

Shifting Demographics: Understanding How Ethnically Diverse Networks Influence Latinos’ Political Uses of Social Media and Offline Political Engagement

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Although prior work has demonstrated a link between online political engagement and offline participation, less is known about which mechanisms might influence online political opinion expression. This study examined specific constructs that might lead to increased social media engagement among Latinos—a demographic group with high social media adoption, but lower levels of political participation. Results from this study, using data from the 2016 presidential election, suggest that acculturation processes can explain the likelihood of online political engagement, willingness to share opinions, and offline political participation. Findings indicate that for Latinos, the ethnic heterogeneity of one’s social media network and perceptions of commonality between one’s own ethnic group and other ethnic and racial groups drive willingness to share opinions, online political engagement, and, indirectly, offline political participatory behaviors. Results are contextualized in relation to the ways Latinos uniquely integrate with U.S. political culture through online engagement.

Keywords: acculturation, social media political expression, political participation, social networks, quantitative, survey

The increase in the Latino population in the United States has elicited speculation regarding its potential impact on the makeup of the U.S. political landscape. Population growth among this ethnic group has surpassed all others: In the year 2000, Latinos represented 12.5% of the entire U.S. population, and by 2014, they represented 17.3% of people in the United States (Stepler & Brown, 2016). Moreover, since the year 2000, the percentage of U.S.-born Latinos has exceeded that of those who have immigrated. Between 2010 and 2014, approximately only 1 in 4 Latinos were new immigrants (Stepler & Brown, 2016). However, Latinos’ political and civic engagement, including voter turnout, has consistently lagged behind that of other races and ethnic groups, such as Whites and African Americans (DeSipio, 2006). We use the term *Latino* to refer to an ethnic group that comprises heterogeneous subgroups.

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Acculturation is one theoretical construct that has been proposed to explain the political behaviors of ethnic minorities in the United States. In this study, we define acculturation as a dual and long-term process of cultural and psychological change that takes place when two cultural groups and their members come into contact (Berry, 2001; Gordon, 2010). At the individual level, this contact implies changes in the behavioral repertoire of a person, and at the group level, it implies changes in both or either of the cultures that come into contact.

The long-term process of acculturation has been documented as enduring across generations, as families and social groups pass on their cultural thumbprint to the following generations (Miller, 2010; Valentine, 2001). Previous studies have operationally defined it in terms of English language dominance and as number of years in the country (e.g., Rumbaut, 1994; Santoro & Segura, 2011; Stokes-Brown, 2012), and they have shown how, as immigrant ethnic minorities spend more time in the United States and learn English, they become better integrated into the country and gain social mobility (Rumbaut, 2008).

In this study, we look at acculturation not only in terms of language dominance and time in the United States, but also using two additional components: social media social network ethnic diversity, and perceived commonality with other races and ethnicities. This novel focus ensures the incorporation of the key distinction between the structural and identification dimensions of the acculturation process (Gordon, 2010) discussed by Sam and Berry (2010) regarding cultural learning and social identity processes. This distinction is discussed in further detail in the following section.

Furthermore, English language media use has long been regarded as an important contributing factor in the acculturation process (Subervi-Velez, 1986). However, social media platforms have increasingly become the most important way people find news, learn about political issues, and encounter and share information and political views. Moreover, they also provide a place for individuals to discuss relevant issues, and interact and maintain their personal relationships; social media affords the combination of mass and interpersonal communication (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

A recent Pew report found that around 73% of Latinos are Facebook users, 38% use Instagram, and 20% use Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Because Latinos are among the most avid users of social media in the United States, this study set out to examine how acculturation processes contribute to Latinos' engagement in emerging modes of political participation (i.e., social media political expression) and in more traditional forms of political engagement. We argue that as individuals from Latino heritage who are users of social media applications become more socially integrated and identify more closely with mainstream American culture and society, their online and offline political engagement will shift. We believe that they will be less willing to self-censor their political opinions, more likely to engage in expressive political behaviors online, and participate in the political process in more traditional ways.

This study expands our knowledge of social media and offline political behaviors by combining acculturation theory and spiral of silence concepts. Specifically, this study examines a mechanism through which social media social network ethnic diversity and Latinos' perceived group commonality with Whites and African Americans lead to an increase in social media political expression and traditional forms of political participation through the mediating role of willingness to self-censor (WTSC). In short, this study examines

whether acculturation through social media, together with an increased sense of commonality with social groups other than the Latino pan-ethnic identity, negatively influences individuals' WTSC and positively impacts social media political expression, ultimately creating a greater path for traditional political participation.

