Executive Summary

Existing public opinion research is limited in what it can tell us about the attitudes of Black and Latinx Americans when it comes to “kitchen table” economic issues, and most analyses focus on contrasting their experiences with those of white Americans. Consequently, there is little analysis that conveys the nuances of how these groups experience and perceive the economy.

Project Mosaic, a joint project of the Groundwork Collaborative, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and UnidosUS Action Fund is a research effort that seeks to better understand Black and Latinx adults’ personal economic experiences as well as the broader views on how the economy should function. We explore the economic challenges they face, their perspective on the role government plays in the economy, and the role racism (institutional and otherwise) plays in their economic outcomes.

This memo presents findings from this study as pertains to responses gathered from Latinx adults. Our results show that:

- Most Latinx adults say they have not felt much benefit from the economy in the last two years.
- Women are much less likely than men to have positive things to say about the economy or their own financial situation.
- Latinx adults face serious “kitchen table” economic challenges.
- Younger Latinx adults are most likely to want the federal government to take a more active role in improving the economy and are more likely to see the system as rigged.
- Latinx adults have mixed views on the roles race and racism play in the economy and in their own lives.

It is important to highlight that this brief merely scratches the surface of the vast and rich dataset that we obtained through Project Mosaic. We plan to continue to release findings in the coming months, and to engage with additional partners across the progressive community to ensure that Latinx Americans’ views are represented in important economic discussions.
Introduction

The United States’ Latinx community is a driving force behind our nation’s economic growth and is a growing part of both the U.S. population and electorate. Despite the community’s substantial economic contributions, little is known about their nuanced views on, and relationship to, the U.S. economy.

For the U.S. Latinx community, the economy is personal and weighed in terms of individual success and income. Like many Americans, they worry about financial pressures like retirement, education, and wages. Yet while Latinx respondents feel and acknowledge racism, it does not dominate, particularly relative to other issues. Further, Latinx respondents are notably less likely to report concerns about racism than Black respondents, with clearer divisions along party lines. Worldviews centering on a rigged economy are balanced with optimism about opportunities available to those who work hard. While Trump is not the focus of this survey, he is not given much credit for positive economic conditions of the Latinx community and is generally seen as drag instead. Trump notwithstanding, many Latinx see an opening for an expanded federal government role, depending on the frame, topic, and demographic audience.

Methodology

Project Mosaic is a study commissioned by the Groundwork Collaborative, and completed in partnership with Topos Partnership, GBAO, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and UnidosUS Action Fund. We combined a multi-phase approach that included the following:

- An ethnography involving 185 total interviews, divided about evenly between Black and Latinx adults. This included 98 full interviews (i.e., 30-60 minutes), and 87 opportunistic encounters (i.e., 5-30 minutes). Most were in-person interviews conducted in locations chosen for demographic purposes; these were supplemented with phone interviews of respondents around country. Interviews were offered in English and Spanish.
- A “TalkBack” exercise involving 630 total interviews - divided about evenly between Black and Latinx adults. During Talkback sessions, individual subjects were presented with brief texts and then asked several open-ended questions. This exercise allows researchers to determine what respondents “hear” in the message (i.e., What is the main idea? Is it the idea we intended? What emotions does the idea provoke?).
- A national multimodal survey of 3,000 Latinx and Black American adults living in the U.S. – divided evenly between 1500 self-identified Latinx respondents and 1500 self-identified Black respondents. Interviews were conducted via live calls to 1,000 landlines and 1,000 cell phones, and an additional 1,000 online panel interviews. Interviews were offered in Spanish and English.

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1 Interviews were conducted from February - March.
2 Black adults were interviewed primarily in Memphis, TN., Philadelphia, PA., Chicago, IL., Tampa, FL., and Orlando, FL.
3 Latinx adults were interviewed primarily in Tucson, AZ., Houston, TX., Chicago, IL., Tampa, FL., and Orlando, FL.
4 Interviews were completed March 31-April 6 (11 texts with 411 respondents), and June 21-June 25 (5 texts with 219 respondents).
5 Interviews were completed May 21-June 6.
How the Economy Works

Latinx Americans see themselves as central to the success of the American economy

Latinx Americans are split on how they tend to think about the economy. A bare majority (51%) say that when they think of the economy, they think of their own income and salary, while 42% think of overall indicators such as the stock market or unemployment rates. Latinx Americans reject a “trickle-down” theory of how the economy works (27%), and are much more likely to embrace the statement that “the economy works better when workers and everyday people are able to keep more of what they earn” as opposed to money staying at the top with business leaders.

