

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

POLITICS AND THE PANDEMIC IN LATINO AND NATIVE AMERICAN
COMMUNITIES

Washington, D.C.
Friday, October 15, 2021

PARTICIPANTS:

FRED DEWS
Multimedia Project Manager
The Brookings Institution

GABRIEL SANCHEZ
David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution
Professor of Political Science and director, Center for Social Policy
The University of New Mexico

HANNA LOVE
Research Associate, Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking, Metropolitan Policy
Program
The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

On today's episode, I interview an expert who calls immigration and the Latino vote a golden opportunity for Democrats in 2022. Gabriel Sanchez is a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico. In the interview, he discusses a range of policy issues including why COVID-19 has had such a devastating impact on Latino families, why vaccination rates are so high in Native American communities, and why immigration policy remains so important headed into the midterm elections. Sanchez is also Founding Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Endowed Chair in Health Policy and director of the Center for Social Policy at the University of New Mexico.

Also on this episode, Hanna Love, a research associate with the Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking in the Brookings Metropolitan Policy program, discusses three trends shaping the future of rural America that she says the dominant narratives aren't very good at capturing.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast, The Current, and our events podcast.

First up, here's Hanna Love with a new Metro Lens on rural America.

LOVE: Hi there, I'm Hanna Love, a research associate for the Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking in the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program.

In the wake of both the 2016 and 2020 elections, a familiar story of American politics had plenty of time to fester: the narrative of two Americas, one metropolitan, thriving, and Democratic, and one rural, declining, and Republican. This narrative presents two societies so

fundamentally opposed that they barely belong to the same world, framing urban America as diverse, educated, and productive, and rural America as white, dependent on declining industries, and characterized by stagnation and despair.

While this trend provides an easy way to think about America in binary terms, it obscures far more complicated trends that shape the future of rural America, most notably its growing demographic, economic, and regional diversity. In a recent analysis, my colleague DW Rowlands and I dive deeper into the trends shaping rural America using the recently released 2020 Census population data. What we found is that while the population of non-metropolitan America did decline by about half a percentage point between 2010 and 2020, there are three trends shaping its future that our dominant narratives just aren't very good at capturing.

First, rural America became more racially and ethnically diverse over the last decade. Contrary to portrayals that often use “rural” as a synonym for “white,” 24 percent of rural Americans were people of color in 2020. Rural America is still less diverse than the nation as a whole, which is 42 percent people of color, but it is diversifying, as the median rural county saw its population of color increase by 3.5 percentage points between 2010 and 2020.

Demographic diversity in rural America varies considerably from place to place. In 2020, two-thirds of rural counties consisted of at least 10 percent people of color, one-third were over a quarter people of color, and 10 percent of rural counties were majority people of color.

In our analysis, DW and I argue that dominant narratives which tend to ignore the 24 percent of rural Americans who are people of color and those rural counties that are majority people of color can devalue the needs of Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Asian rural Americans while giving rhetorical priority to the concerns of an imagined white rural monolith.

Our second finding is that the distribution of people of color in rural America is complex and highly regionalized. Our piece shows how the makeup of rural populations of color is shaped by regionalized variations in the concentration of Black Americans, Latino Americans, and Indigenous Americans across the nation.

Rural counties in the West and the South, for instance, are particularly racially and ethnically diverse, with a substantial number of rural areas in these regions majority or near-majority people of color. In almost all of the rural lowland South, for instance, Black people are the largest population of color. Indigenous groups are the largest population of color in rural areas in eastern Oklahoma, the Four Corners area, the northern tier of the Great Plains, and in most of Alaska. Asian Americans are the largest population of color in rural Hawaii and in parts of Alaska.

We discuss how this regional variation and diversity also has political ramifications. According to researchers from the Economic Innovation Group, Trump won only three majority black rural counties in the U.S. and fared poorly among rural workers employed in the leisure and hospitality sectors, particularly in the rural West who voted for Biden. These rural counties, with recreation-focused economies, were also more likely to gain population over the last decade compared to farming-dependent counties, meaning that the future of rural America is not only increasingly diverse but not as conservative as many assume.