Acculturation

There are individual differences in the way people go about the acculturation process. Berry (2005) has uncovered four different acculturation strategies. These strategies are derived from the distinction between the personal preferences, attitudes, and behaviors related to maintenance of the original culture and how to connect with and participate in the larger society together with other ethno-cultural groups in the host country. In this study, we focus exclusively on the relative preference of being part of the larger society and having contact with other ethno-cultural groups. Berry (2005) identified these strategies as assimilation and integration. The difference between these two strategies is the relative desire to maintain one's culture and heritage together with the host culture.

The process of acculturation involves social, cultural, and psychological changes (Berry, 2001; Gordon, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). The psychological changes refer to observations at the individual level of the different transformations that might take place as part of culture contact situations. These changes influence an individual's affective, behavioral, and/or cognitive functions and perceptions (Sam & Berry, 2010). The study of these different facets of the individual has been traditionally linked with theoretical approaches such as a stress and coping framework, a cultural learning perspective, and a social identification theory approach, respectively.

Social media platforms have become a space for new patterns of sociality and a place where individuals construct and perform their various self-identities as they interact with a variety of audiences (Papacharissi, 2010). We argue that the cultural learning process of acculturation can manifest on social media in the form of the ethnic composition of individuals' social media social network. Although previous studies have operationally defined acculturation in terms of the ethnic/racial diversity of coworkers and friends who constitute individuals' social networks under acculturation processes (e.g., Tucker & Santiago, 2013), this operational definition still describes a meaningful portion of the social contact that Latino social media users currently have with others.

Additionally, acculturation can also be conceived in terms of perceived commonality with other races and ethnicities as part of the social identity component of the acculturation process. We believe this is the case because social identification with other social groups present in the host culture can be considered a manifestation of a positive orientation toward that host culture, and also because it represents the identification subprocesses of acculturation (Gordon, 2010).

In sum, on one hand, this study focuses on the behavioral aspects of acculturation processes; it assumes that interethnic contact through social media entails a shift in individuals' communication styles and values (Gordon, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010) and is representative of the structural subprocess of acculturation. On the other hand, the study assumes a gradual cognitive transformation reflected in the

perceptions of commonality of Latinos with regard to other ethnicities and races, which is part of the identification subprocess (Gordon, 2010). Therefore, we assume that different levels of acculturation will be reflected in Latinos' perceived degree of commonality with other groups and in the degree to which their social media social networks reflect interethnic group contact. We use this operational definition in addition to the traditional operationalization of acculturation based on time in the country and English language dominance because we believe that our operational definition captures other aspects of the level of acculturation of Latino social media users given the current makeup of this population (Stepler & Brown, 2016) and the cultural and social importance of social media.

Latinos' Acculturation and Political Participation

The vast majority of studies examining the relationship between acculturation and political participation have defined this concept in terms of time spent in the United States (Lien, 1994), generation status (Santoro & Segura, 2011), or English language proficiency (Stokes-Brown, 2012). Currently, nearly half of Latinos in the United States who are able to vote are second- or third-generation Latinos born from immigrant parents or from Mexicans who crossed the border (Cisneros, 2014, p. 9). This means that they speak English fluently because they have gone to school and operated socially using this language. However, traditional cultural values, customs, and social connections might still be present despite their having been born in the United States or speaking English. In other words, those previous definitions might not be reflective of the acculturation levels present for the new makeup of the Latino population in the United States. Therefore, we complement them with our proposed conceptual approach.

A research strand already exists that has examined the relationship between acculturation and Latinos' political behaviors and attitudes that can be linked to cultural learning and social identification approaches. Research on Latinos' political participation examining acculturation from a cultural learning perspective has defined acculturation regarding social integration. In this case, acculturation has been observed in terms of the diversity of Latinos' social networks. Tucker and Santiago (2013) found that acculturation, measured as heterogeneity of friendship and coworker networks, was positively and significantly related to civic engagement. In another study, Albarracin and Valeva (2011) examined how the degree to which Latinos were connected to other members of society influenced their participation in different political activities. Findings suggest that individuals with social networks extending beyond their own ethnic group were more likely to contact a public official and work for or contribute to a political candidate.

