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Laurel E. Bennett
Gettysburg College

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Framing of Latinx Vote Choice and Voter Registration

Abstract

This work investigates media framing done by CNN between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. Although Latinx voters remain underrepresented and under researched, they have the ability to highly influence elections. Specifically, CNN uses the sleeping giant frame, the need for Latinx voter registration as a frame, and the importance of Latinx voter mobilization as a frame in the 2020 presidential election more prominently than in the 2016 presidential election upon consideration of Latinx vote choice and voter turnout.

Keywords

Latinx, Voting, CNN, Media

Disciplines

American Politics | Broadcast and Video Studies | Latin American Studies | Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments

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Introduction

In both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Latinx voters played an influential role in altering the final results, particularly as a result of using their voice in key swing states. Latinx voters have been receiving increased media coverage in more recent years with politics due to their potential decisiveness when it ultimately comes to election results. Because of this, it is interesting to consider how prominent news sources portrayed Latinx voters between the two election cycles. In turn, this introduces the following research question: how does CNN frame Latinx vote choice and voter turnout differently between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections? This topic is highly important due to the sheer fact that Latinx voters are the biggest ethnic group in the United States growing in numbers, culminating in them potentially having the ability to greatly shape presidential elections (Arvizu and Garcia 1996). That said, Latinx voters remain underrepresented and under researched when it comes to elections despite their numbers within the U.S., which then makes it interesting to see how a major news source portrays them differently over two cycles (Arvizu and Garcia 1996). With this topic, it is crucial to acknowledge that Latinx political participation rates are lower than other ethnic groups, and this can be connected to the framing done by CNN as well in terms of turnout (Michelson 2005). As a result, the framing represented by CNN could vary between the election cycles due to increased personal canvassing for instance (Michelson 2005). Given the overall importance and potential strong influence of Latinx voters, I found that CNN uses the sleeping giant frame, the need for Latinx voter registration as a frame, and the importance of Latinx voter mobilization as a frame

in the 2020 presidential election more prominently than in the 2016 presidential election upon consideration of Latinx vote choice and voter turnout.

Literature Review

When reflecting on the framing done by CNN between the 2016 and 2020 elections, it should be noted that CNN is considered to be a liberal cable news source, which could then alter the framing they present of the group (Nie et al 2010). The attitudes of the hosts of CNN are said to appeal to self-identified liberals and progressives more than other groups such as conservatives, and this results in the framing of this source potentially being different from a source such as FOX News (Nie et al 2010). To add, it should be emphasized that CNN themselves created the three frames through their reporting, since the news source worked to contextualize them and shine light on the importance. These frames became evident through their reports of Latinx voters in relation to the candidates, policies, and location of residence with battleground states amongst other factors.

Although Latinx voters do not have as much research completed on them as other voter groups, it is established that both Republican and Democratic candidates have sought to receive the Latinx vote, which is interesting when reflecting on CNN's framing. In the 2016 election, President Trump ultimately received greater Latinx support than initially anticipated at 28%, which was an improvement from Romney in 2012 (Corral and Leal 2020). This was surprising to lots of people given President Trump's rhetoric, leading many to believe that he was not fighting to receive the Latinx vote (Corral and Leal 2020). Similar can be said for the Republican candidate in the 2020 election in terms of President Trump not truly striving to win over Latinx voters (Garza 2021). However, President Trump did win over some Latinx voters in 2020 due to

his policies, not necessarily his personality (Garza 2021). Shifting back to the 2016 election, it is intriguing to put President Trump's relationship to Latinx voters with Hillary Clinton's fight. Efforts were made to reach undecided voters, and there was more of a focus on the Get Out to Vote movement (Larrosa-Fuentes 2017). In 2020, Joe Biden fought for the Latinx vote through Spanish advertisements as well as holding virtual meetings with Latinx public figures (Romero Marin 2021).

To add, traditional Latinx voting behavior is key when considering this topic, as throughout the 2010s, it was believed that more Latinx voters would result in a Democratic majority (Soto-Vasquez 2018). However, Latinx voters are not necessarily a reliable voting bloc when it comes to only supporting one party, but factors such as the economy, religion, and jobs can influence voters (Soto-Vasquez 2018). In that regard, Republican candidates are able to appeal to voters in a way that Democrats cannot. As Latinx voters continue to rise, the tide could keep on turning when it comes to the preferred candidate with a sense of unpredictability.

