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WHAT HISPANICS SAID ABOUT BIDEN AND TRUMP *In Spanish and on Twitter*

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The "Hispanic" or "Latino" Vote (the terms will be used interchangeably here) became news after the 2020 presidential election. That's because it changed from 2016 and made a difference in two key states. Definitive data breaking down the vote has yet to arrive, and exit poll data compiled on election day has raised methodological concerns due to the pandemic and the correspondingly heavy voting which occurred before election day. But it is clear that Hispanic votes were decisive in Arizona, which went Democratic at the presidential level for the first time in 24 years, and Florida, where strong Trump showings in Miami-Dade and Osceola Counties helped put the Sunshine State in the Republican column. There were also striking developments in Nevada, with record turnouts by Hispanics, and Texas, where Trump posted big gains in Harris County (Houston) and along the Mexican border.

At the Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM) we focus on how campaigns operate and communicate. Our flagship research project, known by the acronym PEORIA (for Public Echoes Of Rhetoric in America) examines online conversations, especially on Twitter, for evidence of how candidate messages are received by social media users, who vary in the degree that they "echo" or share those messages within and across their personal networks. Given the signs of a crucial Hispanic vote in 2020, we analyzed Spanish language Twitter dialogues about the presidential candidates, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, in Arizona, Florida, Nevada, Texas, and the entire United States during the last eight weeks of the campaign. We sought to understand

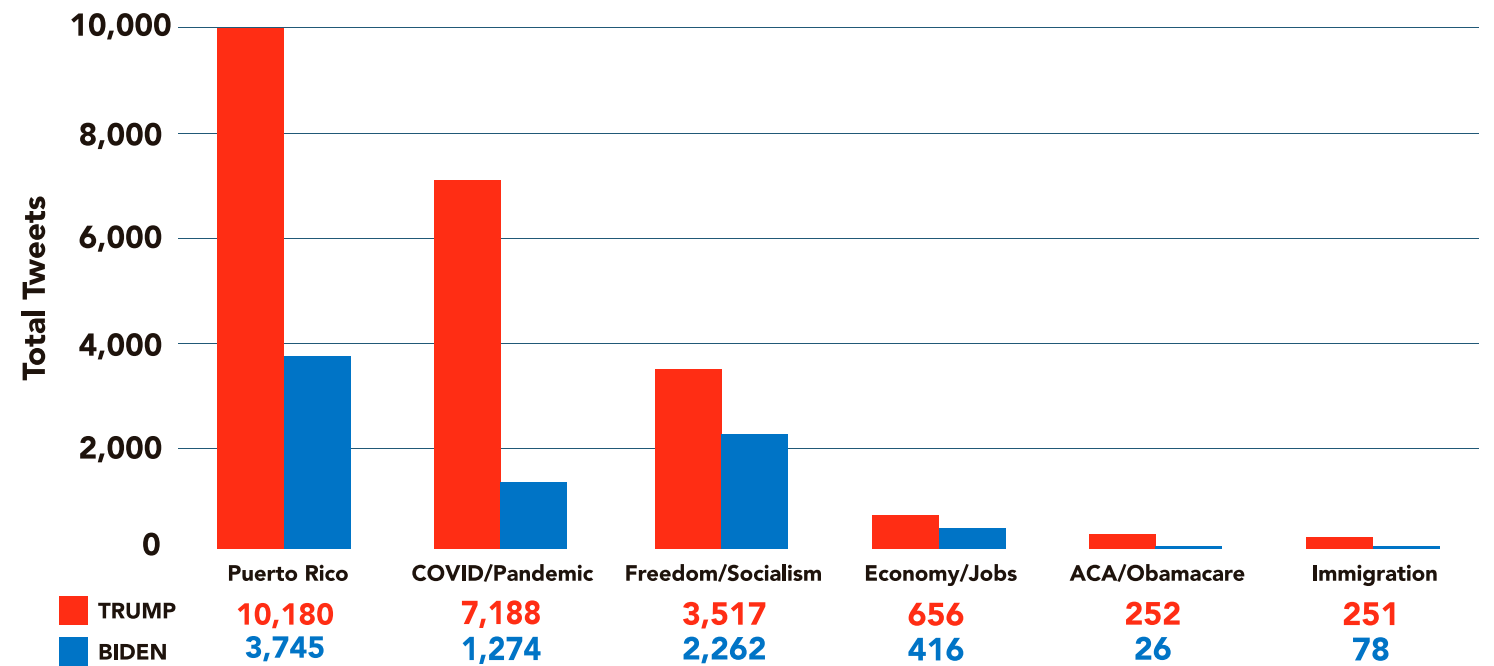
which issue appeals and personal characterizations resonated among Spanish speakers. What does the message pattern tell us about Hispanic involvement in American politics at the presidential level? Our findings support the idea that campaigning on the notion that a uniform "Hispanic" or "Latino" voting bloc exists across the nation makes less sense with each succeeding campaign and election cycle.