Our third finding was that expanding diversity in rural America is largely driven by growth in the rural Latino population. Whereas the Black and Indigenous populations remained relatively constant in rural America, the rural Latino population has grown rapidly along the Pacific Coast, in the High Plains, as well as in some counties further east. In fact, population gains in many rural areas were driven solely by increases in Latino residents, many of whom

immigrated to work in meatpacking plants, industries like construction, oil, and timber, or to start a business.

So, what do these three trends mean for the future of rural America? In short, our piece argues that the future of rural America requires policy choices that value its increasingly diverse population. While patterns of demographic change in rural America are complex and regionalized, the key takeaway is clear: Rural America is increasingly marked by demographic, regional, and economic diversity. These patterns underscore the need to reject one-size-fits-all policies and programs for rural America and to acknowledge the importance of nurturing diverse, dynamic, and connected rural communities.

Our colleague Tony Pipa at Brookings, as well as researchers at the Center for American Progress, have urged the federal government to support these aims by investing in grassroots strategies to bolster local assets and nurture racial and economic justice.

At the community level, this means rural leaders must embrace intentional strategies to support demographic diversity and dynamic local economies, including supporting clusters of diverse, locally owned small businesses that build community wealth; implementing built environment and quality of life improvements for vulnerable residents; strengthening social cohesion between neighbors; and nurturing new community-led structures to build capacity and advance community priorities.

Rural areas account for over 70 percent of our nation's land. Rather than trying to pigeonhole them into an antiquated framework, our policies must value the diversity that is both their present and their future.

DEWS: You can find more data and analysis about this issue on The Avenue blog on brookings.edu, and more Metro Lens pieces on the Brookings SoundCloud Channel. And now, here's my interview with Gabriel Sanchez.

DEWS: Gabe, welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

SANCHEZ: Thanks for having me.

DEWS: So, as I mentioned in the introduction, you're one of our new David M. Rubenstein fellows. And one of the things that we sometimes like to do on this podcast is to have new scholars introduce themselves to a series of questions. So, if I could just throw out those series of questions to you and we'll, and then after that, we'll talk more about your research. Sound good?

SANCHEZ: Sounds perfect.

DEWS: Let me ask you first, where did you grow up?

SANCHEZ: Yeah. I was born in a small town north of Albuquerque called Las Vegas, New Mexico. So I'm from the great state of New Mexico. And although we moved around a lot when I was a kid, a lot of time spent in San Diego and in Southern California, graduated from high school here in Albuquerque. Very much consider Albuquerque, New Mexico, my hometown.

DEWS: One of the best meals I ever had in my life was in Bernalillo, right outside Albuquerque.

SANCHEZ: Yeah, I've spent a lot of time with my family in Bernalillo, I can't doubt that you had a great meal there.

DEWS: Gabe, what inspired you to become a scholar?

SANCHEZ: You know, I was blessed to participate in American Political Science Association's diversity program called the Ralph Bunche Summer Institute, where they take undergrads right around their junior year. They put them through research opportunities and give them a real-life idea of what Ph.D. training might look like. And that was a game changer for me. I think going through that program and really being able to connect the dots between doing research and improving outcomes, particularly for marginalized underrepresented communities, that that really turned me on to this, and it's been a blessing to be able to participate in that program.

DEWS: So, as I mentioned, you just joined Brookings as one of the new class of Rubenstein Fellows, a terrific program here at Brookings now in its third class, I think. Where have you been working before Brookings and what is your continued affiliation?

SANCHEZ: Yeah, I was able to start my career right out of graduate school. I went to the University of Arizona, worked under the great John Garcia, godfather in Latino politics, and was able to get my first job here at the University of New Mexico, which is essentially a dream come true to be able to serve the communities that I'm from. And I've been here now, believe it or not, 15 going on 16 years at the University of New Mexico.

So, I'm a full professor in the political science department where I continue to have a home while I'm doing the Brookings fellowship, but also oversee our Center for Social Policy, which coordinates all policy-oriented research in the social sciences, and also trains Ph.D. students from underrepresented groups to be the next generation of leaders that try to tackle our nation's greatest social policy issues, really from a racial equity perspective.