Methods

I collected my data by utilizing CNN News' official website, as CNN is a large mainstream news source that provides continual coverage of elections, along with reports on Latinx voters. It was useful for finding information due to the audio and live TV features as well that the website highlights (CNN 2022). I classified my data into two different categories prior to looking at the three frames: information about Latinx voters in the 2016 election cycle and then in the 2020 election cycle. When classifying, it was important to ensure that the information was not about the midterm elections. I considered an article to be about Latinx vote choice and voter turnout when the article specifically noted Latinx voters in the article title or Latinx was

prominent in the preview of the article. For example, a piece titled “Are Latino Voters The Key?” would be classified as applicable to the topic (CNN 2016). The three frames were selected due to the fact that all three influence the ability to alter election results, but they still are distinct from each other. More specifically, voter registration is vastly different from voter mobilization to actually vote, and both of these framings are different from the emerging, unreleased power associated with sleeping giants if they come together to take action. It was determined if an article centers around a particular frame in a similar way to if it was about Latinx vote choice and voter turnout in either 2016 or 2020. I looked for mention of the framing in either the title of the article or in the article preview.

Theory and Hypothesis

Given the research of others, I expect to find that Latinx voters will be framed by CNN in a more influential manner when it comes to their vote choice and voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election than the 2016 presidential election upon consideration of the sleeping giant frame, the need for Latinx voter registration as a frame, and the importance of Latinx voter mobilization as a frame. Researchers have pushed the idea that in the 2020 election, Latinx voters could have an immense influence on the results if they actually awoke so to speak, got registered, and ultimately voted given their growing numbers in the country.

Findings for the Sleeping Giant Frame

Traditionally speaking, Latinx voters have been considered a sleeping giant, and CNN pushes this framing in both 2016 and 2020, but this framing is more prevalent in the latter election in terms of Latinx being able to make change. CNN emphasized that the sleeping giants for both elections had the ability to shape the outcome, and this first began coming to light in the

2016 election (CNN 2012). This is crucial because Latinx have the capability to greatly shape elections, and the term sleeping giant comes from being untapped so to speak (Gonzalez-Sobrinio 2020). Interestingly, the term sleeping giant is traditionally used with Latinx voters, not African-Americans, even though African-Americans also have the ability to alter the course of an election (Gonzalez-Sobrinio 2020). With the 2016 election, CNN explained how Latinos being considered sleeping giants resulted in them having the power to influence the presidential election (Hurtado and Martinez 2016). Although the news source did frame the sleeping giants in 2016 as being able to select the next president, an air of uncertainty remained prominent due to Latinx not actually getting registered and then voting (Hurtado and Martinez 2016). As part of this frame, CNN reiterated a lack of unity between Latinx voters, something that is necessary for the sleeping giant to awake so to speak (Blanco 2016). Maintaining parallels to 2016, CNN in 2020 found similar results while keeping with the idea of Latinos being sleeping giants, but they developed a sense of unity to largely boost their desired candidate (Morales 2020). It has been argued that the 2016 presidential election created more of a divide between voters due to President Trump, but in 2020, the heightened unity despite their diversity as a group helped the sleeping giants be more influential (Morales 2020). The sleeping giant frame was stronger in the more recent election due to voters being able to unify as a result of their biculturalism, bilingualism, media consumption, and historical narrative that shifted the sleeping giants more strongly to the Democratic party than in the previous presidential election (Morales 2020). Even though this framing was stronger in 2020 than in 2016 as a result of unification, the level of unpredictability within the sleeping giants remains steady with all election cycles (Merica and Krieg 2020).

Findings for the Importance of the Latinx Voter Registration Frame

Interestingly, CNN framed the importance of Latinx voter registration in an extremely similar manner between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections by continually reiterating the large influence on the entire country that Latinx could have as a result of getting registered to vote. That said, this framing was stronger and represented more importantly in the more recent election, as voter registration increased in the midst of protests over racial injustice and police brutality (Janfaza 2020). Specifically, the news source in both 2016 and 2020 emphasized a number of swing states where Latinx need to get registered to have a greater emphasis on the election. Research has been completed on the shift in Latinx voter registration from the 2016 to the 2020 election, and in key states such as Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Texas, there was a percent increase in voter registration between the two cycles (Bergad and Miranda 2021). Additionally, this ties into the concept of a Latinx voting bloc, which began receiving more coverage from Obama's election onwards, especially 2016 and after (Anguiano 2016). It is necessary to emphasize that Latinx historically do not have the same levels of civic engagement as other groups (Anguiano 2016). Prior to 2016 for example, 17.4% of the US population was Latinx, but only 11.4% were registered to vote (Anguiano 2016). Even though the news source frames Latinx voter registration as being crucial in both elections, the presence of a Latinx voting bloc was more prevalent in 2020 in comparison to 2016, particularly with men (Bradner et al 2020).

In 2016, CNN highlighted Puerto Ricans, as they especially were capable of forming a voting bloc if enough people got registered in the first place (CNN 2016). This correlates with this news source's portrayal of more Latinx people overall including Puerto Ricans, especially in

North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia registering to vote (CNN 2016). This framing gets paralleled and strengthened in the 2020 election through their reporting, giving a similar impression to the power of voter registration. Shifting to solely the 2020 election, CNN continued to discuss the importance of Latinx voter registration in key states to shape the results. The news source emphasized Latinx voter registration in the states of Texas, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, and California through an organization called Vote Latino (Tatum 2020). This organization worked in the 2020 election to register one million Latinx voters across the country with an overall budget of seven million dollars (Tatum 2020). Although CNN began highlighting this organization after the 2016 election, the framing remains similar due to having ongoing goals with Latinx voter registration.

