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Reportage

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The Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies is a research institute that works for the advancement of the study of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States in the doctoral programs at the CUNY Graduate Center. One of its major priorities is to provide funding and research opportunities to Latino students at the Ph.D. level.

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We are thrilled to introduce the inaugural publication of our CLACLS Reportage series, a significant step forward in our commitment to advancing impactful, public-facing scholarship. This publication unites three compelling articles that offer diverse perspectives and a shared dedication to bridging the gap between academic research and public engagement.

Phoenix Paz presents a vivid ethnographic account of recent migrants in New York City, revealing how state inefficiencies marginalize a sector that contributes daily to the city's economy.

Pierina Pighi Bel explores the growing appeal of the Republican Party among Latino voters in election cycles, delving into the complexities and inherent contradictions within this trend.

Finally, *Ana Maria Granados Romero* provides profound insights into migration, gender, and domestic work through her exploration of "La Parada"—a corner in Brooklyn where social dynamics unfold in unexpected ways.

In our pursuit to expand the reach and impact of research, public-facing scholarship is essential. This series represents CLACLS's commitment to sharing research as a public resource, engaging with topics that resonate deeply within New York City and beyond.

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About the Authors

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Hierarchies of care: immigration, gender, and domestic work in New York City

Ana María Granados Romero

PhD. Student Latin American, Iberian and Latino Cultures

Latinas and Domestic Labor

The U.S. domestic workforce is predominantly comprised of women, with Latinas being significantly overrepresented in the service industry. According to the National Domestic Workers Alliance, 91.5% of domestic workers in New York City are women, 78% were born outside the U.S., and 38% are Hispanic/Latinx. This demographic over-representation suggests that these populations fill positions that are systematically undervalued and underpaid, and indicates entrenched ethnic and gender inequalities in the labor market.

Latinas, in particular, face alarming economic challenges. They experience the highest rates of in-work poverty among major racial and ethnic groups. According to the Latino Data Project, by 2017 the in-work poverty rate for Latinas was 12.2% —about twice as high as the 6.7% rate for Latino men, while for non-Hispanic white men and women, it was 3.0% and 2.6%, respectively. This situation is also shared by Latinas who are not classified as poor, as they also have lower average personal incomes than their female counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups.

These data underscore a persistent and widespread economic disparity that undermines Latinas' employment opportunities, financial situation, and possibilities of socio-economic mobility. Additionally, according to the Economic Policy Institute, domestic workers are three times more likely to live in poverty than other laborers. Latinas in this industry are therefore particularly vulnerable due to a double layer of disadvantage: they face significant ethnic and gender disparities while enduring the poor conditions of the domestic work industry in the United States.

Intertwined with the economic struggles, the situation of domestic workers is exacerbated by an overall lack of legal protection. They are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, which guarantees the right to organize, form unions, and bargain collectively, and from the Fair Labor Standards Act, which guarantees labor standards and workers' rights. This exclusion leaves domestic workers without legal means to ensure fair treatment, adequate remuneration, and access to benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans.

Furthermore, for undocumented women, these challenges are even more pronounced, as their gender and immigration status not only limit their access to most jobs but also increase their exposure to exploitation and violence.

Waiting for work: day laborers in the corners of New York City

Day labor is a common alternative for immigrant domestic workers. Confronted with limited employment prospects, many immigrants depend on temporary jobs as their primary means of support, especially upon arrival. Such was the case for Irene, a Latin American woman who migrated to the United States seeking better opportunities for herself and her family.

When she arrived in New York City, Irene initially sought work in grocery stores and restaurants, aiming for stable, long-term employment. Despite her persistent efforts, weeks of searching proved fruitless. Eventually, a friend suggested exploring opportunities as a domestic worker in private households. Following this advice and relying upon a friend's referral, Irene secured her first job cleaning a house for a few hours. As a newcomer, she found that day labor —particularly in cleaning roles— offered the most accessible means of income. For months, Irene relied on referrals to secure enough working hours each week to make ends meet. Despite the precariousness of her situation, Irene acknowledges that she was fortunate to know someone who put her

in touch with potential employers, which, however, is not the case for many other immigrants.

