New label, different identity? Three experiments on the uniqueness of *Latinx*

Bianca V. Vicuña & Efrén O. Pérez

View supplementary material

Published online: 08 Dec 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

NOTE

Check for updates

New label, different identity? Three experiments on the uniqueness of *Latinx*

Bianca V. Vicuña[a] and Efrén O. Pérez[b]

[a]Department of Political Science, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA; [b]Department of Political Science and Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT
Groups use labels to define what communities stand for. Yet sometimes multiple labels refer to the same group (e.g., *Hispanic, Latino*). Do different labels generate distinct political opinions? Some work suggests that assorted labels evoke substantively similar views, since the attributes that define group members are highly correlated across categories. Other work, though, implies that varied labels can alter the configuration of group attributes in a way that elicits unique attitudes. We use these insights to evaluate *Latinx*: a new pan-ethnic label said to imply more gender-inclusive views. In three experiments, we randomly allocated Latino adults to report attributes that make them unique *individuals* (control) versus *Latinx*, *Latino*, or *Hispanic*. Assignment to the *Latinx* condition consistently increased participants' support for pro-LGBTQ policies, an effect that was most precisely estimated in a meta-analysis of all three experiments. These results suggest that *Latinx* yields meaningful shifts in gender-inclusive opinions, consistent with claims about this label's nature. We discuss our results' implications for ongoing debates about Latinos' self-designations.

Self-designation is a contentious aspect of US ethnoracial politics (Nagel 1996; Wong et al. 2011). Since America's founding, minoritized groups have faced (extra)legal attempts at classifying them (Nobles 2000), often to subordinate them with respect to Whites: the dominant group in America's ethnoracial hierarchy (Masuoka and Junn 2013). Consequently, people of color have vigorously exercised their agency over what to call themselves and define what they stand for (Pérez 2021). Consider ongoing debates over whether *Hispanic*, *Latino*, or *Latinx* is the more appropriate label for individuals with ancestry in Latin America (Beltrán 2010; Guidotti-Hernández 2017). New work suggests these pan-ethnic labels are not mutually exclusive from each other, but rather, used by co-ethnics in different situations (Mora, Perez, and Vargas 2021). Does this mean that these pan-ethnic labels evoke *unique* political opinions among members of this group?

Previous research suggests that different labels produce distinct collective attitudes and behavior (Tajfel et al. 1971), which implies that labels alone are sufficient for

CONTACT Efrén O. Pérez ✉ perezeo@ucla.edu 🖳 Department of Political Science and Psychology, UCLA, 1285 Franz Hall, Los Angeles, Box 951563, CA 90095, USA

individuals to identify with and behave on behalf of an ingroup. Indeed, Henri Tajfel's "minimal group" studies showed that randomly assigning people to groups on the basis of artificial distinctions, such as (over)counting dots, can lead people to display an attitudinal and behavioral bias toward those nestled under their label (i.e., *ingroup favoritism*). Outside of contrived settings, studies show that group labels become politically consequential when they imply specific normative *content* – that is, when they clarify for individuals what "we" stand for (Turner et al. 1987). When a category becomes salient in a particular context, it brings to mind specific considerations in memory that inform one's opinions and behavior as a group member (Zaller 1992).

This brief report threads these insights to empirically inform our knowledge about *Latinx*: a new pan-ethnic label that is presented as a more gender-inclusive alternative to *Hispanic* and *Latino*. We appraise whether the use of *Latinx* causes individuals to express greater support for LGBTQ individuals: a marginalized segment within this larger pan-ethnic group. Scholars trace *Latinx*'s birth to online discussions in the mid-2010s among progressive activists and scholars around issues of gender diversity and inclusion (Salinas and Lozano 2017), with some of these efforts spearheaded by queer-identifying youth in movements seeking to improve the political status and social well-being of LGBTQ undocumented youth (Juárez Pérez 2018; Guidotti-Hernández 2017). Proponents claim that *Latinx* elicits a distinct identity compared to *Latino* and *Hispanic*. They contend that *Latinx* entails, in part, greater gender-inclusivity, as indicated by the *x* in this label, which replaces traditional and highly gendered pan-ethnic labels – i.e., *Latino*, *Hispanic*, and *Latin@* – with one that is more directly welcoming of co-ethnics who are LGBTQ (DeGuzmán 2017).[1]

