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Institute for  
Latino Policy  
(NiLP)**

25 West 18th Street  
New York, NY 10011  
800-590-2516  
[info@latinopolicy.org](mailto:info@latinopolicy.org)  
[www.latinopolicy.org](http://www.latinopolicy.org)

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**Immigration Reform and  
the Latino Civil Rights Movement:  
*Are They Now in Conflict?***

By Angelo Falcón (April 22, 2014 Updated)

Although immigration reform has emerged as the top civil rights issue for Latinos, is it consistent with the goals and ideology of what we might call the traditional Latino civil rights movement? Recently I have been involved in quite a number of discussions about the impact of the immigration issue on the overall Latino civil rights agenda. Although immigration reform affects about 15 percent of the total Latino population, as a public policy issue it now occupies almost all the Latino policy agenda, sucking up, as one colleague recently put it, all the oxygen on Latino issues.



Since the 2006 mass immigration protests, immigration reform began to seriously dominate the Latino policy and political agendas in the United States. At that point it became clear that there was a divergence in interest in the issue as the mainstream Mexican-American and other Latino advocacy organizations seemed so out of touch with the more grassroots Mexican and other immigrant advocacy groups, which could be summarized by the tension at that point between the Raul Yzaguirre's of NCLR and the Nativo Lopez's of Hermandad. However, due to a number of factors, the immigration issue after this period became mainstreamed or, as some might see it, co-opted, by mainstream groups.

The integration of masses of Latinos through immigration reform became an increasingly irresistible source of potential power for a number of important players. The Democratic Party had been losing the White House and needed new voters. The labor unions were losing members in droves and desperately needed a new source of rank and files. Spanish-language media and its corporate clients needed to cultivate this potentially new source of consumer power. The political right needed scapegoats to fuel their nativist politics as the public began to tire of the culture wars. The traditional Latino civil rights organizations needed to overcome the country's racial fatigue with a new product. Foundations, as always, went with the latest social fad.

In less than a decade, the Latino civil rights agenda became transformed in fundamental ways. The focus became the 8 million or so Latinos who were undocumented, while the issues facing the other more than 50 million who are U.S. citizens faded into the background in the public discourse. Traditional civil rights issues like affirmative action, employment and housing discrimination, bilingual education, voting rights, poverty, etc. were still being

pursued, but they now seemed a bit dated and not as urgent as they once were. In opinion polls, "immigration" replaced "race" and "discrimination" as subjects. Racial issues receded back to the Black and White binary as "immigration" now stood as the surrogate of "Latino" and "Hispanic."

Politically, the immigration issue is presented as the silver bullet to the heart of the Latino vote. The President is threatened by its withdrawal if he doesn't use his executive powers more aggressively, and the Republicans are threatened with extinction if they don't address it comprehensively. Comprehensive immigration reform dominates the topics discussed on Univision and Telemundo as the Jorge's and Jose's emerge as major national spokespersons on this issue. The fact that immigration never seems to emerge as the only or even most important issue prioritized by Latinos in poll after poll doesn't seem to matter; how other issues will influence the Latino vote is not really seriously being discussed.

The traditional Latino civil rights agenda contained many oppositional elements to it, challenging many aspects of American society. Although not universally supported by Latinos, there was a strong anti-assimilationist tendency that generated support for bilingual education, Mexican-American and Puerto Rican studies, as well as anti-imperialist and anti-war movements. On the other hand, the immigration reform movement is almost totally assimilationist by definition, the ultimate goal of most being the attainment of U.S. citizenship. Does this represent a conflict or is it simply an inevitable evolution? How does it impact on the ideology and style of today's Latino agenda? What is the ultimate significance of the historic shift from Brown Berets and Young Lords to the today's Dreamers?

How does this focus on immigration as the single most important issue facing the Latino community help or distort the Latino agenda? Do Latino activists and leaders need to reassess immigration's place on their community's agenda vis-à-vis other issues? Are these concerns about the role that immigration reform is playing in relation to more traditional Latino civil rights issues warranted? Is it even appropriate to raise such questions at such a sensitive time for comprehensive immigration reform in the Congress? I'll try to think about these questions for another week or so for what will eventually be part two of this commentary. In the meantime, let me know what you think.

*Angelo Falcón is President of the National Institute for Latino Policy (NiLP). The NiLP Network on Latino Issues is an information service powered by the Institute. He can be reached at [afalcon@latinopolicy.org](mailto:afalcon@latinopolicy.org).*