In the precarious context of immigrant labor, working conditions vary significantly based on industry sector, gender, ethnicity, immigration status, and access to support networks. These variables determine the socioeconomic positioning of certain jobs. Due to the intersection of several of these variables, immigrant domestic workers who have day labor jobs find themselves at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Irene's case highlights some of the prevailing conditions of this occupation, but workers without a network of contacts face even greater risks. Since 1990, when lacking means to find work, dozens of women have been gathering on a Brooklyn Street corner known as La Parada hoping to get employment opportunities.

Although other corners across Brooklyn and Queens have served similar purposes, La Parada is the most well-known and continues to be a gathering place. This location serves as a central point where immigrants wait to be selected by potential employers who pass by in cars looking for someone to clean their houses. According to a journalistic report on La Parada by Univisión, domestic workers are often chosen based on their physical appearance, with minimal verbal interaction. Being selected by an employer could mean either having a client who will hire them multiple times, or just a one-time job. Regardless of the weather or the season, immigrants continue to stand there, as it is often their last resort

to make a living, even if they are underpaid, exploited, and hired only for a couple of hours. The typical wage received by workers ranges from 8 to 12 dollars per hour, despite the minimum wage in New York State being 15 dollars an hour. Recently, La Parada has also become a gateway for asylum seekers who have no other options to enter the job market.

The situation at La Parada is particularly severe for women, who face multiple layers of exploitation. In addition to unfair wages and abusive working conditions, many women experience sexual harassment by their employers. This gender-based violence exacerbates their already precarious position in the labor market. The intersection of various factors places these women at a compounded disadvantage: fearful of compromising their unresolved immigration status and driven by the urgent need to work, they often endure and refrain from reporting these abuses.

How employment agencies help workers to climb the ladder

Irene described her initial experiences as a day laborer as distressing. She was unfamiliar with the expected wage, the specific tasks of housekeeping, and how to navigate employer relationships. During this period, she worried about securing enough working hours, understanding how much to charge, meeting cleaning expectations, and communicating with employers despite the language barrier. She emphasized that as a newcomer, she had to navigate

this process independently since the domestic workers she knew also lacked adequate knowledge, and her employers never provided guidance. After months of employment uncertainty and financial struggle, Irene's working conditions improved when, following advice from a friend, she decided to subscribe to an employment agency.

Navigating the complexities of wages, rights, and job responsibilities is a major hurdle for many new workers. Employment agencies act as intermediaries, facilitating contact between potential clients and domestic workers. This support can be crucial for immigrants like Irene, who struggle to enter the job market due to limited understanding of their new occupation, the service industry, and the city.

Employment agencies operate through a system of enrollment fees, commissions, and percentages deducted from workers' wages. They provide access to various types of work, from housekeeping to caregiving, allowing workers to occupy roles suited to their skills and preferences. While these agencies offer significant advantages, such as job placement and worker protection, there are also risks and costs. Fees and commissions can sometimes be burdensome, and there is potential for exploitation as immigrants remain in a vulnerable position. Nevertheless, for many workers, employment agencies remain a valuable resource in their quest for economic stability and upward mobility, presenting a more favorable alternative compared to waiting for a job at La Parada.

To access the agency's services, Irene had to pay a $50 affiliation fee. Once in the agency, she had two options: she could either work with multiple clients, in which case she would give 10% of her earnings each time she got a job, or she could be hired as a permanent employee in a household. If she chose the latter, she wouldn't receive any payment for the first week of the month, and afterward, she had to pay the agency a weekly commission. Despite the expenses involved, Irene found that the agency offered her relative employment stability. It meant she no longer had to find her own clients or rely solely on referrals. Thus, even though she remained a day laborer, the working conditions involved a promotion in the immigrant employment hierarchy.

Immigrants Supporting Immigrants

For Irene, the Latin American community on Staten Island was pivotal in helping her navigate New York City and understand its job market. Though no longer a domestic worker, she takes pride in guiding Latin American immigrants, offering employment advice, helping them make connections, and educating them about their rights. According to her, these community networks were essential for her own socioeconomic mobility, providing job referrals and information about the employment agencies.

