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Introduction

Propelled by an enthusiastic introduction, Janet Murguía walked across the stage to a standing ovation. Born and raised in Kansas City to Mexican immigrants, Murguía was set to deliver her annual presidential address as the figurehead of the National Council of La Raza (today known as UnidosUS), a leading national Latino civil rights organization. This former deputy assistant to President Clinton took the podium before hundreds of affiliates, corporate sponsors, and political operatives attending the organization's annual conference.

When Murguía delivered her speech in July 2011, the country was still reeling from the Great Recession, the Democratic Party had lost control of the House of Representatives, Tea Party insurgencies were erupting throughout the country, and Republican state governments were aggressively pursuing draconian immigration laws. President Barack Obama, who had spoken to a mix of cheers and boos at the conference the day before, had not only failed to secure comprehensive immigration reform in his first term but also had overseen an unprecedented spike in deportations.

Murguía did not shy away from discussing these and other challenges in her speech. Yet her remarks exuded much optimism about the future:

I know as sure as I am standing before you today that the future of the Latino community is bright. I know that as a community we will be stronger and that our voices will be heard and that our potential will be realized. I know that one day soon, we will be treated as full American citizens, our presence in communities will be welcomed, and our

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contributions to this great country at every level of society will be acknowledged.

With idealized allusions to “American history,” Murguía claimed, without elaboration, that this soon-to-come future was rooted in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution. But more than in the past, it was reflected in the then newly released results of the 2010 census. Slowing her pace to emphasize each word, she continued: “One—out—of—every—six—Americans—is—Latino.” Then, just as pointedly, she continued, “Put simply, we—are—America’s—future.” The assertion, she added, was “not a brag; it’s a fact.”

Latinos, she voiced with confidence, did not have to—and could not afford to—passively wait for that bright future to dawn. Rather, they had to assert their capacity to *accelerate* its arrival. “How that future unfolds, how quickly it is realized, is in a large way up to us. We can no longer look to politicians in either party to produce it for us.” Applause rumbled through the ballroom as she raised her voice: “It is ours to achieve!” Murguía drove the point further. “It’s our work to finish. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to wait two or three generations to see that future. I don’t want to wait for the *inevitable* demographic tide to bring our community to shore. I want to embrace that future now.”

Murguía cautioned that some opposed the future foretold by the census. Needing little specificity for this audience, she spoke of “those” who instead wanted “to turn the clock back” to “when Latinos weren’t so numerous, a time when we didn’t speak out and we didn’t matter.” This advocate was adamant that she had no intention of going backward. She was determined instead to go forward:

I want to turn the clock *ahead* to a time when every Latino eligible to vote, votes. I want to turn the clock ahead to a time when Latino and Latina senators, judges, police chiefs, mayors, governors, and school board members are the rule and not the exception. I want to turn the clock ahead to a time when all Americans understand and appreciate the contributions Latinos make and the role we play in this great nation.

But how could the proverbial “clock” be turned ahead? What would accelerate the arrival of this projected, or prophesized, future? If Murguía’s speech was a guide, voter participation was paramount. Her words were meant to energize the organization’s affiliates to invest in voter registration and outreach for the upcoming 2012 presidential election. Awakening the

so-called sleeping giant, she and her colleagues claimed, would transform the political landscape. But that was not all. The speech also exercised—yet did not name—another potential catalyst. Interfacing temporal metaphors and statistical figures, she encouraged those in attendance to envision an idyllic Latino-propelled demographic future. This future was, at once, monumental, inevitable, and auspicious. Far from unique, the basic contours of her utopian forecast have been commonplace among national Latino civil rights organizations and leaders for decades. It is part of a longstanding tradition of *population politics*. Far from being a sidebar, this tradition and its tactical repertoire are present in all major aspects of its advocacy, including its public relations, voter operations, and legislative campaigns. And yet we know little about how these civil rights advocates have wielded demographic numbers and narratives to affect political change and how this relates to, and is shaped by, wider contention about ethnoracial demographic change.¹

Figures of the Future examines the contemporary population politics of national Latino civil rights advocacy. Like their predecessors, advocates hold an organizing conviction that is rarely stated outright: achieving or least approximating the political power that tomorrow seemingly promises rests, to a great extent, on how the “Latino demographic” and its growth are publicly perceived and received. To this end, I argue, they have employed a set of temporal tactics to accelerate the *when* of Latino political power. This effort must be understood against the backdrop of public discourses that have framed this population as a population of the future, one perpetually on the rise.

Focused primarily on the second decade of the new century, across the politically polarized Obama and Trump presidencies, I followed these figures as they sought, and struggled, to render the “second largest” ethnoracial population both politically potent *and* socially palatable in the public imagination. This has meant contesting entrenched tropes of Latino threat and passivity, which in practice has often seen such tropes replaced with sanitized, no less essentialist, representations. Based on several years of qualitative and ethnographic fieldwork, I further show how, among these actors, projected demographic futures operate, variously and viscerally, as objects of aspiration, sources of frustration, and weapons for struggle. This book ultimately finds that imagining a bright Latino future is much easier than accelerating it.

Whereas scholars have been largely concerned with the causes and potential consequences of ethnoracial population trends, this book centers on the meanings ascribed to these trends and the political struggles in which

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they are being wielded. Moreover, it goes beyond the almost exclusive focus on the population politics of white—typically white supremacist—political projects. Without question, such analyses are important, and increasingly so. But these are not the only agents of population politics. Political actors from minoritized groups are also bringing ethnoracial futures to bear on the present, in the process shaping contemporary politics and identities. It is important to take stock of how these projects and movements have also envisioned, mobilized, and pursued ethnoracial futures. Without doing so, we compromise our ability to fully understand the political present here and elsewhere.

The Flood

The United States is in the midst of a demographic data downpour. It began decades ago and will likely continue beyond the year 2050. This is not the first time that numbers and narratives about ethnoracial population trends have *flooded* U.S. public life.² The current rains have been, above all, about the purported growth of “nonwhite” populations and the decline of the “white” population, what has been popularly, albeit inexact, labeled the “browning of America.” National Latino civil rights organizations are but one source of precipitation among many. The Census Bureau is another—if not the major—source. Not only does it supply much of the “raw” data and official taxonomies others use to produce population projections, it also generates its own authoritative but by no means uncontested demographic forecasts. In its latest projections, census officials claim that the country is becoming “more racially and ethnically pluralistic.”³ Such phrasing softens the sharper language it has employed in previous announcements about a coming “majority-minority” future.⁴ Downstream from this leading agent of population politics, we find a diverse collection of entities that have advanced their own interpretations about demographic change.⁵

The news media plays an influential role, as both a contributor to and conduit of population politics. As scholars have shown, the press actively thematizes rather than passively reports on population dynamics.⁶ Headlines such as “U.S. Steps Closer to a Future Where Minorities Are the Majority,” “Fewer Births than Deaths among Whites in Majority of U.S. States,” and “Hispanic Population Reaches New High of Nearly 60 Million” regularly shout from newspaper pages.⁷ New technologies online have transformed static maps and charts into sites where individuals can intimately and interactively engage with demographic trends.⁸ Together, this stream

