

Pragmatism within White Politics: Arizona Latina/o Elites' Immigration Strategies

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Abstract

Political positions attributed to activists from U.S. racial minorities have been criticized for allegedly fragmenting voter coalitions needed to defeat an increasingly authoritarian right. In this context, this paper analyzes how Latina/o political elites in Arizona, closely intertwined with the state's pro-immigrant movement, strategize about immigration and claims to belonging in the United States. Drawing on 23 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025, the paper finds that Latina/o elites in Arizona, across social and ideological profiles, adopt a strongly pragmatic political orientation. While they often hold beliefs they understand to challenge dominant aspects of U.S. public culture – conceptualized here as a form of subjugated knowledge about borders, mobility, and belonging – these elites routinely discount such perspectives in their public advocacy. Instead, they focus on making effective interventions within the constraints of white-dominated politics, and notably advance claims of deservingness and economic contribution which they mobilize despite criticisms of these claims' exclusions and limitations. This paper helps to ground understanding of contemporary U.S. identity politics by examining how Latina/o identities inform strategies for intervening in the public sphere.

Introduction

Contemporary debates about “identity politics” in the United States have intensified in the aftermath of the 2024 election. On the political right, identity-based claims are treated as symptoms of problematic diversity (Voegeli 2026). Among some leftists and liberals, they are blamed for the fragmenting of voter coalitions needed to defeat an increasingly authoritarian right: cited as electoral liabilities that repel majority support (Mounk 2024) by being “too focused on personal identity and on Americans’ differences” (New York Times Editorial Board 2025), often even failing to attract the minority voters they purportedly represent (Jilani 2024). Underlying both is a shared empirical premise: that minority political actors advance narrow, particularist, and broadly “unpopular” claims. Perspectives vary widely on the extent to which this has caused recent Democratic electoral losses. More broadly, this premise is rarely examined empirically by considering evidence of how political actors of minoritized identities strategize about their political interventions.

This paper examines this premise through the case of Latina/o political elites in Arizona – a notable case within wider U.S. debates on immigration, citizenship, and belonging, as these have been major electoral issues in Arizona politics which elites have been dealing with for more than two decades. The paper asks two questions. First, how do these elites understand the relationship between their Latina/o identities — and the distinctive perspectives of borders, mobility, and belonging they associate with their identities — and the political claims available to them? Second, what strategic orientations do they adopt when intervening in a political sphere they understand to remain white-dominated? The findings challenge typical identity-politics critiques. Arizona’s Latina/o elites articulate beliefs that they connect to their identities which challenge the understandings dominant in U.S. narratives of migration and belonging. Yet, across institutional positions and ideological profiles, they frequently set these understandings aside in public advocacy, adopting instead a strongly pragmatic orientation focused on making claims within the grain of white-dominated, prioritizing broad coalitions and advancing above all economic framings of Latina/o and immigrant belonging.

The paper develops this argument by drawing on Du Bois's (2020 [1903]) concept of "second sight" as well as Foucault's (1981) concept of "subjugated knowledge." Drawing on Du Bois's observations on Black Americans' intimate familiarity with a white-dominated U.S. public culture that simultaneously denies them full membership, this paper analogizes the position of Arizona Latina/o identities, complicated by the "multi-status" character of contemporary Latina/o positions in respect to immigration status and belonging (de Noronha 2019), and by Arizona's double-coloniality as a space shaped by successive Spanish and U.S. colonization (Huizar-Hernández 2019). These dualities produce an awareness of borders as historically fluid and of belonging as sitting outside sovereign categories, which functions as a subjugated knowledge, formative but unable to attain a hegemonic position in respect to majority politics. Interviewees employ these forms of knowledge to root senses of belonging that sustain their public engagement, while they strategize about public claims to find "cracks in the wall" of exclusionary politics — openings where claims that accord with the values of the dominant U.S. public culture are seen as having political potential.

Empirically, the paper draws on 23 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025 with Latina/o leaders in Arizona politics, activism, and civil society — a movement field that has become highly developed and institutionalized, owing to the sustained conflict over discriminatory immigration policing that culminated in Senate Bill 1070 (2010) and its aftermath (Slaven 2022; Magaña and Silva 2021). The paper proceeds as follows. The next section situates the study within relevant literatures and situates the significance of the concepts from Du Bois and Foucault. After detailing methods, the paper presents findings in four thematic subsections. The article concludes by drawing out implications for debates over identity politics and minority political agency.

Literature Review

The abundant public and academic discussion of identity politics in recent years has featured substantial analysis of changes in U.S. political and social discussion of minoritized identities,

as well as examinations of supposed popular responses to these changes, in the cultural sphere as well as in electoral outcomes and public opinion. However, despite arguments that pin responsibility for unpopular or politically unsuccessful claims on them, we know relatively little about how political elites of minoritized backgrounds approach claims-making in this context. The dominant usage of “identity politics” refers to explicit appeals to minoritized identities, which are usually treated as particularist claims of interest only to certain groups; of late the term has often been deployed in attempts to explain progressive electoral failure in the United States (Lilla 2018; Mounk 2024). The asymmetry of this usage is revealing: there is much less popular discussion of right movements in majority-white countries as identity politics grounded in white identity, though a growing academic literature analyzes it in such terms (Jardina 2019; Feagin and Ducey 2025). The term “identity politics” thus tends to naturalize majority identity as neutral while marking minority claims as narrow (see Dyer 1997).