Research using social identification theory to approach the acculturation process and its relationship with political activity has focused on the different roles that Latinos' pan-ethnic identification and/or identification with other social groups or with the American society as a whole plays in their political activities. Findings in this area suggest that group identity and group consciousness influence their political behaviors such as voting and voting registration. For example, one who primarily identifies as American is more likely to register to vote, to vote (Valdez, 2011), and to engage in civic activities (Tucker & Santiago, 2013). Similarly, Latinos' perceptions of linked fate with Anglos in their community were associated positively with contacting public officials (Albarracin & Valeva, 2011). These findings resonate with previous research showing that youth identifying mainly as Latino/Hispanic are less assimilated than those who adopt

an American identity (Portes & MacLeod, 1996), and older generations of ethnic minorities adopt an American self-identity more than an ethnic or national-origin identity (Rumbaut, 1994).

In sum, research points at a relationship between acculturation—defined under a cultural learning and social identity approach—and different forms of political engagement. These findings suggest that as people increase their social contact with individuals from other races and ethnicities, they learn and adopt the prevalent social norms, including forms of political engagement. Likewise, as Latinos integrate, a sense of belonging, commonality, and identification with the mainstream culture and with other groups becomes more prevalent. These perceptions of commonality and identity lead to higher levels of participation as a sense of a shared future becomes more salient.

Social media platforms have become a new route through which people can become politically active. On these types of online platforms, people can share and discuss their political views, political information, and news. Based on this evidence, we hypothesize that, similar to other forms of political participation, as individuals acculturate, they will tend to use social media as a means for greater political expression.

H1: Social network ethnic heterogeneity will be positively related to social media political expression.

H2: Perceptions of group commonality will be positively related to social media political expression.

Acculturation and Willingness to Self-Censor

Spiral of silence theory conceptualizes public opinion as a social control device. Because people have a natural fear of becoming socially isolated, they tend to silence their opinions when they believe their opinions go against the opinion climate at any particular moment (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Therefore, spiral of silence processes apply to specific opinions in specific contexts because opinion climate regarding a particular issue might vary by moments in the situational and social setting. In other words, self-censorship from this perspective is conceptualized as a situation-based construct.

However, others argue individual differences exist that obstruct or wane self-censorship processes and that part of these differences might be due to traits that people bring to different opinion expression contexts (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005; Matthes et al., 2012). Hayes et al. (2005) argued that, despite their perceived opinion climate, some individuals are more willing to express their opinion and that people have a tendency to self-censor that is relatively constant. Contrary to a situationist conceptualization of self-censorship, this definition assumes a dispositional or trait-based conceptualization of self-censorship. Such conceptualization assumes a personologist view, which implies that this disposition is stable across situations and is not likely to change depending on the issue or the social or political context. Following this line of thought, Hayes et al. (2005) argued that WTSC can be conceptualized as a characteristic of a person that will “enhance the likelihood that the person will refrain from speaking his or her opinion around a dissenting audience across situations” (Hayes et al., 2005, p. 304). This definition assumes that people have dispositions that are relatively stable and that lead people to act consistently in certain ways across different situations.

In this study, although we assume that personality traits can be considered relatively stable, research also suggests that different dimensions of personality change across the life-span (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008) and that these changes can be related to major life events, shifts in life paths and social roles, and changes in norms (Lüdtke, Roberts, Trautwein, & Nagy, 2011; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011). We argue that shifts in the composition of Latinos' social media networks and the way in which they think of themselves and how they self-identify have the potential to impact individuals' WTSC. These changes in WTSC are consistent with the plasticity principle of personality development (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008), which states that personality can be eventually influenced by the external environment.

In this sense, although we adopt Hayes and colleagues' (2005) WTSC construct in this study, we argue that even assuming a personologist perspective, WTSC as a personality trait might be prone to change. Personality development researchers believed for years that although personality changes over time, by age 30, it is mostly defined and does not suffer any major transformations. However, more recent evidence suggests this might not be the case (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Roberts and Mroczek (2008) argued that personality traits continue to change in adulthood and, in some situations, into old age, suggesting that personality is not "set like plaster at any point in the life course" (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008, p. 33). Such changes can be due to modeling others' behavior, receiving feedback from others regarding how we should change, reflecting on changes in our own behavior that make us perceive ourselves differently, and expectations of roles we assume (Roberts et al., 2008; Specht et al., 2011). Personality changes, in sum, can be influenced by life events, normative changes, and social roles (Specht et al., 2011).

