THE LATINO TEST;

WHO GETS TO BE AN AMERICAN? AN INCREASINGLY DIVIDED LATINO POPULATION FINDS A SOURCE OF CONTENTION IN IMMIGRATION.

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Body

Six-year-old Elian Gonzalez has been in the United States for only a couple of months, yet he's taught Americans a thing or two about division. Not surprisingly, we are not of one mind on whether to return the boy to Cuba, and some of the differences break along racial lines.

A recent poll by a Miami television station ***found*** that Latinos in the area enthusiastically supported efforts to keep the boy in the United States, while blacks and whites were just as enthusiastic about sending him back to Cuba. Some 86 percent of Latinos disagreed with the decision by the ***Immigration*** and Naturalization Service to return Elian to his father; 79 percent of black and 70 percent of whites supported it.

But the division isn't just between Latinos and non-Latinos. Rather, it spills across the color line and into the ethnic group itself.

The debate over Elian has brought to the surface long-standing but not-often-talked-about tensions among different types of Latinos. The tension flared up recently during a televised exchange between two Latinos on opposite sides of the debate. A liberal Chicano professor from San Francisco who supported reuniting boy and father squared off against a Cuban-***American*** woman from the anti-Castro Cuban ***American*** National Foundation.

The Cuban-***American*** accused the Mexican-***American*** of employing a double standard on ***immigration*** because he would deny Elian the right to stay in the United States even as Chicanos scream about the "rights" of Mexican immigrants. She had a point. After all, how do Chicano activists who support returning the boy, in spite of his mother's drowning trying to deliver him to freedom, square their view with the romance they harbor for Mexican immigrants who risk their lives to travel north?

A few months earlier, many Mexican-Americans were just as baffled over the support among Puerto Ricans in New York City for the idea of offering clemency to a group of convicted Puerto Rican terrorists.

There long have been differences among different types of Latinos, yet it's not a common notion. The dawn of a new millennium has prompted corporate marketers, media, Internet companies and political strategists to toss around the slogan "Latinos 2000" as they try to capture the attention, buying power and votes of the 30 million Latinos in the United States with a one-size-fits-all approach. Those efforts are bound to fail. A common language cannot overcome the divisions stemming from different ancestries, cultures, national origins and political priorities.

As the case of Elian illustrates, no issue defines these priorities as clearly as ***immigration***. Unlike other Latinos, Americans of Puerto Rican descent have traditionally not had to think much about ***immigration***, since their ancestral homeland is a U.S. territory, and those who live there are U.S. citizens.

That's changing. Now that more than 300,000 Mexican immigrants live in New York City, anxious Puerto Rican leaders are beginning to sound like white nativists in California. A few months ago, former congressman and longtime civil-rights figure Herman Badillo let loose with a series of ugly comments directed at the Mexican immigrants. Dismissing the newcomers as "little people with straight hair" who "come from the hills and have no education," Badillo signaled that those who represent the city's Puerto Rican community are not at all interested in sharing power with the new arrivals. His comments reflect more than economic anxiety about immigrants taking jobs from Puerto Ricans. Badillo also worries about the influences of a people and a culture that he clearly views as inferior.

A similar arrogance has popped up in the ***immigration*** debate. Harvard professor George Borjas, a Cuban-***American*** immigrant, believes ***America***'s ***immigration*** policies are failing not merely because they let in too many immigrants but because they let in too many of the wrong immigrants.

In his new book "Heaven's Door," the economist uses U.S. Census data and various studies to argue that provisions in current ***immigration*** law making family reunification a priority have had the practical effect of increasing the flow of legal immigrants from a handful of countries and limiting the number from countries that have less of a foothold here. Worse, Borjas says, the people who are ***getting*** in are mostly unskilled and uneducated, a fact he assumes will lead to lower levels of employment, lower wages and greater dependence on welfare and other government aid. Dismissing notions about the power of assimilation to close the economic gap between immigrants and natives, Borjas argues that his generalizations hold true for several generations.

As a remedy, Borjas suggests the United States consider adopting a merit-based ***test*** for those wishing to legally immigrate. The examination, similar to ones used in Canada, New Zealand and Australia, could measure everything from English-speaking ability and job skills to age and the size of people's wallets (some exams in use award additional "points" if applicants are willing to make financial investments in the country they seek to enter).

The real problem with the Borjas argument isn't that it's elitist; that "skills" can and should be defined in a hundred different ways apart from education and professional training; that, since it's employers who set wages, any economic gap that exists is just as likely an indicator of a high level of exploitation as it is of a low skill set; and that his dismissal of assimilation flies in the face of everything we know, and have experienced, about how immigrant grandparents yield grandchildren who become successful doctors, lawyers, teachers and heads of industry. The real problem is that there's little mystery which immigrants Borjas views as the most undesirable: those from Mexico and Central ***America***.

Borjas, while an immigrant, misses the whole point of ***America***. The country, at its best, has always rewarded determination, courage and resilience. It has sought out and welcomed those who struggle and sacrifice to ***get*** here and to succeed once here. These are the people who built the United States in the past two centuries and the ones who will rebuild it in the next.

It's not skill that matters. It's will.

It's that kind of will that propels Mexican immigrants across the Arizona desert, negotiating barbed wire and cactus and rattlesnakes.

And it's that kind of will that inspired Elian's mother to step foot on a rickety boat bound for Florida, a boat that would eventually sink, killing her and 10 others. She's the real ***American*** in this story.

Oddly, on this issue, the gap among different types of Latinos may be closing. On the validity of the INS ruling that the boy be returned to Cuba, the poll by the Miami television station detected little difference between the views of

Cuban-Americans and non-Cuban Latinos; 88 percent of Cubans opposed the ruling, along with 78 percent of those Latinos who were non-Cuban.

Some have attributed this convergence of ***Latino*** opinion to the involvement of the INS, a government agency that has few friends among Latinos of any kind and that may be just the sort of common enemy against which a ***divided*** people can finally unite.

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