The Conversational Agenda

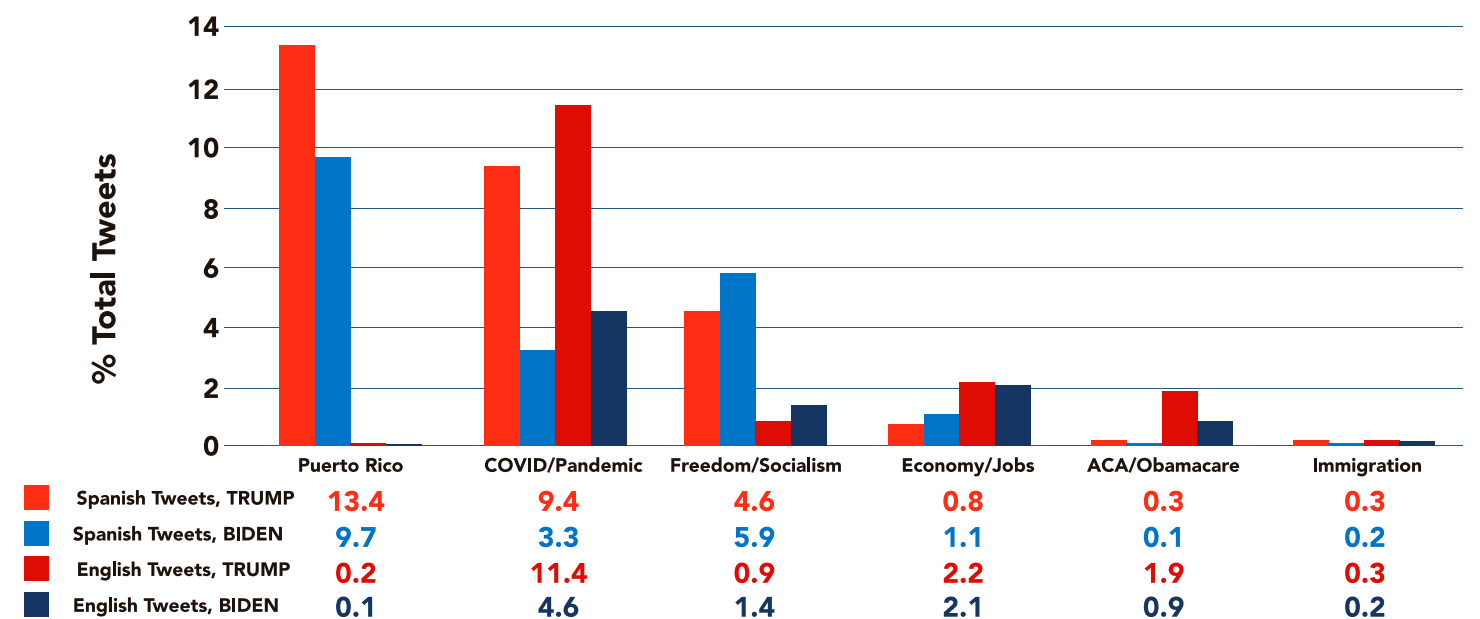
Spanish-language tweeters talking about Biden and Trump addressed a variety of issues. As the table below shows, tweets with Trump's name outnumbered those with Biden's name by a 2 to 1 margin. That's not surprising given the president's constant and prominent presence on Twitter. What is surprising, however, is that there were hardly any tweets about immigration or health care, both major issues in American politics since Trump burst onto the scene in 2015. One might presume that immigration would be of special interest to Spanish-language users of Twitter. But that was not the case. The most popular topics were Puerto Rico, the pandemic, and freedom and socialism. We sampled the conversation about each of them.

