

Introduction

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Hundreds of thousands of immigrants take the oath of citizenship every year. Each has come not only to take but to give. They come asking for a chance to work hard, support their families, and to rise in the world. And together they make our nation more, not less, American. . . . In the life of an immigrant, citizenship is a defining event. In the life of our nation, new citizens bring renewal.

George W. Bush (Ellis Island, July 10, 2001)

Good people who are living here, working hard, and paying taxes should have a path to equal citizenship in the American community. And families should be reunited more quickly.

John Kerry (Washington, D.C., June 26, 2004)

Who votes, who does not participate, and why?

For nearly five decades, political scientists have devoted considerable attention to these questions regarding democratic participation in the United States. Questions regarding electoral participation take on increased significance during eras in which there are substantial changes in the size and composition of the electorate—for instance, with the entry of women into electoral participation following suffrage in 1920 (Andersen 1996), with the rise in participation among European immigrants after the New Deal (Erie 1988; Gamm 1989), and with the entry of southern black voters into the electorate following the civil

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rights movement and the Voting Rights Acts of the 1960s (Davidson and Grofman 1994; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Now, in the early twenty-first century, we are once again witnessing a sea change in the composition of the American electorate, this time caused by processes related to immigration and racial diversification. In the past three decades the number of immigrants living in the United States has grown enormously, from about 10 million in 1970 to about 32 million, or more than 11 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Although the foreign-born constitute a smaller proportion of voting-age citizens (about 6 percent in 2000), this proportion has increased remarkably in the past few years thanks to an upsurge in naturalizations beginning in 1996. This wave has yet to recede, with immigrants naturalizing at a rate of well over five hundred thousand per year (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2002). The surge in immigration since 1965 has also altered the shape of the American citizenry through the children of the foreign-born (or second-generation immigrants). Together, these two groups account for about 15 percent of the adult citizen population today and will grow to about one-quarter of the national electorate by 2020 (Passel and Van Hook 2000). Finally, the growth of the “new” second generation, combined with the entry of naturalized citizens into the electorate, is also creating a shift in the racial, ethnic, and national-origin composition of the American electorate—away from the predominance of a “black-white” dynamic to a “black-white-brown-yellow” dynamic.

The significance of first- and second-generation immigrants to the electoral process has not been lost either on the media or on national political leaders (Greenhouse 2000). Recognizing the value of immigrants in the American electorate, both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates in 2000 sought to garner votes among immigrant citizens. The desire to woo immigrant voters was especially strong for the Republican Party, which endeavored to undo the political damage wrought by the party’s prior support for legislation that restricted immigrant access to public benefits. For instance, George W. Bush distanced himself from the restrictionist policies advocated by Republican governors such as Pete Wilson of California and spent considerable sums of money on Spanish-language advertisements in immigrant-rich states such as California (Segal 2003). Even after the 2000 election, Bush sought to make Republican inroads into current and future immigrant voters. In 2001, he asked Congress to extend the deadline for a limited amnesty allowing undocumented immigrants with

family in the United States to apply for legal status and then declared his support for the idea of a broader amnesty for undocumented immigrants. The September 11 attacks complicated Republican attempts to attract immigrant votes while retaining the support of the party's conservative base. At the same time that the administration deported thousands of South Asian and Arab immigrants who overstayed their visas, it proposed to reclassify undocumented immigrants from Mexico as temporary workers and sought to restore immigrant access to food stamps, the provision of which was initially restricted by the 1996 welfare reform law (Pear 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Despite a few efforts to reach out to immigrant voters, many Republicans and Democrats still harbor a deep uncertainty about the likely participation of these relative newcomers to the electoral process (Edsall and Thompson 2001; Gimpel and Kaufmann 2001). A similar uncertainty is found among many political scientists, who rarely have examined the issue of immigrant political participation in a comprehensive manner. While there are many studies that focus on the political participation of either Latinos or Asian Americans, very few works in political science have studied immigrant political participation across racial groups and national origins. This paucity stands in stark contrast to the burgeoning number of studies in sociology and economics on the experiences and outcomes of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants in a cross-racial perspective (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Borjas 1999; Waldinger 2001; Alba and Nee 2003).

As a consequence of this gap in scholarship, there are still several unanswered questions regarding the political participation of immigrants in the United States. For instance, some political theorists have argued that policies of dual nationality are detrimental to civic participation among immigrants in the United States. And yet few studies have examined whether such policies actually do entail lower rates of participation. Similarly, many political observers have remarked that immigrants from communist regimes are highly engaged in the political life of the United States, based largely on impressionistic evidence from the experience of Cuban immigrants in Florida. And yet, the question of communist country origin has not been asked more generally for immigrants of different racial groups and national origins.