Latinx Americans see themselves as the backbone of the American economy, a finding surfaced by the ethnography, and overwhelmingly confirmed during the “Talkback” exercise. For Latinx adults, it is important to be acknowledged and respected for their contributions and hard work. There are many pathways to this conclusion: one respondent points out that, “Latinos are a growing force that need to be recognized,” while another offers that Latinos often “work the jobs that Americans don't want to do.” Regardless of reason, this idea proves to be striking, inspiring, and – most important to acknowledge – widely accepted as fact.

Latinx Americans’ Experience in the Economy

Latinx adults more positive about personal situation than overall economy

Latinx Americans are very much divided about the direction of the United States economy over the last two years. A plurality (37%) feels that the economy has gotten worse, and 32% say the economy has stayed the same. A smaller share of respondents (29%) believe the economy has improved.
There is however a notable trend that as questions narrow from asking about the American economy at large to the economy in their local communities, Latinx adults are less likely to report feeling pessimistic. For instance, 30% report feeling that economic conditions in their local community have gotten worse compared to 37% who felt that the nation’s overall economy has declined. A similar drop occurs when moving from community to personal; only 23% felt that their own situation has worsened over the last two years.

An interesting segment contradicts this general tendency: Latinx Republicans (which, including leaners, accounts for about 24% of the overall sample). Overall, Latinx Republicans say the U.S. economy has gotten better over the last two years (60%), though this positivity in outlook actually decreases as the focus of the question narrows. Within this segment, 49% say that economic conditions in their community have improved. Similarly, 49% see their own financial situation as improved. Republican men drive much of this difference: 71% of Latinx Republican men say the American economy has gotten better overall, compared to 48% of Republican women. On the contrary, pluralities among Democrats and Independents respectively believe both their local economy and person situation has stayed about the same over the last two years.

When it comes to their own economic situation, Latinx adults are also more likely to cite personal factors such as “personal drive and persistence” (27%) and “the way [their] family raised [them]” (25%) as the single factor that has most contributed to their own economic situation as opposed to more structural issues like “Experiences with racism and race-based discrimination” (12%), or “availability of good jobs” (19%). Of course, it is important to acknowledge that identifying one factor over others does not suggest that any respondent considers unselected factors as unimportant in shaping their economic outcome, just that the option they indicate has “most contributed.”

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Latinx Americans are also split on the question of whether peoples’ economic circumstances are the result of a “rigged system” (46%) as opposed to individual choices (47%). Here, there is a substantial split across party lines, with Republicans overwhelmingly (73%) cite individual choices, Independents slightly favor that view. Democrats are more likely to see a rigged system (56%), as are younger adults, women, and progressives. It is of course challenging to ask respondents to cite a single, primary driver of their own socioeconomic situation. Yet this self-reporting is nonetheless illustrative. With that in mind, it is also important to acknowledge that respondents identifying one factor over others does not suggest that any respondent considers unselected factors as unimportant in shaping their economic outcomes.

**Latinx adults face various “kitchen table” economic challenges**

The Latinx community is concerned about their own personal financial security like saving for retirement, paying for education, finding a job to keep up with the rising cost of living. Latinx respondents seek financial security and point to saving for retirement as a “big” or “somewhat” of a challenge in their lives (38% big, 64% total). Education and wages are similarly challenging obstacles, yet surprisingly health care is lower-tier\(^6\) (28% big, 53% total).

Low-income Latinx adults feel these pressures more acutely. Clear majorities find several of these challenges to be “big”—such as saving for retirement (57%), finding pay that keeps up with the cost of living (58%), finding safe affordable housing (52%), and affording higher education (50%). Respondents for whom both parents were born outside of the U.S. more commonly report facing “big” challenges saving for retirement (41%) and affording higher education (41%) than those with at least one US-born parent (36% and 34%, respectively).

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\(^6\) Polling consistently shows “health care” to be a top issue priority among Latinx Americans. These results do not contradict previous findings, but instead speak to the personal experience of respondents, and the extent to which individuals report having an issue with maintaining sufficient health care.
However, there are other important demographic differences. For example, strong Democrats with a college degree are far more likely to report saving for retirement as a big challenge (42%) than are non-Democrats with a college degree (26%). Meanwhile non-Democrats without a college degree are more similar to college-educated non-Democrats (30% big challenge) than they are to Democrats also without a college degree (strong Democrats: 47% big challenge, weaker Democrats: 44% big challenge).

Further, there is a gender divide that transcends even party identification. Women are more likely than men to find nearly every challenge they were asked about to be a “big” challenge, and this is true across every party group. For example, women of every party—including stronger and weaker Democrats—are more likely than men of their same affiliation to say saving for higher education is a big challenge.