Irene's story underscores the critical role of community support for immigrant workers, not only in securing employment when other aids are unavailable but also in assisting their adjustment to life in a new city and country. Within the immigrant community, there is an underground mobilization of mutual aid that allows newcomers to grasp the hidden employment hierarchies that define their job opportunities. Upon arrival, immigrants often receive crucial community support, meeting basic needs and facilitating rapid job placement. This grassroots network is essential due to the absence of adequate information, immediate economic pressures, and a lack of institutional guidance and protection. The collective resources offered by the community create thus a safety net that helps new immigrants survive and eventually adapt to their new environment.

However, despite this assistance and the potential for upward mobility, immigrant workers continue to face precarious working conditions across all levels of employment hierarchy. As they transition from day labor to more stable positions, they still encounter low wages, job instability, and exploitative practices. The absence of institutional aid compels immigrant workers to heavily rely on community networks, which, though robust, cannot always shield them from systemic issues perpetuating their vulnerability. This situation is aggravated by the fact that many of the jobs occupied by Hispanic immigrants, such as domestic work, have the highest rates of workplace illness and injuries.

In sum, domestic workers face numerous risk factors and disadvantages, yet it remains one of the most common jobs for immigrant women. This situation places them among the most vulnerable populations,

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whether they are day laborers or permanent employees. Therefore, the efforts of organizations such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Liberty Cleaners, which formulate policy solutions while organizing, training, and empowering domestic workers, complement community networks in their attempt to improve their living and working conditions. Such initiatives show that while immigrant women are often segregated into "bad jobs", no occupation should subject workers to abusive or unfair conditions, and no position in the employment hierarchy should sustain exploitation.

Why do the Republicans seem to be attracting more Latino voters than the Democrats despite their anti-immigrant rhetoric (and what Latino voters increase means in crucial states)

Pierina Pighi Bel

PhD. Student Latin American, Iberian and Latino Cultures

Summary: Between the 2016 US presidential election and the 2020 one, there was an evident growth in the Republican vote in counties with large Latino populations. At the same time, Latino voters have increased in crucial states like Michigan, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. What do these changes mean for the 2024 election?

We are close to the United States Presidential election again. As is usual, every four years, the media puts a lot of attention on who the "Latino vote" is going to favor: the republican Donald Trump or the democrat Kamala Harris? They build a debate around it even though there is no actual "Latino" vote understood as a block, given the vast diversity and heterogeneity of the Hispanic or Latino population due to circumstances like nationality, race, gender, education, religion, etc.

However, there are some essential facts that analysts can take into account regarding the voting trends of the largest racial or ethnic minority in the US. According to the US Census Bureau's latest data,

until 2022, they made up 19.1% of the total country's population, and about 36.2 million of them are eligible to vote in the 2024 election (which will make around 14.7% of all eligible voters), according to the Pew Research Center.

Another fact, supported by different data, is the Latinos growing preference for the Republican party.

Statistics coming from the Latino Data Project at the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies (CLACLS) at the City University of New York (CUNY) show that there was a clear increase in the Republican vote between the 2016 presidential election and the 2020 one in US counties with large

Latino populations. Although the Democrat Joe Biden won in 2020, the growth of the vote for the Republican Donald Trump, his rival, was more significant than that for the Democrats in these constituencies.

In the 2020 elections, of the 101 US counties in which more than half (50%) of all residents were Latinos, Donald Trump won 66 (65.3% of all counties). He increased his number of votes by 54% from the 2016 election, according to the report [“Voting Changes between the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections in Counties Across the United States with Large Latino-Origin Populations”](#) (2021) by Professor Laird Bergad, founder of the [Latino Data Project](#) (LDP).

These counties were located in Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, Washington, Colorado, Kansas, and New York. In 2020, Biden received 29% more votes than candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016 in these same divisions, a much lower increase than his rival's party.

Besides these results, of the 35 counties with the largest Latino populations in the US (different from the 101 previous counties), Democrats won 33 (94%). However, total Republican votes in these counties increased by 43% between 2016 and 2020, while votes for the Democratic candidate rose by only 31%, according to [the same report](#). These areas were distributed in the states of California, Texas, Arizona, Florida, New Mexico, New York, Illinois, and Nevada.