Therefore, one's general disposition to silence an opinion in circumstances of an adverse opinion climate can suffer changes over time. This dispositional variation can be in part due to environmental influences and to changes in how we think of ourselves and how we identify. In the case of Latinos, as the process of acculturation progresses toward higher adaptation to American culture, higher levels of social identification with other social groups and more social contact through social media with people from other ethnic and racial groups are likely. These forces together can likely cause their WTSC to decrease.

We argue that this may be the case for different reasons. The legacy of the political systems of Latin American countries, characterized by weaker democratic institutions and political practices ("EIU Democracy Index 2016," n.d.), creates a political culture more permeated by self-censorship practices (Shen & Liang, 2015). Those who have not integrated into the American culture may still be influenced by the political culture of their home country and thus transmit this influence to second-generation Latinos through family political socialization processes (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). Second, Latino culture has been characterized as having a high degree of familism (Germán, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2009; Kuhlberg, Peña, & Zayas, 2010). Findings by Austin and Nelson (1993) suggest that in the process of political socialization, family communication practices and cultural background, in the form of ethnic and racial makeup, play a role in individuals' political socialization. It might be that the micro-social environment characterized by familism dimensions—such as familial support, familial interconnectedness, familial honor, and, especially, subjugation of self for family (Steidel & Contreras, 2003)—influences the political socialization process.

However, as previous research has documented, various aspects of familism wane to some degree as Latinos become more acculturated (Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Therefore, as people from Latino backgrounds become more acculturated and increase their social contact with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, it is likely that they start to model political behaviors that more closely resemble those of the American political culture broadly. Moreover, evidence suggests that the orientation toward the American culture increases over time for young Latinos, and Latino culture orientation decreases (Perez & Padilla, 2000), while less inter-ethnic social contact might hamper the acculturation process (Waters & Jiménez, 2005).

In sum, we argue that as Latinos integrate and assimilate into the U.S. culture, their levels of WTSC will tend to decrease because of the social contact involved with these acculturation strategies and because of self-perception changes. The accommodation to the new culture includes such aspects as not only learning a new language but also adopting forms of interaction that are characteristic of the other group (Sam & Berry, 2010). This acculturation process implies changes in communication styles (Albert & Ah Ha, 2004) and perceptions of communication competence (Johnson, Lindsey, & Zakahi, 2001) that entail lower levels of WTSC; previous evidence suggests that communication culture predispositions influence willingness to express opinions (Ho, Chen, & Sim, 2013). Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H3: Social media network ethnic heterogeneity will be negatively related to willingness to self-censor.

Perceptions of group commonality should also influence WTSC negatively. As the acculturation process brings about identification with the dominant culture of the host country, individuals of Latino origin are then likely to perceive commonalities with people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Not only will they adopt and accommodate to the communication norms and styles of that culture, as suggested by the cultural learning approach to acculturation, but they will also perceive themselves as part of, and behave in ways that reflect identification with, the broader American culture. The cognitive process of identification with the American culture and society should also bring about changes in self-perceptions regarding their WTSC. We hypothesize that:

H4: Perceptions of group commonality will be negatively related to willingness to self-censor.

Willingness to Self-Censor and Political Participation

Different types of political participation can be construed as a form of opinion expression given that many of these types of political actions are public and, explicitly or implicitly, imply the public expression of a political opinion (Hayes, Scheufele, & Huges, 2006). Consequently, Hayes et al. (2006) found that those who are more willing to self-censor their political opinions also tend to engage less in political activities as compared with those lower in WTSC.

The same pattern has been found in the online context. Kwon, Moon, and Stefanone (2015) examined social network sites' political opinion expression and its relationship with social network characteristics and WTSC. Findings in this study suggest that WTSC negatively influences political posting

on social media. Congruent with this evidence, we hypothesize that WTSC should be negatively related to social media political expression and to political participation.

Theorized as expression effects (Shah, 2016; Shah et al., 2017), social media political expression has also been found to increase levels of political engagement. Research findings have consistently illustrated how different forms of political expression through social media increase individuals' traditional political engagement (Cho, Ahmed, Keum, Choi, & Lee, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Based on these findings, we hypothesize that social media political expression should be positively related to political participation:

H5: Social media political expression will be positively related to offline political participation.

As one's WTSC influences his or her political expression in social media platforms and online political expression drives offline political engagement as well, we similarly expect there to be an effect of WTSC on offline political participation, dependent on one's level of online political engagement. Specifically, we predict that those less willing to censor their opinions in online spaces are also more likely to express political opinions offline, leading to engagement in politics offline:

H6: WTSC will indirectly affect offline political participation through social media political expression.