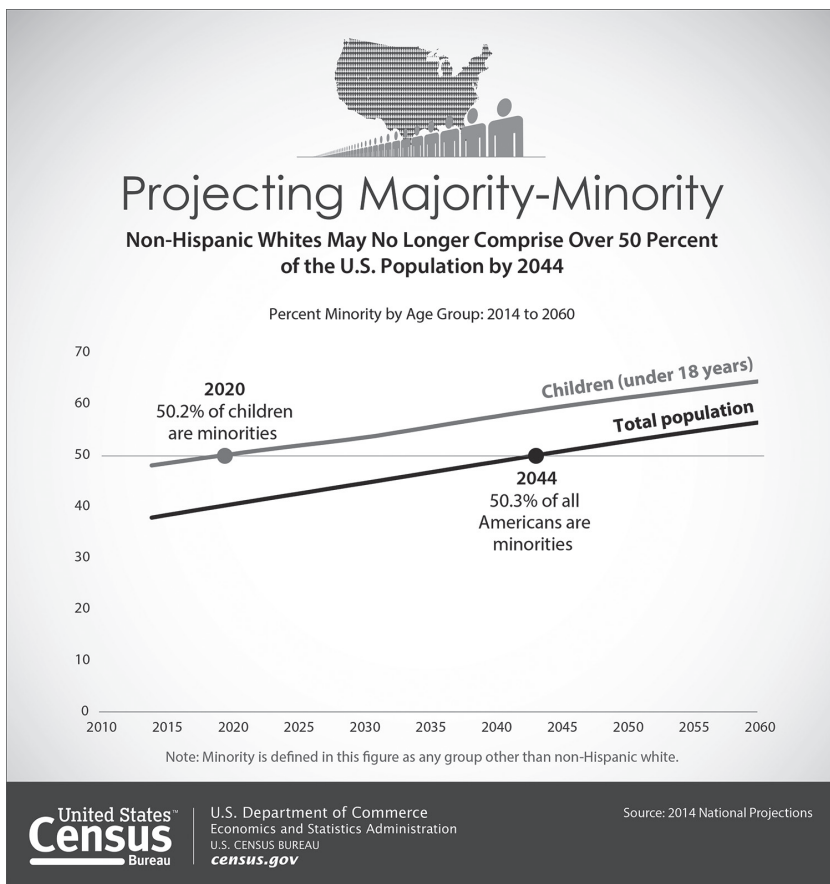


FIGURE 0.1. “Projecting Majority-Minority” infographic. United States Census Bureau, March 2015.

of texts, photographs, and data visualizations renders demographic change “newsworthy.”⁹

In debates over ethnoracial demographics, academic scholars and researchers are not mere bystanders who at most produce disinterested, scientific knowledge. Instead, in offering interpretations of demographic trends and their potential societal impacts, they contribute to the inundation. Along with academic-based work, think tanks, “fact tanks,” and policy institutes have had much to say about how demographic dynamics should be understood. These include the Brookings Institution, Center for Immigration Studies, Cato Institute, Pew Research Center, and Center for American Progress, among others.

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Finally, political, civic, and movement leaders from across the ideological spectrum have further saturated public life with demographic statistics and stories. Take, for example, former Republican representative Steve King’s white supremacist tweet in 2017 stating that “culture and demographics are our destiny. We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”¹⁰ With less anxiety and more ambivalence, then president Barack Obama, in his farewell address, described “demographic change” as both one of the factors testing the country’s security, prosperity, and democracy and “something to embrace” rather than fear. Social movement leaders and activists have also engaged in population politics. As progressive groups have made celebratory proclamations of an emerging “new majority,” white supremacist groups have decried “white genocide” and used it to justify violence.

National Latino civil rights groups swim in these turbulent waters. But, as Murguía’s speech illustrates, they have also contributed to this deluge of demographic data and discourse—a deluge that has made it difficult, perhaps impossible, for any of us to remain unconcerned, untouched, or unnerved by ethnoracial population trends. Indeed, there is widespread consensus that—for better or worse—the United States will *look* and *feel* dramatically different in the decades to come. At the same time, and not at all coincidentally, there is also widespread disagreement and division about what this all means and how this projected future should be met.

Contrary to the undertow of contemporary population discourse, neither consensus nor dissensus about the country’s ethnoracial future arises outright from the “demographics” in question. These demographics do not dictate which population trends matter, which deserve our attention, and how we should respond to them. Nor do they determine how populations are classified and how trends are studied. Yet these are precisely the powers that are often ascribed to demography. However, this pervasive misattribution is one of the most potent outcomes of population politics. Thus to investigate these waters, as this book endeavors, demands considerable vigilance, lest we be unwittingly overtaken by its waves and currents.

Demographic Naturalism

When writing about the “state,” the preeminent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once professed, “If it is so easy to say easy things about this object, that is precisely because we are in a certain sense penetrated by the very thing we have to study.”¹¹ Bourdieu could have just as well been referring to demography. To study population politics, whether of national Latino civil

rights organizations or of some other political project, we must confront demographic naturalism, the dominant attitude toward demography.¹² We must also, and with equal fervor, confront racial essentialism, with which demographic thinking is often closely linked. Only doing so will prepare us to examine—rather than to parrot—the political struggles through which ethnoracial demographics are constituted and contested.

Demographic naturalism holds three major assumptions. First, it views populations as “real,” natural, and actually existing entities. In politics, populations are regularly conflated with peoples and attributed collective agency and coherence. Second, it conceives of population trends as akin to natural forces with the potential to affect social and political life unmediated by modes of perception. For instance, demographic anxieties and fears are regularly depicted as automatic, seemingly unavoidable, outcomes of population dynamics rather than as sentiments of political cultivation. Third, it believes that demographic knowledge—as a product of science—more or less reflects or approximates said demographic realities.

I depart from each of these assumptions. Demographic populations are not what they seem, at least in a straightforward sense. They do not exist “out there,” as basic and obvious features of the social world. As the sociologist Bruce Curtis writes, “Population is not an observable object but a way of organizing social observations.”¹³ Similarly, population trends cannot be studied, known, or managed apart from the political relations, social imaginaries, and statistical techniques and conventions through which we constitute populations. Additionally, the apparent power of demographic trends rests to a great extent on interpretation—and it must be stressed that interpretations do not grow naturally from trends. Furthermore, demographic knowledge is a “political science.”¹⁴ This should not be taken to mean that demographic statistics are necessarily and reducibly partisan, corrupt, or ideological. Rather, it is to recognize, as William Alonso and Paul Starr wrote long ago, that “political judgements are implicit in the choice of what to measure, how to measure it, how often to measure it, and how to present and interpret the results.”¹⁵

Naturalistic assumptions pervade public discussions about ethnoracial population change. Claims are routinely made about “racial” populations that presume their actual existence and treat racial statistics as plainly objective. But such claims not only express naturalized assumptions about demography, they also rest on and further reify assumptions about race. Accordingly, it is not enough to problematize demographic naturalism without also addressing its relationship to racial conceptualization.

