage.

As public figures, specifically Republican public icons, they were in some way or another forced to grapple with issues of race. Opposition to ethnic and identity politics appear to have affected Chavez's move to the GOP, while the party's emphasis on small government and personal responsibility appealed to Marin as a first-generation immigrant. Both eventually became power brokers for the Republican Party and represented Latinos on issues that polarized and divided the electorate along party lines. Their stories exemplify how generational differences informed Chavez and Marin's policy positions on controversial issues such as Affirmative Action and CA Proposition 187.

In their respective memoirs Linda Chavez and Rosario Marin highlighted their independence and self-sufficiency, which they argued stemmed from the values and work ethic of their upbringing. While they were both raised in working-class households, they were not only a generation apart, but also grew up in two distinct regions of the southwest. Marin was a first generation Mexican immigrant raised in the predominantly Mexican immigrant community of Huntington Park in Southeast Los Angeles in the 1970s. Linda Chavez, on the other hand, was a New Mexican of Mexican descent, brought up in the 1950s and whose family had lived in the U.S. for generations. While these differences influenced how they identified ethnically, the emphasis on hard work in their autobiographies nonetheless grounded their stories within the traditional conservative narrative.

Linda Chavez's Upbringing and the "Assimilationist Mexican American Generation"

Raised in the multicultural neighborhoods of 1950s and 1960s New Mexico and Colorado and a member of the "Mexican American Generation," Linda Chavez considered herself solely American. The children of Mexicans who were repatriated or accused of disloyalty, formed the "Mexican American Generation." They adopted a strategy of emphasizing American heritage at all times in order to combat prejudice.[4] Americanization led to a demand for the political and economic rights associated with first

[4] Carlos K. Blanton, "George I. Sanchez, Ideology and Whiteness in the Making of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, 1930-1960," *The Journal of Southern History* 72 (August 2006): 571.

class citizenship.[5] Chavez's New Mexican heritage therefore further explained the nuances of her ethnic identity. Like the other New Mexicans of her generation, she identified as American and vaguely recalled her community's reference to a "Spanish" heritage. As a New Mexican, her background had a contentious history of race, language and identity that spoke to the state's development in response to U.S. occupation.

As a New Mexican and member of the Mexican American generation, Chavez's ethnic identity was informed by her upbringing and her family history within the U.S. dating back centuries. Linda Chavez was the child of Velma Lou McKenna, a white woman from Wyoming and Rudolph Chavez, from Albuquerque. Her father Rudy was a descendant of powerful colonial families who helped settle New Mexico in the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. New Mexico's relationship with the United States was unique at its offset. The U.S. doubted the loyalty of New Mexicans who had to work to prove they were truly Americans. White Americans doubted their allegiance insisting they were hostile to American ideals.[6] Reacting to racist views that deemed them unfit for citizenship due to their Spanish and Indian blood, New Mexicans embraced Spanish identity as a form of resistance. An emphasis on their Spanish origins disassociated them from darker-complected Mexicans, who were the prime targets of political and economic discrimination. White upper class New Mexicans experienced far less bigotry and prejudice.[7] Spanish heritage therefore distanced New Mexicans from their indigenous Mexican roots and spared them from discrimination. [8]

Rosario Marin's Upbringing and the "Anti-Assimilationist Mexican-American Generation"

In contrast, Marin's trajectory speaks to another historical epoch—the rapid demographic transformation of Los Angeles and the rise of anti-assimilation sentiments among Mexican Americans. The linear model of assimilation, associated with the adaption of turn-of-the-century European immigrants, did not apply to the wave of Latin American and Asian immigrants of the post 1965 era.[9] A movement to embrace ethnic identity, the development of segregated ethnic enclaves after the fall of manufacturing, and the inability of immigrants of color to blend into society to the same degree as European immigrants all compounded to create a new generation of first and second generation immigrants in the latter half of the twentieth century. Marin's ethnic identity was formed by both her conservative upbringing in Mexico and in the post 1960s Southeast Los Angeles enclave of Huntington Park, CA. The decade in which she arrived was also critical on this end. Her family legally immigrated to California a decade prior to the Mexican economic crisis that sparked massive waves of immigration.[10] When her family arrived, the Southern California economy was booming and there were plentiful jobs for immigrants.

