

Interviewer: Please state your name, title, and affiliation.

Luis Fraga: Luis Fraga. I'm a professor at the University of Notre Dame and a professor of political science, excuse me, at the University of Notre Dame. I hold the Reverend Donald C. McNeil chair in transformative Latino leadership and also have the title of Joseph and Elizabeth Robbie, professor of political science. Thank you.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit about your personal background, specifically where you are from and what was your home or family life like for you growing up?

Luis Fraga: Sure, very happy to. I was born and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, just on the Gulf Coast in the southern part of Texas. My family, my grandparents immigrated from Mexico on my dad's side in 1905, on my mom's side in 1915. Both of my parents were born in the United States, but right just across the US border and raised and had a chance to both of them, which was unusual at the time for someone of Mexican background had the opportunity to graduate from high school. My dad in 1929, which was very unusual, he used to tell the story that he was one of three Mexican Americans who graduated from high school in a class of, I don't know how many, 100 or something like that. And my mom was the baby of her family. She was the youngest of 13 and was the only one who had the chance to graduate from high school. And her brothers got together apparently and said, "One of us is gonna graduate from high school." So I tell you that because when there are four of us in the family, four children, we always had a lot of support to pursue education from both of our parents. My dad worked as a civil servant for the Navy for 40 years. He was in the Navy during World War II, and that's where he and my mom met. And then after the war, they got married and he went to work as a civilian for the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Luis Fraga: Went to high school there, public high school. You might call it high school on the wrong side of the tracks. 90%, 85% of the students were Mexican American and 15% were African American. It was a segregated school, not formally, but the school district adjusted the attendance boundary lines such that the number of white students there weren't many in the area in the neighborhoods, but a few white students had to come to our school, but it was only a handful, five. I think there were 477 in our graduating class in high school. So through the intervention of a counselor, I had the opportunity to attend a summer science institute in Bar Harbor, Maine the summer after my junior year of high school. And I mentioned that because I think it was a life-changing experience for me. And there were about 20 students, high school students, working at the Jackson Laboratory, world-renowned center for the study of mammalian genetics. And I studied the amino acid content of mice who were lethargic, they were bred to be lethargic, as part of a baseline study to understand the biochemistry of phenylketonuria, a renal disease, kidney disease, that kills infants. And this was doing some basic research to try to address them. So I learned how to make a mouse urinate on demand to be able to get the samples, put the tail here between these fingers, and then you press gently and all this sort of stuff. But I met students there, most of the students there were from the Northeast. And they asked me, "Where are you gonna go to college?" I was entering my senior year of high school and I said, "Well, I think I'll go where my brother went," which is the University of Texas at Austin, the big university, close by, relatively close by, but four hours away, three, four hours away. And they said, "We ought to think about coming to the Northeast and applying to schools in the Northeast." So I did, and most of the students came from families where for generations, parents and grandparents had gone to college. My parents didn't have the chance to finish college or go to college. And so I said, "Okay, I'll try it." And so I had a very supportive high school counselor and I applied to Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the University of Texas. And I got into all those schools and decided that I would go to Harvard for my undergraduate degree.