DEWS: I'll put links to that organization in the show notes of this episode so listeners can find more about you there. But what are you going to focus on during your fellowship at Brookings?

SANCHEZ: You know, like a lot of the other fellows in my cohort that I've talked to, we all had grand plans to do various things. For me, focus on voting behavior, obstacles to voting, voter disenfranchisement. Obviously, that's a big issue right now across the country and I was also looking forward to doing a lot on immigration policy, another area of interest of mine. But unfortunately, COVID continues to be with us, and I've done a lot of work on vaccination hesitancy, trying to find paths to get more of our folks vaccinated. And I think at least for the next year, I'm going to continue that focus, and I've already been able to connect with some of the other fellows to advance that line of research. So, I'd expect to be doing a bit more on the COVID work and also recovery from COVID for a lot of our communities, Latino and Native American. For me, in particular, thinking about jobs, economic development, other things that unfortunately have stayed on quite a bit longer through the pandemic than I think a lot of us expected.

DEWS: Well, those are the very things that I'd like to talk to you more about now to learn more about your research and your ideas about these issues. And you have been doing research on the impact of COVID on distance learning, especially in Latino and Native American populations. Can you talk about how COVID disruptions have affected learning among students in those communities?

SANCHEZ: Absolutely. I mean, I'm blessed to be a survey researcher and also affiliated with the survey outfit called BSP Research. And when you kind of have that "Toys 'R' Us" for social scientists of data ability, you know, whether it was the state of New Mexico, other states,

the federal government, as the pandemic broke out and we knew that we were going to distance learning, there was a million questions about what that would look like for communities that don't have regular access to high-speed internet.

So, we went into the field with the number of surveys trying to track, particularly for Latino families and Native American families, what was their access points? What challenges were they facing? And a couple of things were obvious, right? When you have the inability to connect to high-speed internet in your household, the ability to continue with your children's education obviously was hugely disrupted. But even in areas where schools did the right thing and quickly tried to mobilize and give folks Wi-Fi access through hotspots, we often found that, unfortunately, the computers that they might have sent home with the children to be able to do distance learning didn't always sync with the software that was being required by school districts. So, we're just a lot of those early missteps that fortunately, our data was able to help inform.

And I think school districts across the country did an amazing job trying to move quickly and really tackle those problems. And one of the things that I found more recently in our research is that for families that were able to access those resources and be able to get access to high-speed internet, get access to computers or tablets, we actually saw the amount of education loss shrink considerably. And they looked almost like their counterparts that had high speed internet at home. Unfortunately, those folks that were not able to get access to those resources, at least quickly, they're seeing quite a bit of a lag in terms of their educational development through that difficult time during the pandemic.

DEWS: And what about the impact of COVID disruptions more broadly on Latino and Native American communities, especially in areas like jobs and the well-being of their families?

SANCHEZ: Yeah, that's a huge issue and that one's going to be the most long term. Unfortunately, that's going to require a lot more energy and emphasis to try to address that. One thing that I always start with when we're talking about economic challenges, particularly for the Latino community—my area of expertise—we have to look back to the last economic recession. And unfortunately, Latinos recovered at the most slow rate of any racial and ethnic group economically from the last recession. And in fact, right around when the pandemic-driven economic challenges started to emerge, Latinos were barely catching up with where they were in terms of economic well-being from the last recession. So, we know this is going to be a long haul.

We've tracked this consistently in our data and find that Latinos have had significant job losses. And one thing that a lot of people don't realize is in terms of small business ownership, Latinos are overwhelmingly the racial and ethnic group most likely to own a small business and had seen the acceleration of small business ownership and entrepreneurship over the last decade in the Latino community. So, as a lot of these businesses were just getting foot and unfortunately now, right, in danger if they haven't already gone out of business of doing so. You think about the mom-and-pop restaurants, et cetera. Right? Those have been most hit hard by COVID. Unfortunately, Latinos are going to feel the brunt of that, even if they're not the business owner. Latinos are likely to be employees of those small businesses.

So, we're paying close attention to that. And one of the byproducts of the job losses is loss of health insurance for Latinos, right? Folks that had health insurance through their employer, if they lose their job or they move from full time to part time employment. All of those things have impacts on the full family, not just the individual that might be the displaced worker.