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Sociologist Ann Morning defines “racial conceptualization” as “working models of what race is, how it operates, and why it matters.”¹⁶ Despite the social constructionist critique, racial essentialism remains prevalent.¹⁷ “Racial groups” are often seen as different on putatively biological and cultural grounds.¹⁸ This is evident in demographic discourse, where it is common to encounter expressions that attribute, subtly or not, particular traits and interests to specific populations. As Susanne Schultz writes, “Demographic rationalities tend to ‘essentialize’ social relations by ascribing fixed characteristics or properties to specific population groups and by introducing reductionist and reifying forms of analysis.”¹⁹ For example, the Asian American population has often been characterized as almost innately intelligent and respectful to elders. The Latino population has been regularly described as almost inescapably passive and religious. Such stereotypes are relational; for some to be seen as family oriented or prone to crime, others must be seen as not, at least implicitly.

Yet even when population-specific attributions are absent, a deeper assumption about the nature of race itself is often present. What makes a population a *racial* population, as opposed to another type of population, say, an “ethnic” one? This question is rarely asked in public discourse because the answer is seen as self-evident. Left unquestioned, it is often presumed that the racialness of a population inheres in the population itself, that is, it is a racial population because its constituent members purportedly belong to a race. This tautology does not necessarily wither when challenges to specific essentialist claims are raised. What must be asserted vigorously is that there is nothing inherent about individuals, peoples, or groups that makes them “racial” or be seen as “racial” by others. Race does not rest in “the eye of the beholder or on the body of the objectified.”²⁰

Building on the contributions of political theorist Barnor Hesse and others, I instead conceive of race as a modern colonial practice of classification and constitution anchored in the ideological and material division between Europeanness and non-Europeanness.²¹ It is, above all, a political relation, one that “registers the state of colonial hostilities” at a given time and space.²² The concept of population has been one of the prime idioms through which colonially constituted notions of race have been naturalized and normalized. Indeed, demographic knowledge emerged, in part, as a form of racial knowledge. As such, this knowledge exhibits what the philosopher David Theo Goldberg has described as a “dual movement.” On the one hand, it has “parasitically” appropriated the assumptions, techniques, and credibility of scientific knowledge; and on the other, race has been a

foundational object and motivation for the development of scientific fields, including demography.²³ Moreover, the concept of race has survived critique on the back of the seemingly benign, impartial, and objective notion of population. Thus we must account for rather than take for granted the preeminently political processes and practices through which peoples are variously racialized or ethnicized *as* populations.

At this point, it is necessary to note that the problem of essentialism and naturalism cannot be exclusively charged to “public demography,” or what has been more dismissively labeled “garbled demography.”²⁴ Academic researchers are no less liable for ignoring or taking for granted the political conditions and imaginative scaffolds on which demographic knowledge rests.²⁵ Further, as demographers and other social scientists have historically pioneered and partaken in population politics, the line between “public” and “academic” demography can be quite blurred. Although this book focuses on the former, the challenge is the same: to examine the struggles, conventions, and histories implicated in the construction and communication of demographic knowledge.

Population Politics

Many scholars have explored the relationship between politics and demography.²⁶ Writing in 1971, the political scientist Myron Weiner laid out three components for the study of what he termed “political demography.”²⁷ The first component focused on the “study of the size, composition, and distribution of population in relation to both government and politics.” Said more plainly, this research sought to understand how demographic processes affect political systems.²⁸ The second component addressed what Weiner described as the “political determinants of population change,” or how governments have shaped population dynamics. Research on what scholars have called “demographic engineering” has contributed to this line of inquiry.²⁹ The third component concerned “knowledge and attitudes that people and their governments have toward population issues.” Research in this vein has endeavored to study how demography is publicly perceived and to what effect. Examples include work on “innumeracy” and experimental research on views of ethnoracial demographic change.³⁰

Of the three components, the last one is the closest to the line of inquiry taken here. However, perceptions about demographic trends, and what emotions they inspire, are neither an inevitable response to demography nor entirely explainable based on individual characteristics, such as

socioeconomic status, racial identification, or geographic location. For this we need an account of efforts undertaken—successfully or not—to construct populations and cultivate how they should be publicly understood and engaged.

Drawing on past scholarship, we can distinguish between two phases of population politics. The first phase pertains to efforts to influence the production of demographic knowledge. Spurred in large part by Foucault's writings on governmentality and biopolitics, scholars have excavated the origins of demographic knowledge and the field of demography.³¹ More directly, for present purposes, has been work on the creation of demographic statistics through national censuses. This scholarship has shown that population politics occurs most visibly, and often most intensely, over the categories used to construct "official" populations.³² There are countless examples of actors lobbying for specific categories: white U.S. census officials calling for the removal of any categorical distinctions among any individuals with "black blood" in the early twentieth century; members of the "Other Backward Classes" demanding full caste enumeration in the 2011 Indian census; and French scholars and activists petitioning for the inclusion of racial categories in its national census, to name a few.³³ Such population politics do more than determine what populations exist and do not exist; they also define them, at least for official purposes. The U.S. government designates "Hispanic" as an ethnic category. In Brazil, *pardo* is officially defined as different from the category *preto*. Again, there is nothing inherent about the individuals and peoples said to belong to these categories that justifies these or any other conceptions. Both are the result of histories of population politics. All these decisions influence population counts.³⁴ For example, as Richard Alba has argued, the choice of the U.S. Census Bureau to count individuals that report "multiracial" parentage as nonwhite decreases the overall size of the "White" population and accelerates the projected arrival of a "majority-minority" future.³⁵ Although made in the heat of past negotiations and contestations, decisions tend to cool over time, increasingly appearing neutral and necessary.³⁶ Yet this neither erases the impact of these decisions nor how it sets the stage for the second phase.³⁷

Once demographic knowledge is produced, actors—who may or may not have been involved with the earlier phase—begin to wield population statistics. At this point, such knowledge may become objects of struggles over how populations and population trends are to be interpreted and projected to relevant publics. What does it mean that a given population is growing or decreasing? How should we prepare for the future apparently disclosed in

the data? Who will benefit from demographic change, and who will suffer? Although comparatively less documented, past scholarship offers numerous examples of this phase: mid-twentieth-century Israeli demographers mobilizing projections of Palestinian population growth to urge Zionist officials to adopt policies to increase Jewish reproduction; Latin American elites using demographic projections to communicate “national progress” to their international counterparts in the nineteenth century; white supremacists citing population statistics as proof of “white replacement” in the early twenty-first century.³⁸ Despite their differences, such projects often contribute—sometimes by intention—to what scholars have termed “demographization,” or how “social conflicts and problems” become “interpreted as demographic conflicts or problems and within which demographic or population policies are highlighted as solutions.”³⁹ In racialized social systems, this typically entails the racialization of demography, whereby demographic processes (e.g., birth, mortality, and migration) come to be imagined, and engaged as “racial” phenomena.