This work is an attempt to provide answers to these and other questions relating to the political participation of immigrants and their descendants in the United States. In doing so, I examine whether traditional models of voting participation can account for the political

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behavior of immigrants. I also analyze whether new factors related to immigrant adaptation add significantly to our theoretical understandings of voter turnout. Finally, I consider the relationships between race, immigration, and participation inequality, shifting the analysis beyond voting to other forms of political participation. (Note that the terms *race* and *ethnicity* are used interchangeably in this book.)

This study of immigrant political participation focuses on four central sets of questions:

1. *How do immigrant numbers relate to the overall population and the voting-age population in particular?*

The number of immigrants in the United States has grown rapidly since the liberalization of immigration policy in 1965. The demographics of immigrant residents have received considerable attention from studies in sociology, economics, and public policy. And yet there has not been a sufficient accounting of immigrants and their share of the national electorate and various state electorates.

2. *Do traditional models of voting participation account for the political behavior of immigrants?*

Some contemporary studies have suggested that traditional models of voting participation, especially those that emphasize the importance of age and socioeconomic status, do not sufficiently explain the participatory behavior of immigrant and minority populations.<sup>2</sup>

3. *Do factors related to immigrant adaptation add significantly to the existing theoretical knowledge of voter turnout?*

A growing literature in Latino and Asian American politics, and the larger literature on immigrant outcomes in the United States, suggests that various factors regarding immigrant adaptation may bear a significant relationship to political participation. These factors include duration of stay in the United States, various country-of-origin characteristics, and contextual factors related to immigrant life in the United States.

4. *How do group disparities in voting compare to inequalities in other forms of political participation?*

Participation in democratic politics extends well beyond the ballot box to include activities such as writing to elected officials, giving money to political causes, and working on political campaigns. As in the case of voting, involvement in these activities is unevenly distributed across racial groups and immigrant generations. Some activities may exacerbate group inequalities in political participation, while others may serve to mitigate such inequalities.

Before examining these questions, I shall first present an overview of prior work in the field of immigrant electoral participation. In Chapter 2, I summarize the findings of scholars who analyze the adaptation of

European immigrants to American social and political life in the early twentieth century. I also review the contributions from contemporary studies of voting participation among Latinos and Asian Americans. I note that even though these studies provide testable hypotheses regarding immigrant political participation, the external validity of many of their findings is limited by the fact that they are confined to particular groups or geographic areas or that they are derived from elections prior to the massive increase in naturalizations of the mid-1990s. This study attempts to provide a more systematic analysis of the dynamics that govern immigrant political participation in the contemporary period, primarily using national data from recent elections. Chapter 2 ends with an introduction to the data sources used in this book—with surveys such as the Current Population Survey Voter Supplement (CPS), the National Election Studies (NES), the Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University (or PKH) Survey of Latinos, and the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS); field interviews with leaders of ethnic organizations in various cities; and newspaper coverage of immigrant-related issues in three states.

In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed examination of immigrant numbers in the national population and various state populations, as well as their corresponding electorates. I also compare the contemporary levels of first- and second-generation immigrants to those found earlier in the twentieth century. While the analysis confirms a rising tide of first-generation citizens in the past forty years, it also tempers some of the inflated rhetoric referring to immigrants as “sleeping giants” or “awakening giants” in the American electorate.

Chapter 4 examines the question of whether traditional models of participation can account for voter turnout among first- and second-generation immigrants. Many contemporary studies of electoral participation suggest that models that emphasize the importance of age and socioeconomic status cannot account for the political behavior of immigrants. First, I test the validity of what I term the hypothesis of “immigrant exceptionalism.” Next, I test the consistency of other factors that have been shown to be significant predictors of participation among native-born populations (factors related to social incorporation, rules governing registration deadlines and absentee ballots, and party mobilization at the statewide level).

The analysis then proceeds to consider a new model of immigrant participation. In Chapter 5, I introduce and examine the effects of immigrant-related factors such as (1) immigrant generation, (2) duration

of stay in the United States, (3) country-of-origin characteristics such as policies of dual citizenship and histories of nondemocratic rule, and (4) U.S.-based characteristics such as residential ethnic concentration and access to bilingual ballots. Many of these factors have been hypothesized to have significant effects but have not yet been systematically tested. For instance, some political theorists have voiced the concern that access to dual citizenship lowers immigrant participation in U.S. politics. I find that immigrants from countries that allow for dual citizenship actually have a higher level of participation than do immigrants from other countries. For these and several other factors, this book provides the first comprehensive test of the effects of immigrant adaptation on political participation.