Perhaps expectedly, such discussions often obscure more than they reveal about the particular relationships at work between racialized identities and political action in the current U.S. context. Some sociological contributions since 2020 seek to establish how “identity politics” in general terms is being exploited by various social actors, advancing arguments that various forms of identity-conscious cultural politics are co-opted to serve existing economic and cultural elites (Táíwò 2022; al-Gharbi 2024). Despite some such contributions’ concern with maintaining emancipatory potential within minority-led political action, this vein of scholarship, in its focus on co-optation, says relatively little about how minoritized political actors attempt to navigate the identity-politics landscape they describe. Arguably, they maintain focus on claims that identity is a niche ideological issue of limited political appeal, rather than an important factor underlying political action in general. In a similar vein, media attention concentrates on issues articulated explicitly in identity terms, such as the emblematic debate over the term “Latinx,” which has attracted enormous commentary despite minimal adoption among the population it describes (Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020) and its

generally low salience as a cultural issue.

Common mediatized images of identity politics are often driven by the views of commentators or analysts seeking to explain electoral or political outcomes but without attempts at formulating clear causal evidence. While they often assign blame for the adoption of supposedly unpopular identitarian issue positions, such contributions rarely feature a rigorous analysis of why and how these are adopted. In the case of Latinas/os, recent changes in electoral behavior have increased the significance of these discussions. Considerable attention has been paid to the apparent conservative drift of some Latina/o voters, particularly since 2020 (Cadena 2025; Ramos 2024), which often feature in arguments that progressive identity-based claims fail to attract their intended constituencies. Yet the heterogeneity of the Latina/o electorate (Chapa et al. 2026) — across factors including national origin (Bromo et al. 2025), generation (Wakefield et al. 2025), nativity, legal status, region, and religiosity (Kelly and Morgan 2008) — cautions against treating these shifts as verdicts on movement strategy, as do changing Latina/o voting patterns since 2024 (Segura and Barreto 2026). Largely missing from these debates is systematic attention to Latina/o political elites, the strategies of whom are at the crux of discussions about unpopular identity-politics claims. We still know relatively little about the actual strategies of minority political actors, which motivates this paper's approach to examine what leaders from a minoritized group are doing with identity, rather than what is most visibly said about it.

To tackle this set of questions, the paper's framework begins with W.E.B. Du Bois, arguably the first scholar to theorize rigorously the relationship between minoritized identity and the American political sphere. The analysis builds from recent contributions that have (re)asserted Du Bois's centrality to contemporary (political) sociology in the post-Civil Rights Movement United States. This includes the work of Vasquez-Tokos (2025), who illustrates that Du Bois's key question about the Black experience in the white world — "How does it feel to be a problem?" (Du Bois 2020 [1903], 8) — is central to the identity and belonging of people in varied minoritized categories, including Latinas/os. In a U.S. society where belonging is

structured by both race and settler colonialism, many groups “are incorporated into the nation in ways that require them to navigate the idea that they are a ‘problem’ within the national imaginary” (Agius Vallejo 2026, 3). As regards political action, Du Bois located Black political potential in this “two-ness”: Black Americans as inherently part of American society and intimately fluent in its public culture, while also excluded from full participation in it. This duality generated “second sight” (Du Bois 2020 [1903], 9), the capacity to see society both in terms of its own professed values (for example, freedom and equality), and how through forms of domination society fails to live up to these – a perspective not as readily available to its white majority, whose belonging is not problematized and who therefore do not have to live these contradictions. The mobilization of challenging claims precisely in dialogue with the supposed values of the white-dominated public culture – with which minoritized Americans are of course intimately familiar – opens the possibility of social change for society as a whole through minority political engagement.

This perspective has been broadly applied to the analysis and development of political action by minoritized and colonized people, including the development of critical consciousness among Latina/o youth in Arizona amid the state’s SB 1070-era policy of prohibiting ethnic studies in public schools (Camarrota 2016). The application of this framework to U.S. Latinas/os requires a suitably nuanced understanding of how the “color line” operates today, within a diverse United States shaped by its history as both a settler state and an imperial power, and whose society features complex variations of both social and legal belonging (Quisumbing King 2019; see also Joseph and Golash-Boza 2021). First, the U.S. Latina/o population is characterized by what de Noronha (2019) terms “multi-status”: it spans citizens whose family settlement predates the contemporary border, “white-passing” monolingual English speakers, mixed-status families, DACA recipients, and undocumented people exposed to the sharpest edge of bordering. Latina/o citizenship remains in important senses “suspect” within white-dominated society (Beaman 2023; Rocco 2004), yet the internal differentiation of status produces divergent experiences of membership and divergent political incentives.

The Arizona case is made more complex by Arizona's double coloniality: successive Spanish and then U.S. colonization processes which ground complex narratives of belonging and autochthony (Huizar-Hernández 2019; Geschiere 2009), including the assertion, central to a notable strand of Latina/o political claims-making, that “the border crossed us” (Cisneros 2014). The notions of fluidity and hybridity which underlie these claims and identities have been foregrounded through the development of borderlander perspectives (Anzaldúa 1987) which create alternatives to hegemonic U.S. understandings on the essentialism of racial identity, sovereign territory, and national belonging.