This scholarship provides a foundation on which I build an analytic scaffold to further study and theorize population politics. It has three intersecting elements that I will detail below, in turn. Readers anxious to get to the case of national Latino civil rights advocacy may skip ahead.

Analytic Scaffold

TEMPORALITY

Actors conduct population politics with the expressed aim to shape how demographic time and temporalities are experienced and perceived. It is therefore necessary to consult works that have examined and theorized the temporal dimensions of social and political life. Informed by this work, I recognize that our representations and embodied sense of time are neither universal nor constant. Although individuals may, through practices of “timework,” manage and modulate for themselves the duration, sequencing, and allocation of time, among other things, I am concerned with the *temporal tactics* employed by political projects.⁴⁰

In the scholarly record, I find two major types of temporal tactics. The first targets *temporal experience*. E. P. Thompson’s classic essay “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” addresses this type. In it, Thompson describes how British capitalists, employing incentives, coercive measures, and technical devices, especially clocks, not only rendered

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workers compliant but also transformed their phenomenological sense of time. In his “tempography” of an Argentinian welfare office, Javier Auyero shows that street-level bureaucrats exercised power over citizens through imposed and arbitrary waiting.⁴¹ Such “durational time” operates at different scales, from the time it takes to receive social services to the timeframes that regulate when citizens can vote or immigrants can naturalize.⁴² In racialized societies, such as the United States, durational time often closely intersects with “racial time.”⁴³ Disproportionately monitored and policed in public spaces, Raahsan Mahadeo writes, Black and Native American youth rarely have time to feel at peace.⁴⁴ In their own ways, these and other works confirm that temporal experience is not only a social phenomenon but a political one, shaped through particular exercises of and resistances to power.⁴⁵

The second type of temporal tactic targets instead *temporal imaginaries*. Past scholarship suggests a number of ways. Foundationally, political actors and institutions can designate what counts as the “past,” “present,” and “future.” They can also delineate the temporal boundaries of particular events, influencing, for example, what people take as the birth of the nation or the end of a military conflict. Moreover, political actors may draw connections across time. In her examination of French commemorations of the abolition of slavery, Crystal Fleming shows that some social movements deliberately sought to link the transatlantic slave trade to current racial inequality.⁴⁶ On the contrary, narratives of racial progress communicate, more or less starkly, a disjuncture between a racist past and post-racial presents and futures.⁴⁷ Recent research on nationalist projects and “invented traditions” suggests that such temporal tactics have often depended on material culture and objects.⁴⁸

Key for population politics is futurity, which has received far less attention than the past within sociology.⁴⁹ Elaborating a contemporary “sociology of the future,” a growing body of work breaks with the tendency to treat imagined futures as a domain of speculation rather than as a topic of theoretical and empirical investigation.⁵⁰ This work coincides with work on expectation, anticipation, preparedness, and temporal multiplicity in science and technology studies.⁵¹ These works have produced a number of conceptual tools to assist the analysis of imagined demographic futures. Ann Mische, for example, has outlined several dimensions of what she calls “projectivity.”⁵² These dimensions encourage researchers to answer a range of questions about the “future” under analysis, such as, does it extend into the short, medium, or long term? Is it fixed or flexible? Detailed or vague? To what extent does human action (or inaction) determine the future? Mike Michael

proposes other dimensions, including what he labels “speed,” whether the movement toward the future is seen as fast or slow, or what he terms “valency,” whether the future is imagined as positive or negative, utopian or dystopian.⁵³ These and other dimensions will prove valuable as we proceed.

QUANTIFICATION

Demographic futures are often anchored in population statistics and statistical projections.⁵⁴ To deepen what we know about population politics requires adopting an unconventional attitude toward statistics, one that recognizes that statistics—like the populations they help construct—do not objectively reflect or approximate reality.⁵⁵ This does not mean, however, that “realist” attitudes should be dismissed. To the contrary, they should be taken seriously, and their formation and consequences examined. A number of scholars have done precisely this, uncovering some of the historical, organizational, and cultural factors that have generated widespread “trust in numbers.”⁵⁶ While important, this line of inquiry is not enough for the task at hand: to understand the sociopolitical and cultural life of demographic statistics as tools of population politics. As such, the objective is neither to prove nor disprove the factness of demographic data, nor to adjudicate “good” from “bad data.”⁵⁷ Over the past few decades a vibrant and growing disciplinary and interdisciplinary body of research on quantification has generated useful insights for this enterprise.⁵⁸

First, scholars have foregrounded the politics of quantification, specifically in relation to modern statecraft. Given the centrality of censuses to contemporary population politics, this move is vital. From this vantage point, statistics are understood as “an inherently political and administrative knowledge.”⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, for instance, argued that this new political science enabled what he described as the “governmentalization of the state,” a mode of power oriented, above all, to the control, management, and welfare of “populations.”⁶⁰ Statistics—in the words of James Scott—endowed elites and bureaucrats to “see like a state.” Through censuses and other knowledge-gathering techniques (e.g., cadastral maps, civil registries, and passports), heterogeneous people, places, and things were simplified, homogenized, and ultimately rendered “legible.”⁶¹ Official racial classification and quantification represents one of the ways that peoples were made legible for rule. The history of “racial legibility,” especially since the mid-twentieth century, reveals that statistics have been used not only as instruments of control but also as weapons of critique and contestation.⁶²

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Second, recent works have focused on not only the politics of quantification but also its powers. Several terms have been used to express a foundational provocation: statistics and numbers are world-making rather than world-representing instruments. Labels such as *performativity* and *reactivity* offer resonant ways to capture how numerical data can shape social life and even create new forms of sociality. In the words of the philosopher of science Ian Hacking, “The systematic collection of data about people has . . . profoundly transformed what we choose to do, who we try to be, and what we think of ourselves.”⁶³ Empirical cases abound. Opinion polls helped create an “American public” and normalize particular, and often essentialist and restrictive, notions of Americanness.⁶⁴ Censuses and other quantifying techniques have fomented the formation of new collectivities and the transformation of old ones.⁶⁵ Statistics have influenced prevailing conceptions of democracy and democratic citizenship.⁶⁶ Such statistical effects, however, elevate the need to reflect on the ethics of quantification, the potentials, limits, and excesses that working with numbers entails.⁶⁷

Third and finally, I draw on scholars who have explored the meaning and emotive potency of numbers. This work approaches statistics as multivalent rather than singular. The same statistic may be taken to mean, depending on context and perspective, that a population is strong or weak. Numbers may be seen as insignificant or as emblematic, collective representations, what Martin de Santos has labeled “fact-totems.”⁶⁸ Take, for example, the power of the stylized figure of the 1 percent, as a symbol of the hyperconcentration of wealth.⁶⁹ A major part of the politics of numbers is efforts to charge and impose them with meaning. This extends from the process of production to the process of circulation. But, as this scholarship suggests, this is a fraught process as actors cannot control outright the interpretations and meanings given by others.