It is intriguing to see the way CNN shows voter registration in relationship to the presidential candidates for both election cycles as well. Another way in which the framing is interesting is due to Latinx voter registration increasing when people feel a strong connection to a candidate, regardless of partisanship (Contorno 2022). Especially in 2020 though, this started becoming more prevalent due to Latinx wanting to get registered to show support for either candidate in a tumultuous and divisive election (Contorno 2022).

Findings for the Importance of Latinx Voter Mobilization Frame

Civic engagement of Latinx voters extended beyond simply registering to vote in the two election cycles, and voter mobilization gets focused on by CNN as a way to impact battleground states in both 2016 and 2020. More evidently though in the 2020 election cycle, the framing has an increased focus on the candidates' messaging and how that makes Latinx voters more likely

to mobilize. Therefore, CNN's overall framing of voter mobilization is more prominent in the recent election.

When specifically focusing on the 2016 election cycle, it was found that minority voters such as Latinos were not included in certain mobilization strategies, therefore making them less likely to mobilize in comparison to white voters (Ramirez et al 2018). Even when considering battleground states in this election, minority voters were not encouraged to get out to vote in the same way as whites (Ramirez et al 2018). It is interesting to then compare this to the messaging shown by CNN, which gives the impression that Latinx mobilization is more simplistic and a positive process overall for this election. Next, to reflect on both the 2016 and 2020 election cycles, considering partisan battles in these elections has been said to be key when looking at Latinx mobilization (Stokes-Brown 2020). This connects to the messaging given by two candidates with vastly different opinions on many things, which helped drive some Latinx to vote (Stokes-Brown 2020). These points made by scholars are applicable to the reporting of CNN with a focus on battleground states and the heightened focus on messaging in the recent presidential election, making mobilization more front of mind in 2020.

CNN notes in 2016 that it is worth considering that not as many eligible Latinx voters actually mobilize to vote after getting registered in comparison to other groups (Diaz 2016). That said, more Latinx voters mobilized in this election than usual, especially in important states such as Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina (Diaz 2016). This mobilization especially was seen in the 2016 Presidential election as a result of more early voting done by Latinx registered voters (Diaz 2016). Additionally, in 2020, CNN said that the process of actually getting registered Latinx people across the country to vote was heightened by campaign outreach, particularly by

President Trump in states like Florida (Morales 2020). Messaging from the presidential candidates in 2020 had a greater impact on Latinx voter registration in terms of what resonated with them than in the prior election (Morales 2020). Some Latinx voters appreciated Biden's approach towards presidency with respect to wanting to be everyone's president, fracking, and unions amongst other platforms which helped those supporting these viewpoints mobilize in 2020 (Macaya et al 2020). On the other hand, Trump's messaging in 2020 also offered appeals to Latinx voters which encouraged them to mobilize. Trump resonated with some voters in terms of his economic viewpoints such as being against socialism, as well as lowering crime rates, which also encouraged mobilization (Vazquez 2020). Even though there were some variations in the messaging presented by the candidates, this was applicable for both President Trump as well as President Biden, as the candidates resonated with Latinx voters, getting them out and mobilizing. Therefore, this ties back to the concept that Latinx voters are not a reliable voting bloc when it comes to partisanship as a result of messaging.

Discussion and Conclusion

For the sleeping giant frame, the Latinx voter registration frame, and the Latinx voter mobilization frame, CNN highlights the prevalence and importance of these voters in both the 2016 and 2020 election cycles. However, in the 2020 election cycle, CNN framed these three aspects of Latinx voters as being even more pressing. This introduces the question of why this was the case, which ultimately can be tied into the divisiveness of the 2020 election. While there is no doubt that the 2016 election was tumultuous for Latinx voters amongst everyone, a group as large in numbers as Latinx truly had the ability to shape the outcome of the election as a result of actually getting registered and then voting. CNN was pushing for the sleeping giants to awake

and use their voices more in the election, particularly in key battleground states. Because Latinx voters typically register and then consequently vote at lower numbers than other groups, CNN appears to have been encouraging Latinx citizens to make the 2020 election different from past ones through framing these issues in a more pressing manner. This is not to undermine the framing completed by CNN though with the 2016 election, as there were many similarities in terms of pushing voters to make a difference with their vote. However, the framing arguably had a greater sense of urgency in 2020 than in 2016. All things considered, CNN's portrayal of the sleeping giants, the importance of Latinx voter registration, and the importance of Latinx voter mobilization is highly interesting in both the 2016 and 2020 election due to the fact that this group is underrepresented and under researched but still highly powerful when it comes to potentially altering the course of an election.

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