Second, contemporary racial exclusion typically proceeds through what Bonilla-Silva (2021) analyzes as color-blind racism: the formal acceptance that individuals cannot be treated differently by race, combined with facially non-racial rationales — often cultural, rather than biological, justifications — that produce systemically racialized effects. Scholars of migration on both sides of the Atlantic have identified immigration control and bordering as essential technologies of this new racism, deployed by white-majority societies in ways that overwhelmingly exclude non-white groups (Yuval-Davis 2018; Menjívar 2021). Menjívar's (2021) account of the racialization of “illegality” shows how enforcement constructs Latina/o presence as perpetually suspect regardless of formal status, pointing to the relevance of “suspect citizenship” and “multi-status.”

The paper's second theoretical resource helps to flesh out what minoritized identity carries, within the duality of a Du Boisian condition which creates both intimate familiarity with, and exclusion from, the dominant U.S. public culture. To help to make sense of what Latina/o elites do with the various claims tied to their minoritized subject position, this paper links these to a concept of subjugated knowledge. Foucault (1981, 82) defines subjugated knowledges as “those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory” — that is, experience-based, often local ways of knowing that lack the opportunity to become hegemonic, because they collide with entrenched, totalizing systems of understanding. Foucault developed the concept against

the systematized knowledges of sexuality and madness, and he of course had a particular interest in the hegemonic ideas of modernity, including the dominance of science as a way of understanding. Du Bois complements this view by understanding race and colonization as constitutive of modernity (Morris 2022), opening up the excavation of perspectives which challenge notions of belonging rooted in modern formulations of race, borders, and sovereignty. Sovereignty organizes modern understandings of political community as a system of clean lines and mutually exclusive memberships, and it is from sovereignty that dominant understandings of citizenship and belonging derive (Benhabib 2005). Race itself may be understood as a comparably modern, systematizing knowledge of human difference.

This perspective allows a vantage point on how Latina/o identities, as will be explored, often contain knowledges — for instance, of border-crossing family histories, transnational communities, and pre-border presence — that challenge sovereignty as the primary lens for understanding belonging. These knowledges are subjugated in the sense indicated by Foucault: interviewees themselves judge them to be infeasible as public political claims, given a majority political culture that treats Arizona as effectively *terra nullius* before U.S. colonization (Huizar-Hernández 2019, 11). At the same time, subjugation does not necessarily equate to erasure, and the reluctance to voice such knowledges to white audiences does not mean they perform no other functions. The findings trace how these knowledges shape worldview and sustain engagement even as public claims are routed through the perceived values of majority society. This dynamic might be understood as a strategic framing process (Benford and Snow 2000), which itself would complicate accusations of political maladroitness in “identity politics.” A framing perspective, however, would not provide a view on the role of identity within this process, which is permitted by analysing these processes with the aid of the identity-rooted duality that Du Bois identifies.

Methods

The puzzle this article identifies is how political actors from U.S. racial minorities are strategizing about claims-making in the context of recent public debates surrounding “identity politics.” The considerable public and academic discussion of identity politics has been dominated by a focus on very broad impacts that recent developments in “identity” politics have had upon the social sphere; in political analysis, references to identity politics have usually sought to explain electoral disappointments for progressives, sometimes through apportioning blame for “unpopular” positions, based on light evidence. As a result, we still know relatively little about how political elites from minoritized backgrounds – those most responsible for political positioning and social-claims making – actually deal with identity in political claims-making and how they are strategizing in this social and political environment.

Arizona is an important site for observing these dynamics. The SB 1070 era made the state the national exemplar of security-framed immigration policing and the contemporary wave of anti-immigrant politics (Slaven 2022). Analyses of that era have shown both how security became the dominant frame through which Arizona politicians handled immigration as securitization became increasingly connected to racial politics, and how anti-racist norms could be mobilized against bordering when it appeared as racial profiling (Slaven 2021, 2025) in a form of reactive mobilization (Ramírez 2013). Beyond reaction, however, the Latina/o-led movement that emerged from that conflict has been credited with transforming Arizona politics (Magaña and Silva 2021): sustained local conflict institutionalized movement organizations, attracted donor investment in progressive infrastructure often centered on Latina/o-led organizations, and coincided with growing Latina/o representation as Arizona became a swing state in national politics. This unusually institutionalized field makes Arizona an important case for examining how minority elites strategize under conditions of new racism, rising ethnonationalism, and renewed federal enforcement.

To conduct this investigation, this paper takes an interpretive methodological approach, focusing on how actors relate their political action to meaning (Bevir and Rhodes 2002).

This is the appropriate approach for understanding how political actors relate their decisions and strategies to interpretive categories, such as identity and intersubjective understandings of social context (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013, 47). The paper draws on 23 interviews conducted in spring 2025 with Latina/o political elites in Arizona. The two fundamental criteria for being sampled were that interviewees had to hold Latina/o identity, and to be active in public claims-making on issues of immigration and Latina/o belonging in Arizona. These broad inclusion criteria generated a relatively large population of potential interviewees. The resulting sample spans institutional positions — current and former elected officials, professionals working in politics, civil society leaders, and activists engaged in organizing and pressuring officeholders — and is heterogeneous on further dimensions. In age, interviewees ranged from their twenties to their seventies. Their positionalities varied from formerly undocumented respondents to those with multigenerational family histories in Arizona who describe themselves as “white-passing,” with the full range of multi-status positions represented between these poles. Like Arizona Latinas/os in general, the interview sample was overwhelmingly Mexican American (22 respondents, with the other Salvadoran American). Interviewees were identified mainly through snowball sampling, a common sampling method for interviewing political elites (Tansey 2007, 770) which helps to alleviate issues of identifying the entire population of potential respondents, and of access. With non-probability sampling of an elite interviewee population, the essential test of a sufficient interview sample is saturation: where interviewees are not revealing new information but rather provide responses that fall along predictable patterns, and where the snowball sampling process produces recurrent recommendations for new respondents (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013, 91). As discussed below, interviews for this study reached saturation on several very recurrent types of response related to the research question.