Finally, the individual changes involved in the process of acculturation are likely to have a spreading influence in how an individual perceives, engages in, and enacts his or her civic roles. Specifically, when one believes that other racial or ethnic groups share certain aspects with one's own ethnicity, this likely indirectly influences other outcomes, as does the actual makeup of one's social media network. With changes in WTSC that are due to perceptions of group commonality, individuals are also likely to use social media for political expression. Therefore:

H7: Social media network ethnic heterogeneity will indirectly affect social media political expression through willingness to self-censor.

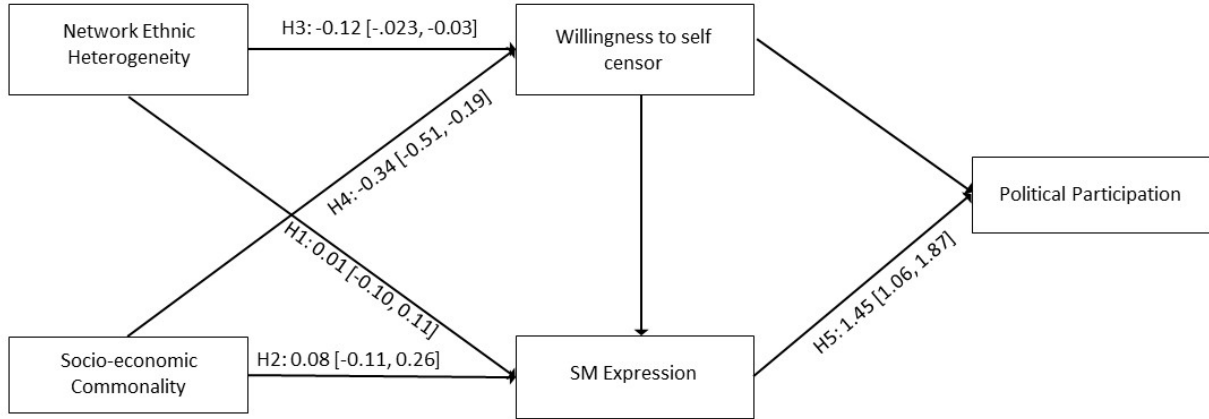
H8: Perceptions of group commonality will indirectly affect social media political expression through willingness to self-censor.

Similarly, we also hypothesize that the observed relationship between acculturation and offline political participation is mediated by WTSC:

H9: Social media ethnic heterogeneity will indirectly affect offline political participation through willingness to self-censor.

H10: Perceptions of group commonality will indirectly affect offline political participation through willingness to self-censor.

The model used to test these hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.



H6: WTSC → SM Expression → Political Participation: -0.80 [-1.17, -0.54]

H7: Network ethnic heterogeneity → WTSC → SM Expression 0.07 [0.02, 0.13]

H8: Group commonality → WTSC → SM Expression: 0.19 [0.09, 0.32]

H9: Network ethnic heterogeneity → WTSC → Political Participation: 0.02 [-0.14, 0.16]

H10: Group commonality → WTSC → Political participation: 0.30 [0.12, 0.61]

Figure 1. Results of the hypothesized model: Links between acculturation, network composition and online and offline engagement.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Data collected for this study were a part of a much larger project, although only the relevant data and procedures will be discussed here. Using a participant panel purchased from SSI ($n = 219$), data were solicited from those participants self-identifying as Latino. Participants were younger than the U.S. average ($M = 34$ years) and predominantly female (67% female). The sample was also more likely to identify as Democrat than the general U.S. population (72% Democrat).

Participants completed an online survey hosted through Qualtrics, although only those who indicated that they had either Facebook or Twitter accounts (or both) were included in the study. Participants completing the study were rewarded for their participation by SSI, using its specific reward structure. No information was available from SSI regarding the nature of the reward, although typically such offers are nominal in value. There was also no information available relevant to possible response rates because it was unclear how many had been solicited to participate in the study initially. Data were collected during the period October 26–28, 2016.

Measures

Social network ethnic homogeneity. Participants were instructed, "Describe your social media (Facebook, Twitter) contacts." Choices were: mostly Latino, mostly White, mixed Latino and White, mostly Black, mixed Latino and Black, or a mix of all the above. Responses on these items were then recorded on a scale from 1 to 4, so that more diverse networks were given a larger value ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.12$).