The next chart compares Spanish and English language tweets as percentages of the totals. It shows that Puerto Rico and freedom and socialism were more popular topics in Spanish than English, and about the same in both languages regarding the pandemic. This reinforces the need to examine those Spanish language conversations.

Topics Associated with the Presidential Candidates Names in U.S. Spanish-Language Twitter from Labor Day (Sep. 7) until Election Day (Nov. 3)



Percent of Overall Tweets on this Topic compared to all Tweets on Candidate from Labor Day to Election Day



¹The total number of tweets, barely more than 100,000, is minuscule by social media standards, yet large enough to disclose patterns and guide us to specific tweet samples for qualitative analysis.

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico, the U.S. territory one thousand miles off the coast of Florida, was a popular topic on Spanish-language political Twitter during the general presidential election campaign. The Biden campaign commemorated the third anniversary of the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Maria on September 20:

“ **Jill and I join with every American who is mourning the immense loss of Puerto Rico, and we honor the strength and resilience that has sustained many during the difficult years.** ”
@JoeBiden, 9/20

This empathetic statement did not attack President Trump for the Administration’s controversial response to the disaster. Another post that day did:

“ **On Hurricane Maria, like COVID19, Trump never acted. You will never have to doubt @JoeBiden’s leadership** ”
@TeamJoe, 9/20

The Biden campaign also issued a Spanish-language version of its plan to help the island’s economic recovery.

Tweets on behalf of Trump begged to differ. October 6: The Biden campaign also issued a Spanish-language version of its plan to help the island’s economic recovery.

Tweets on behalf of Trump begged to differ. October 6:

“ **Hurricane Maria struck three years ago. Donald Trump was the only one on the phone. Joe Biden was still asleep** ”
@USAPerfectUnion, 10/6

That, of course, was an allusion to a Trump epithet for Biden as “Sleepy Joe.” Earlier, on September 22, one of numerous tweets by @EquipoTrump

(Trump’s Spanish-language team), stressing Trump’s economic assistance to the island drew another contrast between the candidates:

“ **For 47 years Joe Biden has ignored Puerto Rico and his failed policies destroyed the island’s economy. The President @realDonaldTrump works to rebuild, encourage investment and bring pharmaceutical companies back to Puerto Rico** ”
@EquipoTrump @KevinORomero, 9/22

Another offered a personal and localized testimonial:

“ **In the years that I have lived in Florida, since I left my beloved island of Puerto Rico in the 1990s, I have never seen high levels of economic progress for Hispanics as I have witnessed with President Donald Trump** ”

The author was Republican strategist Luis Hernandez, a columnist for the Puerto Rican newspaper El Nuevo Dia, and these words were redistributed by @RNCLatinos.

For context, it should be noted that Florida’s Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and the state’s two Republican U.S. Senators Marco Rubio and Rick Scott have campaigned for years on behalf of statehood for Puerto Rico. The Governor of Puerto Rico endorsed Trump on October 6 and this also got a lot of attention on Twitter.

The Pandemic

Spanish-language tweets about Trump and the pandemic did not focus on the administration’s management of the pandemic and the president’s public comments thereof. Instead, they talked about his contracting COVID-19. Spanish-language tweeters expressed sympathy toward him, and admiration for his strength in recovering so robustly, a sign of presidential strength. There was heavy circulation in the Texas-only tweets

for influencer Raul Brindis, a host on Univision’s Uforia, the largest U.S. radio broadcaster catering to Hispanics, when he retweeted a news item on

“ **President Donald Trump reappeared last night in front of his supporters in Florida dancing the YMCA. ‘I am immune and I feel so powerful that I would kiss everyone.** ”
@raulbrindis, 10/13

Freedom and Socialism

In Florida the Trump campaign emphasized the efforts by the administration to oppose the dictatorial regime in Venezuela. While only 80,000 emigres from Venezuela live in the state --mainly in a neighborhood of the Miami suburb Doral known as Doralzuela-- the nation exports oil to Cuba (700,000 Floridians), and refugees have flooded Columbia (160,000).³ Many Cuban emigres also detested President Obama (and thus, by extension, his Vice-President Joe Biden) for having visited with the island’s dictator Raul Castro in a move toward detente.

