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Do Pan-Ethnic Categories Work? An Experimental Test of Symbolic Bureaucratic Representation and Latino Identity(-ies)

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Abstract: Studies on symbolic representation suggest that the presence of members from underrepresented groups in government organizations can improve citizens' perceptions of government. While relevant studies in this area have typically treated pan-Latino ethnic background as a singular identity, scholars of representation in other venues argue that identity tied to national origin plays a more significant role in shaping citizens' attitudes. We report results from a pre-registered survey experiment conducted with a sample of 936 Latino respondents, aimed at testing whether using a pan-Latino identity is appropriate when examining how symbolic representation shapes government perceptions among individuals from different Latin American backgrounds. Findings suggest that pan-ethnic identity increases approval and perceived efficacy of the individual police officer encountered, but neither pan-ethnic identity nor identity based on shared national origin significantly affect trust in the broader institution of the police. We discuss the implications of these findings.

Keywords: Symbolic representation, government perceptions, experiments
Supplements: Open data, Preregistration

Symbolic representation suggests that the mere presence of an underrepresented group in a government bureaucracy can have a transformative effect on how citizens perceive and interact with government. Pan-Latino ethnic background has often been treated as a singular, unified identity in the study of representation behavior by bureaucrats (see Favero 2024 for a very recent example) and the response to descriptive representation by citizens. Alternatively, studies of symbolic representation in other contexts have argued that identity tied to national origin may have a larger impact on political preferences than any type of Pan-Ethnic identity (i.e. Latino) (see Cuevas-Molina, I. and Nteta 2023).

This study explores whether it is appropriate to use a pan-Latino identity when examining the effect of bureaucratic representation on the perceptions of individuals from diverse Latin American backgrounds. We designed a between subjects survey experiment to investigate whether Latino subjects view police officers and departments more favorably when interacting with someone who shares an identity based on national origin with them versus someone who shares only a pan-ethinc identity or someone who shares no ethnic identity. The experiment was preregistered and fielded in a subject pool comprised of 936 self-identified Mexican-American, Cuban-American, and Puerto Rican respondents.

Findings suggest that a pan-ethnic identity improves assessments of the individual police officer presented in the scenario, while neither pan-ethnic identity nor identity based on shared national origin are effective in shaping trust in the broader institution of the police. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these results for studies of symbolic bureaucratic representation and of future research necessary to confirm and add nuance to our results.

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Symbolic Bureaucratic Representation

In her foundational work, Pitkin distinguished between representation as "standing for" and "acting for" another, or between what a representative looks like and what they do (Pitkin, 1967). In the literature on bureaucratic behavior, this spawned a focus on the conditions under which "passive" representation would translate to "active" representation on the part of bureaucrats (see Meier, 1993). In an often distinct literature concerned with citizen *perceptions* of public organizations and programs, the key question became the relationship between descriptive and symbolic representation, or the degree to which people being represented believe that government officials who look like them actually act in a way that benefits their social group and, thus, view representative agencies more favorably (See Thielemann & Stewart, 1996).

Symbolic bureaucratic representation suggests that citizens trust representative organizations more and perceive them more positively. The expected linkage between representation, attitudes, and behavior has been used post-hoc to explain observed outcomes across a host of public programs (see Gade & Wilkins, 2013; Grissom et al. 2009; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006; Hong, 2017; Lim, 2006). There is also a growing body of work that directly tests for, and finds evidence of, symbolic representation in diverse bureaucratic settings. For example, Riccucci et al. (2016) find that female subjects are more likely to report willingness to recycle when a hypothetical recycling authority has more female employees. Similarly, numerous studies have found evidence that citizens view police actions more positively when the force is more descriptively representative of their group (see for example Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2009; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, & Lavena, 2014). Scholars have found similar evidence of the impact of gender or racial match between parents or children and teachers in k-12 education (Doornkamp et al., 2019).

A recent meta-analysis examining 28 studies and almost 300 effect sizes concluded that there is a "statistically significant, albeit weak, association between passive bureaucratic representation and favorable responses from citizens" (Wang, 2025). The weakness of that association suggests that findings are not universally consistent. Null findings in areas such as emergency preparedness have led to the conclusion that there is likely variation in the relationship between passive representation and citizen perceptions of government across policy areas. Others have found such realtionships are conditional on factors such as previous organizational performance (Schuck et al., 2021) or on the expectations of citizens regarding the behavior of bureaucrats from different groups (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2025). Wang (2025) concludes that the translation of passive to symbolic representation is more easily observed at the street, rather than the managerial, level.