EMOTIONS

As we will see, population politics cannot be properly studied without an eye to emotions and affects.⁷⁰ Demographic numbers, for instance, can inspire hope and anxiety, excitement and boredom.⁷¹ Among U.S. Jewish leaders, anthropologist Michal Kravel-Tovi has found that numbers and practices of counting the Jewish population have elicited a wide range of “affective positions,” including ambivalence and hostility.⁷² Traditionally, however, political sociologists and students of social movements have narrowly conceived of politics as a cognitive enterprise. This stems at least in part as a

response to early behaviorist accounts that framed social movements as irrational.⁷³ But this has begun to change.

Importantly, some recent scholarship has emphasized the role of emotions in politics. These extend far beyond anger and fear. For example, Deborah Gould intimately narrates how activists from the radical AIDS activist group Act Up expressed and managed feelings of sadness, pain, and pleasure.⁷⁴ Writing about imagined futures, Arjun Appadurai comments that our visions about tomorrow are “shot through with affect and with sensation,” capable of producing “awe, vertigo, excitement, disorientation.”⁷⁵ These accounts urge us to consider actors engaged in population politics as embodied and emotionally complex agents, who are led not only by “instrumental” goals. Furthermore, it helps us recognize that goals such as political power and recognition are themselves affectively charged.

Some works have provided means to move beyond individualist or internalist accounts of emotions. In her influential work, Sara Ahmed has proposed the notion of “affective economies.” Instead of conceptualizing emotions as “psychological dispositions,” Ahmed argues for the “need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”⁷⁶ Said differently, she trains our attention on what emotions do. Building on this conception, it is necessary to attend to the ways that political projects—often intentionally—seek to transform affective economies. This point is important, as population politics are in the business of “sticking” particular emotions to particular populations and trends. Indeed, without attending to emotions, we cannot understand what scholars have called *demographobia*.⁷⁷ Political projects may thus be both objects and orchestrators of affective economies. Consider, for example, sociologist Hiro Saito’s analysis of national commemorations of Hiroshima. Saito argues that these commemorations were not meant to simply present facts about the U.S. nuclear bombing of Japan and its effects. Instead, they were designed to generate a collective sense of trauma, one meant to generate “sympathy and solidarity” with the victims of the atomic bombing.⁷⁸ In the case of population politics, we must further consider how political projects *racialize* emotional economies.⁷⁹ Ahmed has, for instance, examined how hate and fear circulate through narratives about immigrants and mixed-race couples. In all cases, however, political actors cannot entirely determine or constrain what emotions are unleashed by particular discourses or representations, or even how political actors themselves are emotionally moved in the process.

National Latino Civil Rights Advocacy

Equipped with conceptual tools and sensibilities harvested from the literatures discussed above, I turn my attention to the case of population politics at the center of this book. National Latino civil rights advocacy organizations are part of the broader landscape of contemporary Latino/a/x politics. One aspect that distinguishes national advocates from most elements of this landscape is their explicit desire, untenable as it may be, to advocate for the “Latino community” as a whole. No matter the location of their headquarters or the majority of their staff, they are preeminently focused on the “national” political scene. In this scene, they interface, in some cases regularly and in others episodically, with state agencies, elected officials, courts, think tanks, academics, media, philanthropy, corporations, social movements, and other advocacy organizations. With a few exceptions, the vast majority of national Latino civil rights organizations were born during or after the period that sociologist John Skrentny has dubbed the “Minority Rights’ Revolution” and as such are part of the “explosion” of advocacy organizations that has occurred since the 1960s.⁸⁰

In 1991 the major national Latino civil rights organizations and leaders established the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA).⁸¹ Its mission calls for “unity among Latinos around the country to provide the Hispanic community with greater visibility and a clearer, stronger influence in our country’s affairs. NHLA brings together Hispanic leaders to establish policy priorities that address, and raise public awareness of, the major issues affecting the Latino community and the nation as a whole.” Building on increased collaboration for the 2008 election and the 2010 census, plus an influx of new leadership, the coalition has expanded its influence and membership to over forty-five organizations. Although these organizations still compete at times for resources and recognition, there has been a concerted—even if sometimes inconsistent—effort to build a united front.

Herein I largely focus on NHLA’s most visible and arguably most influential members. These include the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), UnidosUS (formerly known as the National Council of La Raza), the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund (NALEO-EF), the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), Mi Familia Vota (MFV), and Voto Latino. LULAC, UnidosUS/NCLR, NALEO-EF, and MALDEF are “legacy” organizations that have anchored national Latino advocacy for decades. Mi Familia Vota and Voto Latino—as their names indicate—emerged as civic engagement and

voter mobilization projects in the 2000s. They are among the newest members of the coalition.

National Latino civil rights organizations are “professionalized” and officially nonpartisan organizations.⁸² In an influential essay, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald distinguished “professional social movements” from classic models based on several features: the former were led by full-time leaders, largely externally funded, generally possessed a “paper membership,” assumed the role of spokesperson for a given constituency, and sought to influence policy for the benefit of that constituency.⁸³ Each of these characteristics applies to the majority of the above organizations.⁸⁴ They are led and mostly staffed by full-time advocates. Their work rests on government, philanthropic, and corporate funds. They are, as a result, comparatively better funded than their grassroots counterparts (although most have comparatively smaller budgets than many business or professional lobby groups).⁸⁵ With the exception of LULAC and NALEO, most are nonmembership advocacy organizations.⁸⁶ Furthermore, all speak on behalf of the “Latino community” and advocate for policies that will improve the welfare and status of this constituency.

Latino advocacy groups have influenced U.S. public policy and politics. For example, they played a major role in the inclusion of a language amendment to the Voting Rights Act in 1975. Central to the story I tell, these political groups were also instrumental to the development of the statistical category “Hispanic” and its eventual integration into the official ethnic and racial classification system of the United States. They have carried out successful naturalization campaigns and challenged gerrymandered districts, voter suppression tactics, and anti-immigrant laws. Most recently, MALDEF, for example, was part of a successful lawsuit against the Donald Trump administration’s proposed inclusion of a citizenship question on the 2020 census. Yet these organizations and their efforts have not gone without critique. They have been labeled “reformist” and “accommodationist” and criticized for being out of touch with everyday struggles and social movements. Serious concerns have been raised about the influence of philanthropic and corporate funding on their policy agendas, a process that political scientist Megan Ming Francis had termed “movement capture.”⁸⁷ As discussed later on, advocates themselves have expressed—sometimes publicly—similar reservations and concerns about the state of national Latino civil rights.