A product of the post 1965 immigrant wave, Marin came of age in a predominantly Mexican immigrant community and attributed her success to the values of work ethic and faith. Born and raised in Mexico, she and her family immigrated to-Huntington Park, California in 1972 after her father's employer helped secure visas for the family. Huntington Park was one of eight cities that made up Southeast Los Angeles. In the 1970s its composition shifted from Anglo to Latino—a small percentage of Central

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[5] Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930-1960*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 175-176.
[6] John M. Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish-American Identity in New Mexico, 1880s-1930s*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 1.
[7] Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood*, 4.
[8] Ibid., 8.
[9] Carola Suarez-Orozco, "Commentary" in *Latinos Remaking America*, eds. Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Mariela M. Paez, 304. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.
[10] Martin Valadez Torres, "Indispensable Migrants" in *Latino Los Angeles: Transformation, Communities and Activism*, eds. Enrique C. Ochoa and Gilda L. Ochoa, 33-34. Tucson. The University of Arizona Press, 2005.

Americans and Cubans with an overwhelming Mexican immigrant presence.[11] In response to the perceived chaos in the inner city after the Watts Riots of 1965, the 1970s decline in manufacturing, and the growth of suburbs in Orange County, many Anglos left the region. By 1980, Huntington Park was eighty percent Latino.[12] Soon after, the 1982 Mexican economic crisis created an influx of immigrants, dramatically increasing the Mexican population of Los Angeles and of cities like Huntington Park.[13] While it was a heavily Mexican community at the time of her arrival, she nonetheless faced the culture shock and alienation characteristic of the immigrant experience.

Born and raised in the multicultural neighborhoods of New Mexico and Colorado and as a member of the Mexican American generation, Linda Chavez identified primarily as American. She considered herself an assimilationist and believed attachment to a racial ethnicity was divisive and counterproductive. She believed all immigrants should recognize a common American heritage.[14] As a part of the 1970s immigrant generation, Rosario Marin lived in a neighborhood of southeast Los Angeles during a period of widespread cultural and political pride in Chicano identity. She did not promote assimilation like other conservative members of the GOP. However, she maintained a strong allegiance to conservative values; her ethnic and political identity was influenced by the traditions of a conservative upbringing in Mexico. Chavez had a previous trajectory in politics before committing to the GOP. She turned to the Republican Party when she felt the Democratic Party changed, moving too far to the left. She became critical of the racial quotas the party supported. While at one point a mainstream Democrat, she later found herself on the right fringes of the Democratic Party. Marin, on the other hand became a Republican because she believed the values professed by the 1980s GOP and its leader Ronald Reagan aligned with her views on upward mobility. Opposition to ethnic and identity politics appear to have affected Chavez's move to the GOP, while the party's emphasis on small government and personal responsibility appealed to Marin as a first-generation immigrant.

Chavez and Ethnic Identity

Primarily identifying as American and often feeling disconnected from a Latino ethnic identity, Chavez considered the radical nature of left-wing uprisings like the Chicano movement excessive and counterproductive to the success of Mexican Americans in the U.S. While back in New Mexico, members of her community often used the term "Spanish" to describe themselves, the term actually had little to do with language or surnames. [15] This identification had never previously affected Chavez's sense of self, nor her family's; they considered themselves American. Her father "bristled at the mere mention of the word 'Chicano'" and she personally did not identify with the Mexican American civil rights movement.[16] She acknowledged they addressed some important issues but disagreed with their "tactics or [the movement's] hostility to America."[17] She blamed the social programs of the civil rights era for what she considered a new wave of anti-assimilation. Unlike previous generation of Americans "eager to become American [….][and] fit in" Latinos were instead encouraged by the entitlements of the Civil Rights Era to "maintain their language and culture, their separate identity" in return for minority status and the benefits, Chavez

[11] Myrna Cherkoss Donahue, "Economic Restructuring and Labor Organizing in Southeast Los Angeles, 1935-2001," in *Latino Los Angeles: Transformation, Communities and Activism,* eds. Enrique C. Ochoa and Gilda L. Ochoa, 83-136 (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 83.
[12] Ibid., 96.
[13] Valadez Torres, "Indispensable Migrants," 33.
[14] Linda Chavez, interview by Brian Lamb, *Discussion on Out of the Barrio,* C-SPAN Booknotes, 6 February 1992.
[15] New Mexican Spanish identity was instead forged as a form of resistance to a caste system. Blood purity determined social and civic equality and therefore Mexicans of darker complexion were the most marginalized. Claiming Spanish identity was used to regain command over tenets central to their identity: land, history, and language. Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood*, 10.
[16] Chavez, *An Unlikely Conservative*, 56.
[17] Ibid., 40.

argued, came with it.[18] An examination of the rise of the "Mexican American Generation" reveals a more nuanced portrait of Mexicans' relationship to assimilation. Members of the "Mexicanist Generation" considered themselves Mexicans living abroad and were widely resistant to assimilation. [19] However, to circumvent discrimination that followed World War I and to curb presumptions of disloyalty, Mexicans detached themselves from their Mexican identity and subscribed to Americanization programs. [20]