Luis Fraga: And I have to think, I met the admissions counselor who actually read my file later when I was a professor at Stanford. And she told me that one of the things that made my application different was that I had had this experience of coming from, if you will, an underrepresented background on the wrong side of town, but had this opportunity to go study and work in a lab of a biochemistry professor, Robert Blake, who was from UC Berkeley, but he had a grant to be able to study there and do this research. And so that I think was what opened the door for me to many different things. So I was an undergraduate at Harvard in the fall of 1973. Shut me up whenever you want me to, but two of my classmates were John Roberts, the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Bill Gates Jr., who never finished, but subsequently did quite well for himself, if not for the world, through his foundation. And when I got to my junior year of college, it was a hard adjustment for me. So many of the people at the university and undergraduates, and especially first year students, seemed to fit in. They were from there. They had parents and grandparents, great grandparents who had gone there and just felt very comfortable. And it was hard for me to adjust to, one, the weather, but just the sense of culture and difference and whatnot. And junior year of college, I decided that I thought I would want to get a PhD and be a professor. And the reason was because I had never had a professor who looked like me, or who had any interest in what I was interested in, which was the politics of communities of color, and the barriers that our communities experience in trying to gain greater access to politics and power and policymaking. I had one professor who taught a class on Black politics in the United States, an African American, Martin Kilson, and that was it, nobody else, no Latinos who was interested in Latinos in the United States. So I decided that junior year of college that maybe, maybe if I took the opportunity to get a PhD and try to become a professor, I didn't know anybody other than the professors in college who had PhDs, I didn't know anyone personally, didn't have any friends, I had some TAs who mentored me a bit and how the process worked, that maybe because I had been given the chance to go to such a selective school, that I maybe had a unique opportunity to give back to my community of origin and other similarly situated communities by becoming a professor who would bring an interest in communities of color and the politics of communities of color to the university, to academia.

Luis Fraga: And I did, I decided to go back home to Texas, got my PhD at Rice University, and this was in the fall of 1978 that I started there. And had a very good time, there were some bumps in the road, but you know, there's, you face hostility and racism and dismissiveness, but you work through those, or at least I had the chance to work through those. And started my career at the University of Oklahoma. So assistant professor was there for a number of years, then moved to Notre Dame actually. And I think it was the fall of 1986 or so, think that's right. While I was at Notre Dame as an untenured assistant professor, I was invited to be a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. A very unique opportunity, which untenured faculty rarely get, they're mostly senior faculty who go there. But through the intervention of one of my mentors at Rice, it became possible for me to do that. So I spent a year there, worked on a couple of projects while I was there. And it was such an enriching experience to be around another set of scholars interested in many different things in the social sciences. There were about 30 of us, I think. And we'd meet for lunch every day and give presentations and talk and so forth. So it really showed me what a really active intellectual environment could be. Based on my experience there, I then got invited to the faculty at Stanford and came in, Notre Dame had offered me tenure. While I was away, I went back to Notre Dame for a year and then Stanford said, "We'd like to hire you "and we'll offer you tenure." So I moved there in the fall of 1991. And I was there for 16 years as an associate professor in the political science department.

Luis Fraga: Then, how shall I put this? The university seemed not to be making very much progress regarding hiring other faculty of color. Made some, made some, but very slow. And I challenged certain senior administrators about this and they were not happy. So I had the opportunity to move to the University of Washington in Seattle as an administrator in the provost's office and the office of minority affairs and a professor in the political science department with an endowed chair. And so I moved and was there for seven years and did work to try to help diversify the faculty. And so it's very interesting that the issue that I was unhappy with, so to speak, and others too were unhappy with at Stanford was what I was hired to do and this would be much more difficult to do now in 2026. But to help diversify the faculty by race, ethnicity, by gender, depending on the department and the school and the history. And I had responsibility for trying to develop strategies with deans and department chairs to help diversify the faculty as well as teach a class in political science. And then Notre Dame came calling and said, "We'd like for you to come back." And offered me this new chair in transformative Latino leadership and that's how I wound up where I am now. That's all very impressive. I can only imagine how challenging and exciting a lot of that must have been.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit more about your graduate school experience?

Luis Fraga: Sure.

Interviewer: Additionally, did you have any mentors along the way? How would you characterize the political and social environment during that time?