Bureaucratic Representation and the Latino Community

The majority of studies of symbolic representation have explored the impact of passive representation of women and black Americans in bureaucratic settings. However, authors have also examined whether the presence of Latino bureaucrats influences the perceptions of public organizations among members of that group (see for example Headley et al., 2021; Hawes, 2021; Xu, 2023; Lee & Nicholson-Crotty, 2023). Like other studies of symbolic representation, these studies assume that shared identity facilitates the translation of passive representation into positive feelings about the organization.

In order to make that mechanism feasible, the work has also borrowed a fundamental assumption from the broader representative bureaucracy literature concerned with the behavior of Latino bureaucrats; namely, that there exists a pan-Hispanic or pan-Latino identity. For decades, studies of representative bureaucracy have used the census designation of "Hispanic" ethnicity to desig-

nate a single identity group for both representatives in public organizations and those being represented within the population or client base (see for example Meier, 1993; Hindera, 1993; Wilkins & Williams, 2009; Rocha & Hawes, 2009; Marvel & Resh, 2015; Hawes, 2022).[1] Testing representative bureaucracy hypotheses using "Hispanic" to delineate relevant groups of bureaucrats and citizens requires the assumption that the individuals who identify as that ethnicity share a common set of experiences and sense of linked fate.

Some authors have acknowledged this potential variation in the commitment to a "pan-Latino identity" across bureaucrats, which may influence representative behavior (see Meier, 2019) and several studies have suggested the need to consider of country of origin rather than just ethnicity (e.g., Bishu & Kennedy, 2020; Vinopal & Holt, 2019). To our knowledge, however, only one study to date has tested if clients experience better outcomes when represented by someone that shares ancestral national origin and the results do suggest a small performance increase for students whose teacher shares that characteristic, particularly for those students who are English language learners (Grissom et al., 2023). It is important to note, however, that Grissom et al. (2023) do not test the *relative* impact of country of origin match between teacher and student and a more general pan-Latino ethnic match.

Challenges to the Concept of a Pan-Latino Identity

Grissom et al.'s (2023) work is consistent with the literature challenging the strength of a pan-ethnic identity among Latinos. Previous research has shown positive correlations between the presence of a Latino political candidate and support among Latino voters (see for example Stokes-Brown, 2006; Manzano & Sanchez, 2010; Barreto, 2007; McConnaughy, White, Leal, & Casellas, 2010). However, studies of shared identity or group consciousness among Latinos have produced mixed conclusions. Some have demonstrated that Latinos may develop a pan-ethnic identity as a result of experiences with racial discrimination, the desire and ability to navigate the racial hierarchy in the United States, and systems of racial classification in personal country of origin (Golash-Boza, 2006; Darity, 2005; García Bedolla, 2005).

Research has suggested that Latinos often have stronger identification with their national-origin identities when compared with their pan-ethnic identity (Rodriguez, 2000; Landale & Oropesa 2002; Golash-Boza, 2006). Cuevos-Molina & Nteta (2023) develop and find evidence for the expectations that Latino voters will prefer candidates with which they share national origin (co-ethnics) over those with whom they share only pan-ethnic identity, but that they will prefer both co- and pan-ethnic candidates over those from another ethnicity. Weaker attachment to a pan-ethnic relative to a nation-centric identity is assumed to arise from the way in which the former originated in this nation. The label "Hispanic" was first used in the 1970 census as an attempt to more easily classify, and some suggest erase variation among, numerous ethnic groups. It was not a term that grew organically from the Spanish speaking communities within the country (Mora, 2014; Padilla, 1985). This new pan-ethnic designation has less meaning when compared to an individual's ethnic or national identity, which is anchored in those communities and shared experiences (Beltrán, 2010; Le Espiritu, 2016; Rodgriguez, 2000). This results in weaker perceptions of "linked fate," the feeling their well-being is closely linked to outcomes for their demographic group, with the pan-ethnic group, which is a key causal mechanism for the translation of social into political identity (Lee, 2008;

[1] See Strader et al. (2023) for a discussion of the treating race as "natural" or as a social construction in the representative bureaucracy literature.

Sanchez, 2006; Burnside & Rodriguez, 2009; Sanchez & Masuoka, 2010; Gay, Hochschild, White, 2016; Segura, 2012; Sanchez & Vargas, 2016).[2]

It is also important to note that some scholars suggest that there may be an even broader identity than pan-Latino, which can influence political preferences and behavior. Specifically, they argue that a person of color identity may be triggered when Latinos believe they are perceived as foreign or inferior in the same way as other groups (See Chin et al., 2023; Perez, 2021) and that this solidarity can increase support for policies that benefit minority groups other than their own. Additionally, Perez et al. (2025) argue that a nontrivial proportion of Latinos may actually elevate their American identity over narrow or broad ethnic identities and that this ordering can influence political choices such as partisan identification. We do not test explicitly for a person of color identity in this study, but introduce this body of work to emphasize that existing conclusions about the linkage between social and political identity among Latinos are inconsistent.