Interviews were semi-structured (Leech 2002), the most relevant interview method for both covering analytically significant ground while providing interview respondents the opportunity to introduce the interviewer to new aspects of the research question. The semi-

structured interview schedule was organized around three central areas: respondents' own biographies, family stories, and paths into public life, as windows onto the formation of identity; their understandings of why immigration is controversial in Arizona; and their assessments of movement strategies, successes, and failures. Interviewees were provided with project information and signed informed consent forms in line with ethical procedures. Twenty interviews were conducted in person during an interview fieldwork period in April 2025, with three interviews conducted by video call. Their length ranged between 30 minutes and two hours. Interviews are treated confidentially per these agreements, and no respondents are identified by name or other identifiable information.

This research is conducted as part of a larger project about the global impact of colonialism on migration governance, funded by the British Academy (ref: KF8\230123), which includes a parallel interview series with minoritized activists and politicians in the United Kingdom. The Arizona interview series follows earlier research by the author on the SB 1070 era (Slaven 2022), in which the interview base, reflecting that project's focus on the power structure of Arizona at the time, was predominantly Anglo. The present research reverses that vantage point, taking stock of the Latina/o-led movement that emerged from events of that period. The positionality of the researcher is important to note. The author's previous research, as well as experience of having worked in progressive politics in Arizona, created a status as a partial insider to these processes who was deeply familiar with Arizona's political and social context, which was useful for gaining access to elite respondents. At the same time, as an Anglo researcher, the interviewer occupied the unmarked "majority" position that represents a point of reference and critique, which will have influence on the interview process.

Findings

The findings proceed in four broad sections. The first traces how interviewees' identities embed borderlander and immigrant knowledges of belonging, which are subjugated in Foucault's sense of lacking the opportunity to become hegemonic knowledge, but which serve other

purposes for Latina/o leaders in providing assurance about belonging and the right to participate. The second presents the overwhelming way that interviewees diagnose the source of immigration controversy in Arizona and the United States: as rooted in longstanding racism, politicized in more recent times by politicians seeking opportunistically to profit from the border and immigration. The third analyzes the overwhelming pragmatic orientation adopted by the respondents, where they seek to make effective interventions in white-dominated politics, through a focus on claims that can mobilize broad coalitions, seeking to “humanize” in particular some immigrant groups with already closer claims to belonging, while appealing to the self-interest of the white electorate by arguing for immigrants’ and Latinas/os’ economic contribution. The final section examines the costs and limits that respondents see in this pragmatic approach, including strains on movement solidarity, before turning to how interviewees project the future.

Fluidity, hybridity and subjugated knowledge

Respondents repeatedly located themselves and their families within histories of movement and presence that complicate the prevailing contemporary images of the U.S.-Mexico border. The interview schedule contained questions about family, upbringing, and respondents’ paths into public life in order to discuss the core narratives through which interviewees situated themselves within society.

One segment of responses reflect a distinct borderlander perspective (Anzaldúa 1987) which articulates the border as fluid and the lands on either side deeply interconnected, in a reality more true to the fundamental nature of the border than its contemporary securitization. Such responses were common among interviewees with personal or family histories in the borderlands. This perspective provides the foundation for complex and layered accounts of belonging. One U.S.-born respondent (Interview 18), for example, initially described their parents as coming from Northern Mexico. As the interview progressed, it emerged that earlier generations had lived in what is now Southern Arizona both when it was part of Mexico and

after it became part of the United States, that a later generation had moved to Mexico at a time when crossing was more informal, and that the respondent's parents had then crossed into the United States again before the interviewee was born. This interviewee explicitly invoked the formulation that, rather than crossing the border, "the border crossed us."

Another interviewee described a grandmother who had lived on an ejido (a communal agricultural cooperative) in the early 20th century directly across the Colorado River from Arizona. Their great-grandmother was shown in records as speaking Spanish, English, and Cocopah, the indigenous language of that area. While the first generation of this family to live in the United States was the interviewee's parents, as this respondent put it, "even though we were immigrants," the family had been "part of that community for about 150 years" (Interview 14), a transnational community encompassing people on both sides of the border. As this interviewee recalled,

If you live in the border, you know it is fluid. Because you're so close to the border, and we didn't have cable back then [during childhood], we would get transmission from Mexican telenovelas. When I was growing up in particular, there was more of a cultural identity to radio and TV that was on the other side than what you actually had on the U.S. side, where you were living and working.

Other interviewees recounted their family that had lived in Arizona only to be deported in the early twentieth century, subsequently returning during the Second World War during a period of high labor demand (Interview 12). A DACA recipient respondent recalled how their grandparents "helped to feed America" as braceros, though they had not lived permanently in the country (Interview 3).