Luis Fraga: I was the only person of color in my small cohort of PhD students at Rice. It was a small program. At the most it had 10. The year I came in, there were three of us, as I recall. No faculty of color who were there. But because it was such a small graduate student and faculty community, I think I was able to develop the space to pursue what I wanted to pursue. So I felt very supported by many of the faculty there and had some magnificent faculty mentors who mentored me in the profession and research and so forth. Did have a couple of challenges in graduate school. One of my professors who's a wonderful supporter and very accomplished scholar at a conference invited me to come up to his room because he wanted to have a talk with me. This may be my third year or so. And I said, sure. And so I went up to his room and he said, Luis, I know that you have this interest in race and ethnicity. I said, yes, that's why I became a professor or I'm trying to become a professor. And he said, well, that's all well and good but if you continue to do that, you're never going to get ahead in the profession. Because the profession doesn't respect research like that. Do more mainstream research and study American political institutions. I had been his research assistant. So he said, I know you know the work and I know you know the questions. And he said, if you do that, if you change to focusing in mainstream areas of political science as the way I heard him, I'll be able to help you. I know folks in that area. I can get you the job that you might want and we can work together on that. And I remember it's one of those decision points. And I said, okay, what am I going to decide here?

Luis Fraga: And I said the following, I said, I agree with what you're saying. And he said, well, you know that if you agree with me that the best you're ever going to be is a professor at a community college. And I said, well, I understand that might be the case but many African American and Latino students and students from other underrepresented backgrounds start out at community college. I love teaching. So I said, if that's my fate, that's my fate. But I can't avoid what motivated me to go to graduate school in the first place. And I have to stay true to that commitment because that's why I'm doing this. And he said, well, it's going to be bad for the profession. It's going to be very sad. You're not going to get the opportunities you deserve. He's very supportive and

I understood. Said, I agree with you but I have to be true to my values. And things worked out differently. I have had opportunities that I could only dream of to be a professor at universities, to be part of research clusters and research institutes in the course of my career that I could never have imagined at that time. But that was hard to hear. And it didn't feel good to hear that.

Luis Fraga: And then I had another experience bumping the road in graduate school when I started to work for a Latino candidate who was running for mayor of the city of Houston. And I did some consulting with him on statistics and stuff like that. His staff was doing that. And the then chair of the department called me into his office and said, you're not going to get them. We're not going to continue you in the graduate program because you're out working in campaigns. And I said, well, I'm a scholar of urban politics and race and ethnicity and here's a chance to learn how it really works, to be in the field. And he said, no. And I had been fortunate to receive a fellowship from the National Science Foundation to pay for my graduate school. And so I thought, well, asking my department to give me funding for an additional year was not that difficult given that I had been bringing in money for three years. And he said, no, I'm not going to do it. You've got to go out on the job market. And I said, well, I haven't made any progress on my dissertation. And he said, too bad. That's it. So I went, spoke to the dean. And the dean said, well, go out on the job market, see if you can get a job. And if you don't get a job, then we can talk and see what we can do. So I went out, got a job. Got two job offers, actually. One from Texas A&M, one from the University of Oklahoma. And I took the one at the University of Oklahoma. Finished my dissertation after being there for a year, which was hard. I was teaching six classes a year, three each semester. But I did. And got my degree and stayed there for a number of years until I had the offer from the University of Notre Dame.

Luis Fraga: What those experiences taught me is, I think, is the importance of remaining true to your values. When you know those values are committing you to expanding opportunity to communities, students, other faculty, administrators, and communities in general, who are not accustomed to having opportunities. And you can call it a commitment to social justice. You can call it a commitment to greater inclusion. However you want to phrase it, when you do that, it makes you a better person. And when you do that, it gives you the strength to deal with all the challenges that you have, as many faculty members do, whatever their background, in the course of making it in the profession. And it's given me, I think, an insight into what many scholars of color, especially women scholars of color, and women scholars and LGBTQ scholars, have to face in the course of their professional development. When I was at Notre Dame the first

time, we held a big conference on racial and ethnic minorities in advanced industrial democracies. And one of my co-organizers said, I want us to invite Derek Bell, who is a professor at Harvard Law School, African-American professor at Harvard Law School, to be a keynote speaker. And in the course of his keynote speech, he said the following. He said he had been involved in civil rights work and wrote one of the first civil rights constitutional law textbooks, and had been a professor at Harvard Law School for a number of years. And he said, if you commit yourself to pursuing social justice-- and I hated hearing this at the time, as a young untenured as a professor-- he said, you're going to have more failures than you have successes. And he says, it's hard. But that's because you're trying to change systems that exist already. But always remember that in pursuing this type of work, you live a life of virtue and become a better person yourself. That has run through my mind every time I face a barrier.