Marin and Ethnic Identity

Marin's ethnic and conservative identity was formed by her immigrant experience. She openly prided herself in her ethnic heritage. But while she embraced it, she dismissed the perception that her background accounted for the political posts she earned. In a speech delivered for a Forbes forum she openly expressed pride in her identity as a Latina.[21] Throughout her memoir she readily discussed her list of firsts inextricably tied to her ethnic background—First Latina Chair of the State Council on Developmental Disabilities, first Mexican-born immigrant to become treasurer of the U.S. and the first Latina in California to run for a U.S. senate position. She considered herself a role model and cited the responsibility tied to her success, for if she had failed it would "have meant closing the door for someone after me—especially other Latinas."[22] She strived to serve as an example for other young Latinas who, like her, may have encountered familial barriers tied to gendered expectations and financial responsibility.

The different ways in which Chavez and Marin reconciled identity and politics demonstrated how despite shared conservative ideologies, a single posture did not define oppositional political struggles. A member of the Mexican American generation, Chavez advocated against ethnic based coalitions, social programs and identity politics, arguing it alienated Latinos and stalled their progress toward becoming Americans. Marin, on the other hand, a leader in a primarily Democratic, Mexican American and Mexican immigrant community and member of the immigrant generation herself, worked across party lines. In some instances, her GOP affiliation did not detract from her support for ethnic-based issues.

Chavez and Affirmative Action

Chavez was involved in politics on the national scene and was therefore compelled to take hard-right stances on controversial issues related to race and ethnicity like Affirmative Action. She felt Affirmative Action politics fueled the victimization narrative she fought so ardently against throughout her career. She argued the policy was essentially ethnic-based entitlement that posed a danger to the country's shift toward color blindness.[23] Her conservative position garnered notoriety, but also faced scathing criticism. Her enemies, she claimed, were likely to be civil rights groups or leaders who "did not like [her] position on racial preferences."[24] She was not indifferent to the plight of disadvantaged students and did believe they deserved a chance at a college education and good employment opportunities. However, her skepticism against affirmative action programs stemmed from her firm belief that when grades and test scores did not measure up "it would take hard work to make up for years of educational neglect."[25]

Chavez considered Affirmative Action a byproduct of the anti-assimilation generation of Latinos, suggesting they directly capitalized on perpetuating disadvantaged status. She believed Latino leaders

[18] Chavez, *Out of the Barrio,* 5.
[19] Blanton, *Ideology and Whiteness*, 571.
[20] George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 95.
[21] Rosario Marin, "Yo Soy El Poder" (Speech, Foro Forbes, Mujeres Poderosos: Redefiniendo el Poder, July 6, 2015).
[22] Marin, *Leading Between Two Worlds,* 195.
[23] Chavez, *Out of the Barrio*, 170.
[24] Marin, *Leading Between Two Worlds,* 17.
[25] Ibid., 63.

were interested in proving severe group disadvantage to justify their "entitlement to affirmative action programs."[26] She thus believed a resistance to assimilation relegated Latinos to "permanent victim status" by ignoring the substantial socioeconomic progress she considered comparable to previous immigrant groups.[27] She presumed preservation of identity and ethnic enclaves would derail Latino progress and prevent them from assimilating at the rate of other immigrant groups.[28] Her view was that "Hispanics [were] trained in the politics of affirmative action, believing that jobs, advancement, and even political power should be apportioned on the basis of ethnicity."[29] She referred to ethnic politics as an "old and honored tradition in the United States" and a "game" Hispanics played throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.[30] In her view, privileges based on race essentially robbed Latinos of their real political, social and economic power.[31]

Marin and Proposition 187

Throughout her tenure in local politics, Marin focused on working across party lines, in an attempt to ameliorate partisan tension and maintain ethnic ties. Serving as a Republican council member in a Democratic Immigrant city like Huntington Park, California was surely unconventional and wrought with tension.[32] She served in the Huntington Park City Council for seven years, from 1994-2001, including her tenure as mayor from 1999-2000. Rosario Marin's position within Huntington Park's city council and her later appointment within the Wilson administration caused friction between her partisan identity and the policy stances of her community. In a city where the population was over eighty percent Latino in the early 1990s, Marin's Republican partisan identity was at odds with her predominantly Democratic, working class constituency of recent Mexican immigrants.