Willingness to self-censor. This 10-item scale (Hayes et al., 2005) assessed the degree to which participants censor themselves in various communication situations. Participants evaluated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 5-point Likert scale ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.91$, $\alpha = 0.87$).

Socioeconomic commonality. Participants were asked, "Thinking about issues like job opportunities, educational attainment, or income, how much do Latinos have in common with other racial groups in the United States today?" Respondents evaluated the commonality between their own ethnic group and African Americans and Whites ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.72$, interitem correlation = 0.34).

Social media political expression. To assess how participants express politics online, a nine-item scale adapted from Velasquez and Rojas (2017) was used. Participants were asked about their political expression behaviors on Facebook and Twitter ("express views on current issues," "share news stories with your contacts," "express your views on the presidential election," "post or shared photos, videos, memes, or gifs created by you that relate to current events or politics," "click, like, or share political information"); their informational behavior ("read news articles posted by your contacts," "receive messages or information from a politician or political party," "read the opinions of your contacts about political issues"); and their attempts to mobilize others ("mobilize your contacts about social or political causes"; $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.21$, $\alpha = 0.95$).

Offline political participation. Offline political participation was assessed using a 12-item measure. Participants indicated whether they had engaged in any of the 12 behaviors within the previous 12 months: attending a political rally, attending a public meeting of their city, participating in local municipal council, signing a petition, working for a political party or movement, writing a letter to the editor, calling in to a live radio show to express an opinion, donating money or objects to a political party or movement, donating money or objects to a group that does social or environmental work, attending a social or political protest, protesting by blocking a street, or ceasing to buy a product or service because of disagreement with the politics of the company that provides it ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 3.39$).

Control variables. A set of five control variables was used in all analyses. These included political interest ($M = 7.76$, $SD = 2.95$); education ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.50$); income ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 2.89$); political party identification (72% Democrat); and gender (67% female). Two traditional measures of acculturation were also included as controls. The first of these included the number of years each participant had lived in the United States ($M = 30.12$, $SD = 12.82$). The second was an index of two variables, partly based on previous research (Shoemaker, Reese, & Danielson, 1985), asking participants, "[in which language you] get your news and information from the media" and use Facebook and/or Twitter (73% primarily English language use).

Analytic Strategy. A structural equation model was used to simultaneously estimate the relationships between the variables and examine the predicted direct and indirect effects of network and acculturation variables on social media and offline political engagement. Data were analyzed using 1,000 bias-corrected bootstrapped samples in Mplus. Model fit was sufficient based on several fit indices ($\chi^2 = 3.83$, $p = 0.05$, RMSEA = 0.11, CFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.01). The tested model is shown in Figure 1. For each of the findings reported, the unstandardized beta and 95% confidence intervals are included.

Alternative models were also tested and found to have less significant fit compared with the model used to test the hypotheses described here. Information about the alternative tested models is available on request.

Results

To begin, the predictors of social media political expression were examined to evaluate the extent to which the makeup of one's social network and perceptions of group commonality influence social media political expression. The model suggests that social network ethnic heterogeneity did not significantly predict social media political expression ($b = 0.01$; [-0.10, 0.11]). Perceptions of group socioeconomic commonality did not significantly predict social media political expression either ($b = 0.08$; [-0.11, 0.26]). Hypotheses 1 and 2 were not supported.

Next, social media network ethnic heterogeneity and perceptions of socioeconomic group commonality were examined as predictors of one's WTSC. Results indicated that both were significant predictors. Those who had more ethnically and racially diverse social networks were less willing to censor themselves online, whereas more homogenous social networks were linked to greater self-censorship ($b = -0.12$, [-0.23, -0.03]). H3 was supported.

WTSC was significantly negatively predicted by socioeconomic group commonality perceptions—those who believed they shared with other races and ethnicities their socioeconomic conditions were also less willing to censor themselves ($b = -0.34$; [-0.51, -0.19]). These findings supported H4.

H5 tested the relationship between social media political expression and offline political participation. The model indicated that those who reported engaging in more political expression behaviors on social media were also significantly more likely to report that they engaged in a variety of offline political behaviors ($b = 1.45$; [1.06, 1.87]). H5 was supported.

The next hypothesis examined the indirect effect of WTSC on offline political participation through social media political expression. The model indicated that this effect was significant ($b = -0.80$; [-1.17, -0.54]). Individuals' willingness to censor their opinions indirectly affected their offline political participation as a function of their online political engagement through social media—supporting H6.