Luis Fraga: Derek Bell, you may know, resigned from Harvard Law School because they would not tenure an African-American woman. And he took a leave of absence. He was fired after two years because Harvard has a rule that you can only be on leave for two years, and then you give up your tenured position. And he taught as a visiting scholar at NYU Law School, subsequently. Anyway, because of that, the university tenured finally the first African-American woman at the law school. That was a famous friend and famous person, Lani Guinier. Incredible. She's since passed on, like Derek Bell has. An incredible voting rights lawyer and attorney and prolific author. But that experience of hearing him say that and being a senior African-American practicing lawyer and academic made an impression on me that I will always be grateful for. And that gives me strength at times when I feel the defeats and they hurt in this line of work. But although I didn't want to hear it then, he was absolutely right. Absolutely right. And I see it among my friends and scholars who are committed to expanding opportunity and those who are not. And I see what impact it has on them as well. I see that he had a deep, deep understanding of what it meant to fight for civil rights and civil liberties and opportunity based on his own experience. And I've cherished that experience and that memory that he gave me.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit more about your research trajectory? So specifically, what was your dissertation topic and what is your current main area of focus? And were there any particular scholars whose work was influential in your thinking and your research?

Luis Fraga: When I was in graduate school, I was very fortunate in that one of my non-political scientist mentors-- he was a sociologist, but a political sociologist, Chandler Davidson, who had developed expertise serving as an expert witness in voting rights litigation. And he had worked on a number of cases serving as an expert witness. He was a specialist in the politics of race and class and had been an expert witness in a very famous voting rights case in Houston, Texas in the 1970s. He took a class with him, and he invited me to become his research assistant. And we traveled to Abilene, Texas, where he was pursuing a case-- very interesting experience. From him, I learned about voting rights research. So here it is. Not a political scientist, but he's clearly working in the area that political science would be interested in. But he was doing it as a political sociologist, but working in the law on voting rights cases. Now, I had always thought I would become a lawyer. But when I decided my junior year of college that I wasn't, and I was going to do this, I thought, how ironic that now here I am working as a research assistant for someone who's working with lawyers all the time to try to fight for greater voting rights for African-American and Latino community. So my dissertation focused on a factor that we experience in Abilene, which is the presence of what were called nonpartisan slating groups. These were organizations in a nonpartisan-- that is, no party-- system in local elections who would run slates of candidates for office. And they tended to be dominated by business interests. And they tended to exclude representatives, or possible representatives, from African-American and Latino communities. So that was the focus of my dissertation research.

Luis Fraga: And I studied that organization, those organizations in Abilene, where we were doing work, but also in San Antonio and Dallas, and found in the course of my research that there had been organizations like this in many different cities across the country. And essence became, by their own words, many political machines, but in a nonpartisan system, with a preference for, if you will, white businessmen and the interests of business. And in cities, business and business development is a critical component of the work that they do. And it's necessary to try to bring in as much business as you can and support businesses and whatnot. But it had this exclusionary effect for communities. And that motivated me. And you can see how the pieces are kind of coming together, given what I said before. And here I found myself focusing in an area of work that I thought I could understand and hold on to. And that fulfilled my vision of trying to bring a different perspective to the study of politics, and especially barriers to politics. So I did that dissertation. Finished the dissertation and published a couple of articles, one co-authored with Chandler, another co-authored with-- single authored by myself on that work. I was very happy that I had success. And I'll be eternally grateful to the editors of those journals. One was, interestingly enough, at the time, called the Western Political Quarterly. And the other was, at the time, called the Urban Affairs

Quarterly, now called the Urban Review, I think. Forget where this is called now. And I had publishing success. So I felt validated in the choices I had made for my research.