**Worries about racism are not ubiquitous and vary along party and gender lines**

In a series of forced-choice questions asking respondents “which comes closest to your own view, even if neither is exactly right,” results show Latinx adults to be clearly concerned about inequality and the needs of workers and hold mixed views about the impact of hard work.

For example, a majority of Latinx adults (57%) favor the view that, “it’s harder for black and brown people to overcome the obstacles put in the way” versus the viewpoint that now, “most of the time, people are judged on their hard work and ability, not the color of their skin” (35%). Similarly, 57% lean toward feeling that “people still have to work too hard to stay afloat,” while, “those who already have certain privileges can get ahead more easily.” Just 37% align with the view that “America is full of opportunities. For the most part, people can get a better job and get ahead if they are willing to work hard.”
But the gap disappears when respondents are asked whether fighting racism must be part of the fight for economic fairness. Latinx adults split almost evenly between favoring a view that fighting for a fair economy means we have to fight against racism (46%), or the contradictory view that, “the fight for economic fairness doesn’t have to be a fight about racism,” and “Right now, we can all work together to fight for a fairer economy that works for everybody,” (45%). Those who are college-educated (61%), younger (54%), and women identifying as Democrats (61%) favor the view of centralizing the fight against racism, while Republican women (61%) and men (67%) lean in the opposite direction. Interestingly, a majority of Independent men favor the, “doesn’t have to be a fight about racism” view (51% to 37%), while Independent women narrowly favor the “fight against racism” position (43%) over the opposing choice (41%).

This is not to say Latinx adults believe racism does not exist or is not serious. In fact, most (69%) believe that the federal government should do more to address race-based discrimination encountered in the workplace. Four-in-ten (42%) say the government should, “do a lot more” about workplace discrimination, even though only one-in-ten (13%) say it is a big challenge they personally face. Ultimately, this data provides a proof point that Latinx adults’ views on race are nuanced and complex, though there is a clear awareness of racism in America today.

Donald Trump unsurprisingly triggers negative reactions from Latinx respondents. Survey results show Latinx respondents are decidedly more negative when thinking about Trump’s effect on the economic conditions for Hispanic and Latinx people overall—just 20% think economic conditions under Trump are better, compared to the 50% who say conditions are in fact worse under Trump. For context, slightly more Latinx adults believe conditions in their local community are worse (30%), rather than better (27%), though they are more likely to be positive about their personal situation (35% improved vs. 23% who say worse). One takeaway these results suggest is that very few Latinx adults believe President Trump is responsible for positive economic changes. Another acknowledges that perceptions of Trump and the economy are worse when respondents consider the specific impact on Latinx communities.
Government’s Role in the Economy

Most believe government should “solve problems.”

The survey asks two different versions of a broad question on the role of the federal government—should it do more, or does it already do “too many things better left to businesses and individuals.” Latinx respondents prefer the frame of government involvement as one that “solves problems and helps meet people’s needs” (72% vs. 22% does too many things) as opposed to “take a more active role in making the economy stronger” (63% vs. 28% who say government does too many things).

There is a clear role for government in assisting with Latinx adults’ biggest personal challenges.

This role for government extends from the broad to the specific challenges Latinx adults face. Clear majorities want to see the federal government have a larger role in ensuring individuals have sufficient health care coverage (58% do a lot more, 80% total more) and covering the cost of college and vocational programs (56% a lot more, 80% total more).

Party identification is obviously a big driver here. Across all of the areas tested—including having sufficient healthcare, covering college costs, finding a decent job, accessing affordable housing, finding quality child care, saving for retirement—those identifying as strong Democrats are more likely to want to see an expanded government role than weaker Democrats, weaker Democrats are more likely than Independents, and Independents more likely than Republicans. There is also a gender gap; more Latinx women than men say the government should do “a lot more” on every single item tested. In most cases, this gender gap transcends party lines, with Republican men the least likely to prefer a more active government role.
**Not Every Challenge Demands a Comparable Government Response**

Respondents’ top personal challenges are not necessarily their top areas for expanded federal government involvement. For example, only about four-in-ten say the government should “do a lot more” to help with saving for retirement, despite Latinx adults identifying it as a top challenge. Similarly, achieving one’s economic goals and dreams may be a mid-tier challenge, but it is lower on the list of things the government should do more to address. Conversely, health care is a more mid-pack challenge, yet it is considered the number one area in which respondents want the government to take a more active role. Additionally, four-in-ten (42%) say the government should “do a lot more” about workplace discrimination, even though only one-in-ten (13%) say it is a big challenge they personally face.