To examine the impact of acculturation on social media political expression, a series of indirect effects were examined. Notably, both social network ethnic heterogeneity and perceptions of socioeconomic group commonality were indirectly related to social media political expression through WTSC. Those with

more diverse networks ($b = 0.07$; [0.02, 0.13]) and those who believed they shared the same socioeconomic conditions and possibilities with Whites and African Americans ($b = 0.19$; [0.09, 0.32]) were more likely to engage in political expression online as a function of their willingness to share opinions. These findings provide support for both H7 and H8.

However, the influence of acculturation on offline political participation was mixed. Although network heterogeneity was not indirectly related to participation through WTSC ($b = 0.02$; [-0.14, 0.16]), perceptions of socioeconomic group commonality were ($b = 0.30$; [0.12, 0.61]). Those with stronger beliefs that ethnic and racial groups share socioeconomic prosperity were more likely to participate in politics as a function of their WTSC. However, the same was not true for those with varying amounts of heterogeneity in their social network. H10 was supported, whereas H9 was not.

Discussion

This study connects acculturation processes with variations in political predispositions and reported behaviors that are ultimately related to increases in Latinos' political participation. Social media platforms have turned into a space of sociality where individuals not only share and are exposed to information and opinions, but also generate norms of interaction (Thorson, 2014; Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015), and political practices and cultures (Bennett, 2012; Shao & Wang, 2017). We argued that the emergence of these norms, practices, and cultures contributes to Latinos' reported political behaviors on social media and offline.

Cultural learning and social identification processes influence political communication predispositions such as individuals' WTSC, ultimately leading to political expression on social media and more traditional forms of political participation. Being part of a more ethnically diverse network on social media might offer opportunities to enact Latinos' political selves to an audience more akin to the dominant American culture. Independent of individual differences in WTSC, it might be the case that American political culture is less prone to individual self-censorship in relation to the features embedded in Latino culture. This may explain the relationship between social media social network ethnic composition and WTSC.

Although WTSC is conceptualized as an individual political predisposition, we offer evidence suggesting that it is influenced by the social environment. From a cultural learning approach to acculturation, individuals will adapt their communication styles and accommodate to their environment with the goal of integrating and assimilating into the new culture. Social media is a space where such learning processes take place. For those Latinos who belong to more ethnically diverse social networks on social media, their opportunities for learning about the political communication practices embedded within American culture are broader and might also include behaviors that are not common in their countries of origin or in their family unit, given the greater degree of familism (Germán et al., 2009; Kuhlberg et al., 2010) and power distance in Latin American countries and of low context in the United States (Albert & Ah Ha, 2004).

Therefore, these results contribute to a broader research agenda on political socialization between generations of immigrants and the role that social media social contact plays during such socialization processes. Moreover, previous studies have found that social media users are influenced by previous

behaviors of other users and conform to others' behaviors (Velasquez, 2012). In our findings, this relationship is expressed by the mediating role of WTSC in the relationship between ethnic network composition and social media political expression.

Our findings also provide evidence for social-identification processes taking place during acculturation and how those influence political predispositions and communication. Findings in previous studies show how Latinos who have a positive orientation toward American culture seek ways to identify as Americans to feel accepted in other social groups and increase their sense of belonging (Bedolla, 2003). Our findings suggest that this social identification with American culture, at least regarding socioeconomic commonality, also influences Latinos' WTSC and their social media political expression and participation. These findings are consistent with prior evidence suggesting that Latinos who perceive discrimination against themselves tend to become more politically alienated (Schildkraut, 2005).

When Latinos increased their perceived group commonality levels with other ethnic and racial groups, they were less willing to self-censor their political opinions and reported higher levels of social media political expression activities. It might be that Latinos who think of themselves as belonging to the American society enact that identification through the adoption of political and social practices that characterize and are consistent with the behaviors of others beyond their ethnic group. This notion is consistent with previous findings (Menjívar & Lakhani, 2016) illustrating how, through life changes, including adoption of behaviors and self-concepts, Latinos seek to integrate into American society. The adoption of behaviors and values and the identification with members of other ethnic and racial groups denote their perceived permeability of group boundaries and desire for social mobility in the United States (Abrams & Hogg, 2010).