The scholarly record on these organizations and NHLA, as a whole, is rather sparse. What research exists has almost entirely attended to the origins of these entities and their activity during the Civil Rights era.⁸⁸ With

the exceptions of works such as Deirdre Martinez's *Who Speaks for Hispanics* and David Rodríguez's *Latino National Political Coalitions*, we have limited knowledge of the actual workings and composition of national Latino civil rights today.⁸⁹ Like advocacy groups generally, it is difficult to define and demarcate these organizations and their efforts. This is the case because these entities not only mediate relations between different constituencies and governmental and nongovernmental institutions but also are multifaceted.⁹⁰ Their efforts, on the whole, involve legislative and legal advocacy, public relations, civic engagement, and research and analysis.

But what concerns me most is a particular aspect of their tactical repertoire. Accordingly, this book does not offer—nor aim to offer—an exhaustive portrait of this political network. Rather, it focuses specifically on how these agents of population politics have constructed, communicated, and contested ideas about the ethnoracial population positioned at the eye of the demographic storm.

The Latino Demographic

A nonstop torrent of knowledge production over the past forty years has helped make the “Latino demographic” a major figure in the contemporary U.S. ethnoracial imaginary. Before this period, this figure did not exist. As noted earlier and expanded in the next chapter, national Latino civil rights groups are partially responsible for the emergence of this population in public life. The predecessors of today's advocates pressured the federal government to produce knowledge about what would become, through chance and compromise, the “Hispanic” population. The current attention placed on this population cannot be disentangled from the broader demographic deluge of which it is part.

Public discourse and representations have, above all, emphasized the *future* impact of the Latino population, routinely described as one of the “fastest-growing” populations. The future anchors what anthropologists Leo Chávez and Arlene Dávila have called, respectively, “Latino threat” and “Latino spin.”⁹¹ On the one hand, the Latino population has been narrated as a serious danger to the future of the country. On the other hand, some have claimed that it promises to strengthen the country and revive its ethos. However inflected, the future animates both claims about the population. Every general election cycle as of late has been inundated with talk about the “Latino vote,” a constituency some say holds the fate of the major parties in its giant hands. Report after report of market research has announced

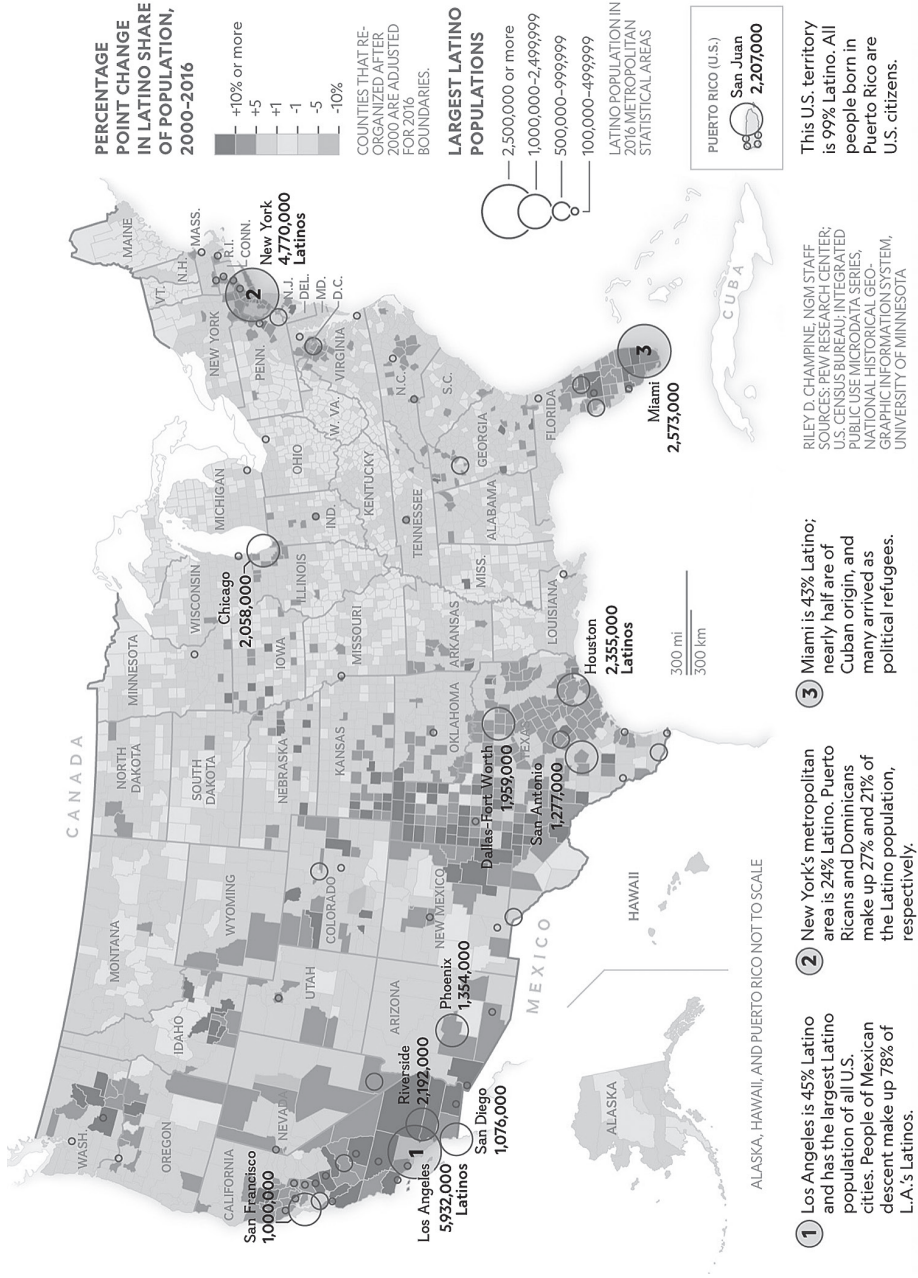


FIGURE 0.2. "Expanding Latinidad" infographic. *National Geographic*, July 2018. Used by permission of National Geographic Society.

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the arrival of an ever-growing consumer base with an annual buying power far into the trillions. Comedic routines and pieces of satire have delivered demographic punchlines about the “Hispanic” future. Journalists and scholars have written about how this population will transform schools, churches, cities, and rural communities. Old ideas of race will buckle, some have said, under the immense weight of this demographic multitude. By midcentury, we hear incessantly, the face of the country as well as its tongue and culture will be dramatically different. A new normal, population politics has told us, is on the horizon (fig. 0.2).

National Latino civil rights organizations and leaders have not passively consumed narratives about the Latino population and its future impact. On the contrary, they have crafted and communicated their own narratives to rally supporters, entice funders, challenge opponents, and insert themselves onto the national stage. Although they tend to traffic in inevitabilities, their efforts suggest a recognition that capitalizing on demography cannot be left to demography alone. Indeed, as they are quick to criticize, Latino political power has not run apace with Latino demographic growth. Underlining this frustration is the sense that demographic and political influence are intertwined, or at least should be. This is not their naiveté; it is one of the conceits of liberal democracy.⁹² Thus woven into their advocacy, population politics have come to be seen as a way to speed up the rate of progress. In the wake of the 2010 census, as later chapters describe, they have worked to project tomorrow’s power onto today’s political landscape. Indeed, as Janet Murguía told her audience in the speech discussed at the onset, “we don’t have to wait ten to fifteen years to have our future realized.”