Luis Fraga: I then continued to study systems of election and voting, and especially their exclusionary consequences. Did that for school boards. Did that for city councils. And then got into political behavior of Latino communities and started to do survey-based research on Latino communities in the United States. And later, while I was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute, was working with several colleagues, including the incoming president of the APSA, Valerie Martinez-Ebers, but also Gary Segura, and former president Rodney Hero, Michael Jones Correa, and John Garcia. And we put together the Latino National Political Survey. And I forget what year it was. But anyway, whatever year that was that we put it together. And that was still, I think it's fair to say, although it's 20 years old now, the most comprehensive survey done of Latinos in the United States, all different national origin groups, all different parts of the country, all different citizenship backgrounds and class backgrounds and so forth, and became very, very interested in that and had success in publishing in that area and with those data. And at one point, it was the most downloaded data set at ICPSR. And we made a commitment consistent with what I started with. We, all of us together, the six of us, made a commitment that we would make the data public as soon as it was clean, even before we published anything from the data. And we did that on purpose because we wanted to help support younger scholars and any scholars who are interested in this particular area of work. And so we posted the data and cleaned it up. And that's why it was used by a lot of students, not old now, still used by some students. But we asked a very innovative set of questions, a broad set of questions, about a 45-minute interview. But some took as long as two to three hours, depending. And we had a survey research firm that had bilingual Interviewers. And so people could talk in either English or Spanish, depending, and allowed us to access Spanish-dominant citizens and residents. And we assume undocumented individuals and so forth to get a sense of the broad range of views that exist. So that was lovely.

Luis Fraga: In the course of that, also did some work on immigration and published a couple of articles on immigration, one in Perspectives on Politics, when a dear friend at Harvard, Jennifer Hochschild, was the first editor, and I'm mentioning that because of the influence of the APSA. And early on had the opportunity, through the Western, and then the APSA, and then the Midwest Political Science Association, had the opportunity to become active in the profession a long time. So in terms of the research, now I'm going to retire at the end of May. But I'm working on two manuscripts now. One is on the California Voting Rights Act. I'm presenting a paper, actually, tomorrow, here at the

Western on that. And another on the 1975 expansion and extension of the Voting Rights Act. The original 1965 Voting Rights Act, that largely applied to the South for African-American voters, was expanded in 1975 to apply to the term that was used in the legislation, was language minorities. And that included Latinos and Asians, Native Americans and others. And was a major, major innovation and expansion. And through building a coalition in 1975 in Congress, and with support of President Ford, who ultimately signed the legislation, the Voting Rights Act now covered this other set of communities, in addition to continuing to cover African-American communities, especially in the South. No one has ever written a book or a substantial article on the 1975, the politics of the 1975 expansion and extension of the Voting Rights Act. That's the second book I'm working on now.

Luis Fraga: So what I like to say is that I've come full circle. That's where I started. In terms of voting rights, it's where I've done work throughout my career. But now at the end of my active academic career, toward the end-- I don't want to say I'm dead yet-- but toward the end of my academic career, I'm coming back to a very, very significant piece of legislation. That the 65 Voting Rights Act and 75 Voting Rights Act, and now the California Voting Rights Act, the state-based Voting Rights Act, coming back to studying-- and it's the title of one of the books-- what I call America at its best. And the country could come together to do what was right, to do what made sense. Not that it was uncontroversial, it was definitely controversial. In many different parts of the country, in 65 and certainly in 75 and today, it's controversial. The Supreme Court is hearing a case that is likely to gut the 1965 Voting Rights Act, depending on how they decide. And so I studied the evolution of Supreme Court support for the Voting Rights Act and the arguments that they make and so on. So I've come full circle. And I like that feeling. And it's, in my interpretation, not surprisingly, a validation for that original choice I made as to what I wanted to study. And I've been very, very fortunate in having an incredible set of mentors and guides and supporters in the pursuit of all of this research. That's phenomenal. We're going to shift gears a little bit.

