

# The Challenges of Studying Political and Civic Incorporation

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# The Challenges of Studying Political and Civic Incorporation

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The papers in this volume are a welcome addition to an area of immigration research that is relatively understudied—the civic and political incorporation of immigrants and their children. Sociological studies of immigrant incorporation have, with only a few exceptions, tended to ignore politics in favor of a focus on social and economic incorporation (Bloemraad, 2006). Political scientists have only recently begun to focus on how the post-1965 wave of mostly non-White immigrants complicate American racial politics and on whether new immigrants will follow some of the same trajectories of assimilation into American politics as European immigrants did in the last century (Jones-Correa, 1998; Rogers, 2006). The psychological and developmental issues surrounding civic engagement have also not been addressed in studies of immigrant and second-generation children, even though, as many authors here point out, they are a large and growing proportion of our nation’s young people.

This collection of studies therefore serves a great need for careful attention to unfolding patterns of political activities among these young people. Taken as a whole the papers here provide a wonderful overview of issues surrounding immigrant and second-generation civic engagement. Substantively they address racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination, group solidarity, the role of culture, and notions of citizenship. Methodologically, they combine a variety of different methods designed to elucidate subtle issues of meaning, as well as to document the prevalence of different types of behavior and attitudes. The essays also are very good at pointing out the role of context in studying political engagement. Political incidents such as the Elián González case in South Florida, the immigrants’ rights protests in the spring of 2006, and the events of 9/11 all have far-reaching consequences, and the researchers in this volume are correct to point to the very real effects of contextual phenomena on cross-sectional surveys.

## THE UNITED STATES IN CONTEXT

A good beginning frame for studies of this sort is a comparative one. For all of the problems of political incorporation in the United States currently, one only has to turn to western Europe to see that there is much to praise in the American model. The riots of second-generation North Africans in France, the high unemployment and low college attainment rates in Germany, and the tense political debates over inclusiveness in the Netherlands, as well as growing concern about “home grown” second-generation terrorists in Great Britain, stand in contrast to the relative success of the United States in incorporating many of its immigrants and their children (Crul & Vermeulen, 2003). Although scholars have noted the economic and educational success of this incorporation process, there is a strong civic and political story to tell as well. Unlike western Europe, where some nation-states denied birthright citizenship to the second generation or require young people to choose between their parents’ national citizenship and the citizenship of their birth country, the United States has provided birthright citizenship to anyone born on its soil, including the children of parents who are in the country illegally. The inclusive nature of citizenship in the United States, together with a tradition of ethnic-based politics that celebrates rather than denies the immigrant origins of our population, sets the stage for a political arena that young people of immigrant origins can ignore or embrace but which is very much an opportunity for them (one that is very significantly denied to the estimated 12 million undocumented first-generation immigrants in the United States, a troubling and growing exception to this otherwise rather successful story).

The papers in this volume explore the extent to which first- and second-generation young people engage with politics and the civic sphere. And to do that the authors must wrestle with several important theoretical and methodological issues that are central to the field of

immigrant studies. They include the theoretical question of how to define the target of assimilation and the thorny methodological questions of how to define key concepts in the study of assimilation—such as identity and civic and political engagement itself. I will briefly review these key issues below.

## THEORIES OF ASSIMILATION

Much of the scholarly debate about how to characterize the incorporation of immigrants and their children addresses the question, assimilation into what? Given that the United States is a multicultural, multiracial, complex society that long ago abandoned a notion of itself as a White Anglo-Saxon society, the question of how to characterize the changing nature of the society that immigrants are entering has become central in debates about immigration. The sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) argue that assimilation is still a useful guide for understanding the experiences of immigrants, as long as the idea of a White Anglo-conforming mainstream is replaced with the concept of a remade mainstream, reflecting both the successes of earlier immigrants from Europe, Latin America, and Asia and the real changes brought about by the civil rights movement, removing de jure segregation and legal discrimination. A slightly different model is offered by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993), further refined by Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2001), in the theory of segmented assimilation. Recognizing the stratified nature of American society, these scholars argue that when immigrants and their children become integrated into the society, it is to a particular segment of that society—segments that are stratified by race and class.