Given evidence that a pan-ethnic identity may influence political choices, but that it is may have a weaker impact than identity linked to national origin, we offer the following hypotheses regarding the relationship between identity and symbolic representation among Latinos.

Hypothesis 1: *Subjects will view actions of a government organization more positively (in terms of support, trust, and perceived effectiveness) when that organization employs someone who shares a pan-Ethnic identity (i.e. Hispanic or Latino) with them.*

Hypothesis 2: *Subjects will view actions of a government organization more positively (in terms of support, trust, and perceived effectiveness) when that organization employs someone who shares an identity based on national origin with them.*

Hypothesis 3: *Shared identity arising from shared country of origin will have a larger impact on subjects' positive assessment of a government organization than does shared pan-ethnic identity.*

Methods

To test these pre-registered hypotheses, we designed a survey experiment and recruited a sample of 936 participants from the U.S. through Qualtrics. To be eligible for the survey, respondents had to be located in the U.S. and self-identify as Latino/Hispanic. Quota sampling ensured an even distribution of male and female respondents. Additionally, we agreed with our provider that the sample should be equally distributed by personal or familial country of origin, including: Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. The rationale behind this decision is to ensure a sufficiently high number of respondents shared the same country of origin as the street-level bureaucrat described in the scenario – outlined below – while still maintaining variation. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection on February 4, 2025, from the Indiana University Human Research Protection Program.

Experimental scenario

In the experimental vignette, participants are asked to imagine that a police officer knocks on their door. As soon as they open it, the police officer immediately explains that she is making a community policing visit in a non-enforcement capacity. During the interaction, the officer communicates

[2] In the case of Black Americans, there is significant evidence that members of this minoritized group share a sense of linked fate, where individuals assume that their well-being is closely linked to outcomes for the group, which facilitates the translation of demographic identity into political action or perceptions (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; Wright Austen et al. 2011). Authors have expressed concerns over the applicability of the concept of linked fate to other minoritized groups (McClain 2009).

respect by initiating a formal greeting. Participants learn some personal information about the officer. The officer then explains that the visit is an equal-status engagement with the goal of improving safety in the community and encouraging residents to provide feedback about policing and neighborhood issues. The officer also shares a personal example of the benefits of community policing from her time in another community and how a resident there helped her solve a crime and identify a shooter. The officer attributed this success to the rapport she had established with the residents in her former district, and she is now trying to establish similar relationships with residents in her newly assigned district.

The text of the experimental vignettes and the items measuring our outcomes are included in the Appendix. In each scenario, we manipulate personal information about the officer regarding her name and background. We adopt a between-subjects design, such that each participant is randomly assigned to only one scenario.

Manipulation and operationalization

The main variable we manipulate is personal information about the officer, specifically her name and background. We have three experimental conditions:

1. The first experimental group is a control group in which participants learn that the officer's name is Carrol Miller, her family is originally from the Midwest, and she has worked as a police officer for nine years.

2. Participants in the second experimental group learn that the officer's name is Luna Garcia, her family is originally from Mexico. Her parents moved to the U.S. before she was born and she has worked as a police officer for nine years.

3. The third experimental group is exposed to the same information as the second group; however, they learn that Luna's family is originally from Puerto Rico rather than Mexico.[3]

In sum, based on our sample of Latino/Hispanic respondents and the experimental manipulation, we rely on two main explanatory variables to test our hypotheses. First, a dummy variable compares Luna to Carrol and captures the overall effect of sharing the same ethnicity as the officer on our outcomes. The second dummy variable indicates whether respondents also share the officer's country of origin, allowing us to disentangle this effect from that of the broader pan-ethnic Latino category and assess their relative impact.

Outcomes

After exposing participants to the experimental vignette, we measure our outcome variables adapting our operationalizations from studies measuring the same outcomes (e.g., de Fine Licht et al. 2022; John et al. 2023).

- *Approval* – We ask participants to indicate, on a scale from one to five, to what extent they would approve or disapprove the police officer's approach to community policing described in the scenario.

[3] We realized during the peer-review process that we had included a typo in the vignette. We meant to state that Luna's parents moved to the U.S. after Luna was born, not before. We got IRB approval and ran a quick data collection with 507 respondents, recruited using the same criteria through Centiment, and confirmed that manipulating this piece of information does not have any major effect on our estimates.

