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Latinos Back Black Lives Matter Protests. They Want Change for Themselves, Too.

Many Latinos are pushing for an acknowledgment of the systemic racism they face, and a conversation about over-policing in their own communities.

By Jennifer Medina

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PHOENIX — “Tu lucha es mi lucha,” several signs declared at a recent Black Lives Matter protest near the Arizona State Capitol. Your struggle is my struggle. The sea of faces included young Latinos who had marched before, during the immigrant rights movement in the state a decade ago, when Joe Arpaio championed draconian policies as the sheriff of Maricopa County. There was no doubt in these protesters’ minds: Their fights against racism are bound up together.

“Black and brown” has been a catchphrase in Democratic politics and progressive activist circles for years, envisioning the two minority groups as a coalition with both electoral power and an array of shared concerns about pay equity, criminal justice, access to health care and other issues. The ongoing protests about police violence and systemic racism encompass both communities as well — but the national focus has chiefly been about the impact on Black Americans and the ways white Americans are responding to it.

Many liberal Latino voters and activists, in turn, are trying to figure out where they fit in the national conversation about racial and ethnic discrimination. They have specific problems and histories that can be obscured by the broad “Black and brown” framework or overshadowed by the injustices facing Black Americans. For some, there is also a history of anti-Black racism in their own community to contend with, and a lack of inclusion of Afro-Latinos, who make up 25 percent of Latinos in the United States.

And while Latinos want people to understand how systemic racism in education, housing and wealth affects them, they are also grappling with an entrenched assumption that racism is a black-and-white issue, which can make it challenging to gain a foothold in the national conversation.

They often find themselves frustrated and implicitly left out.

“We are made to feel unwelcome here no matter what we’ve done or how long we’ve been here,” said Cynthia Garcia, 28, who attended the protest and whose parents immigrated from Mexico. As a child in Phoenix, she said, she regularly heard racist slurs aimed at her family and now hears the same words used against her own school-age children. She said it was important to march, both to “show up for ourselves, and to say this is wrong.”

The searching conversations among Latinos about race are unfolding at a moment when urgent concerns about health, policing and immigration are colliding. They are also taking place ahead of an election in which Latinos are expected to be the largest nonwhite voting bloc and could prove critical in battleground states like Arizona, Florida and North Carolina.

The coronavirus pandemic has torn through Black and Latino communities at disproportionately high rates, in part because so many are considered essential workers in agricultural fields, meatpacking plants, restaurants and hospitals across the country.

And as protests erupted across the country over police killings of Black people, two cases involving Latino men prompted new outcries last week: An 18-year-old security guard was shot and killed by Los Angeles sheriff's deputies and, in Tucson, newly released police body camera footage showed a man dying while handcuffed, pleading with officers for water.

For decades, Latinos have chafed over aggressive policing tactics, including at the hands of Latino officers. In the last several years, hundreds of Latinos, mostly men, have been killed by the police in California, Arizona and New Mexico, among other states, though national statistics are hard to come by. Now, activists are pushing for a more explicit conversation about over-policing in Latino communities.

"We've always known that police brutality is a Black and brown issue, a poor people's issue," said Marisa Franco, the executive director of Mijente, a Latino civil rights group.

"Right now it is imperative for non-Black Latino communities to both empathize with Black people and also recognize that it is in our material interest to fundamentally change policing in this country," Ms. Franco said.

In New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Philadelphia and many other cities, thousands of young Latinos have shown up to Black Lives Matter protests in recent weeks. Sometimes, they speak only quietly about their own concerns of anti-Latino racism.

Other times they are more overt. In Phoenix, activists wore face masks emblazoned with "Defund Police" — the last three letters marked in red to emphasize ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. An artist passed out a silk-screened Aztec-style painting that showed a black jaguar and a brown tiger, each blending into the other, his own symbolism of the moment.

A demonstrator held up a sign in Spanish at a protest against police brutality in New Haven, Conn. John Moore/Getty Images

Last week, the police in Tempe, Ariz., approved a $2 million settlement with the family of Antonio Arce, a 14-year-old boy who was shot in the back and killed by an officer in January 2019. Immigrant rights activists routinely point to the fact that local police departments often carry out immigration enforcement, leaving many Latinos terrified to call the police out of fear of potential deportation.

The fear and anger has been especially acute in the era of President Trump, who five years ago announced his candidacy by calling Mexicans rapists and criminals. The suspect in the deadliest anti-Latino attack in modern American history, in El Paso last year, used similar language in his manifesto.

Before voting in favor of a Democratic congressional police overhaul package last week, Representative Joaquin Castro spoke of Hector Santoscoy, a Mexican man who was killed by a San Antonio police officer in 1980.