The report recognizes that "it is impossible" to attribute the Republican vote increase precisely to the Latinos "because there is no data on voting by race/ethnicity in these counties," which means that the Republican growth could have also been related to other races/ethnicities.

However, the data "suggest that support for the Republican presidential candidate increased significantly in counties with large Latino populations despite the xenophobic, anti-immigrant, white supremacist, and racist policies which were the central issues of his campaign."

One could ask if "despite" is an accurate word for this situation, as there is also a lot of racism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and discrimination in Latin America. And some Latinos don't necessarily leave these practices behind when they immigrate to the US. According to a [Pew Research Center Survey](#) published in May 2022, "Latinos experience discrimination from other Latinos about as much as from non-Latinos."

The results show that "about 41% of Latinos with darker skin say they have experienced discrimination or unfair treatment by another Latino, while 25% with lighter skin color say the same" and that "48% of Hispanics say they hear racist or racially insensitive comments or jokes from Hispanic friends and family about other Hispanics."

There is also more data on the shift towards Republicans. The Latino Data Project report also states that "exit polling data for the November 2020 election indicate increases in Latino support for the Republican candidate between 2016 and 2020 in some parts of the United States, especially in Florida and the counties bordering Mexico in the U.S. Southwestern states." While historically more Latinos have voted Democratic, "it's not 100% true that they vote overwhelmingly Democratic," said Professor Laird Bergad, author of the CLACLS' Latino Data Project report, early in the campaign. What have the Republicans been doing to start attracting more Latinos? And, how will this impact the 2024 elections?

Factors that favor Republicans

This shift happened despite the Republican Party and Donald Trump's anti-Hispanic rhetoric. One reason could be that Latinos tend to vote more through an economic lens than through racial-ethnics lens, explained Mike Madrid, an expert on Latino voting trends, co-host of the podcast "The Latino Vote," and author of the upcoming book "The Latino Century," in March. They want to hear more about the economy and jobs than about other topics like immigration or racial issues, he added.

Scott Keeter, a senior survey advisor at the Pew Research Center, agreed with Madrid that "the state of the US economy, particularly inflation," is a "persistent concern" among Latino voters due to the large share of them who are "less well-off financially."

According to the latest Pew Research Center survey on Latino voters preferences, 85% of this group's **registered** voters said that the economy was the most important issue for them in the elections.

This survey gives Harris a very small lead in this issue among registered Latino voters: 53% of them said they are very or somewhat confident she would make good decisions on economic policy, while 50% said the same about Trump.

When asked to compare both candidates, or who they think would do a better job on the economy, regardless of who they will vote for, 47% of the **likely** Hispanics voters chose Trump, compared to 41% of Hispanics who preferred Harris, according to a September New York Times/Siena College poll.

In this sense, Professor Bergad noted that "the economy under Biden has been booming, unemployment is at its historical lowest (below 4% for two years), the stock market is at its highest."

"But the average voter would say 'things were better under Trump.The Republican party is very effective at getting messages across. Those messages may be complete lies. But if you watch Fox News, you think what they say is true. Democrats seem to be missing the boat to get their message across. Of course, we can't say that across the board. It's not the case in California or New York," said Bergad.

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Educational divide

Many other factors could weigh into the Latino shift towards the Republicans. According to Mike Madrid, one might be the "educational divide" in the US.

"College-educated voters are increasingly voting with the Democratic party, and non-college-educated voters are increasingly voting with the Republican party. 65% of voters in the country don't have a college degree, with Latinos is even greater than that. Latinos make up the fastest growing group of non-college-educated workers," he said early in the campaign.

Keeter, from the Pew Research Center, also mentioned that there is a "broad realignment of the electorate by educational achievement."

 "The movement of working class and non-college Americans to greater support for Republican candidates (Trump in particular) is seen among all racial and ethnic groups," he said. "But it may be especially impactful for Hispanic Americans because a larger than average share of them are working class or non-college educated."

According to the Pew Research Center, only 21% of Hispanic eligible voters have a bachelor's degree or higher education. However, the educational realignment has not yet produced a majority of Latinos leaning toward the Republican party.