- *Perceived effectiveness* – On a scale from one to five, we measure perceived effectiveness of the police officer's approach to community policing described in the scenario.
- *Trust in the police* – On a scale from one to five, we measure to what extent participants trust police in their community.

Manipulation checks and control variables

Following the items measuring our outcome variables, participants are asked to respond to two manipulation checks to verify that they read information about the police officer and understood it. These included a question about the name of police officer described in the scenario, which could be either Carrol or Luna, and one about the country of origin of the police officer, which could be either the U.S., or Mexico, or Puerto Rico. About 96 percent (N = 901) of respondents correctly recalled the name of the officer, while 89 percent (N = 837) correctly recalled the officer's country of origin. About 86 percent (N = 802) correctly recalled both. Following best practices in social sciences (Mutz 2021), we keep all respondents in the analysis without dropping those who failed manipulation checks, as internal validity may be compromised if attrition patterns differ across experimental groups. To assess the randomization process, we included the following control variables: gender, age, education, ethnicity, income, country of origin, generation of immigration, employment status, and political ideology. The Appendix reports the complete list of our measures.

Results

Table 1 reports the demographic characteristics of our sample and outcomes' averages, as well as the results from a series of ANOVAs testing their balance across experimental groups and across respondents' country of origin. As expected, given the random assignment, the groups are comparable across experimental conditions, and we did not detect any significant differences at the 0.05 level. However, groups are not balanced across respondents' country of origin. More specifically, Cuban Americans are significantly younger, more educated, more likely to be a dual ethnicity, more likely to be first generation immigrants, and less likely to be unemployed. These differences are not surprising, given that we did not impose any quotas on the three groups. Nonetheless, they can be important in explaining our results.

Table 2 reports results from linear regressions testing the effect of sharing a Latino identity with the police officer on citizens' perceptions. Compared to the non-Latina police officer, Hispanic citizens encountering the Latina officer report significantly higher levels of approval and – marginally non-significant ($p = 0.117$) – higher levels of perceived effectiveness regarding the officer's approach to community policing. We do not detect any significant difference in overall trust in the local police. In other words, Hypothesis 1 is only partially confirmed.

It is important to note that the first two outcomes refer to the specific approach to community policing adopted by the officer described in the scenario, while the third refers more generally to the police in the respondent's community.

Table 1: Sample demographics, balance tests, and outcomes' average by group

	Overall sample	Carrol, Midwest	Luna, Mexico	Luna, Puerto Rico	*p-value*	Mexicans	Puerto Ricans	Cubans	*p-value*
N	*936*	*292*	*335*	*309*		*312*	*311*	*313*	
Mexican	0.33	0.34	0.34	0.32	0.9				
Puerto Rican	0.33	0.37	0.30	0.33	0.119				
Cuban	0.33	0.29	0.36	0.34	0.143				
Female	0.51	0.54	0.5	0.48	0.276	0.51	0.54	0.47	0.243
Age	39.06 (13.837)	39.38 (14.189)	39.21 (13.663)	38.6 (13.721)	0.76	41.69 (13.330)	40.38 (14.023)	35.14 (13.312)	0.000
Some college degree or higher	0.72	0.77	0.7	0.7	0.058	0.67	0.68	0.82	0.000
Dual ethnicity	0.36	0.4	0.35	0.34	0.223	0.39	0.53	0.18	0.000
First generation	0.14	0.12	0.15	0.16	0.25	0.06	0.14	0.24	0.000
Income	61,448 (43,601)	61,559 (42,919)	62,792 (45,452)	59,887 (42,260)	0.7	60,906 (42,467)	60,741 (44,235)	62,692 (44,191)	0.825
Unemployed	0.18	0.15	0.2	0.19	0.351	0.21	0.25	0.08	0.000
Conservative*	0.28	0.26	0.28	0.29	0.788	0.28	0.29	0.26	0.805
Approval	2.67 (1.193)	2.57 (1.192)	2.68 (1.197)	2.74 (1.188)	0.2	2.70 (1.242)	2.54 (1.182)	2.77 (1.145)	0.042
Perceived effectiveness	3.61 (1.200)	3.52 (1.162)	3.63 (1.206)	3.67 (1.226)	0.28	3.60 (1.218)	3.48 (1.199)	3.74 (1.171)	0.022
Trust in the police	3.06 (1.376)	3.07 (1.319)	3.11 (1.427)	3.01 (1.373)	0.76	3.34 (1.446)	3.21 (1.376)	2.64 (1.196)	0.000

Standard deviations between parentheses (not reported for binary variables)
* This indicates the proportion of respondents selecting either "very conservative" or "somewhat conservative", excluding 29 respondents who selected "I prefer not to say."