The jury is still out on which model best captures the arc of the last 50 years of America's immigration history, but most relevant for this special issue, both of these models lead to further questions about how to think about civic engagement and political activity. First, as authors such as Putnam (2000) and Skocpol (2003) have noted, American voluntary organizations and political engagement in general have changed over the last century, and immigrants now enter a society in which civic engagement and political activity is declining on average, especially for those with low education. As Alba and Nee note, assimilation theory has often conflated social mobility with assimilation. What does it mean for immigrants to enter a society in which the average political activity is declining? Will immigrants become less political over time as they become more American? How should scholars conceive of "high" or "low" political activity?

Segmented assimilation does not provide an easy answer, because it is unclear which characteristic—class

or race—will prove most important in segmenting the immigrant populations when it comes to civic engagement. Although middle-class and upper-class people are more likely to be politically active and engaged than the poor and the working class, African Americans, perhaps owing to the struggle for political voice of the civil rights movement, tend to be very civically active and engaged. In a recent study I codirected examining the incorporation of second-generation young adults in New York City, we found that the groups who were most successful in terms of their educational attainment and income and occupational status—Russians and Chinese—were the least likely to vote or engage in any political activity. West Indians—a much less successful group—together with African Americans were much more politically active and engaged than all other groups, including native-born Whites. Indeed we found that second-generation Blacks and Latinos were more likely to be politically and civically engaged than their native-born peers (Kasinitz et al., forthcoming).

Thus a central point for all of the papers in this volume is that it is important to be clear about the target of assimilation: If immigrants and their children are becoming Americans, the question is what kind of Americans they are becoming, and whether that means lower or higher rates of civic engagement over time.

## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

All of the authors address these questions as they compare the first- and second-generation immigrant groups they study with other groups. The theoretical models they hold about immigration, which are mostly not made very explicit, lead to different comparison groups and ways of defining the ethnic and racial groups themselves.

In terms of identity, Stepick et al., specifically ask whether immigrant youth will be different on civic engagement than nonimmigrant youth, or whether they will come to resemble U.S. minorities given their non-White status. Jensen asks how the cultural identities as Indian or Salvadoran affect civic engagement, or whether their civic engagement is best understood not through their cultural identities but through their status as immigrants. Lopez and Marcelo find that although immigrants and natives look very different on civic engagement, this is largely due to other characteristics that differentiate the groups, and once those are held constant, there is little difference between immigrants and all nonimmigrants in their survey. The second generation, however, remains different from natives, even after background characteristics are controlled for. Junn and Masuoka look at panethnic identities as Asian and Latino and ask whether group pride as Latino or Asian

185 is changed by exposure to pictures of elected politicians  
 from the same racial background. Finally, Wray-Lake  
 et al., examine the effect of perceptions of media images  
 of Arab Americans on experiences of prejudice among  
 Arab Americans. In each of these cases, there are  
 190 implicit and explicit comparisons—to native minorities,  
 to other panethnic groups, to narrowly defined national  
 origin groups, to all native-born Americans (including  
 the second generation), and to native-born Whites.  
 These choices of groups to focus on, as well as the  
 195 comparison groups, imply ideas about the nature of  
 American assimilation, perhaps a theoretical consider-  
 ation that the reader should explicitly consider in  
 reading each particular case.

The authors also use very many definitions of polit-  
 200 ical and civic engagement. Although almost all the  
 papers address questions of whether the respondents  
 see prejudice against their group, they also examine  
 standard issues such as registering to vote, voting,  
 taking part in political rallies or demonstrations, and  
 205 joining ethnic voluntary organizations. It seems wise  
 to be as inclusive as possible in measuring all of the  
 possible ways in which young people can be civically  
 or politically engaged, although Stepick et al. go a little  
 far in including “helping family and peers” as an indi-  
 210 cator of social engagement. With such a far-reaching  
 definition, it would be hard to find anyone who was  
 not in some way civically engaged.

In sum, the papers in this volume are part of a wider  
 conversation in immigrant studies about how to concep-  
 215 tualize and measure assimilation and incorporation.  
 This conversation has for too long neglected politics,  
 civic engagement, and psychological development even  
 while it has focused on young people and on issues that  
 are fundamentally political in nature. I hope that future

research will explore many of the pressing questions 220  
 these studies address and build on the important work  
 of these scholars.

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