Nevertheless, empirical evidence for this claim is sparse and mixed (Salinas and Lozano 2017). Some analyses suggest that no more than 3% of US Latino adults apply the label *Latinx* to themselves (Noe-Bustamente, Mora, and Lopez 2020). Yet this is likely a lower bound. Cristina Mora and her colleagues (2020), who use a California survey of Latino adults, report that 25% of respondents refer to themselves as *Latinx*. These authors also show that self-use of *Latinx* is not mutually exclusive of *Latino* or *Hispanic*, with individuals applying these labels to themselves in different social and political settings. Together, these insights imply that insofar as *Latinx* produces unique political effects, it will do so by evoking considerations in memory that are more strongly related to LGBTQ individuals and their marginalization. Therefore, the use of *Latinx* should cause individuals to express greater support for policies that improve the political status of LGBTQ individuals (H1).

It is plausible, however, that *Latinx* yields few unique effects at all. Although *Latinx*, *Latino*, and *Hispanic* are semantically different, each label draws on the same population's politics, which are, on average, left-leaning (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; García Bedolla and Hosam 2021; García and Sanchez 2021). Indeed, similar to how liberal ideology is associated with the use of *Latino* (e.g., Abrajano and Alvarez 2010), use of *Latinx* is also correlated with this ideological orientation (Mora et al. 2020). Thus, it can be challenging for those who view themselves as *Latinx* to express more distinctive opinions about LGBTQ politics (H0), since the ideological perspective of the larger pan-ethnic group trends, in the aggregate, toward a liberal direction.

We test these hypotheses with three experiments on Latino adults that varied each sample's age and setting. Study 1 sampled Latino adults ages 25 years and older, while

Study 2 sampled Latino adults aged 25 years and younger. This variation in age tests whether *Latinx* is more distinctive among younger adults, who have matured as *Latinx* publicly circulates (Juárez Pérez 2018; Salinas and Lozano 2017). Study 3 is a lab study with Latino undergraduates ($N = 304$) at a large Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).[2] This study tests whether *Latinx* effects are driven by younger adults who inhabit a higher education setting, where *Latinx* is highly promoted (DeGuzmán 2017).

Our studies randomly assigned Latino adults to one of four conditions (*control*, *Latinx*, *Latino*, *Hispanic*). If the use of *Latinx* evokes unique political attitudes, then it should yield measurable increases in support for pro-LGBTQ policies based on the mental considerations this label evokes, which we infer from patterns in responses. Insofar as this trend emerges, it will affirm that *Latinx* yields a form of pan-ethnicity that is more gender-inclusive than *Hispanic* or *Latino* (DeGuzmán 2017; Juárez Pérez 2018).

We analyze our studies individually and meta-analytically, finding that those assigned to the *Latinx* condition report increased support for pro-LGBTQ policies, including making restrooms gender-neutral. This pattern is most precisely estimated in a meta-analysis of all three experiments (Goh, Hall, and Rosenthal 2016), indicating that this label evokes a distinct set of considerations aimed at making the larger pan-ethnic group more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals. We interpret these results as one benchmark to guide further empirical work on *Latinx*'s political effects.

Design of studies

All three studies were designed to estimate average treatment effects (ATEs). Studies 1 ($N = 580$, 25 years and older) and 2 ($N = 320$, 25 years and younger) occurred on Prolific, an online platform for academic studies. This study pair was only available to Prolific participants who were self-identified Latinos currently residing in the US, and who met our age thresholds. Study 3 was a lab study with Latino undergraduates at a large HSI ($N = 304$). We collected some pre-treatment data on age and other demographics, which we use to characterize each sample below.[3] We also ensured participant attentiveness by having them report the number of triangles on a screen and write open-ended replies to our manipulation, which guards against bots and other nuisances in online survey experiments (Clifford and Jerit 2014).