Even with the academic divide, the share of Latinos who say they would prefer Harris is still more prominent on both sides, the latest Pew Research Center survey shows.

Self-perceived ethnicity or race

Another element impacting voting trends is race or identity self-perception. Self-identification as Hispanic or Latino has decreased throughout generations. "Second, third, fourth generation Latinos don't see themselves as racially distinct and are voting now with their non-Hispanic white peers," said Madrid. When asked if they see themselves as white, Madrid replied, "Increasingly, yes."

By 2017, 97% of first-generation Hispanic or Latino immigrants identified themselves as such, but this self-identification dropped to 77% by the third generation, according to data collected by the Pew Research Center.

How are all these factors coming into play during this presidential election? Will the Latino shift toward the Republican party continue to grow in the 2024 elections? If it goes on, will it favor Trump?

Latino support for Harris

Not necessarily, according to the September survey mentioned earlier, published by The New York Times and Siena College, and applied to **likely** voters after the first Harris-Trump debate. The results show a technical tie at the federal level (they change in some

states). When broken down to results according to ethnicity, 51% of Hispanics said they would have voted for Harris, while 39% answered they would have voted for Trump if the election had been held on the day of the poll. Also, 37% of Hispanics considered themselves Democrats, while only 17% identified themselves as Republicans, a smaller group than those who claimed to be independents, 33%.

Among **registered** voters, even a larger share of Latinos, 57%, said they would vote for Harris, while 39% said they would prefer Trump, according to the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in late August and early September on Latino voters preferences.

 "Kamala Harris now has nearly the same level of support among Hispanics that Joe Biden had in the 2020 election. Biden had not been able to regain that level of support when he was still in the race," said Scott Keeter, a senior survey advisor at the Pew Research Center.

But how relevant or significant is the "Latino" vote?

Latino voters increase in key US states

By 2022, there were already 13 US states with one million or more Hispanic residents: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington, according to US Census Bureau's latest data.

And not only is the population large, but they are also registering more to vote. Historically, Latinos have shown low voting registration rates and even lower voting rates. In the 2022 midterm elections, only 37.9% of all eligible Latino voters actually voted, according to the report "Latino Voter Participation in the 2018 and 2022 Midterm Elections," by Bergad for the Latino Data Project.

"But in 2020, for the first time, the registration rate was above 60%," said Professor Bergad (See "Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates in the 2020 Presidential Election" report).

The percentage of eligible Latinos who actually voted also "rose to a historic high of 53.7%" in the 2020 election (compared to 47.3% in 2016). According to this report, most of them were US-born, young Latinos between 18 and 44 years old, and their votes accounted for 10.2% of all the votes.

 "What we seem to be finding here is that more and more Latinos are becoming involved in registration and in voting," Bergad added.

"The surge in registration and voting rates suggests that Latinos are poised to exert political influence in the U.S. commensurate with their share of the population. The presidential election of 2024 may confirm that the often-called 'sleeping giant' of U.S. electoral politics is ready to emerge in full force," says the report.

Mike Madrid also thinks Latinos might be decisive in the 2024 presidential election.

"They used to be just in California, Texas, and Florida. Now, they are everywhere, virtually in every battleground state: North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia, Tennessee, Nevada, and Arizona," he says.

According to the report "Latino Voter Participation in the 2018 and 2022 Midterm Elections," between the 2018 and 2022 midterm elections, Latino voters increased by 118% in Michigan and 84.2% in Georgia. In Pennsylvania, they grew by 26%.

These three states were vital in the 2020 presidential elections. Georgia voted for a Democrat after over 20 years (the last time was in 1992). In Pennsylvania and Michigan (part of what was called the "blue wall"), Trump won in 2016 but lost in 2020.

"One state can be carried by 10,000 votes," said Bergad. If the increasing voting trend continues, "of course they (Latino voters) can make a difference. They can be significant in a very close election."

According to the September New York Times/Siena College poll, 50% of the likely electorate in Pennsylvania said they would vote for Harris, 4% more than those who would prefer Trump. However, Trump is leading the polls in Arizona and Georgia by similar margins.