DEWS: So, I want to switch to politics here in a minute, but first, I want to stick on this question of vaccines and again, you've done some research on vaccination in these communities. I have seen some reports that vaccination rates are very high in many Native American communities. So, is that true? And if so, in a nation, the United States, where the overall rate among adults is maybe creeping up to 80 percent, why is the rate in Native American community even higher?

SANCHEZ: Yeah, that's a great question. And that's one thing, I think, that Native Americans can take a lot of pride in. Our data, along with everybody else's, show particularly through the first wave of vaccination outreach Native Americans led the nation in terms of racial and ethnic groups in terms of vaccination. But it is important to note that tribes are very diverse across the country. So, although the overall population has done very well, that doesn't mean that there's not pockets of tribes across the country that have had difficulty, particularly due to their rural nature, getting access to vaccines or being able to reach all of their population. But I think it's a real testament to the fact that tribes really have the ability because of their sovereignty status in most states to be able to make decisions on their own on how they wanted to distribute the vaccines, in many cases prioritizing the elders in their community that have language abilities to try to retain that very important aspect of their culture.

So, the ability for folks to be able to have multiple access points to get the vaccine and unfortunately, the huge devastation that that COVID had on Native Americans and tribes across the country very early on, I think raised the saliency of getting a vaccine for many Native Americans who really felt like it wasn't just about them, but protection of their entire culture because unfortunately, they were seeing such high losses among their elder population, which is so critical to continuing their culture. So, I think all those factors have worked really well for

tribes, and what we're trying to do is figure out what's worked well for various communities and figure out what's the right messaging and the right messengers to pair that with to get the overall population vaccinated at the same rate that we've seen tribes.

DEWS: Right. Back in January, you wrote about vaccine hesitancy among different Latino communities and also differences by gender in those communities. What's your assessment of vaccination rates in Latino communities now?

SANCHEZ: Fortunately, since I wrote that piece back in January, we've actually seen a significant increase among Latinos in vaccination. And I think the take home message was for a lot of Latinos, the barriers weren't so much about hesitancy and underlying ideological distance from wanting to get vaccinated, a lot of it was tangible barriers. For example, a lot of Latinos did not know that you didn't have to pay for the vaccine. They didn't realize early on that if you didn't have health insurance—and remember, Latinos are more likely than anybody else to not have health insurance—that you can still get access to a vaccine.

So, as we started to track this and get the need for basic information out to Latino communities and, importantly, that none of this information was going to be tracked and utilized for immigration purposes, as that basic information started to permeate across the Latino community, we started to see an increase in uptake. And I think that's again a testament to a lot of good research that was done on behalf of Latinos by Latinos to really inform what states could do to do a better job of increasing uptake among that community in particular.

DEWS: Let's move on to politics, Latino politics, starting with Texas, which happens to be my home state, but I haven't lived there since Bill Clements was governor. Texas legislature is doing some redistricting right now, but, as we've learned, Texas population growth driven largely by Latino population growth has allowed Texas to get two more seats in the U.S. House

of Representatives in Washington. And yet the Texas Senate, which is controlled by the Republican Party, seems to not be creating any new majority Latino districts in the entire state. Can you unpack what's going on there?

SANCHEZ: Yeah. I did my undergraduate work in the state of Texas and have done a ton of work over my career in the state of Texas around voter suppression and increasing access to Latinos and other communities in the state of Texas, including the Texas photo ID case. So, I'm very familiar with the nuances of the politics of Texas. And it's unfortunate, right? On one hand, you see the population not just in Texas, but across most of the southwest, really driven by the Latino population. So, now as it's redistricting season, a lot of folks intuitively might say, well, if Latinos are fueling the population growth, wouldn't you expect to see more majority Latino districts or at least districts with a sizable segment of Latinos so that they can influence really the outcomes in the areas in which they live?

And although that's very intuitive, right, unfortunately, when it comes to redistricting, everything is partisan in terms of the way that it's decided. And unfortunately, in the state of Texas, where there's a climate right now to essentially try to reduce access points for political influence for communities like Latinos and African Americans, who tend to vote to a greater extent Democrat than Republican over this time period, I think what we're seeing play out is Republicans in the state of Texas trying to maximize their opportunity to elect other Republicans. And unfortunately, that often has racial and ethnic implications in the context of Latinos potentially minimizing their voice.