All studies randomly allocated Ps to 1 of 4 conditions (instrumentation in A.1). Ps in the control read "participants are being asked to write down attributes that make one a unique individual. Please follow the instructions on the next page to complete this exercise." Ps used three boxes to write attributes. Ps in other conditions reported traits making them *Latinx*, *Latino*, or *Hispanic*. Section A.2 describes coding for these open-ended data, which occurred inductively. This approach assumes that individual replies (e.g., "feminist") reflect specific topics (e.g., *gender-inclusivity*). Our analysis suggests that relative to the control, Ps in the *Latinx* condition expressed more traits related to *gender-inclusivity*, broadly construed.[4]

Post-treatment, Ps expressed their support for policies deemed friendly to LGBTQ concerns. Using a scale from 1-strongly oppose to 7-strongly support, Ps endorsed "Making most public restrooms gender neutral;" "Encouraging the use of gender-neutral language in government proceedings;" "Increasing penalties for hate crimes

toward LGBTQ individuals;" and "Collecting public data on the gender orientation of US residents." We scale these as *pro-LGBTQ policy* ($\alpha = .738$).[5]

We coded all variables to run on a 0–1 interval, allowing us to interpret our coefficients as percentage-point shifts. All *p*-values are two-tailed.[6]

Study 1's results – older Latino adults

This study sampled Latino adults, ages 25 and older, who currently resided in the US. The median age here was 34 years. Most Ps were US-born (82%), with nearly half of them (45%) reporting two foreign-born parents, which aligns with data showing that 2 of every 3 Latinos is native-born (Pew Research Center 2017). Roughly 55% of this sample self-identified as Democrats. Although this falls below the estimated 66% of Latinos who generally self-identify with this party (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010), this difference should not affect our ability to uncover ATEs, if they exist (Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix 2018).

Figure 1 displays point estimates and confidence intervals for *pro-LGBTQ policy* based on whether Ps were assigned to the *Latinx*, *Latino*, or *Hispanic* condition. We find an effect for *Latinx* in the expected positive direction, but one that is statistically unreliable ($.031, p < .252$). In turn, Ps assigned to the *Latino* ($-.021, p < .447$) or *Hispanic* ($= -.010, p < .717$) condition yielded negative effects on this outcome.

Further analyses suggest *Latinx* yields greater support for *pro-LGBTQ policy* when compared exclusively to *Latino* ($.053, p < .046$) and *Hispanic* ($.042, p < .119$), although only the *Latinx|Latino* comparison is reliable. To ensure these results do not reflect false negatives, we focused on participants who reported familiarity with *Latinx* (72% of sample). Figure 2 shows *Latinx* again yields a positive, but statistically unreliable effect ($.042, p < .110$). When paired with our manipulation's open-ended replies, it implies these null results are not a design artifact (see A.2: relative to the control, Ps in *Latinx* condition report more attributes related to *gender inclusivity*).
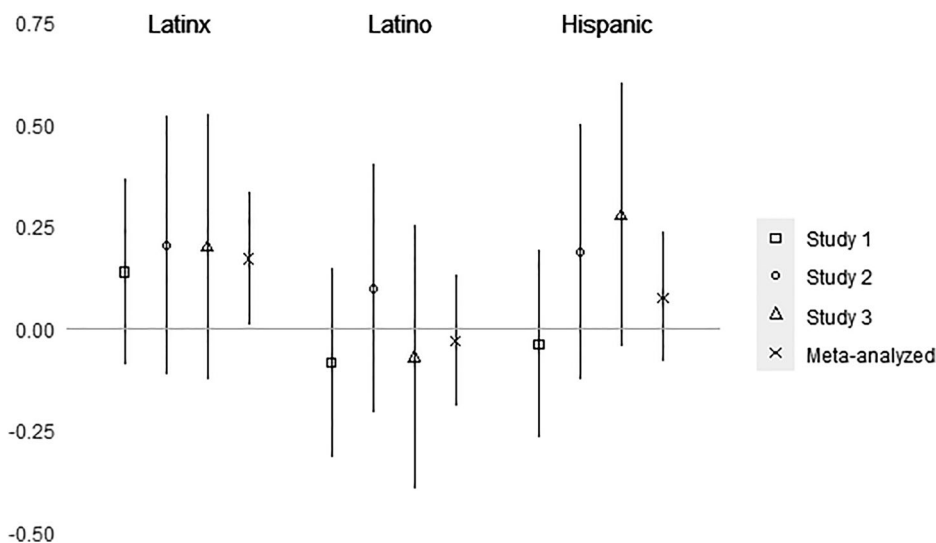

Figure 1. Effect of *Latinx* on support for Pro-LGBTQ Policy.