Another major theme in responses contrastingly underscores cultural and ideational aspects of U.S. imperialism as generating interconnection to the United States before migration, demonstrating the reach of the United States as an imperial power into sending societies. These were more commonly voiced by interviewees who had themselves immigrated and whose families were not rooted in the borderlands. Several described pre-existing interconnection with the United States. One respondent who immigrated to the United States as a child

prefaced their self-description this way:

Where I grew up, the idea of going to the United States was known as El Norte... When you came to El Norte, for all intents and purposes, you'd made it... What are you going to do once you've made it? With that in mind, I'm a proud Mexican-American. I'm a proud Latino. I'm a proud immigrant. But I take pride in saying that I'm also a proud American. (Interview 7)

Even non-U.S.-born Latinas/os arrive in the United States possessing some fluency in America's self-image, its professed values, and the meanings attached to being American. Therefore the duality of the Du Boisian framework – intimacy with a public culture, combined with partial exclusion from it — occurs across the multi-status range of the sample. This is inflected very differently, however, depending on legal status, social position, and proximity to the border.

Turning to the essential question of the paper: What do these elites do with these various forms of knowledge about the real nature of borders and belonging? When asked directly about their relevance to Arizona's immigration debates, most respondents related that, at the political level, these realities could not matter in and of themselves. Their explanations converged on the absence of historical memory in majority political culture, on a white American view of Arizona as effectively empty land before U.S. colonization, in which histories of possession and dispossession are simply not relevant to the present (Huízar-Hernández 2019). The interviewee who said regarding their family that “the border crossed us” explained their reasoning for not voicing that formulation in public debates:

It's the same reason why when you talk about reparations and slavery, the first response is, well, I wasn't the slave owner. You know what I'm saying? People see that history as completely disconnected from who they are now... If I have nothing to do with immigration and the only thing I know is that 200 years ago, the state spoke Spanish, why should I care? We haven't been able to answer that question. (Interview 18)

The respondent with the 150-year family history along the Colorado River connected this dynamic to the possessive logic of settler colonialism in the Western United States:

If either you arrived from Ohio last week, or you've been here for 10 generations, you think that you're entitled to the West. I think people have a vision of Arizona that's always

connected to their ability to own. Buy a home, right? I mean, it's just like the concept of land ownership in the West. And so I think people gravitate to the state of Arizona and have, like, a very privileged perspective. (Interview 14)

Asked how this shapes politics, the same respondent answered: "anybody who looks different doesn't necessarily belong here" (Interview 14). Such assessments capture the subjugated status of these knowledges, rooted alternately in borderlander or immigrant identity. These knowledges collide with a systematized, sovereignty-based understanding of belonging, reinforced by settler narratives of rightful possession, and appear therefore to have little potential in public debates concerning these topics.

However, the fact that these knowledges are subjugated with respect to hegemonic social and political discourses does not make them worthless to respondents, or mean nothing is done with them. Rather, many interviewees discussed these knowledges as securing their own certainty about their belonging, in a society where this is often placed in fundamental question. One respondent reflected: "it's been a beautiful journey of understanding for myself what that means, and not necessarily having to perform any of this. I am comfortable and at peace with my identities, and I take the greatest pride in those identities for myself as an internal thing" (Interview 7). The DACA recipient respondent with bracero grandparents explained:

Understanding more of my history, I think, gives me a greater sense of, while I may still be treated as a foreigner, I don't feel as a foreigner in this land. Because I can trace now 50, 60 years of this is where my grandparents built a house, or this is where my grandfather helped to work in this field and cultivate. So that has been really, I think, helpful for me personally. (Interview 3)

These knowledges construe belonging apart from sovereignty-based understandings, and in doing so provide the ballast for political engagement and social belonging in hostile conditions, an assurance of the right to participate fully in a public culture that contests one's membership. This is the first sense in which identity is doing political work in this field, though this is invisible to accounts of identity politics that attend only to explicit public identity claims.

Diagnosing immigration controversy

In strategizing about immigration politics in Arizona, respondents offered explanations for the level of controversy surrounding the subject which strikingly consistently contained two very consistent elements: That immigration is controversial, first, because it has been politicized — made controversial by political leaders for electoral gain — and second, that this politicization is possible only because of underlying racism in U.S. society. This formulation, including the diagnosis of underlying racism, was very consistent between respondents across professional profiles and belonging to both activists and institutionalist milieus.

To understand the political problems these elites understand themselves as contending with, the interview schedule probed their diagnoses for why immigration is controversial in Arizona. The answers were notable for how often they contrasted with the way racism's connection to immigration politics is usually represented by mainstream political actors in the majority-white political sphere, including in Arizona (Slaven 2025), where anti-immigration voters are represented as having “legitimate grievances” that are non-racial (Mondon 2025). While many respondents participate in that discourse, when asked directly to account for why immigration is controversial, their responses focus much more readily on the nature of racism in U.S. society. As one interviewee replied:

This is the section that's going to get me in trouble, I guess. I mean, I think there's several things. I think, certainly, race plays a big factor in that. Whether, you know, people want to admit that or not. Whether people actually understand that about themselves or not. I think if you look at any political ad about this these days, you see what looks like an army of people with dark brown skin running across the desert. And there's a clear message that these people are not like you. (Interview 21)

Accounts of the underlying racism of U.S. society varied. Some accounts of racism were structural: “White people don't like brown people in this country, period. And at the end of the day, this country is rooted in a system that is meant to uplift the wealthiest in the nation first, and white folks second” (Interview 18). Others emphasized processes of “othering:” “It's the fear of the unknown. It's the fear of someone who's different from you. And it takes a lot

of courage to try to get to meet or understand someone who doesn't look like you or sound like you" (Interview 4). Many tied anti-Latina/o racism to demographic anxiety: "I think that white folks don't mind a few of us, but too many of us is too many" (Interview 10). Several added that white Americans tolerate Latinas/os in low-status labor but that rising social visibility had inflamed hostility.