So, the race seems too close to know by now how the Hispanics could influence it. Also, Viviana Rivera-Burgos, professor of Political Science at Baruch College (CUNY), wonders if the Latino shift toward Republicans is a long-term tendency that will continue this year and in the following elections, or if it is something that we only saw in 2020. We have plenty of time to find out.

Living in Limbo: Inefficient Processing, Insufficient Housing, Informality and Marginalization, NYC's Migrants' Crises

Phoenix Paz

PhD. Student History

Monday, May 6, 2024, 9:46am, Queensboro Plaza Station: I wait for the 7; the N pulls away from the opposite side of the platform, wheels shrieking against the steel rails, structure thundering as the train roars out of the station. How I wish the plans to revamp the system included dealing with the noise. Grey water, somehow slimy, drips onto the track in front of me in the morning gloom. A woman cautiously navigates a folding laundry cart loaded with fresh fruit around the blue plywood structure that still consumes the width of the platform after two years of continued construction. The wheels of the cart threaten to spill over the platform's edge. It is the same type of cart my grandmother used back when I was a girl, its metal ribs painted red; the strong tread of its black rubber tires prevent the cart from slipping. A watermelon sits precariously on top, green rind glowing almost in the grey of the morning. The woman herself wears a soft pink cardigan, her dark curly hair streaked with grey pulled back into a bun, comfortable sneakers on her feet. The 7 pulls up, brakes screeching and doors hissing as they pop open. People pour out. The woman uses her foot to tilt the heavy cart back and shoves it onto the train with an easy economy of movement that comes from long practice.

I wonder who she is, this woman with her cart of fruit. Where is she from? How long has she been in the city? Is New York home? Or does she want to return to her country, someday, when she knows it is safe?

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More than 183,000 migrants have arrived in New York City since spring 2022, the New York Mayor's Office found in a March 2024 study. Of these recently arrived migrants, some 67,200 have found refuge only in the city's 218 emergency and homeless shelters, the New York Times reports. New York City Mayor Eric Adams states that the situation in which migrants find themselves upon arriving to the United States is a "national humanitarian crisis."

Migration to the United States has reached unprecedented levels since 2022. The continued economic and political instability in Venezuela and Ecuador, political repression in Haiti, religious persecutions in China, the war in Ukraine, and the conflict between Israel and Hamas have all contributed to the diversification of the migrant population seeking refuge or asylum in the US after the COVID-19 pandemic. In fiscal year 2023, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) reports there were 3.2 million migrant encounters across all borders and ports of entry, including airports. Of these, some 2.5 million encounters occurred along the US-Mexican border, where undocumented migrants increasingly turn themselves in to US Border Patrol to request asylum.

Political events, economic instability, and climate change are also changing the character of undocumented international migration along the southern border. While in the past, the undocumented migrant population consisted largely of single men from Mexico or northern Central America seeking employment, today, families with young children and unaccompanied minors constitute the largest proportions of undocumented migrants crossing the southern border, according to the MPI. They are fleeing not only economic insecurity or persecution by state actors, but also domestic violence, or forced recruitment or persecution by non-state actors. Their journeys are often longer, too. Many of today's migrants face multiple relocations and cross several

national boundaries before arriving at the United States. In 2023, for example, USCIS (US Citizenship and Immigration Services) received 431,000 affirmative asylum applications, with Venezuelans, Cubans, Colombians, Nicaraguans, and Haitians constituting the top five nationalities. The EOIR (Executive Office for Immigration Review) received 316,000 defensive asylum applications, though nationality data was not provided. Of these asylum applicants, some 409,000 of them crossed the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama before making their way north to the United States in the first 10 months of 2023.

Despite the unprecedented numbers of international migrants and asylum seekers, US migration policy has not been updated since the mid-1990s, and immigration is an increasingly polemical political issue that Congress refuses to address in a systematic manner through the reconceptualization of US migration policy. Because Congress has not addressed immigration, migration and asylum policy is decided through a combination of executive orders and judicial review, which results in significant fluctuations in policy between presidential administrations and the inconsistent application of different policies between states. For example, politicians in Texas and Florida have chosen to bus undocumented migrants to Washington D.C. or to other states including New York and California rather than use state resources to regularize migrants' status or facilitate work authorization.