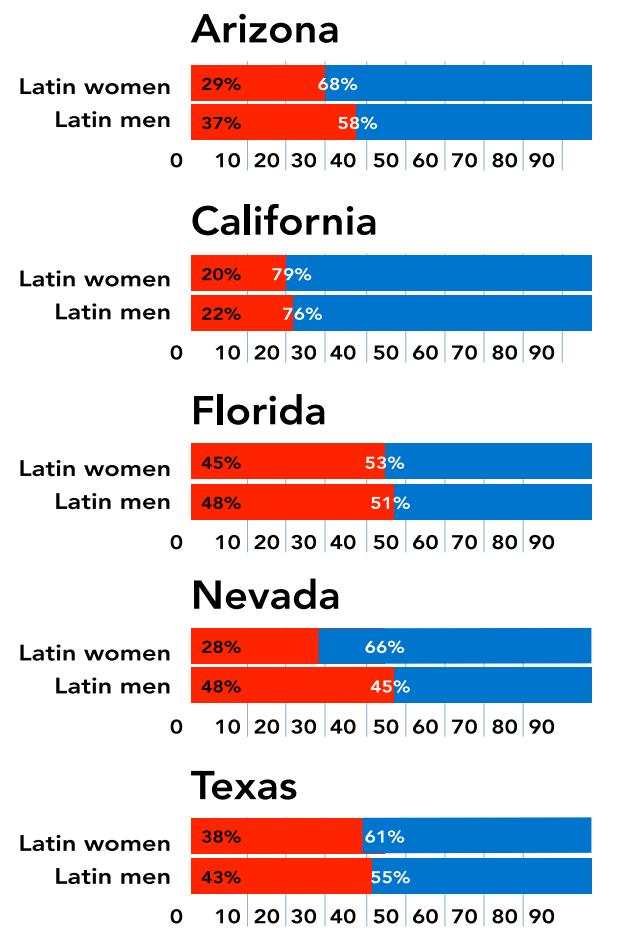
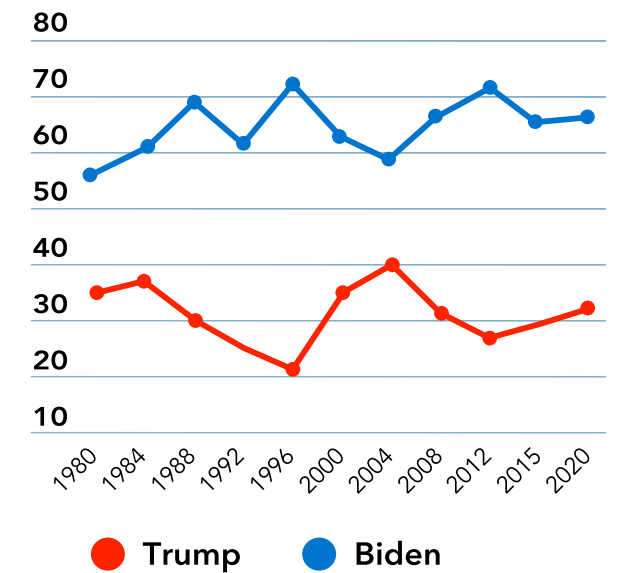
On Twitter Biden’s son Hunter became a symbol of socialism and corruption, linked in seemingly shady deals with Venezuela’s dictator Nicolas Maduro, Colombian ex-president Juan Manuel Santos, and the regimes in China and Russia for good measure. Hunter Biden had already been a notorious figure thanks to the scandalous phone call between President Trump and Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky which had led to Trump’s impeachment.

On October 22, 2020, the day of a presidential debate, Ernesto Ackerman, president of a group called Independent Venezuelan-American citizens, relied on Twitter to tell Hispanics what to listen for:

³Jonathan Blitzer, “So Goes the Nation,” The New Yorker, September 23, 2019.

The National Latino Vote over Time

Latino voter’s strongest showing for the Republican presidential candidate were in 2004 and 1984, and for the Democratic one in 1996 and 2012



Source: CNBC, CNN, NBC, New York Times

“ I think that tonight President Trump is going to demand that Biden explain what is happening with Hunter Biden and himself. ”
Quote by Ernesto Ackerman, original tweet by @cmrondon, 10/11

A week earlier another Spanish tweet read:

“ Donald Trump demanded that Biden reveal ‘immediately’ the alleged crime of influence peddling of his son Hunter ”
@AmerHoy, 10/15

On October 23 a third tweet dubbed the Bidens “the most corrupt family in American history.”