After examining the role of various immigrant-related factors on voting participation as found in national surveys, I consider in more detail the effects of political threat and institutional mobilization on the likelihood of immigrant participation. The mid-1990s were watershed years in the contemporary era of immigration and naturalization, as the United States considered and passed legislation that restricted immigrant access to public benefits. The trend started in 1994 with the passage of Proposition 187 in California and continued in 1996 with national legislation that made even legal immigrants ineligible for most welfare benefits. These measures (hereby termed “anti-immigrant legislation”) produced a sense of political threat among many first- and second-generation citizens and have largely been credited for an immigrant backlash at the polls against the Republican Party. In Chapter 6, I provide a structured case study comparison of threat and mobilization across groups in California, Texas, and New York. This comparative analysis relies on newspaper coverage of immigrant-related issues prior to each general election and on interviews with leaders of ethnopolitical organizations. Finally, I combine these contextual and group-specific measures of threat and mobilization with individual-level data on participation from the Current Population Survey, thus providing a cross-regional analysis of the relative importance of each factor in stimulating voter turnout among immigrants.

Chapter 7 addresses the question of immigrant participation in political activities beyond the ballot box. Using recent data from the Public Policy Institute of California, the analysis focuses on whether disparities in participation across racial groups and immigrant generations get better or worse when the scope of relevant activities includes not just voting but also other types of political activities that may have a

substantial impact on election and policy outcomes. Finally, Chapter 8 considers the future of immigrant political participation, paying particular attention to policies aimed at reducing participation inequality and the partisan consequences of immigration in the United States. This final chapter also considers the ways that immigrant political participation is prompting reformulations of theories of political participation as well as the more general literature on immigrant adaptation. As will be clear from the analysis, not only are immigrants transforming the demographic and political landscape of the United States; they are also transforming our very understandings of the factors that motivate electoral participation.

While this book treats the question of immigrant political participation from an empirical perspective using survey data and elite interviews, the issue of political participation is not merely of academic interest. For the immigrants themselves, the extent of their political participation is often important to securing their economic, social, and political footholds in the United States. Some may argue otherwise—that the primary goal of immigrants entering the United States is to seek a better life defined in terms of wealth and social mobility and that political participation is not necessary for the foreign-born to attain these goals. In my fieldwork in California, Texas, and New York, a common refrain among leaders of party organizations and middle-class Asian community organizations was that it was difficult to get more Asian immigrants involved in politics because they were already enjoying considerable success in the economic realm. Some may argue that this kind of behavior—giving primacy to economic activity over political participation—is perfectly rational. With economic advancement as the primary yardstick for immigrant success, low levels of political participation should not be a cause for concern. Others may extend these arguments of economic primacy even further, rationalizing away low levels of participation even among those immigrants with limited socioeconomic mobility. Indeed, the focus on economic or professional advancement may be seen as even more pressing among those immigrants who have not yet fulfilled the “American Dream,” with political participation seen as an afterthought.

This apologia for low levels of participation among immigrants certainly has an intuitive appeal, especially given the centrality of the “American Dream” in the mythologizing of social relations in the United States—both by individuals and institutions of the host society

and by the immigrants themselves. However, the argument of economic primacy is limited in several ways. First, political activism is indeed necessary for the economic advancement of many immigrants who face racial and ethnic discrimination in areas such as housing, lending, and the workplace (see, for instance, activism among undocumented immigrants in California to secure driver's licenses and to obtain compensation for work-related injuries). Far from being an unnecessary diversion, political participation for these immigrants is integral to the mission of securing an economic foothold in the United States. Political participation may also be necessary for the economic advancement of those immigrants who have enjoyed some degree of economic success but who nevertheless continue to face barriers such as glass ceilings in the workplace. Finally, political activism is also important for those immigrants who have succeeded in economic terms but who have not yet secured a legal foothold in the United States and who do not enjoy the same protections as native-born whites (see, for instance, the detention of many Arab and South Asian immigrants during the months following September 11, 2001).

With low levels of political participation, immigrants may find themselves trapped in what Claire Jean Kim (1999, 2000) has called systems of "racial triangulation." They may be valorized in relation to other subordinate groups such as native-born blacks, yet ostracized as foreigners and kept outside the realm of the body politic. During periods of economic decline or crisis in national security, the political vulnerability of immigrants intensifies, with attempts by the state and various social actors to restrict immigrant rights and erect even greater barriers to citizenship. Higher levels of political participation and strategic activism among immigrant communities challenge such policies of political marginalization. Activities such as participating in public protests, writing letters to elected officials, and attending meetings of local government can provide immigrants with the skills necessary to defend their rights during times of political vulnerability. Also, immigrant participation in political and civic activities can lessen the ability of states and social actors to paint immigrants as alien to the American body politic. Thus, political participation need not be marginal to the concerns of immigrants. Indeed, in many ways it is central to the goal of immigrants to secure a better life in the United States for themselves and their children.