Additionally, the president cannot fund different federal departments without approval from Congress. Therefore, the agencies within the Department of Homeland Security that review immigration and asylum applications and work authorization for migrants—US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Patrol (CBP)—remain chronically underfunded and understaffed, and technologically out-of-date. As of September 2023, USCIS had only 760 asylum officers working in 11 offices around the country, and a backlog of more than a million affirmative asylum applications. Similarly, the New York Post reported in 2023, that the New York State branch of ICE is fully booked with defensive asylum case reviews until 2032, meaning that some asylum applicants will wait for nearly a decade for their case to be brought before court. Once in court, the adjudication process for asylum applicants can take up to four years to complete. Thus, migrants seeking asylum or the regularization of their status face years of living in limbo before knowing their fate.

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Thursday, May 9, 2024, 5:15pm, 34th Street Harold Square: Street level, behind the station stairs: The woman has a folding chair; it's green. I think she may have borrowed it from the park across the street. Her fruit is displayed on a soft, dove-grey folding card table, and she has a small collapsible dolly tucked neatly underneath. There are cups of mixed fruit, bright yellow and juicy red, that remind me salpicón, my favorite snack in the sticky heat of Colombia's Caribbean coast. There's pale green mango bichce with salt, so different from the orange tamarind and red tajin chile powder I saw another woman selling earlier. Pink watermelon. Yellow pineapple. The woman's long silky black hair is tied back in a careful braid, and she wears pink sneakers, jeans, and a light blue sweater. She looks up from the phone in her lap, sighs, resting her head against the wall behind her, and closes her eyes for a second, clutching the rail of the subway stairs next to her.

It's early evening, and the return-home traffic rush is in full swing. A food truck that sells fresh-fruit smoothies and juices pulls up 35th to the corner with 6th and looks for a place to park. I cannot see the driver, so I look towards the vendor whose face tightens as her dark eyes scan the square. The rich smell of coffee wafts into the street as young professionals push through the door of the One Café and round the corner. I wonder what the workday is like for her and what competition she faces from food trucks or other vendors. Does she prefer being outside, or in the subway? Is the competition different in those places?

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The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) found that immigrant women were among those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; unemployment among

this demographic reached 18.5% in May 2020 and the labor force participation rate dropped from 55% to 52%. Researchers at the MPI suggest that the pandemic's greater impact on immigrant women's labor force participation was due, in part, to the combination of their roles as primary caregivers for school-aged children or sick relatives at home and a concentration in the service and hospitality industries in jobs like waitstaff, maids, and housekeepers, which were among the most affected by COVID-19 related layoffs.

During the pandemic, many of these women turned to informal street vending as an alternative source of income that gives them the flexibility to keep their children close. Former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's decision to reduce enforcement against informal street vending during the pandemic further increased the appeal of vending for people who needed new sources of income. For example, beginning in 2020, an informal marketplace composed of nearly 80 vendors arose in Corona Plaza in Queens, along the 7 lines. The majority of these vendors were women.

Nonetheless, since July 2021, restrictions against informal vending were reinstated in full force. In fall 2023, the informal market in Corona Plaza was shut down until public outcry led to the creation of a new licensing system. The Queens Economic Development Corporation and the Street Vendor Project worked with vendors to create the non-profit Corona Plaza Vendors Association to allow vendors to continue selling food and wares in Corona Plaza legally. Other vendors have not been so lucky, and the number of fines and arrests have only increased since 2021.

Despite the hardship and insecurity, informal street vending has continued to increase since 2022 in parallel with the arrival of new migrant asylum seekers, who arrive in the city either directly from their home countries, are relocated from other states within the US, or slowly make their way to the Big Apple after months or years of multiple displacements and relocations. The Street Vendor Project, an Urban Justice Center affiliate, estimates that street vendors contribute $293 million dollars to the local economy, $192 million in wages, and over 17,000 jobs annually. However, this estimate is likely to be low as a large part of the vending economy remains informal, or "in the shadows" to use the words of 14th district city councilman Pierina Sanchez. Many street vendors, she states, lack access to education and resources that would make their jobs safer, healthier, and more profitable for both the vendor and the city.