The politicization component of this formulation was equally consistent and analytically striking, in part because of how it contrasts with a prevalent narrative in the media and political discourse that anti-immigration politics wells up from "below" (Mondon 2025). Almost every respondent attributed the controversy of immigration to choices by political actors. As one interviewee expressed in a typical formulation: "I think if you look back throughout history, immigration has always been a topic that politicians can throw out as red meat to create a villain to explain their own failures. . . . And it just infuriates me that it is still effective" (Interview 20). Respondents also frequently connected the scapegoating of immigrants to a political desire to distract from other governance failures: "When you can demonize other people and scapegoat them, I mean, it's just way too easy. And then you get everyone talking about that and not about how we've made a choice to, you know, underfund schools. We didn't have to" (Interview 15).

The prevalence of this diagnosis raised the question of whether it circulated as a shared script within movement circles, but interviewees indicated it did not. Rather it appears to be an interpretive consensus that the present configuration of immigration politics in Arizona and the United States more broadly was chosen and therefore contingent: things did not have to be as they are, and could be otherwise. Interviewees sometimes also historicized this point. Anti-Latina/o racism at personal and systemic levels had been pervasive in earlier decades, indeed in experiences that helped spur Chicano movement identity and claims (Alaniz and Cornish 2008). However, as one respondent observed, those previous configurations of racism "does not necessarily translate into, we're going to have a political opinion about how to police the border" (Interview 19). The politicization of immigration as a racial issue

results from decisions by politicians to mobilize the issue in that way. The diagnosis thus independently converges with scholarly accounts of bordering as a technology of new racism: facially non-racial policies through which racism is mobilized in politics (Bonilla-Silva 2021; Menjívar 2021; Yuval-Davis 2018).

Strategizing interventions in the white-dominated political field

In the context of this diagnosis, the overwhelming preoccupation of respondents was making effective claims within white-dominated politics. This pragmatist orientation was remarkably consistent across the sample, shared by those directly involved in electoral politics as well as by activists at arm's length from it, who might be presumed to be oriented toward more radical claims. In their interviews, respondents frequently positioned themselves against less pragmatic actors within the movement who prioritized principle over incrementalism or categorically refused concessions to more conservative opinion. These more radical or less incrementalist actors, however, proved difficult to identify in the interview sampling process. Within the sample, even respondents with activist or further-left orientations, or who made radical critiques of mainstream politics, took pains to characterize their strategies as oriented toward pragmatic movement successes in the policy realm. This raises the interpretive possibility that the “unpragmatic activist” functions partly as a rhetorical foil through which elites argue for the wisdom of their own strategies, rather than as a substantial position within the movement.

Asked about movement successes, respondents almost invariably cited broad-based coalitions assembled to win specific policy advances. Proposition 308 (2022), which restored in-state tuition for Dreamers (Santos 2022) after voters had rescinded this by referendum in 2006, was the most cited recent success. Respondents attributed this especially to the movement organization Alianto, and for its attitude of a willingness to work with anyone, including business groups and conservative actors, even as the campaign's argument moved away from immigration justice. As one respondent recalled of Proposition 308 “it wasn't

about immigration or even education, it was more about supporting Arizona kids” (Interview 8). Respondents repeatedly noted that the movement’s signal wins, including Proposition 308 and (on a national level) the introduction of DACA in 2012, had come when activists defied the tactical caution of others in the movement who counseled comity with officials, better timing, or holding out for sweeping reform. The leading role of the movement organization LUCHA in passing the 2016 minimum wage increase was likewise cited as a success that served the movement’s core constituency through a generalized policy benefiting society as a whole.

Respondents also demonstrated a consensus around tactical pluralism: the idea different tactics fit different moments, with the paramount object being policy wins for the movement.

I’m very much of the thought that we need all lanes to make impact and make change happen. The people who come out and march have a role, and the people who are in the policy space have a role, and the folks who are trying to uplift the stories or trying to get people out of detention, or who are just going to visit people in detention. I think all of that has a role to play. So I don’t know if there’s one tactic that would be like, that didn’t work. I think certain things worked at a time. (Interview 16)

Differences emerged, however, around policing certain tactics for respectability in white-dominated politics, with the display of other countries’ flags at demonstrations the recurrent example. Some supported such policing, while others rejected it by taking a tactical-pluralist position.

Respondents generally cited two approaches when asked what was effective at making the case for immigrants or for Latina/o belonging in Arizona politics. First was an emphasis on what some respondents termed “humanization” in order to counterbalance an often-discussed tendency of the debate to dehumanize, though respondents were keenly aware that this was more effective for some kinds of people than others. When considering successes, one respondent offered a typical formulation:

When it comes to something like the in-state tuition initiative and what the immigrants rights movement did correct, is really just appealing to people’s understanding that so many of the immigrants in our communities are our neighbors, they’re our coworkers. They’ve

contributed to our economy and they have been here for years and years. So I think that there's been some success in humanizing the issue. (Interview 20)

In this formulation, success in white-dominated politics depends on an ability to distance debate from polarized social issues, through a “nonpartisan strategy” where “you’re just talking to your neighbor about this issue. . . , showing how we can engage on this issue and humanize it without us putting a partisan label. . . . When you humanize the issue, people take a second look at it” (Interview 11). While the opportunity to have (white) voters take a second look at proposals has been key to movement successes, it is also not transformative and depends on voters’ ability to understand the issue through personal exposure to “neighbors” or “co-workers.”