An October 24 tweet defending Biden called these charges “fake news,” an ironic reversal of a favorite Trump phrase. But the charges were circulating.

Thanks partly to social media activity it became a social stigma to support Biden within the Florida Venezuelan community.⁴ On September 6 conservative podcaster Jon Gabriel, the top influencer in our Arizona tweet set by reach of posts, retweeted a post by another conservative voice, Annika H. Rothstein, which claimed “the Venezuelan United Socialist Party (the party of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro) is endorsing Joe Biden.” That was a stretch; the party media outlet had carried a pro-Biden article. Numerous commenters on the thread objected, but the word linkage of “Biden” and “socialism” was amplified.

Conclusion

These conversational excerpts and statistics support the argument that state political histories and candidate message priorities figure into the choices of Hispanic voters. So, relatedly, do countries of origin. And, just as with the entire electorate, important differences exist between generations, gender, and urban/suburban/rural location of residence.⁵

⁴Lautaro Grinspan, “Accused of socialism and communism, Venezuelan-Americans say supporting Biden carries stigma,” Miami Herald, September 30, 2020.

In Florida, the Puerto Rico and socialism/freedom topics found audiences ready to share what they heard. But the online case for Trump was not as influential in Arizona. Arizona politics has been heavily inflected for years by grassroots organizations fighting S.B. 1070, the “show us your papers” state law. In 2011, these organizations powered a recall of the bill’s chief sponsor, State Senator Russell Pearce; five years later, they helped defeat Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, an ardent enforcer of that law.

Meanwhile, in Nevada union politics provided Biden with important Latino support. As Stephania Taladrid wrote: “In Las Vegas and Reno, the Culinary Union, which represents sixty thousand workers, including porters, bellhops, and casino cooks, mounted its largest political effort in its eighty-five-year history, knocking on half a million doors.”⁶ In Texas, ground zero for border control controversies, there was hardly any online conversation about immigration. Other analysts have noted that Tejanos living alongside the Rio Grande appreciated the job opportunities that border control created.

Given these variations, it’s no wonder that political consultancies specializing in Latino outreach are proliferating. There are many constituencies under the umbrella term “Hispanic voter.” Their ranks are growing: in 2008 they comprised less than 10% of eligible voters, but by 2020 they were at 13%. Many of them are young and, not coincidentally, many are active on social media.

And it’s also not a surprise, therefore, that President-Elect Biden has nominated four Hispanics to Cabinet-level positions: Xavier Becerra (Health and Human Services), Miguel Cardona (Education), Isabel Guzman (Small Business Administration), and Alejandro Mayorkas (Homeland Security).

⁵Separate PEORIA research investigating the characteristics of heavy political tweeters on the Democratic side shows that white men above the age of 65 engage in that activity more than their counterparts, although this does not account for those exposed to such tweets, including those who pass them along to peers in their social network.

⁶Stephania Taladrid, “Deconstructing the 2020 Latino Vote,” The New Yorker, December 31, 2020.

Michael Cornfield

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Cornfield directs the PEORIA (Public Echoes Of Rhetoric in America) Project, a research initiative developing qualitative and quantitative methods to extract political intelligence from social media data. Cornfield exclusively teaches the on-campus introductory course in the Political Management Program, Fundamentals of Political Management, and supervises the thesis and independent study courses.

Cornfield is the author of two books: *Politics Moves Online: Campaigning and the Internet* (The Century Foundation, 2004) and *The Civic Web: Online Politics and Democratic Values*, co-edited with David M. Anderson (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

Cornfield comments on American politics frequently in the news media, especially overseas outlets seeking adept summaries for international audiences. He served as expert “presenter” (commentator) for the BBC World Service radio network during the 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections. He regularly reviews political science books for *The Guardian*.

Cornfield received his B.A. from Pomona College and his Ph.D. from Harvard University. Before coming to The George Washington University, he taught at the University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary. Cornfield also served as a Senior Research Consultant to the Pew Internet & American Life Project. He lives with his wife Kathryn Mimberg and son Matthew in Arlington, Virginia.

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