I've actually done some survey work recently trying to figure out how to engage more of the Latino population in Texas and other southern states in the redistricting process, and that population is very aware of these nuances. When we ask them in surveys, they'll tell you they

understand that there's forces trying to undercut their power or their political influence through the redistricting process. So, they understand that context. The challenge is getting them to understand that if they voice their opinion, get involved in the redistricting process, they might be able to overcome that. And that's a daunting task because a lot of them look at it and realize, look, what can I do as an individual when the powers that be seem so powerful in a state like Texas and you continuously see, unfortunately, a lot of outcomes that suggest increasing access to the ballot box is not a real priority, unfortunately, for a lot of the Senate and the House in the state of Texas?

DEWS: What do you think are the social and political implications of a state where the population growth is fueled largely by Latinos and there is no Latino representation in Congress in Washington, D.C.?

SANCHEZ: You know, it has huge implications for a number of different factors. I mean, when whenever we talk about redistricting and the census numbers, obviously it's about resource distribution. So, you think about those communities that probably need resources the most potentially not getting their fair share because of this process.

But also at the individual level, we know factors like trust in government efficacy and believing that your community can have an impact, those things have huge implications for voter turnout and civic engagement. So, if communities see that the system isn't working for them and they say, wait a minute, our population numbers suggest—and our survey data really puts it this simply—Latinos, when they look at the population numbers say they, quote unquote, deserve to have the same level of resources as everybody else because of their population numbers. And if they don't see the system produce those outcomes, they start to question whether or not the

system is something that they should participate in. And I think that's a dangerous overall situation for democracy, period. Much less thinking about resources and all of those other things.

So, it does have huge implications. And keep in mind, right, when we're talking about redistricting, that's a decade worth of outcomes, right? So that's impacting a generation, if you will. And so, I think, again, redistricting season, this is always an important time. I think right now it just seems even more consequential given the stakes and the realities of life that we've all seen through the pandemic.

DEWS: I think there's there's been a very interesting phenomenon that I, as even just a layperson observing politics has seen, is that the partisan preference of Latino communities, if you will, is not monolithic and it's maybe even less monolithic than some other groups. And it strikes me that in the redistricting in Texas, the Republicans are making the assumption that Latinos are monolithically going to vote for Democrats. But you wrote a piece recently in the How We Rise blog, which is on Brookings.edu, that there has been a rise in the percentage of Latino voters who vote based on partisan identification, and that ethnic attachment is decreasing as a voting behavior. Is this a phenomenon that you think will accelerate for different Latino communities?

SANCHEZ: Yes. That's a great question, and I appreciate you referencing that blog that I think has a lot of useful data points for folks to be able to take a look at to back up what I'm about to say. But I think if you take a historical context on this, we don't even have to go that far back. If we look at 2000, 2004, the George W. Bush years, for example, remember, Latinos voted according to most polls at that time at about 40 percent for former President Bush. And so if you think about that marker, Republican strategists have always felt if they can get to about 40 percent of the Latino vote at the national level, they feel that they can do very well in presidential

racism, and at that 40 percent rate in many states they think they can do very well in statewide elections. So, it's not that long ago we thought about a 60-40 split among Latinos.

Now, you fast forward and you think about more recent election periods 2008, '12, '16, you saw a significant increase in Democratic vote share among Latinos. And my argument, backed by data that I've been tracking over that long period of time, is that Latinos were really moved towards the Democratic Party as immigration became the dominant wedge issue, if you will, for Latino voters. Right? Obviously, border control, immigration policy, all those things had a very much racialized component to it, where the Republican Party often framed their stance on immigration policy really around Latinos and more directly Mexican immigrants. And over that long period of time, our survey data consistently showed that Latinos felt that they were being singled out or discriminated against in the context of immigration. And that led a lot of even U.S.-born Latinos who are not necessarily immigrants themselves, don't have an immigrant experience per se, but felt that pressure. They felt that the Democratic Party was doing a better job as it related to immigration policy.