Study 2's results – young Latino adults

Study 1 finds limited support for *Latinx*'s uniqueness. But perhaps older Latinos are the "wrong" people to examine. Study 2 sampled Latino adults 25 years and under to test whether younger Latinos, who have matured in light of *Latinx*'s creation, are more distinctly impacted. Like Study 1, most participants in Study 2 were US-born (90%), with nearly half of them (47%) reporting two foreign-born parents. About 55% of this sample also reported Democratic partisanship. Finally, although this sample is relatively young, it is one where the prevalence of college-educated individuals is low (15%), consistent with data on the larger Latino population (U.S. Census Bureau 2017).

Figure 1 shows that Ps assigned to the *Latinx* condition were more supportive of *pro-LGBTQ policy* ($\alpha = .724$), but this effect is still unreliable (.046, $p < .196$). Ps assigned to the *Latino* (.021, $p < .530$) or *Hispanic* (.041, $p < .239$) conditions displayed somewhat smaller effects. We also explored comparisons of *Latinx* to our two other labels, finding that *Latinx* is no more distinctive than *Latino* (.024, $p < .471$) or *Hispanic* (.005, $p < .891$). Additionally, Figure 2 shows that among Ps reporting familiarity with *Latinx* (83% of sample), no reliable effect emerges (.046, $p < .190$).

Study 3's results – Latino undergraduates

Study 2 does not support the distinctiveness of *Latinx* among younger Ps. Yet some scholars contend that *Latinx* is the product of discourse in higher education (DeGuzmán 2017). Study 3 is an experiment with Latino undergraduates at an HSI. Here, Ps are mostly native-born (86%) with two foreign-born parents (70%), and who overwhelmingly identified as Democrats (74%). Although all Ps here were currently enrolled undergraduates, this sample is relatively older (median 29 yrs.) and more female (69%) than Study 2.

We detect yet another positive, but unreliable effect for *Latinx* (.039, $p < .222$), as illustrated in Figure 1. Further analyses suggest *Latinx* is marginally more unique compared
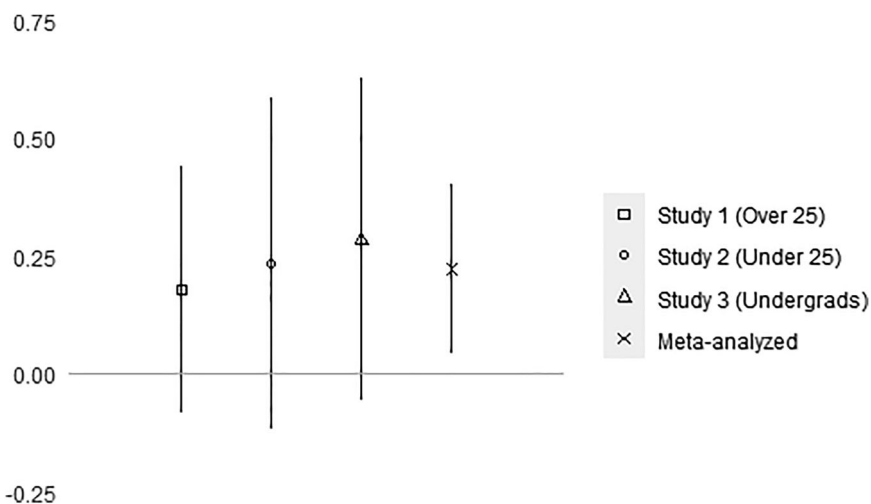

Figure 2. Effect of *Latinx* on support for Pro-LGBTQ Policy among participants familiar with *Latinx* Label.

to *Latino* (.054, *p* < .09), but not *Hispanic* (.015, *p* < .596). Figure 2 then shows that among Ps familiar with *Latinx* (91% of sample), this label yields a positive and marginally reliable effect (.055, *p* < .094).