Interviewer: What does being a political scientist of color mean to you?

Luis Fraga: It means having a chance to influence the next generation of leaders. That's my teaching, which I take very, very seriously. Sorry. Which I take very, very seriously. And what a gift that is to me. A professor now, I counted it up the other day for 44 years. I've taught many, many students of all different backgrounds and both genders and sexualities and white, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, mixed race, all sorts

of students. And I've always tried to impose upon them the importance of understanding what I call their leadership responsibilities, being leaders in the country for themselves, but also for the next generation. So that's been an incredible, incredible gift that I have been given in the course of this work. The academic work, the scholarship, the research, I'm very, very proud of. Sometimes I think that what's most long-lasting, though, is what happens in the classroom. And the way that you can empower students, whatever their own ideological backgrounds or racial backgrounds or genders or sexualities, empower them to have the tools to understand how to make America better.

Interviewer: And in your view, what is necessary in order to further diversify the discipline and make it more equitable and welcoming to scholars of color in the profession?

Luis Fraga: This is a hard time for pursuing these goals. Our current presidential administration is so opposed and, I would say, vicious in its opposition. To helping the academy, broadly defined, become more inclusive. Those people of goodwill-- and I have to say this because I'm at Notre Dame-- and good faith, who know that this is not the best-- in the best long-term interests of what I like to call our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren. That the way to influence at this point is to be smarter, to be more committed, and to be more strategic. We've always had to be those three things. But in today's environment, it's even more necessary to focus on those three dimensions of action. I'll also say that I have learned in the course of my graduate education, and certainly in my professional career, that the academy intellectual work matters. It influences how people think, and it sets the stage for what people think, and it sets standards as to the values that we might want to pursue as individuals, as citizens, as leaders, as scholars, or whatever our work, whatever our profession in medicine, in law, many different areas. And in doing so, in doing so, we have an opportunity to leave a legacy to those children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, that they deserve. Not one that focuses on conflict, not one that focuses on division, not one that focuses on difference, but one that focuses on building communities, inclusive communities, of strength. And the academy is the place to do that, get that started. And then translate one's work in this area to the real world of politics, which isn't always easy. I've had several of my students become very important political leaders in the country, and elected officials in the country, and I'm so proud of their having made the choice to try to use their time and commit their families to pursuing lives of social justice.

Interviewer: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

Luis Fraga: Let me think a minute about that. I know that I have been very lucky. I know many scholars, especially scholars of color, especially women scholars of color, who have worked just as hard as I have ever worked and been denied opportunity. And I know that part of the reason I have been, if I can say this, which I will, as successful as I have been, is because of course the hard work and sacrifice and strategizing, and very good luck. And faith that luck would come, opportunity would come, if you will, to be cliché, doing the right thing for the right purpose. And I am blessed beyond measure to have been able to live that and continue to live that. And the origin of all that was deciding to go to graduate school, deciding to become a scholar. And the doors that have been open for me to learn, see, experience, for a while I was working with a group with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, had opportunities to go to conferences in Europe and in Asia, and many different places, South America, many different places, had opportunities to give lectures at universities in Mexico. Although I am third generation, in US born, I speak fluent Spanish and some Portuguese, and have had the opportunity to give lectures in Spanish. Those are incredible opportunities. One time I was invited to give a recent talk at a university in Mexico, I started it by saying, "Thank you for giving me the chance to honor my grandparents who sacrificed to come here." They didn't have an easy time. They lived lives of poverty largely. But their sacrifice was what gave me this chance, and I appreciate the opportunity to try to pay that forward and give it to other students and scholars and administrators as well.

Interviewer: That concludes our interview today. Thank you so much for your time and all of your stories. We really appreciate it.

Luis Fraga: Thank you very much, and thank you to the APSA, to Kimberly Mealy and all of you who are working on this project and for all the work that you do for our members.