“There’s no doubt that the African-American community has borne the biggest brunt of police brutality, but it’s also clear that Latinos have suffered as well,” Mr. Castro said in an interview. “There’s a kinship of experience as a community.”

Yet illuminating and addressing discrimination faced by Latinos remains a challenge, Mr. Castro said. While many Americans at least learn the basic history of slavery and Jim Crow racism against Black people, there remains a lack of fundamental knowledge about Latino history, which can make it difficult to discuss how social policies have been harmful.

“Many Americans don’t know exactly where you fit in,” Mr. Castro said.

In conversations with her three children about race, Alma Aguilar, 31, has been clear about her own experience: “We are not treated the same way as white people,” she tells them.

“People pretty much tend to attack us,” said Ms. Aguilar, who attended a small protest near her home in the Phoenix suburbs. “When my son grows up, I don’t want him to be killed by a police officer because he looks a certain way, because he’s a brown boy.”

Even the term “brown” can oversimplify matters, given that it is often used to describe people from multiple continents and different cultures, whose skin color can range from ivory to sienna. It can also be used to refer to some people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent. The opposite of a monolith, Latinos include undocumented immigrants and those whose families have been in the United States for centuries.

At a time when Mr. Trump has made his anti-immigrant language and policies a centerpiece of his administration, some Latinos — perhaps especially young ones — see themselves as part of a broader fight for racial equity.

“Many Latino youth, they are making the connection, they are pressing their families to have difficult conversations,” said Chris Zepeda-Millán, a professor of Chicano studies and public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In one indication that Latinos are reacting to the current moment with urgency, a recent poll by The New York Times and Siena College found that 21 percent of Hispanic voters said they had participated in Black Lives Matter protests, nearly identical to the 22 percent of Black voters who said they had done so.

But some activists have privately wondered whether the recent police killings of Latinos have received enough attention, and whether there is broad acknowledgment that they, too, suffer from police brutality and systemic racism.

Jonathan Jayes-Green, a longtime activist who in 2015 created UndocuBlack, an organization designed to bring attention to issues of immigration and racial justice, said he had seen a notable shift among Latinos, both in their desire to protest and their willingness to confront racism among themselves.

That activism could be seen when dozens of Latino political leaders recently signed an open letter calling on Univision and Telemundo, the largest Spanish-language news networks based in the United States, to improve their coverage of the protests and to “use their platforms to dismantle racism, colorism and anti-blackness in our own Latino community.” Mijente circulated a similar petition.

Anti-Blackness has deep and complicated roots throughout Latin America, where fair-skinned people are frequently viewed as the ideal and receive better treatment. And those views have often carried over to the United States, where some believe that assimilation is the path to equality.

“Historically we’ve tended to aspire to the American dream, to aspire to whiteness,” said Mr. Jayes-Green, who is Afro-Latino. “Latinos have a real active role to play in this fight. We can show that these fights are not separated and that we can be active conspirators in fights against anti-Blackness.”

Many liberal Latino activists have been pushing for huge changes in policing for years, particularly in large urban centers. In many large cities, there is a history of coalitions among Black and Latino community groups fighting for police overhauls, with mixed success.

“The police has always represented this outside force that could harm us,” said Rafael Návar, who said he was roughed up by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department as a teenager.

But policing, Mr. Návar pointed out, is only part of the struggle for Latinos, who make up roughly 18 percent of the country’s population.

“This is a huge moment to expand consciousness around our own community, to recognize the contradiction of what kind of power do we and don’t we have in this country, that despite our size, we don’t even have basic needs met,” Mr. Návar said. “This country does not eat without our community, yet the people doing the work can’t keep their own family safe. The lack of power has to make us ask: What kind of respect do we have? How do we organize to have dignity?”

Like several of his friends and cousins, Victor Ortiz, 22, attended protests daily for more than two weeks. Many of their parents are working in jobs that force them to leave their home during the pandemic.

“So it’s like either way, your family is at risk,” he said. “It’s the same for Black folks, we know that. We have to show up for each other.”

Latinos hardly have the kind of deep political infrastructure that African-Americans have built up over decades, with many organizations working toward similar goals. Many liberal Latino activists view the Black Lives Matter movement, and the current wave of protests, as a model.

Ysenia Lechuga, 28, who brought a “tu lucha es mi lucha” sign to several recent demonstrations in Phoenix, said she found Black activism “inspiring.”

“I can come here and preach about immigrants and all the issues that we go through,” Ms. Lechuga said of attending the Black Lives Matter protests. “We get racially profiled, we get beat down.”

She thinks the current movement will have a “ripple effect” that will reach her community, too. “Everything is going to start to change,” she said.

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