Meta-analysis of experiments

Our studies suggest the average political effects produced by *Latinx* are consistently in the hypothesized positive direction, but short on statistical significance. We consider here whether a measureable and *reliable* effect exist, but is hard to detect in any single sample of ours. We do this via a meta-analysis (Goh, Hall, and Rosenthal 2016), which boosts statistical power and uses a fixed-effects approach to statistically summarize results across a set of methodologically similar studies like ours by accounting for varied study features (e.g., age thresholds, sample size, survey platform, (non-)educational settings). This approach is recommended "when the author wishes to make a statement about the studies on hand (Goh, Hall, and Rosenthal 2016, 538)."

Our meta-analysis unearths a positive and reliable average effect of *Latinx* on *pro-LGBTQ policy* (*d* = .183, *p* < .026). We present this result as a *d*-value, or standardized mean difference, to clarify the effect size. By this metric, the use of *Latinx* meaningfully increases support for gender-inclusive opinions by nearly a fifth of a standard deviation (i.e., *d* = .183) (section A.4. reports full analyses). Little substantive or statistical import emerges in our meta-analysis of *Latino* and *Hispanic*. Thus, the use of *Latinx* appears to cause individuals to become reliably more supportive of *pro-LGBTQ* policy, with Figure 1 depicting this result.

Implications

Across three studies, we find consistent evidence that *Latinx* uniquely causes increased support for pro-LGBTQ policy in comparison to *Latino* and *Hispanic* – an effect most precisely estimated by our meta-analysis. Going forward, one way to improve on this result is to design experiments that account for self-labeling. Our experiments answer *whether* the use of *Latinx* causes distinctive opinions toward LGBTQ policy, but studies that incorporate participants' preferences for these labels might uncover stronger evidence (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Subsequent work may also productively consider when *Latinx* is preferred to *Latino* or *Hispanic* among members of this pan-ethnic group (Mora, Perez, and Vargas 2021).

What do our findings say about *Latinx*'s nature? Proponents have asserted, with sparse empirical evidence, that *Latinx* entails greater gender-inclusivity than *Latino* and *Hispanic*. Our results suggest this inclusivity is real, as *Latinx* causes individuals to become more supportive of pro-LGBTQ policies. Indeed, section A.3. reports exploratory analyses suggesting that *Latinx* does not boost positive affect toward LGBTQ individuals because these favorable feelings are already high to begin with among our study participants. This implies that the power of *Latinx* partly rests in increasing support for *policies* that impact LGBTQ communities. This should be reassuring for *Latinx*'s advocates, for it suggests some individuals consider this label a viable pathway toward broader community-building. Indeed, *Latinx* presents another option for individuals to express themselves pan-ethnically, depending on the particulars of a situation (Mora, Perez, and

Vargas 2021). Thus, by entering *Latinx* into the menu of pan-ethnic labels, some individuals may feel more included in their larger pan-ethnic group – a major catalyst behind *Latinx*'s original emergence (DeGuzmán 2017; Vidal-Ortíz and Martínez 2018).

Notes

1. Some scholars also suggest that *Latinx* is used by individuals to classify their own gender in non-binary fashion (Vidal-Ortíz and Martínez 2018). We do not empirically address this claim.
2. The US Department of Education defines HSIs as institutions where undergraduate enrollment is at least 25% Hispanic. We also considered running experiments that sampled on the basis of non-binary gender and sexual orientation, but our data-collection platforms did not have the capacity to yield large enough numbers of these individuals for statistical analysis.
3. Since randomization ensures participants in our conditions will be similar on all (un-)observed characteristics, we limit the number of measured pre-treatment covariates.
4. It is plausible that our *Latinx* condition induces *categorization threat*, which occurs when people feel an identity is mis-applied to them. If categorization threat is prevalent in our studies, our *Latinx* treatment should yield negative effects on our outcome. Our inspection of open-ended replies identifies only four Ps across our studies (N = 1204) that expressly rejected the *Latinx* label (e.g., "I do not consider myself Latinx"). Dropping them from our analyses leaves our inferences unchanged (see section A.5).
5. We designed these items tap a broad domain (pro-LGBTQ policy), while minimizing the degree of error that inheres in each single item. Our scale's alpha is consistent with this goal, but future work should develop additional items to improve appraisals of opinion in this realm.
6. To gauge spillover effects beyond *pro-LGBTQ policy*, Ps in each study also expressed their feelings toward LGBTQs and ethnoracial groups. We detail these exploratory analyses in A.3.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