Following the Figures

This book is the culmination of research carried out between 2012 and 2019. The research I conducted is known as ethnography, one of the three major methods used by sociologists (and other social scientists). Ethnographic studies can take different forms but tend to share a commitment to learning through some degree of immersion in the lives and worlds of others. It therefore represents a deeply embodied and experiential mode of research.⁹³ Given its substantive concerns, this work joins a recent wave of political ethnographies.⁹⁴

Across the country, I tracked the population politics of national Latino advocates in civic engagement campaigns, legislative lobbying, and a range of public-facing activities. But this research was not only interested in political

figures but also in demographic figures. As such, this book is “peopled” with human beings and population statistics, among other objects.⁹⁵ Attentive to both, I pursued three major sources of data, each based on a different technique: participant observation, interviewing, and the collection of primary material (print and multimedia). Below I will provide details about each. Some chapters draw more on certain data sources than others, but the book in its entirety integrates each to tell a set of nested stories.

No matter the wealth of data I collected and analyzed, the ethnographic account I provide cannot be understood as definitive. Like all forms of knowledge, it is situated and incomplete. The conclusions I draw are as much shaped by the social world I examined as by the interpretative, political, and biographic features I brought to it. The result comes from an uneven encounter between these two “landscapes of meaning.”⁹⁶ While this encounter cannot produce the lofty generalizations of other methods, this fact need not be seen as a weakness but as a strength.⁹⁷ Ultimately, the reader will decide whether this project was a success.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In April 2012 I boarded a plane to Los Angeles to attend Voto Latino’s first “Power Summit.” This research trip, the first of many, began my effort to observe and participate, as closely as possible, in the world of national Latino advocacy. Within a matter of months I made visits to Washington, DC, Las Vegas, and Orlando to attend conferences and conventions organized by leading organizations. At these events I took notes, photographs, and videos as I heard presentations and leaders dispense demographic statistics and narratives about the Latino demographic. These experiences gave me a glimpse into what I later designated as population politics.

In late September of that year I returned to Orlando for an extended stay, curious to learn about the role of demographic rhetoric in civic engagement efforts. I could have chosen a number of locations, but I was drawn to central Florida. Part of my motivation was personal: as a Puerto Rican, I have long been interested in Puerto Rican Orlando, the site of the largest migration of Puerto Ricans—from across the diaspora and the archipelago—over the past three decades.⁹⁸ The more direct reason was the fact that most of the major national Latino advocacy groups were invested in Latino “civic engagement” efforts throughout the state and particularly in central Florida in anticipation of the 2012 presidential election. There I connected with the voter campaigns of *Mi Familia Vota*, *Voto Latino*, the National Council of *La Raza*,

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and a joint campaign of the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, and the Hispanic Federation. Fieldwork entailed volunteering in their respective campaigns, through which I registered voters outside of local groceries and community centers, canvassed neighborhoods, phone banked, and attended local community events and organizational meetings. These activities took place primarily in Orange County, mostly within Orlando proper, though trips to Tampa and Miami helped me learn about operations outside of central Florida.

In January 2013 I moved to the Washington, DC, area, where I spent a year observing—and, in some sense, participating in—Latino advocacy. Like Orlando, I entered DC with few contacts and worked to gain access to an unfamiliar city and political world. My only previous experiences there were limited to attending protests and lobbying for Puerto Rican human rights issues. Thankfully, some of my contacts opened doors and I began to attend postelection forums and lobbying efforts in the capital. For nearly four months, LULAC opened its doors to me, generously giving me a workspace, access to its staff meetings, and the ability to follow its advocacy for comprehensive immigration reform. As a very minor compensation, I proofread documents, designed posters and flyers, reached out to potential speakers for immigration town halls, and provided logistical support where possible. One of the highlights of this work was taking part in legislative visits on Capitol Hill with LULAC council members from across the country. I also participated in similar efforts organized by Voto Latino and the National Council of La Raza.

My time in Washington was also punctuated by public events organized by leading Latino lobbyists, major think tanks and research institutes, and Latino advocacy groups and their collaborators. I moved away in early 2015 to complete my doctorate but returned for regular visits—between two and four each year—until 2019. This more “episodic fieldwork” not only updated my research but deepened my understandings of national Latino civil rights and their population politics.⁹⁹

INTERVIEWING

Participant observation gave me insight into the ways that these political actors and their contemporaries have wielded data and projections. To learn more about their perspectives, aspirations, and frustrations, I conducted interviews. Gaining access to advocates often proved difficult and frustrating. I was not a familiar face and had no history with any of the organizations.

In Washington, initial reactions to me ranged from suspicion to annoyance to mild interest. It became clear to me that some leaders and organizations were much more open to researchers than others. Even after the better part of a decade trying, I was unable to speak to some advocates, and thus they appear here only through their public pronouncements. Several, however, generously made time to speak with me and put me in contact with their colleagues.

In total, I interviewed eighty individuals. These respondents included organizational leaders, public relations specialists, policy analysts, researchers, canvassers, federal appointees, partisan lobbyists, consultants, and staff members of national Latino groups. These interviews were typically conducted in English, the primary language used by these advocates in their professional and, in most cases, personal lives. Interviews typically lasted an hour but on several occasions exceeded two and a half hours. I interviewed some individuals repeated times. While most interviews were semi-structured, I did use a more structured interview protocol in select cases where I was interested in capturing some of the variance between similarly positioned actors. Adapting certain techniques of the “focused interview,” I used prompts and objects, including newspaper articles, promotional materials, and infographics, to elicit specific reflections on current events. I found infographics containing graphs and other visualizations of statistical data especially helpful in discussing ideas and assumptions about demographic trends.¹⁰⁰ In what follows, I use pseudonyms for all respondents except organizational leaders who are regularly in the press.

COLLECTION OF PRIMARY MATERIALS

Along with ethnographic and interview data, I built a large cache of primary materials, both documents and multimedia products. These included hundreds of newspaper articles, commentaries, and visualizations (e.g., infographics, photographs, and cartoons), and reports and documents produced by national Latino advocacy organizations and other organizations within the broader Washington, DC, political-policy field. These reports covered a wide range of substantive issues, including immigration, electoral outcomes, demographic trends, and voting rights. The multimedia products I collected included public service announcements made by national Latino organizations and video shorts produced by media outlets, as well as recordings of webinars on the latest polling data on Latinos, immigration reform, and the results of the 2012 and 2016 elections.

In sum, *Figures of the Future* marshals a wealth of qualitative and ethnographic data collected across multiple sites, both physical and virtual. I integrate ethnographic observations, interview data, and primary materials throughout this book to understand the population politics of national Latino advocacy within a context of growing anxieties about the country's ethnoracial future.