So, that backdrop really fueled the voting trends of Latinos up and through the first election with Donald Trump, where obviously that crystallized and you really saw the messaging ramped up in terms of anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican, anti-Latino. And that was the backdrop in which I think you really started to see a shift and almost an assumption that Latinos are going to vote Democratic.

But the 2020 election, obviously, things moved much differently. And we saw a lot of Latinos vote Republican, including folks that voted against Donald Trump in his first election, shifted enough to make a difference in some states.

My argument is the big reason for that had a lot more to do with immigration policy not being the forefront of the campaign, and COVID relief and the pandemic and the economic collapse associated with that, all of that sucked the air out of domestic policy discussions, and we really weren't talking about immigration and there wasn't a demonizing of Latino immigrants in the same way you had in previous elections.

So, the multimillion-dollar question is obviously what's going to happen in 2022 and moving forward? And I think a lot of it has to do with whether or not Latinos feel that they continue to be discriminated against in this country, if they feel like they're being treated unfairly, and particularly as it relates to immigration policy. And obviously, whichever party does a better job of communicating to Latinos how they can address those issues, I think they're going to do well with the Latino vote, not just in the short term, but in the long term as well.

DEWS: Well, on that same How We Rise post on Brookings.edu, you called the Latino vote in 2022 "a golden opportunity for Democrats." Is that why, that if Democrats focus on immigration, they might be able to gain more of the Latino vote share?

SANCHEZ: Absolutely, and especially if they can actually deliver on some aspects of President Biden's immigration policy agenda. Our polling consistently suggests that Latinos support just about everything the Biden administration is trying to accomplish with immigration policy. But unfortunately for the Biden administration, many Latino voters don't have a very good handle on what the administration's actual policy stance is. And I think there's a lot of worry that if nothing gets done on immigration, that might provide an opportunity for the Republican Party to seize some of that Latino vote if they can make arguments, whether it be on immigration or other public policy issues, that they can actually deliver on those items.

I think Latinos, I wouldn't go as far as saying they're up for grabs in the context of going back to the Bush years of 60-40, but I think being a little bit more balanced in terms of their vote shift, I think that's very much plausible and a lot of it will depend on what actually gets done and what's passed by Congress.

Obviously, we're all really, really frustrated with the lack of action out of Congress and the really polarized, partisan nature of those institutions right now. And Latinos, like everybody else, might just decide to sit out an election and say, Look, what's the point? Neither party is delivering. And I think a drop in turnout among Latinos, especially when we think about the 2018 cycle where we saw a significant increase in Latino vote, whether that will happen in 2022 or actually see a decrease in turnout is another of the many scenarios that we're trying to track and hopefully do a good job informing our audience with.

DEWS: Is there any salience for voters, not just Latino voters, but all voters in, when you look at Congress in Washington, knowing it's polarized and seeing how processes prevent legislation from passing, say the filibuster, is there any salience of those kind of structural problems in terms of saying, Well, I would prefer there be comprehensive immigration reform or infrastructure package, but I recognize that, for example, the Democratic Party is hamstrung in the Senate by the filibuster. So, I'm not going to blame Democrats for that. I know it's a process issue. It's a structural issue. Or is it just, you know, Congress can't get anything done and I'm not going to vote or I'm going to vote for the opposition party?

SANCHEZ: That's always a complicated question, right, in terms of the electorate. I think those of us that do this for a living, pay super close attention to the news every day, read everything we can get, we understand those nuances to a much greater extent than the average American voter. And so for the average American voter, sometimes it's difficult to connect those

dots because obviously you've got messaging coming from both parties, either trying to blame the opposition for why nothing's getting done or try to take credit for things that they might not actually have done the effort to try to get through Congress. So, you have to battle through all that misinformation and try to make sense of this, and that's a complex enterprise for the average voter.

I think what's really going to be critical is whether or not either side, you talk about this from the Democratic or the Republican perspective, can simplify the messaging and make clear that they've done everything that they could to get things done on behalf of their constituency group, but articulate why those structural obstacles are the way that they are and how that's prevented them from being able to get done what they promised to voters.