Table 2: Effect of Latino identity of the police officer

	Approval	Perceived effectiveness	Trust in police
N	***936***	***936***	***936***
Luna	0.14*	0.13	-0.01
	(0.084)	(0.083)	(0.095)
Constant	2.57***	3.52***	3.07***
	(0.070)	(0.068)	(0.077)

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05; * p-value < 0.1

Table 3 focuses on the effects of sharing a country of origin with the police officer on citizens' perceptions. We present models both with and without control variables, since groups are unbalanced across country of origin, which may affect our estimates. Country of origin is not randomly distributed across our respondents. Additionally, Cuban American respondents never share the police officer's country of origin in the vignette, which may affect the results if they systematically evaluate the police officer's approach – and the police in general – in a different way. As shown, we do not detect any significant differences in approval or perceived effectiveness of the community policing approach between respondents who encountered a police officer from their own country and

those who encountered one from a different country. Results remain unchanged when accounting for demographics. However, compared to Hispanic respondents who encountered an officer from a different country, those who interacted with an officer from their own country report significantly higher levels of trust in the police. This coefficient becomes insignificant once control variables are added to the model. The negative coefficient for Cuban respondents suggests that this group is driving the results in the model estimated without control variables. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not confirmed.

It is interesting to note the coefficients on education. Highly educated Hispanic respondents — those with a college degree or higher — evaluate the specific approach adopted by the police officer more positively than Hispanic respondents without a college degree. However, the relationship is reversed when it comes to trust in the police.

Table 3: Effect of shared country of origin

	Approval			**Perceived effectiveness**			**Trust in police**		
N	***936***	***906***	***906***	***936***	***906***	***906***	***936***	***906***	***906***
Shared country of origin	0.00	0.05	0.10	-0.07	-0.04	0.01	0.26**	0.14	-0.05
	(0.094)	(0.098)	(0.105)	(0.093)	(0.099)	(0.105)	(0.109)	(0.115)	(0.122)
Cuban			0.15			0.13			-0.50***
			(0.096)			(0.950)			(105)
Female		0.02	0.03		-0.10	-0.10		0.20**	0.19**
		(0.081)	(0.081)		(0.081)	(0.081)		(0.090)	(0.089)
Age		-0.00	-0.00		-0.00	-0.00		0.01***	0.01**
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
College		0.18**	0.16*		0.21**	0.19**		-0.28***	-0.22**
		(0.092)	(0.092)		(0.093)	(0.093)		(0.102)	(0.102)
Dual ethnicity		-0.04	-0.01		-0.06	-0.03		0.18*	0.08
		(0.084)	(0.086)		(0.085)	(0.086)		(0.099)	(0.102)
First generation		-0.01	-0.04		0.02	-0.00		-0.21	-0.11
		(0.115)	(0.117)		(0.115)	(0.116)		(0.128)	(0.127)
Income		0	0		0	0		0	0
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Unemployed		-0.14	-0.13		-0.10	-0.09		0.14	0.09
		(0.113)	(0.113)		(0.114)	(0.114)		(0.133)	(0.131)
Conservative		0.03	0.03		0.20**	0.20**		-0.23**	-0.23**
		(0.088)	(0.088)		(0.089)	(0.089)		(0.095)	(0.094)
Constant	2.70***	2.60***	2.49***	3.62***	3.56***	3.48***	3.00***	2.76***	3.06***
	(0.044)	(0.157)	(0.168)	(0.045)	(0.152)	(0.162)	(0.051)	(0.172)	(0.187)

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05; * p-value < 0.1

Table 4 reports results from the full models, which include both of our main independent variables: the Latino identity of the police officer and shared country of origin. The results confirm the overall patterns outlined above, even when each of the two variables is held constant. In sum, shared ethnicity has a positive effect on approval and perceived effectiveness of the approach adopted by the police officer, but no effect on overall trust in the police. Shared country of origin has no effect on our outcomes once demographic variables are controlled for.

Additionally, to assess our third hypothesis, we statistically test, for each outcome, whether the coefficient for Latino identity differs significantly from that for shared country of origin using Wald tests of the null hypothesis that the two coefficients are equal. Contrary to our expectations, the effect of shared identity on approval and perceived effectiveness of the community policing approach is larger than that of shared country of origin – although the differences are not statistically significant ($p = 0.30$ and $p = 0.11$, respectively). In sum, Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed.