Another approach, related but distinct, commanded near-universal endorsement as effective, if partial: tying immigration to the economy and emphasising immigrants’ economic contribution. Theoretically, liberal capitalism supplies a framework for construing contribution and membership that is immediately legible to Americans, and whose logic can cut against sovereignty-based ideas of exclusion. Respondents described economic framing as a way to open dialogue, since immigrants’ economic contribution is acknowledged even on the conservative side. More pointedly, it renders white self-interest in immigrant incorporation concrete.

We also are working within a system where we have to convince hundreds of thousands of people that our way is the correct way. I’m definitely not saying we should cater our message specifically to the main bloc of voters here, but we have to know how to talk to them. We have to know the language they speak. We have to know what motivates them. And we need to find ways for them to understand their self-interest in supporting progressive immigration policy. For me, it’s always worked best in economics. (Interview 18)

As another respondent explained:

What happens when you block out a workforce? Well, you have to pay \$10 for an avocado. That’s what happens. You have to find someone else to take care of your ailing mother. You don’t have room service at your hotel. All of these things that we’ve become so accustomed to and that we love, suddenly are not there. And so when you start pointing those things out, that’s where the real difficult conversation happens. (Interview 22)

Asked what does not work, the same respondent replied, “Asking people to do the right thing.”

Partial wins, fatigue, and fraying solidarity

At the same time as endorsing these strategies, the elites interviewed did not see them as lacking costs, and many reflected on the limits of these strategies in light of recent electoral and movement difficulties. The humanizing approach works best for those groups whose claims to social membership are already strongest: Dreamers raised in the United States, or those with clear achievements. Some respondents described the shortcomings of this approach as the “valedictorian” problem: the ability to argue for the undocumented valedictorian, but not manual workers or immigrants of lower social capital. This derives from the Du Boisian duality identified earlier in the paper; indeed, when asked about the utility of this approach, one respondent commented: “this is going to be something I feel in my heart and I think in my head differently” (Interview 9).

Making public arguments about belonging for only some parts of the movement constituency also generates fatigue within a movement animated by immigration justice claims but which settles for incremental progress. One respondent recalled that “a lot of activists and after a while Dreamers, too, grew tired of one set of words, tired of selling my humanity and hoping people will buy it” (Interview 18). Asked whether such critics had a point, the reply was characteristically double-edged:

Absolutely they do. There’s a limit to every strategy, and not one strategy will work every single time for eternity. And there are ebbs and flows of what motivates people as a collective. But that doesn’t mean that it wasn’t successful and it wasn’t a good idea and a good strategy at the time. (Interview 18)

Respondents were similarly circumspect about one of the movement’s most notable achievements, the growth of Latina/o political power and representation in Arizona since 2010. Movement wins were often defensive, such as removing figures such as Joe Arpaio (Greene Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021) or preventing further bills in the mold of SB 1070.

Positive policy visions, particularly at state and local level, remained much more thinly specified in the interviews, but there was a frequently voiced sense that the movement needed to achieve more. As one respondent assessed:

It is, I think, a fallacy to believe that building a political infrastructure alone is a success. . . . We've elected people. We've created organizations. But all of that is in political terms, right? Again, the material conditions of people, they didn't change. . . . I don't believe the political infrastructure we built is a success because it hasn't always shown the results. We're a little bit more protected now. . . . Where we've fallen short is that we haven't had a vision for moving beyond. (Interview 9)

This sense of under-delivery framed respondents' interpretations of the apparent conservative turn among some Latina/o voters in the 2020s. Interviewees were unsurprised by such shifts, citing the documented cultural conservatism of segments of U.S. Latina/o population (Ramos 2024); the differentiated incentives of multi-status, including the pull to leave the immigrant struggle behind and approximate majority status; a post-COVID decline in community organizing, as the SB 1070 generation of activists ages and a younger generation, formed in a different political environment, exhibits lower political trust; and the movement's institutionalization, elevating professional organizing at the expense of immigrant-led efforts. Above all, respondents pointed to two decades of non-delivery at the federal level. Since comprehensive immigration reform first entered serious congressional debate, conditions have changed only for Dreamers, and then only through the politically contingent DACA, while newer asylum-seekers received immediate forms of support, straining solidarity: "Why are these people given a work permit when I've been here for 25 years paying taxes and raising my kids? That's not fair" (Interview 3). As another explained, "Folks who are undocumented and who have been here for a long time don't see an end to their despair, in that sense, right? . . . Again, it's like the scapegoating, the shifting blame to other people. . . , hammering these points about incoming immigrants, about immigrants they can easily otherize" (Interview 16).