And I think for Latino voters in particular—and we saw this happen through the Obama administration years as it related to immigration—there's also a question of which public policy issue are you prioritizing with your political capital? Are you going to go full force and try to push through comprehensive immigration reform or various aspects of immigration policy? Or are you going to prioritize other public policy issues and potentially wait until a second term to try to get immigration done? And you're nodding your head, probably because you can remember the Obama years and those conversations about immigration versus the ACA and all of that context. I think Latinos in particular are very, very highly informed about immigration policy. They know more about immigration than any other racial and ethnic group as a voting population, so they understand the nuances of what it means to prioritize a public policy agenda item and whether or not they might feel that at the end of the day, maybe you could have gotten more done, but you chose not to because you put other issues in front of immigration. That's

again, one of the scenarios that I think will have huge implications for what we think about, not just in terms of the next round of congressional elections but thinking about the next presidential.

DEWS: Well, do you think even nine months into the Biden administration, that Latino voters might see the priorities being put on things like infrastructure and on the Build Back Better agenda and not on immigration reform and immigration issues?

SANCHEZ: I think that's very plausible. Fortunately for the Biden administration, if those elements of their recovery plan are actually passed and implemented, a lot of that is going to benefit Latinos and Latinos are highly supportive of those policies. So, for all the reasons that we noted, Latinos being hit very hard economically because of the pandemic-driven recession.

So, I think the key is communicating, and this is where the best politicians, right, earn their salt, if you will. They're able to communicate very clearly to voters, Hey, I know you wanted me to do something on immigration, here's why I could not do it. But here's how the policies that we did prioritize are going to benefit you and your families. I think being able to articulate that to the Latino population can go a long way. But that obviously is dependent on whether or not the administration, A, gets those things done, right, and B, is able to communicate that effectively to the overall voting population. That again is to be determined.

DEWS: Well, you have noted that public support just broadly for comprehensive immigration reform is high and higher still for specific kinds of reforms, like a path to citizenship for the Dreamer population. So, what is your outlook for any kind of immigration reform, any kind of progress on some of these very specific but major immigration reforms before the next election?

SANCHEZ: You know, I think a lot of these things have such high support, even among Republicans, that they're almost no-brainers to be able to get some things done. You know, the

Dreamers, other aspects of the workforce, agricultural workforce, for example, even Republicans understand the value of that workforce to the overall economy. So, I think some of those pieces, if it's dismantled and you think about it as more of a piecemeal approach and not one full comprehensive package, I think those things are relatively easy to get done.

Unfortunately, I think the longer this takes, I start to get less optimistic about bigger pieces to the puzzle getting implemented. And that's unfortunately because of the partisan politics and the way immigration has consistently been used as a bit of a wedge issue during congressional campaigns and presidential elections. So, I think the closer we get to to the midterm elections, the harder it's going to be to get things done because a lot of Republicans in some of those swing districts, they might actually perceive that some elements of immigration policy reform are going to be in their best interests to get passed. But it's a dangerous period to be able to market some of those issues and have that part of your overall campaign context where immigration policy has been so volatile of the last couple of U.S. cycles. So, I think the longer this takes the more pessimistic I am that we'll see some major reform happen quickly. And we might be talking about this into the second term of a Democratic administration if, and this is a big if, if they're able to even get that far.

DEWS: Well, Gabe, I think we'll leave it at that, this has been a fascinating conversation. Very interesting. I want to thank you for sharing your time and your expertise with our listeners today.

SANCHEZ: I appreciate it, Fred, it was a great conversation. I appreciate the way you thought through some great questions, which I think led to a great interview.

DEWS: If you're interested in learning more about Gabe Sanchez and his research and all of these issues, I'll put links in the show notes, and you can visit us at [Brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu).

A team of amazing colleagues makes the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks go out to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo; our audio intern this semester, Nicolette Kelly; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, who does the book interviews; my communications colleagues Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration. And finally, to Ian McAllister, Soren Messner-Zidell and Andrea Risotto for their guidance and support.

The Brookings Cafeteria is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network, which also produces Dollar & Sense, The Current, and our events podcasts. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. You can listen to the Brookings Cafeteria in all the usual places and visit us online at Brookings.edu.

Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.