References

Abrajano, Marisa A., and R. Michael Alvarez. 2010. *New Faces, New Voices: The Hispanic Electorate in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Arceneaux, Kevin, and Martin Johnson. 2013. *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Beltrán, Cristina. 2010. *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bureau, U S. 2017. *Facts for Features: 2017 Hispanic Heritage Month*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce.

Clifford, Scott, and Jennifer Jerit. 2014. "Is There a Cost to Convenience? An Experimental Comparison of Data Quality in Laboratory and Online Studies." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 1 (2): 120–131.

Coppock, Alexander, Thomas J. Leeper, and Kevin J. Mullinix. 2018. "Generalizability of Heterogeneous Treatment Effect Estimates Across Samples." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115: 12441–12446.

DeGuzmán, Maria. 2017. "Latinx: Estamos Aqui!, or Being "Latinx" at UNC-Chapel Hill." *Cultural Dynamics* 29 (3): 214–230.

García, John A., and Gabriel R. Sanchez. 2021. *Latino Politics in America: Community, Culture, and Interests*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

García Bedolla, Lisa, and Christian Hosam. 2021. *Latino Politics*. London: Polity Press.

Goh, Jin X., Judith A. Hall, and Robert Rosenthal. 2016. "Mini Meta-Analysis of Your Own Studies: Some Arguments on Why and a Primer on How." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 10 (10): 535–549.

Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole M. 2017. "Affective Communities and Millenial Desires: Latinx, or Why My Computer Won't Recognize Latina/o." *Cultural Dynamics* 29 (3): 141–159.

Juárez Pérez, Melina. 2018. 2 Years After Pulse: How Can Scholars Aid in the Fight Against LGBTQ+ Marginalization? *Politics of Color: Commentary & Reflections on Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*. http://politicsofcolor.com.

Masuoka, Natalie, and Jane Junn. 2013. *The Politics of Belonging*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Mora, G. Cristina, Reuben Perez, and Nicholas Vargas. 2021. "Who Identifies as "Latinx"? The Generational Politics of Ethnoracial Labels." *Social Forces*. Advance Articles.

Mora, G. Cristina, Reuben Perez, Nicholas Vargas. 2021. "Who Identifies as 'Latinx'? The Generational Politics of Ethnoracial Labels." *Social Forces*. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab011.

Nagel, Joane. 1996. *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nobles, Melissa. 2000. *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Noe-Bustamante, Luis, Lauren Mora, and Mark Hugo Lopez. 2020. *About One in Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, But Just 3% Use It*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Pérez, Efrén O. 2021. *Diversity's Child: People of Color and the Politics of Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pew Research Center . 2017. "Tabulations of 2017 American Community Survey (1% PUMS). Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

Salinas, Cristobal, and Adele Lozano. 2017. "Mapping and Recontextualizing the Evolution of the Term *Latinx*: An Environmental Scanning in Higher Education." *Journal of Latinos and Education* 18 (4): 1–14.

Tajfel, Henri, Michael G. Billig, R. P. Bundy, and Claude Flamente. 1971. "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1: 149–178.

Turner, John, Michael Hogg, Penelope Oakes, Stephen Reicher, and Margaret Wetherell. 1987. *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Vidal-Ortíz, Salvador, and Juliana Martínez. 2018. "Latinx Thoughts: Latinidad with an X." *Latino Studies* 16: 384–395.

Wong, Janelle, Karthick Ramakrishnan, Taeku Lee, and Jane Junn. 2011. *Asian American Political Participation: Emerging Constituents and Their Political Identities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Origins and Nature of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.