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DOES BIRTH PLACE MATTER?
DETERMINANTS OF NON-ELECTORAL CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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The Latino community in the United States has a diverse ancestry and a complex demographic profile. It includes native and foreign-born people of many races with varied national origins. Most Latinos in the U.S. come from Mexico or have Mexican ancestry and the neighborhood of Pilsen is no exception. In our sample, a majority declared to be a U.S. citizen (52 percent) while 47 percent are Mexican citizens or citizens from other Latin American countries, namely Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Interestingly, 66 percent of respondents were born outside of the United States and 63 percent of those were born in Mexico. This demographic distribution illustrates a clear immigrant profile in this neighborhood.

In a community with high numbers of non-citizen residents, it is only natural that civic and political engagement should not be restricted solely to the electoral arena. Residents participate in neighborhood organizations, churches, schools, labor, ethnic, and grassroots organizations, and in non-electoral political activities as well. Pilsen has strong community-based organizations, providing services for immigrants and U.S. citizens alike. As a result, it comes maybe at no surprise that in Pilsen, place of birth did not matter to determine the level of non-electoral civic engagement. In our models, we do not find any statistically significant difference in the level of non-electoral civic and political engagement between the foreign-born and the native born Latino groups represented in our sample.

The city of Chicago provides several public spaces where all residents can participate regardless of legal status or citizenship such as block clubs, labor unions, neighborhood organizations, religious groups, advocacy groups, Parent Teacher Organizations, and Local School Councils to name a few. There are several possibilities for Chicago residents to become civically active in the city and the neighborhood of Pilsen fosters a quite inclusive atmosphere for civic engagement where residents are interested in engaging with the community in a variety of activities.

In the last decade, similar studies using national surveys of Latinos have found similar trends among Mexicans and Latinos in the United States but there is no consensus about the overall effect of nativity on civic engagement. For example, in a previous analysis done by Barreto and Muñoz on non-electoral activities including attending a meeting or rally, volunteering for a campaign, or donating money to a political cause, they do not find any significant differences in the non-electoral engagement of Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, holding all other variables constant (Barreto and Muñoz, 2003). However, Leal finds that although Latino non-citizens do not shy away from activities that require contact with the government, they tend to be significantly less involved in non-electoral political activities than Latino citizens (Leal, 2002).

As Sommers argues, “de jure state citizenship rights” are not enough to foster civic engagement unless they are supplemented by a well-organized community (Sommers 2008). Recent comparative studies actually suggest that institutionalized government responses to immigrant incorporation positively influence citizenship outcomes and participatory behavior among immigrant groups. For instance, Irene Bloemraad, in her comparison of naturalization and civic incorporation among immigrants in Toronto and Boston, finds that immigrants in Canada are more likely to naturalize, more likely to organize, and more likely to get elected to public office than their American counterparts. She shows that immigrants with similar background characteristics follow different civic integration patterns depending on the local context of their integration (Bloemraad 2006).

Recent quantitative research on Latino civic engagement shows that age, political trust, country of origin, SES resources, ethnic identification, level of social network politicization, English language ability, and citizenship status are important predictors of electoral and non-electoral civic engagement among Latinos. (Bass and Casper, 2009; García Bedolla, 2004; Klesner, 2003; Leal, 2002; Segura, Pachón, and Woods, 2001). However, few studies have been done at the neighborhood or city level so it is not possible to capture regional or local differences to produce meaningful comparisons. Among the few studies done at the
neighbhorhood level in Chicago, it seems that there are important differences in the political attitudes of foreign and native-born Latinos, thus signaling the importance of place and context of reception. For instance, Michelson finds that Mexican-American citizens and continental U.S. born Puerto Ricans are found to be less trusting of government when compared to Mexican-descent non-citizens and Island-born Puerto Ricans in Pilsen, Little Village, and Logan Square (2001). This erosion in political trust among those identifying as hyphenated Americans might indicate a corrosive effect of assimilation.

As previously mentioned, in our interaction models to measure the predictors of civic engagement in Pilsen, we find no distinction between the level of non-electoral civic engagement exhibited by foreign-born and native-born Latinos. We believe this trend might be highly correlated with the demographic profile of the area. In Pilsen, there are roughly equal percentages of foreign-born and native-born Latinos, which lead to greater interactions between both groups due to residential proximity. Residents in Pilsen might be emulating the level of participation of their neighbors regardless of nativity in the best tradition of “keeping up with the Joneses.” However, the trend of having similarly engaged residents regardless of nativity does not hold true when focusing in the larger Chicago metropolitan area. For example, Latino immigrants seem to participate in civic organizations in the Chicago metropolitan in higher number than U.S. born Latinos. The Institute for Latino Studies of the University of Notre Dame conducted a survey in 2003 among 1,512 foreign born and U.S. born Latinos in the Chicago metro area and the data indicates a strong correlation between nativity and propensity to participate in civic life in Chicago metro area as it finds that “foreign-born Latinos are much more likely to belong to a community or civic organization than are the US born; 53 percent of the foreign-born belong to one or more community or civic organizations compared to only 37 percent of the US born.” (Ready et al., 2006:3)

Therefore, the observed differences among Latino immigrant participation in civic organizations in the Chicago metro area might have to do with the context of reception. How unique is the state of Illinois for facilitating immigrant incorporation? Are there any spaces that foster equal participation to all residents of the state? The state of Illinois has traditionally been a pro-immigration state and a positive reception tends to foster a sense of belonging among immigrants coming to the State. In 2005, Illinois enacted the New Americans Initiative (NAI), a bipartisan initiative aimed at facilitating integration across the state. Although limited in scope and currently facing budgetary cuts in the present recession, this initiative has tried to foster an acceptance of diversity while inviting immigrants to participate actively in several public arenas.