After weeks of interviewing migrant vendors, New York Times reporters Ana Ley and Nicole Hong found that the recent influx of migrants has led to increased competition between established and newly arrived vendors over territory, and conflict with the police due to the informal nature of the work. Competition and possible police action are just two elements that make vending daunting: long hours, uncertain sales, and uncomfortable conditions on subway platforms or

street corners contribute to making vendors feel emotionally exhausted, unsafe, and insecure. However, many new migrants increasingly turn to vending as the lack of a working cellphone and the need to keep young children nearby prevent them from taking jobs in construction or domestic service, other longtime sources of informal employment. Moreover, the comparatively low startup costs of selling candy or bottled drinks make vending more accessible to people with limited resources.

Vending legally in New York City is often difficult for recent migrants. Following the 2022 Asylumworks et al. v. Mayorkas et al. decision, asylum seekers can apply for temporary work permits 150 days after successfully submitting their asylum application. Nonetheless, 150 days still represents a waiting period of six months before asylum-seekers can apply for a work permit. Moreover, immigrants with other migration statuses cannot even apply for temporary work permits while their applications are being processed. Unable to apply for a social security number, obtain temporary permits, or access state-mandated business or vocational licenses that would allow them to work legally in the city, many migrants turn to informal employment.

Even if migrants do get work authorization, permits are often limited to paid employment and do not give the permit holder permission to apply for independent business licenses or entrepreneurship assistance for small businesses and startups. Additionally, NYC limits the number of street vendor permits offered annually, and there are waiting lists of more than 10,000 applicants for both food and merchandise vending, according to Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez, the deputy director of the Street Vendor Project. A vending license or permit represents just the first step in the process of regularization and integration into the formal labor market. Even when someone finally gets their vending license, the expense of buying a food truck or a portable stall can be cost prohibitive. "A license is not enough," a subway vendor who wishes to remain anonymous informed me in Spanish in a recent interview, "sure, it'll help you with the police, but it does nothing to improve the healthiness of the work conditions or environment. You have to keep your product safe. And yourself. And a license doesn't do that."

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Tuesday, May 7, 2024, 5:46pm, Colombus Circle Station: B line. The woman wears white sneakers, black capri sweats, and a navy-blue track jacket with red stripes on the cuffs and the waist. Her long black hair is pulled back into a messy braid that falls to her butt. She stands near a steel pillar, painted green, with a small plaque naming the station: Colombus Circle. A green plastic trey perches on top a black laundry cart, loaded with cups of sliced bright-yellow mango, each one carefully wrapped in a plastic bag. A bottle of powdered tajin sits in the front corner of the tray. A pale blue five-gallon paint bucket serves as a temporary garbage can.

The young boy at her feet tugs on her sleeve, looking at her with imploring eyes, his legs clenched tight. She glances around the station, pulls off her light blue latex gloves dropping them into the bucket, picks up a bag, and grabs the boy's hand. They dart around the corner out of sight. When they come back, she takes a water bottle out of the bag on her shoulder and, kneeling, rinses the boy's hands. A squirt of hand sanitizer from a small bottle follows with another round of water. She repeats the process with her own hands before pulling out a washcloth to dry the boy's hands and her own. A new set of latex gloves are then extracted from a box on the fruit cart.

The train pulls into the station and the boy runs to it. The woman dives after him and pulls him back from the crowd as the doors opens. As I get on the train, I watch the woman pull a toy from the bag and hand it to the child, speaking to him firmly. Her words are lost in the din of the busy station.

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Migrants arriving in New York City face many challenges. Insufficient housing results in tens of thousands of migrants being trapped in emergency shelters without the means for moving on. Additionally, inefficiency in the processing of asylum applications and work authorization forces many migrants to turn to informal means of generating income. These factors combine, deepening migrants' vulnerability over time. In New York City, city-wide legal limitations on street vending synergize with the lack of coherent, up-to-date national immigration and work authorization policy to create a double marginalization in which people are criminalized for trying to support themselves while living in legal limbo. However, migrants and street vendors are a vital part of New York's social landscape. As Steve Davies from the Social Life Project states, "It's time to stop treating them like criminals…!"