Acculturation literature suggests that as people assimilate and become more integrated into the host culture, they tend to engage more in participatory political behaviors (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2008; Lien, 1994). Our findings contribute to theories of acculturation and political participation by providing evidence of possible mechanisms that explain such a relationship, underscoring the importance of communication factors in the process. These data suggest that assimilation and integration are associated with WTSC, a political communication predisposition that explains participatory political behaviors (Hayes et al., 2006). Moreover, in this theoretical model, the mechanism through which assimilation and integration influence political participation is explained not only through variations in WTSC levels but also through political expression on social media.

As social media has become one of the preferred ways in which people in the United States get their news (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), and given its interpersonal communication affordances, these platforms provide spaces where the debate about issues of public importance takes place. Given that they offer a one-stop shop for intake of political news, and the opportunity to talk about politics and current events with others, it is not surprising to find that social media platforms positively influence political participation. While several other studies have shown that social media political expression and news use positively influence political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009), this study situates such relationship in the context of Latinos and the differences in their routes to acculturation.

Latino identity and its relationship with political attitudes and behaviors (see Stokes-Brown, 2012, for a discussion and review of this research) have been of interest to researchers. However, this study took an alternative route to that of identity politics, situating this issue in relation to Latinos' level of integration and assimilation into American society, and the role that political communication predispositions and behaviors play in such process.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study brings an understanding of the interconnected relationships between political predispositions and individual differences, exposure, and engagement in the marketplace of political information, and opinion sharing in social media platforms and offline political engagement. As such, several opportunities for future research could further clarify these relationships and improve on the design and execution of this particular study.

The findings in this study are based on the untested assumption that Latinos lean toward higher levels of WTSC compared with the mainstream American culture. This assumption is problematic not only because there is no existing direct evidence to support this claim, but also because it assumes that this disposition will be present among a group whose monolithic identity can be contested. Latinos, as an ethnic group, consist of heterogeneous subgroups. Latinos in the United States are immigrants from a wide variety of countries; they may be part of a second or third generation of immigrants or even of descended from Mexicans who became Americans after the Mexican-American war. Such diverse roots make any claims and assumptions about a unique Latino identity problematic.

However, although the idea of a pan-ethnic Latino identity may not necessarily be associated with political prescriptions such as WTSC, the experience as a Latino within the social and cultural order of the United States might be. It might be the case that the experience as an ethnic minority translates into perceptions of minority opinion, especially for issues salient to that ethnic group, which would make members of that minority more likely to silence their opinions to avoid social exclusion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Further studies should focus on providing evidence about whether Latinos in the United States are more prone to WTSC, or whether minority experiences—such as discrimination or minority opinion perceptions—play any role in WTSC predispositions.

Part of the relationship we found between WTSC and political expression on social media might be explained in part by the difference between opinion engagement strategies and opinion avoidance strategies (Ho et al., 2013). Future research should examine the extent to which either of these strategies influences the model presented here. Second, while socioeconomic perceptions are likely influential and potentially represent a particularly robust form of social identification (Sanchez, 2006; Sanchez & Vargas, 2016), future work should explore other types of perceptions about connections between one's own racial or ethnic identity and other groups. Additionally, this study took into account only those acculturation processes relative to integration with the host culture without considering the role that maintenance of the original culture might play in political predispositions and behaviors, both on social media and offline.

Finally, because of issues involved in collecting an oversample of Latino participants for the study, there were several biases in the sample that future work could seek to eliminate. Our sample was predominantly female and Democrat and was slightly younger than the U.S. population. Although we were able to control for the influence of these variables, the impact of these characteristics on the data remains an open question. Previous work has suggested that candidate preference is related to political participation (Scheufele & Eveland, 2001); we suggest that those interested in studying Latinos as a subgroup of the population seek to collect data from a sample representative of the demographic characteristics of this population segment.

Conclusions

As the Latino population continues to grow rapidly, and as Latinos carry on with their individual acculturation paths into U.S. society, their use of social media provides an opportunity to observe and mirror the communication habits of the broader U.S. culture—specifically the types of communicative behaviors exhibited relative to politics. This study has shown that social media use is a reflection of this acculturation process but also demonstrates that using social media for political expression can facilitate offline political engagement as well. Potentially, then, leveraging social media engagement can be a meaningful way to motivate offline political participation among a population demographic that lags behind other racial and ethnic groups regarding political engagement.

As low levels of political participation in the United States continue to concern political scholars, finding avenues to boost participation among a growing population segment that holds significant influence over the electoral process can provide a glimmer of hope in a political landscape that can appear dreary at best.

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