It is rather soon to measure the impact NAI has had on Latino immigrant civic and political engagement but the Chicago metro area has shown a clear positive trend in Mexican immigrant naturalization rates since 2005. For example, in the Core Based Statistical Area that includes the metropolitan area of Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI, 4,739 Mexican immigrants acquired U.S. citizenship in the year 2005. In the year 2008, 13,160 Mexicans naturalized, representing more than a three-fold increase. There is not much information about the demographic profile of these new Mexican-born U.S citizens but it is interesting that Mexican women consistently show higher rates of naturalization in the 2005-2008 period (U.S. Department of Homeland Security). Naturalization alone might not produce an increase in political engagement unless new citizens decide to exercise their newly acquired rights; however, it is an important step on the path of immigrant civic integration.

Another arena where Latino immigrants in Chicago have an opportunity for active engagement is at the local school councils. In 1988, the city of Chicago enacted a radical school reform to shift a centralized bureaucratic control to a local democratic control aimed at establishing school-based management in each of its elementary and secondary schools. Since then, parents and community members were empowered through their majority control over the Local School Council (LSC) as a way of providing more oversight to local schools. Recent research on Chicago LSC has shown that Latino parent participation in these governing bodies increases Latino student performance and plays a critical role in enhancing school-parent relations and encourages higher levels of parent involvement in school activities. Latino parent participation in local school councils has also been the result of active recruitment organized by Latino-led grassroots organizations (Marshall 2006). The successful model implemented by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association to improve school-community relationships has been the subject of a recent book (Hong, 2011).

In 1995, a study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that 700 Latino parents (14 percent of the total) served on Chicago LSC at a moment when Chicago’s Latino population was at 20 percent. (Ryan et. al., 1997) Surprisingly, the study did not ask questions related to birth place so it is not possible to determine the percentage of foreign-born and native-born Latinos represented among these 700 Latino parents. To observe the increase of Latino participation in this important local governance institution since this benchmark study, our research team used a medical algorithm to determine the number of Latino parents and community members serving on Chicago’s LSCs. The algorithm was used to detect Latino last names among 5,901 council members with available listed names.1 This algorithm detected 1,332 Latino last names representing 22.57 percent of the total of the listed names.2 Compared to the Latino population in the city, participation still lags behind but there are important trends emerging in this area.3 Without detailed demographic information of Latino parent participation in local schools, it is difficult to determine the role of nativity on parental involvement. However, the preference for Spanish language is a good approximation to gauge the level of immigrant parent involvement. For example, graduate student David Beltrán, in his research documenting the participation of Latino parents in the Head Start Program during the spring of 2009 documents that the program in the city is experiencing an overwhelming
participation of parents whose primary language is Spanish and show high interest in wanting to engage in their children's school. A local program administrator indicates in this study that about 33 percent of Latino parents are involved in several Head Start activities, compared to 25 percent of African American parents involved. One of the program managers overseeing the implementation of parent workshops for Pre-K students in the city further mentions: “90 percent of the workshops that [Chicago public] schools requested in the 2008-2009 school year were bilingual; superseding the percentage of requests the prior school year (Beltrán, 2009).

To provide a more comprehensive portrait of non-electoral civic engagement at the neighborhood or city level, it might be necessary to focus on one site of engagement. A case study would be able to isolate particular motivations while trying to incorporate contextual effects such as state policies aimed at immigrant incorporation (NAI) or city-wide school policies aimed at all residents regardless of legal status (LSCs). In our Pilsen survey, we asked respondents if they had participated in a meeting at a school in the past two years but we did not ask the type of issues addressed in those meeting. Nevertheless, it is clear that education is an area of engagement as 42 percent in the sample declared to have participated in a school meeting. As we have seen, the area of education seems to be a fertile ground to explore Latino immigrant engagement. Unfortunately, there is no systematic information available on Latino parent involvement in local school councils or about the Pre-K workshops organized by the Head Start Program. Chicago local school councils present a unique case of civic engagement open to any resident regardless of legal status and parental involvement in early childhood education is another example of meaningful engagement for all Latinos. More research needs to be done to determine the extent of Latino immigrant and native parent participation in this important sphere of civic engagement.

NOTES
1 Those serving as principals were excluded from our lists.
2 We are aware that there are most certainly Latino individuals with non-Latino last names as well as non-Latinos with Latino last names. Unfortunately, the most reliable source for Latino elected officials is the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials directory but they do not include Chicago’s LSCs in their 2009 directory for the state of Illinois.
3 According to the American Community Survey estimates for 2006-2008, the Latino population in the city of Chicago represents 28 percent of the total.

REFERENCES


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