Table 4: Complete models including both Latino identity of the police officer and shared country of origin

	Approval			**Perceived effectiveness**			**Trust in police**		
N	***936***	***906***	***906***	***936***	***906***	***906***	***936***	***906***	***906***
Luna	0.16*	0.15*	0.13	0.18**	0.16*	0.14	-0.11	-0.09	-0.01
	(0.090)	(0.092)	(0.094)	(0.090)	(0.092)	(0.094)	(0.102)	(0.103)	(0.104)
Shared country of origin	-0.06	-0.01	0.04	-0.15	-0.11	-0.06	0.31***	0.17	-0.05
	(0.101)	(0.105)	(0.115)	(0.101)	(0.107)	(0.116)	(0.118)	(0.124)	(0.134)
Cuban			0.12			0.10			-0.50***
			(0.098)			(0.097)			(0.107)
Female		0.03	0.03		-0.09	-0.09		0.20**	0.19**
		(0.081)	(0.081)		(0.081)	(0.081)		(0.090)	(0.089)
Age		-0.00	-0.00		-0.00	-0.00		0.01***	0.01**
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
College		0.19**	0.17*		0.21**	0.20**		-0.29***	-0.22**
		(0.092)	(0.093)		(0.093)	(0.093)		(0.103)	(0.103)
Dual ethnicity		-0.03	-0.01		-0.05	-0.03		0.17*	0.0.08
		(0.084)	(0.086)		(0.085)	(0.086)		(0.100)	(0.102)
First generation		-0.02	-0.04		0.01	0.01		-0.20	-0.11
		(0.115)	(0.117)		(0.114)	(0.116)		(0.128)	(0.127)
Income		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Unemployed		-0.15	-0.13		-0.10	-0.10		0.15	0.09
		(0.113)	(0.113)		(0.114)	(0.114)		(0.133)	(0.131)
Conservative		0.03	0.03		0.20**	0.20**		-0.23**	-0.23**
		(0.088)	(0.088)		(0.089)	(0.089)		(0.095)	(0.094)
Constant	2.57***	2.48***	2.42***	3.52***	3.45***	3.40***	3.07***	2.82***	3.05***
	(0.070)	(0.173)	(0.179)	(0.068)	(0.165)	(0.171)	(0.077)	(0.189)	(0.198)

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05; * p-value < 0.1

Discussion and conclusion

Research on symbolic bureaucratic representation has largely assumed a shared pan-Latino identity that helps to translate descriptive representation into higher levels of trust in and approval for government agencies. That assumption is largely shared by scholars who study active representation by bureaucrats but is far more contested in research on representation in electoral settings and work focused more explicitly on identity and group consciousness within the Latino Community. That work, as well as one very recent study in representative bureaucracy, has suggested that Latinos

may have some pan-Ethnic identity, but may identify more strongly with persons of similar national origin, what Cuevos-Molina and Nteta (2023) term co-ethnics.

Based on that work, we hypothesized that Latino subjects in our preregistered experiment would feel more positively about an individual police officer and the department that hired them if that officer was also Latino, and that the positive effect would be even larger if the officer was from the country from which they or their family had emigrated. Analyses of a sample containing Cuban-American, Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican subjects provide partial support for these hypotheses. Results suggest that pan-ethnic identity increases approval and perceived efficacy of an individual police officer, while shared country of origin does not seem to play a significant role in changing Hispanic respondents' perceptions. Moreover, trust in the broader institution of the police does not vary significantly by pan-ethnic identity or shared country of origin.

Our results do not confirm the insight from recent work on symbolic representation in electoral settings that both pan-ethnic and co-ethnic identity influence Latino subject's assessments of and responses to government. This difference from previous studies may arise because of differences in the translation of descriptive to symbolic representation in bureaucratic versus electoral settings. It might also be due in part to the fact that we ask subjects to evaluate both the individual representative and the institution they represent, which work in other settings has not. Determining the cause of differences across governmental settings suggests an opportunity for future research.

It is also plausible that identity based on shared national origin may produce different effects depending on the specific country, which we are unable to explore due to low statistical power. Moreover, other individual characteristics may explain some heterogeneity in attitudes. For example, the work by Pérez and colleagues (2025) suggests that prioritizing ethnic or national identity is itself an effect of individuals' beliefs about the role of race in their lives. It may therefore be associated with political preferences: Democrats are viewed as a diverse party that advocates for people of color and appeals to voters who prioritize ethnic identity, whereas Republicans are seen as a more demographically homogeneous coalition that champions racially conservative politics and appeals to voters who prioritize national identity. The fact that less than one-third of our sample of Hispanic voters self-identify as conservative may explain the limited impact of national identity on our outcomes. Future research could further explore these heterogeneous effects by relying on larger samples. Importantly, the work by Pérez and colleagues focuses on a variety of ethnic groups (e.g., Carter and Pérez 2016; Pérez et al. 2019; Pérez et al. 2025), suggesting that our research questions apply not only to the Hispanic group but also to other ethnic groups, which may be investigated in future studies.