As a part of the immigrant generation, Marin's Republican affiliation did not stop her from addressing ethnic based issues at odds with her party' platform. Soon into her work as a council member, she faced the turmoil and divisiveness spurred by the 1994, Proposition 187. The initiative, titled "Save Our State," garnered support from a majority of Californians who felt concrete action was needed to curb undocumented immigration.[33] The measure would deny all public services to undocumented immigrants, including public schooling to children. Despite diverging positions within the Latino community, immigrants and Spanish speaking Latinos were more likely than their English-speaking citizen counterparts to oppose the measure.[34] A community whose population consisted of thousands of documented and undocumented immigrants, Huntington Park residents staunchly opposed it and Marin was caught in the crosshair. Wilson's early focus on the influx of undocumented immigration helped him gain traction in his campaign.[35] Marin expressed opposition primarily on the grounds that it would deny schooling for children and medical care for those with disabilities. While she initially attempted to dismiss Proposition 187 merely as bad policy, in the closing chapters of her autobiography she revealed a more emotional dismissal. Despite feeling initially torn, she confessed, "she could not live with [herself]"

[26] Chavez, *Out of the Barrio*, 5.
[27] Ibid., 6.
[28] Ibid., 6.
[29] Ibid., 169.
[30] Ibid., 166.
[31] Ibid., 170.
[32] Reagan's values of personal responsibility, small government, low taxes and strong national defense influenced her decision to support the Republican party shortly after she was naturalized in 1984.
[33] Lina Y. Newton, "Why Some Latinos Supported Proposition 187: Testing Economic Threat and Cultural Identity Hypotheses," *Social Science Quarterly* 81 (March 2000): 180.
[34] Newton, "Why Some Latinos Supported Proposition," 190.

[35] Andrew Wroe, *The Republican Party and Immigration Politics: From Proposition 187 to George W. Bush* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 69.

if she continued to hide how she "truly felt about the proposition that would deny services to thousands of undocumented immigrants." [36] She expressed how nervous she felt when standing up to her fellow Republican colleagues, as she not only voiced discontent with the policy, but condemned the emotionally charged commercials that urged Americans to defund education for undocumented children. She then described her obligation to confront the issue, despite potentially "losing the esteem of [her] Republican colleagues."[37] She eventually supported the governor's reelection but opposed 187.

Through the discussion of the Proposition 187 quagmire, Marin attempted to portray herself as a politician, who acted on principle rather than partisan or racial lines. In several instances, she cited her willingness to go against the tide, even if that meant losing friends and gaining enemies. She spoke of conviction and honesty in several occasions throughout her autobiography, mentioning how she based her decisions on what she deemed to be right, even if it was unpopular. Specifically, she recounted a time when she was offered a secure political position if she agreed to oppose Wilson and support the Democrats.[38] In this case, and in several others, she emphasized that her decisions as a leader were not influenced by whether they would have expanded her career opportunities, but were instead guided by doing what was right.[39] Marin's dilemma speaks to the wider issues of how identity politics, partisanship, and pragmatism shaped the decisions and political identities of conservative figures of color.

Conclusion: Generational Distinctions and the Manifestation of a Latino Heritage

While both Chavez and Marin championed conservative issues, their ethnic identities proved inseparable from politics as they were called on to defend the GOP's positions on a series of polarizing issues. That is, despite their different stances on minority politics, they were homogenized, ironically, on the basis of their ethnic identity. Their generational differences affected how they came to be conservatives but, most importantly, how they conceived of their Latino heritage. A native New Mexican, Chavez hailed from a unique history of Mexican origin peoples and was a member of the Mexican American generation, which considered itself American. Marin, on the other hand, was part of the 1970s immigrant generation who arrived in the U.S. at a time of promising economic opportunity and pride in Chicano identity. Despite her commitment to the Republican Party, she remained an advocate of her Latino constituency and often expressed pride in her Latina identity; she felt privileged to make inroads for her community. In sum, the clash between conservative counterrevolution and the rise of ethnic-based civil rights struggles placed a series of ethnic political issues like Affirmative Action, Proposition 187 and the politics of assimilation at the forefront of national conversations of identity politics. The political trajectories of Linda Chavez and Rosario Marin, epitomized success stories of the GOP. Marin was a poor immigrant from Mexico who arrived speaking no English, and Chavez was raised in a poor family in New Mexico, whose successful political career was a result of a series of serendipitous events. Their narratives represented a thread of twentieth century American conservative rhetoric, where race, class and ethnicity were important insofar as they proved that they were not impediments to success.

[36] Marin, *Leading Between Two Worlds,* 209.
[37] Ibid, 210.
[38] Marin, *Leading Between Two Worlds, 194.*
[39] Ibid., 194.