In the context of the second Trump administration and the recurrence of inflamed immigration politics, what do these Arizona Latina/o elites expect in terms of the future landscape

of the issue? Two main responses recurred, both drawing on U.S. immigration history and an allegedly repetitive character of American xenophobia. The first interprets anti-Latina/o prejudice as a phase that will pass, and is compared to the experiences of prior immigrant groups. One respondent developed the point:

I think there is a hazing that takes place among immigrants in the United States... whether you be the Irish, Italian, or Chinese... Latinos are unique in that this is our second hazing... A lot of groups don't get a second hazing. We've got a second one because of the recent influx when immigration again became a wave because our labor was needed... So I guess we should feel honored because this is our second hazing. I don't think there will be a third, because the numbers have changed and there are so many young Latinos that are going to come up. Anyway, that's my hope. You can call me an optimist if you want. (Interview 2)

Another respondent reached for the same precedent: "It's like the Irish went through this, the Italians went through this, right? We're just repeating a cycle in history. It just happens to be Latinos' turn in that cycle" (Interview 22). Pressed on whether the cycle claim was true, this interviewee replied, "I think it certainly helps not to take it personally." The recurrent choice of Irish and Italian precedents is telling. This draws white America toward its own immigrant history, yet the ultimate fate of those groups was absorption into American whiteness, a trajectory some scholars have analyzed in respect to Latinas/os (Yancey 2004; Vargas 2015).

A second formulation focuses on resilience in the face of enduring white racism. An older respondent who came of age in the Chicano movement, asked whether the conversation could be brought back from the highly politicized racism of recent decades, answered: "I think about that, and I guess I'm very doubtful of that" (Interview 12). "But having said that," the respondent continued, "I'm not pessimistic. I think the vast majority of us are going to make it in this country. Now, please understand, I don't think we're going to be welcomed. But the capacity to deny us is going to lessen."

The vantage point of subjugated knowledge clarifies how these Latina/o elites grasp simultaneously the strength and the fragility of hegemonic narratives structuring belonging in U.S. society. They are strong enough to considerably narrow the range of interventions

on behalf of Latina/o belonging that can be effective, but their explicit politicization can lessen just as it has increased, and they are susceptible to change. Identity in this sense also provides the foundation for an epistemic position from which an enduring Latina/o future in Arizona can be perceived and pursued even amidst considerable political hostility, separate from the activity of public claims-making.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Latina/o elites in Arizona strategize about making public interventions in debates about immigration and belonging, and how identity informs this amidst prominent contemporary critiques and claims about “identity politics.” Minoritized U.S. political actors have been said to advance narrow, particularist claims ill-suited to majority coalition-building. For Arizona’s Latina/o political elites, this is not the case. This paper’s major finding is that these elites are overwhelmingly concerned with making pragmatic interventions that are effective in white-dominated politics. Across institutional positions, ages, and multi-status positionalities, movement success is understood in terms of their ability to assemble broad and effective coalitions to implement favored policy. This entails tactical flexibility and strategic claims about economic contribution and deservingness, which are intended to accord with the values and dispositions of the white-dominated public culture. Activists who favor radical interventions above pragmatic ones serve mainly as a foil in respondents’ own accounts of their reasoning and are harder to empirically identify, even among respondents with long histories in activist organizations.

The paper’s theoretical contribution lies in specifying the relationship between identity and this pragmatic strategic orientation. Interviewees’ identities embed borderlander and immigrant knowledges emphasising hybridity and fluidity that fundamentally challenge dominant contemporary accounts of the U.S.-Mexico border and sovereignty-based understandings of belonging. These knowledges are subjugated in the sense explained by Foucault (1981): respondents themselves judge them inadmissible in a majority political culture. However,

these knowledges supply the private assurance of national belonging and a right to participate that sustains these respondents' public engagement. These identity-based perspectives also provide the basis for the Du Boisian "second sight" through which these elites perceive both what American public culture professes and what it practices, locating cracks in the wall of racism and opportunities for challenging the status quo via the hegemonic values of U.S. public culture. Identity, on this account, is not the message of these elites' public practices, but rather provides the conditions of possibility for public interventions that can effect social change. As the final section explores, these knowledges proceeding from minoritized identity also embed sources of tension and critique in respect to these elites' major strategies for political intervention, even if claims-making remains narrower and more pragmatic.

Three implications follow. First, the charge that minority claims-making is maximalist and unpopular appears to be the opposite in Arizona. The operative tension within Arizona's Latina/o-led pro-immigrant movement is not radicalism versus moderation, but rather how long partial, pragmatic claims — the "valedictorian" issue, and the tendency toward defensive successes rather than federal policy wins — can continue without the movement disengaging its own constituency. Second, for assertions about Latina/o political realignment, respondents' accounts locate changing voting patterns not as a response to excessive identity politics, but to sectoral changes in Latinas/os' self-perceived social position, combined with non-delivery of movement promises — two decades of federal inaction, defensive rather than transformative state-level wins, and the differentiated incentives of multi-status positions among Latinas/os. Third, for the sociology of new racism, the fact that respondents appeared to independently converge on a diagnosis of immigration controversy as politicized racism, historicized against older racisms that did not translate automatically to bordering politics, offers grounded corroboration of scholarly accounts of bordering as an elite-activated technology of racial exclusion (Mondon 2025; Menjívar 2021).

This study, of course, carries limitations. This is a single-state study of a distinctively institutionalized movement field in Arizona, conducted at a particular — and turbulent —

moment in 2025. The sample comprises elites active in pro-immigrant politics and the analysis rests on elites' own strategic accounts rather than observation of practice; this aligns with the interpretive methodological approach of the study, but responses may also have been affected by the prevalence of critiques about "identity politics" after the 2024 election. What the Arizona case already establishes, however, is that the leaders of this movement are doing something with identity far removed from how identity's role in contemporary politics is usually portrayed: converting subjugated knowledges into durable belief in an Arizona and U.S. Latina/o future, and into strategic interventions meant to resonate in white-dominated majority politics.

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