

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Radio Waves

[Dolores Inés Casillas](#), an associate professor in the [Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies](#) at UC Santa Barbara, picked a good time to write a book about the ways Latinos use Spanish-language radio. Not that she planned it that way. Who, after all, could have foreseen the rise of Donald Trump and his anti-immigrant comments?

And yet the book, “Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy” (New York University Press, 2014) arrived in time to garner two national awards and draw the attention of a media obsessed with Trump. It earned an Honorable Mention for Best Monograph in Latino Studies from the Latin American Studies Association in May and will receive the Annual Book Award at the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education’s conference in March in Costa Mesa.

“It’s a big topic that, astonishingly, not a lot of people write about,” Casillas said, noting that “Sounds of Belonging” was the first book-length study of Spanish-language radio published since 1978. “I think part of it is that it’s just always gone under people’s radar, but I really want to make the argument that you can’t ignore Spanish-language radio.”

Spanish-language radio, Casillas explained, has emerged in the past three decades as the electronic campfire around which Latinos gather for more than just entertainment. It’s a key source of news and information, a cheap and ubiquitous medium available to even the poorest people. “It’s like an acoustic ally,” she said. “It’s something they listen to all day.”

This is where Trump fits in. When the Republican presidential candidate crashed onto the scene in June with his comments about Mexican immigrants being “rapists” and drug smugglers, Latinos noticed — and turned to their radios. If there’s a hot-button issue of the moment, Casillas noted, “this is their go-to place if they’re going to hear about it.”

And they don’t just listen. According to Casillas, Latinos have little electoral influence to date, but the radio gives them a chance to participate in the national conversation. “It allows us a space to talk about issues,” she said. “It’s also a way for Latinos to make fun of Trump. We make jokes, and that’s powerful. Laughter is powerful, so it creates a space to pretend you’re not the little guy.”

As the largest minority in the U.S., Latinos have long been a target of anti-immigrant backlash. “If you look at English-language media, Latinos are always ‘them,’ ” Casillas observed. “It’s this huge block and there’s too many of ‘them,’ and there’s too much Spanish. So there’s something transgressive about having this space to talk about immigration, to talk about power, to laugh at power. I think that fuels the really distinct personality of radio.”

Casillas, who was interviewed by several national media outlets in the wake of Trump’s comments about immigrants, said Spanish-language radio has the potential to be a galvanizing force that allows Latinos to achieve a political power commensurate with their share of the electorate. “They use radio to accumulate electoral power and I think we’re all hoping that gets translated into actually going out to the polls,” she said.

About UC Santa Barbara

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