![Graph showing the relationship between personal challenges and government role](image)

Similarly, achieving one’s economic goals and dreams may be a mid-tier challenge, but it is lower on the list of things the government should do more about. In the other direction, health care is a more mid-pack challenge, yet it is considered the number one thing the government should do more about.
Messaging on the Economy

Zero-sum mental model leads many to miss the mark

Messaging is most effective when communicators successfully tap broadly shared mental models and inspire collective action. However, policy debates often fail to engage Latinx Americans in part because little account is given to the mental models they use to understand what the economy is and how it works. The qualitative component of this study is especially helpful for understanding some of the issues that currently plague progressive policymakers and advocates seeking to engage Latinx Americans.

To encourage people to consider policy changes, progressive communicators often lead with talk about economic disparities, economic fairness and the negative influence of the wealthy and powerful. In this view, the economy is the net outcome of a contest of raw power between elites and regular people. This zero-sum outlook – that “I have less because others have more,” – is unquestioned, as is the view that the rich and powerful will fight changes and policies that would take from them to give to others. This frame also does little to lead people to think about economic growth.

For Latinx Americans, there is somewhat of a tendency to disengage with this model because individuals are prone to see ways out of their economic status quo. As previously mentioned, Latinx adults strongly espouse the value hard work, and feel it is important to be acknowledged for their contributions. Therefore, as learned during “Talkback” testing, the zero-sum framing can provoke pushback from Latinx adults and at times lead them to consider explanations for differences in economic outcomes (i.e., lack of drive) rather than focusing on the opportunity in collective action. References to the rich are surely vivid and powerful, but unless people also see legitimate room for their own empowerment and influence, references to the rich and powerful are distracting and potentially undermine otherwise helpful models. In other words, people may direct their attention to evaluating the critique and the underlying causes if this frame fails to centralize, or even precludes personal agency.

This is not to say it would be better to shy away from attacking the problem of elites not sharing the wealth. However, it is necessary to do so in a way that not only highlights the potential economic power of regular people, but also places the us-versus-them problem into a larger framework in which it is in everyone’s interest that Latinx Americans thrive economically – including even elites.

The ethnographic research finds indications of a promising economic mental model that would require further expansion and reinforcement. A “people-centered” way of thinking builds on the centrality of “people” in Latinx Americans’ thinking, but bridges to community and to the larger economic system. Also, as opposed to the widely rejected “trickle down” view of the economy in which money flows from the rich to the rest, a people-centered view of the economy recognizes that value and wealth is created by everyday people and should flow through communities.
This people-centered economic mental model includes the understanding that access to well-paying jobs and economic mobility can create a good economy rather than be a result of it. Accordingly, such a model uplifts the idea that regular, working people are the key to a strong economy in several ways. First, spending money creates, sustains and grows an economy, because businesses have enough customers to stay afloat and hire people, which leads to more paychecks. Second, when people have money, they can save and invest in their future, open businesses, and take various other steps that enable a community to thrive. And finally, everyday workers in all fields are the ones who actually create the value the economy produces. Thriving workers means a thriving economy. Therefore, this model drives home the idea that each individual is affected by how the people around them – neighbors, friends, and family – are doing economically.

Future success in political communications targeting Latinx Americans will depend on communicators’ ability to improve how messages land on several keys:

- **Highlighting intentionality**: the economy is something that people create, construct, change and manage for various kinds of outcomes, not something one simply has to endure as best one can, like the weather.
- **F ore fronting people**: the economy should be constructed for the benefit of everyday people – and especially Latinx people whose hard work drives prosperity – rather than for the benefit of corporations or the wealthy and powerful.
- **Giving people hope**: the economy can and will be changed for their benefit.
- **Supporting and vividly envision a picture of what a good economy actually is**: a better economy is not just imagined; there must also be clear steps to make it happen.
- **Encouraging personal agency**: people, as members of a democratic society, have an important role to play and a positive outcome is possible.

In an exercise exploring how well this viewpoint resonates, each of the statements perform extremely well. For instance, 87% of respondents say that, “Everyday working people drive the economy. It’s our labor, our production of goods and services, and our small businesses that create wealth, jobs, and a vibrant economy. However, our economic policies all favor those at the top. It’s time to change focus and have our policies build the economy by putting working people first,” reflects their views at least somewhat, including 52% who say it reflects their views either exactly or very closely.
This type of approach is key both to internalizing and communicating that prosperity starts with people and communities -- when everyday people have what they need to do well, the benefits ripple through communities and the overall economy. America’s prosperity persists because of the contributions from Latinx Americans, even as many are prevented from fully sharing in the economic gains they’ve created. Latinx Americans understand this, though many believe in the inevitability that hard work will receive appropriate recognition in due time. Indeed, this recognition could be a major key to creating a groundswell around the idea of the need for collective action to drive systemic economic change.