Chapter Overview

The remainder of *Figures of the Future* is divided into six chapters and a conclusion. The chapters are roughly chronological. The first two set the stage for the analysis of contemporary population politics and together comprise the section of the "Past." Chapter 1 situates the book in a distant but living past. Drawing on primary and secondary materials, it begins with an account of the earliest expressions and episodes of racialized population politics in the United States. Throughout this history, white political projects and movements have cast ethnoracial demographic futures as a racial problem or threat to white domination. Moving closer to the present, I discuss the mid-twentieth-century reemergence of discourses about overpopulation and how this "problem" came to be linked to Mexican and Latin American immigration in the 1970s. Finally, I show how this episode of population politics was coincident with another development: the Civil Rights era creation of the "Latino demographic." As the book demonstrates, these layered histories powerfully structure how and in what ways Latino advocates engage in population politics.

Chapter 2 tells a more recent story. It returns to the early years of the Obama presidency, when the 2010 U.S. census was on the horizon. As in prior decades, national Latino organizations and leaders made that decennial census a top priority. To ensure a "complete count" of the Latino population, advocates pressured the Census Bureau and legislators and launched community campaigns to promote participation and confront obstacles to census enumeration. Looking closely at tropes of "strength in numbers," this chapter details how advocates have contributed to the statistical construction of the "Latino population" and its projected future.

The content of the second set of chapters takes place after the 2010 census. Each chapter foregrounds a different temporal tactic of population politics used to accelerate Latino political power. For this reason I have labeled this section the "Future." Chapter 3 takes off as census data became public. Flooded with newly available census data, journalists, pundits, scholars, and activists immediately began to articulate various, sometimes explicitly,

competing interpretations and narratives. I describe how, within this discursive context, advocates *forecast* Latino demographic futures as a benefit to the country's future. This account was a deliberately calibrated response to expressions of—and worries about—white demophobia. Seeking to assuage white fear over demographic change and to rebut racist stereotypes, Latino advocates advanced deracialized demo-utopias.

As the 2012 presidential election approached, Latino advocates also sought to *foreshadow* the future in the present. Chapter 4 analyzes this enactment. Coupled with voter registration and mobilization campaigns, these political actors produced and mobilized statistical knowledge to convince onlookers that the future had, in a sense, arrived. I focus on how two key figures—the projection that 12.2 million Latino voters would cast a ballot and the estimate that 50,000 Latino citizens turn eighteen every month—entered into circulation, came to be treated as “facts,” and eventually validated the idea that the Latino “sleeping giant” awoke in the 2012 election and offered a glimpse into the future.

Confident that the election opened a new day in Latino politics, advocates immediately sought to seize the postelection moment and translate demographic futures (and electoral results) into concrete political gains. Zeroing in on beltway politics, chapter 5 analyzes attempts to *forewarn* that the failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform would seal the fates of political leaders and their parties. Although expectations were high, advocates quickly encountered serious challenges to their agenda. They could not control internal shifts within the Republican Party nor how swiftly the future foreshadowed in the election was forgotten.

The final chapter takes us up to the near present and is part of its own section. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 ushered in an unexpected, even unthinkable, present. Chapter 6 explores how, during the first two years of the Trump presidency, advocacy organizations and leaders responded to an intensification of anti-Latino and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy. Among other things, the chapter discusses the fate of population politics in unsettled times. This context has brought to light longstanding internal and external frustrations about the political tactics and orientations of the major national Latino organizations, as well as a growing demand for new ideas and strategies for the realization of “Latino” power.

In the conclusion, I return to the major themes and tensions that mark the population politics of national Latino civil rights organizations. But more than this, I restate and broaden the central argument of this book—that the so-called browning of America owes more to politico-cultural dynamics

than to the complexion of emergent populations. Calling for greater demographic reflexivity, it challenges naturalistic and essentialist accounts of ethnoracial demographic change.

A Word on Labels

Decisions about what labels or categories to use should not be taken lightly. Much is in a name. I therefore want to say a few words about one that appears throughout this book: “Latino.” Like other ethnoracial categories, its meaning is not self-evident or universal. It is historical, political, and situational.

For decades scholars and activists have grappled with this label. In the 1980s intense debates raged about whether it was at all beneficial or legitimate to group heterogeneous persons and peoples under a single, encompassing “panethnic” label. Those who endorsed this practice won that debate, but it led to others. What specific term should be used? Hispanic or Latino? The former was viewed, simplistically, as a government imposition, and the latter, no less simplistically, as a bottom-up, community-born alternative. Not long after, Latino itself came under criticism. The masculinist Latino, it was charged, erased and subordinated the identities and realities of “Latinas.” Not without resistance, new alternatives were put forth, such as “Latina/o” and “Latin@.” These gained some currency in the 1990s and 2000s.

More recently, these alternatives have themselves been critiqued for preserving gender binaries and erasing and subordinating gender-fluid and non-binary peoples. In response, several newer alternatives have been proposed, including Latinx and Latine. Others have challenged the historical erasure of Blackness and Indigeneity from dominant representations and conceptions of “Latinidad” (or Latino-ness). Identities and constituencies have begun to form around labels, such as “Afro-Latinx.” Still others have voiced calls for the abandonment of Latinidad, writ large. This appeal in some sense revives older debates about the utility of pan-Latino labels. Overlapping and intersecting with many of these debates is contention about the meaning of these labels. The most controversial of these surrounds whether “Latino/Hispanic” designates a “race,” “ethnicity,” or “panethnicity.” Together, these are only some of the struggles that have been and are being had over these names, to say nothing of those that may come in the future.

Bearing this history in mind, which I have only sketched here, I thought long and hard about what term to use in this book. No decision can fully appreciate and acknowledge the complexity of these labels and their contingent relations to peoples and projects. That said, I have chosen to primarily

use the now somewhat archaic “Latino.” This choice might influence how the book is received and what assumptions are made about it. Perhaps this is unavoidable. But more important for me was remaining close to the labels and categories used by national Latino civil rights organizations. While this political network has recently, and modestly, begun to integrate “Latinx,” I worried that my adoption of this label in the text would overstate its prevalence among these groups. Moreover, using Latinx or any other alternative could cloud rather than clarify the meanings that civil rights advocates have ascribed to Latinidad. And these meanings, as will become evident, are quite important to the story I tell.

In using the term “Latino,” however, I want to make clear that I do not assume a correspondence between this category (or any sociopolitical category) and those categorized as such. That correspondence, if and when it exists, is contingent and conditional rather than autonomic and necessary. My approach follows political theorist Cristina Beltrán in viewing Latinidad as a verb, something that must be done or enacted, and not as a noun that signifies something that someone *is*.¹⁰¹ Rather than dismiss or embrace these labels uncritically, the question for this book becomes how, in what contexts, for what ends, and with what consequences these labels have been invoked, quantified, and temporalized.

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