Our results also suggest possible further research on shared identities, focusing on the *different* ways in which citizens evaluate government performance. We measured approval of the police officer's approach to community policing, the perceived effectiveness of the approach, and trust in the police without ranking the relative importance or fundamentality of these concepts. We chose to do so because the direction of the causal relationship between trust and perceived efficacy has been ambiguous in most previous studies (Belardinelli, 2024; van der Meer, 2018; Van Ryzin, 2007). However, very recent research by Xiao et al (2024) suggests that trust in government is causally prior to, and thus influences, evaluations of the performance of individual bureaucrats, programs, or agencies. If trust represents a more foundational evaluation of government than perceived effectiveness, then our results may suggest that a pan-ethnic identity influences citizens' evaluations of government only at the margin or in specific encounters, without changing broader attitudes towards the institution. Obviously, however, more research is necessary to disentangle the effects of different types of shared identity on different metrics used to evaluate government.

Our study suggests that the near exclusive focus on pan-ethnic identity may not have led to incomplete or inaccurate conclusions in the literature on symbolic bureaucratic representation and

representative bureaucracy. Nonetheless, some of our results do suggest that previous work may have masked the importance of identity based on shared national origin within the Latino community, as well as potential interactions between things like education and ethnic identity. Previous work (see Prerez at al., 2025) suggests that, in addition to these factors, future work on symbolic representation should also better incorporate variation in the salience of ethnicity for individual citizens when assessing the impact of representation.

Limitations and future research

To conclude, several limitations should be acknowledged for a correct interpretation of our findings, which also point to potential directions for future research. As is common with experimental designs, our study is not immune to threats to generalizability. In constructing our scenarios, we had to make specific choices regarding the characteristics of the police officers, and future research may test whether our findings depend on those choices. For example, scholars could examine what happens if the police officer is not female, if the Hispanic American officer's country of origin differs from Mexico or Puerto Rico, or if the officer is from the South rather than the Midwest. Additionally, in our scenarios, Luna was clearly a first generation immigrant while there was no information about Carrol immigration status.

A second set of limitations concerns our sample of participants. We limited recruitment to Hispanic respondents from three specific countries, namely Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, which may again affect the generalizability of our findings. In this regard, the fact that Cuban American respondents consistently trust the police less than their Mexican and Puerto Rican counterparts suggests that such differences merit further exploration. Related to this point, pre-tests that ask respondents how they perceive different racial and ethnic groups can help identify potential differences in baseline perceptions and strengthen our understanding of treatment effects. Finally, our sample size did not provide sufficient power to conduct subgroup analyses and test whether average treatment effects were moderated by other variables.

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Appendix

Experimental vignettes [The text in italics displays our experimental manipulations]

Experimental group 1 – Carrol from the Midwest

Imagine a police officer knocks on your door. As soon as you open it, she immediately explains that she is making a community policing visit in a non-enforcement capacity: "Everything is okay. No one is in trouble, and everyone is safe."

During the interaction, the officer communicates respect by initiating a formal greeting. Her name is *Carrol Miller*.

You learn that *Carrol's family is originally from the Midwest* and she has worked as a police officer for nine years. She has recently been assigned to your district.

Carrol explains that the visit is an equal-status engagement with the goal of improving safety in your shared community and encouraging residents to provide feedback about policing and neighborhood issues. *Carrol* shares a personal example of the benefits of community policing from her time in another community. In 2019, a cop was shot multiple times, and *Carrol* was the one who solved the crime. She attributed this success to the rapport she had established with the residents in her former district. They held her in high regard and trusted her to protect their identities. After the shooting, someone called the station and left a number, saying they had information but would only speak to "*Carrol*, *the lady that came by my house*." The caller later informed on the shooter, and *Carrol* was able to solve the crime.

She is now trying to establish similar relationships with residents in her newly assigned district. *Carrol* ends the interaction by giving you a personalized business card with her work-issued cell phone number.

Experimental group 2 – Luna from Mexico

Imagine a police officer knocks on your door. As soon as you open it, she immediately explains that she is making a community policing visit in a non-enforcement capacity: "Everything is okay. No one is in trouble, and everyone is safe."

During the interaction, the officer communicates respect by initiating a formal greeting. Her name is *Luna Garcia*.

You learn that *Luna's family is originally from Mexico and that her parents moved to the U.S. before she was born. She has been living in the U.S. for the last sixteen years*, and has worked as a police officer for nine years. She has recently been assigned to your district.

Luna explains that the visit is an equal-status engagement with the goal of improving safety in your shared community and encouraging residents to provide feedback about policing and neighborhood issues. *Luna* shares a personal example of the benefits of community policing from her time in another community. In 2019, a cop was shot multiple times, and *Luna* was the one who solved the crime. She attributed this success to the rapport she had established with the residents in her former district. They held her in high regard and trusted her to protect their identities. After the shooting, someone called

the station and left a number, saying they had information but would only speak to "*Luna*, *the lady from Mexico*." The caller later informed on the shooter, and *Luna* was able to solve the crime.

She is now trying to establish similar relationships with residents in her newly assigned district. *Luna* ends the interaction by giving you a personalized business card with her work-issued cell phone number.

Experimental group 3 – Luna from Puerto Rico

Imagine a police officer knocks on your door. As soon as you open it, she immediately explains that she is making a community policing visit in a non-enforcement capacity: "Everything is okay. No one is in trouble, and everyone is safe."

During the interaction, the officer communicates respect by initiating a formal greeting. Her name is *Luna Garcia*.

You learn that *Luna's family is originally from Puerto Rico and that her parents moved to the U.S. before she was born. She has been living in the U.S. for the last sixteen years*, and has worked as a police officer for nine years. She has recently been assigned to your district.

Luna explains that the visit is an equal-status engagement with the goal of improving safety in your shared community and encouraging residents to provide feedback about policing and neighborhood issues. *Luna* shares a personal example of the benefits of community policing from her time in another community. In 2019, a cop was shot multiple times, and *Luna* was the one who solved the crime. She attributed this success to the rapport she had established with the residents in her former district. They held her in high regard and trusted her to protect their identities. After the shooting, someone called the station and left a number, saying they had information but would only speak to "*Luna*, *the lady from Puerto Rico*." The caller later informed on the shooter, and *Luna* was able to solve the crime.

She is now trying to establish similar relationships with residents in her newly assigned district. *Luna* ends the interaction by giving you a personalized business card with her work-issued cell phone number.

Outcome variables

"Would you approve or disapprove of *Luna's* [*Carrol's*] approach to community policing described in the scenario? {Strongly approve, Somewhat approve, Neither approve nor disapprove, Somewhat disapprove, Strongly disapprove}"

"Do you agree or disagree that *Luna's* [*Carrol's*] approach to community policing described in the scenario would help keep your district safe? {Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree}"

"How much do you trust police in your community? {None at all, A little, A moderate amount, A lot, A great deal}"

Manipulation checks

"What is the name of the officer in the scenario you just read about? {Luna, Carrol, Mackenzie, Berit}"

"Where is Luna's [Carrol's] family originally from? {Mexico, Puerto Rico, Midwest, Venezuela, Costa Rica}"

Control variables

Gender. – "Which best describes your gender? {Female, Male, Non-binary, Other, I Prefer not to say}"

Age – "What is your age? {18-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, 41-45, 46-50, 51-55, 56-60, 61-65, 66 or older, I prefer not to say}"

Education – "What is the highest level of education you have completed? {Less than high school, High school diploma, GED, or equivalent, Some college, Associate's degree or equivalent, Bachelor's degree or equivalent, Master's or professional degree, Doctorate, I prefer not to say}"

Race/Ethnicity – "What is your race/ethnicity? Check all that apply {Native Americcan or Alaskan Native, Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White or Caucasian, Latinx or Hispanic, Other, I prefer not to say}"

Income – "Last year, what was your annual household income from all sources, before taxes? {Under $10,000, $10,000 - $24,999, $25,000 - $39,999, $40,000 - $54,999, $55,000 - $69,999, $70,000 - $84,999, $85,000 - $99,999, $100,000 - $124,999, $125,000 - $149,999, $150,000 and over, I prefer not to say}"

Country of origin – "If you or a relative immigrated to the United States, what was your family's country of origin? {Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Venezuela, Other (please type it it)}"

Generation – "If your family immigrated to the United States, was it: {You, Your parent(s), Your grandparent(s), Your great grandparent(s), Previous generation, My family did not immigrate to the United States}"

Employment status – "What is your employment status? {Employed part-time less than 40 hours per week, Employed full time 40+ hours per week, Retired, Unemployed, currently looking for work, Unemployed, not currently looking for work, I prefer not to say}

Political ideology – "How would you describe your political ideology? {Very conservative, Somewhat conservative, Moderate, Somewhat liberal, Very liberal, I prefer not to say}"