

# IMMIGRANTS' PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN ELECTIONS

## *Where is Their Voice?*

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20 **E**lections in America are held once every four years, and every citizen including naturalized immigrants are eligible to vote. Because citizenship is such a crucial element of electoral engagement, this paper will examine voter participation among minority immigrants and their native-born children. The number of naturalized citizens has been increasing dramatically over the last few decades (Wang & Kim, 2011). For example, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 American Community Survey as cited in Wang and Kim (2011) shows that the foreign-born population now stands at nearly 40 million, a historic high, representing 12.9 percent of the US population. The report further mentions that between 2009 and 2010, the foreign-born population increased by more than 1.4 million, or by 3.7 percent, compared to 1.5 percent from 2008-09. In terms of naturalized citizens, in 2009 there were an estimated 38.5 million immigrants living in the United States of which 44 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens (Wang & Kim, 2011). According to DeSipio, Masuoka, and Stout (2008), nearly 70 percent of adults are immigrants. Therefore, the social incorporation of minority immigrants is directly related to rates of naturalization and citizenship status in ensuring their participation in American elections. This paper examines immigrant political behavior and voter participation of minority immigrants and its impact on the American political process. In addition, the paper will discuss the electoral behavior of these new Americans and the potential impact on the election outcome.

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### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore voter participation of naturalized citizens and its potential implications on American election outcomes. Research studies indicate that immigrants and their children are becoming more influential in American elections (Ewing & Cantor, 2014). According to a special report by the American Immigration Council (Ewing and Canter, 2014), these "new Americans" who are recently natu-

ralized citizens and children born of immigrants since 1965 are becoming powerful in elections as their numbers grow. Major demographic transformations in the U.S. have seen a tremendous increase in native-born children of immigrants, especially among Latinos and Asians, as well as immigrants from other countries. Conversely, the report further indicated that the number of the native-born white voters is on the decline (Ewing & Canter, 2014).

Voting matters to all immigrants since it is part of being an American. Lawn, Mcmillan, Comley, Smith, and Brayley (2014) described the role of being a citizen as follows:

A citizen is a person who is “entitled to enjoy all the legal rights and privileges granted by a state to the people comprising its constituency and who is obligated to obey its laws and to fulfill his or her duties as called upon” In America this includes the right and duty to vote (p.290).

#### THE VOTING PROCESS AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT

First, one has to be eighteen years of age in order to be eligible to vote. The person must be a native or naturalized citizen if not born in the United States. Second, one must be registered to vote. A report by the NAACP describes the voting rights as follows:

The right to vote is the cornerstone of American democracy. Our votes affirm the legitimacy of our democracy. The right to vote is so essential because we use it to preserve and protect all other Constitutional rights. It serves as a check on our political leaders and as a source of power for their constituents. In this way, the vote is both a tangible measure of what we are as a nation, and of what we aspire to be (p.2).

Historically, many people of color particularly African-Americans were denied the right to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed as a way to prevent discrimination in voter registration and voting especially against African-Americans. However, other vulnerable members of society have become beneficiaries of the same Act, including the poor, the elderly, immigrants, and the disabled. According to a report by the NAACP, the Act was passed in order to combat the widespread and persistent discrimination in voting. The report stated that the Voting Rights Act not only guarantees the right of all citizens to participate in the electoral process, but also provides a legal framework to prevent and/or remedy a wide array of barriers that are used to threaten that right. Several steps are involved in the voting process as identified in the How to Register to Vote in the United States: 8 Steps document:

1. Citizens must check for their eligibility.
  - Eligibility is that of citizenship; at least 18 years of age on election day ( in some states you may vote in a primary election at 17, provided you'll turn 18 by the general election)
  - A resident of the state in which you register (each state has its own residency requirements)
  - Not currently on parole or other post-release supervision
2. People can register online if they can
3. National Voter Registration form can be mailed if the state does not allow people to register online
4. People can register in person at designated locations in their states
5. People need to check their state's deadline before the election

6. One must fill out the Federal Postcard Application to vote absentee
7. The voter's card is mailed in
8. Consider registering with a national political party or organization ( p.1-4)

Clarke (2007) suggested that Congress' recent reauthorization of the expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 makes clear that both African American and Latino voters continue to experience significant levels of discrimination that impair their ability to meaningfully exercise their right to vote and equally access the ballot box on Election Day. Immigrants who have become naturalized citizens may view such discriminatory practices as attempts to silence their voices and consequently stay away from participating in elections.

#### REASONS WHY PEOPLE VOTE

Political behavior for immigrants is also affected by the degree to which these communities are assimilated into American society (Taylor, 2015). Immigrant communities, once they are granted citizenship, are often encouraged to exercise their fundamental rights to vote and to participate in the American political process. Voting in America is meant to provide all citizens an equal voice in the decision-making process of the country and in their local communities (Wang & Kim, 2011). According to these authors, it is how citizens ensure that their elected leaders truly represent the will of the people. Wang and Kim (2011) reported that in the United States, there is a significant gap in the voter participation rates of native-born and naturalized American citizens. Wang and Kim (2011) made the following observation with regards to voter turnout among naturalized citizens:

Voter turnout among naturalized citizens is much lower overall than that of native-born citizens, consistently around 9 to 12 percentage points less during at least the past four elections. In the last general election of 2012, almost 1 in 2 native-born citizens turned out to vote, while less than 2 in 5 naturalized citizen did. Even in 2008, a year of historic turnout among many constituencies, just over half of naturalized Americans voted, compared to a little less than two thirds of native-born citizens (p.3).

Some factors that contribute to variations in political participation include resources and rootedness, political context, and group context of participation. Although fewer in numbers, blacks register and vote at higher rates than whites in terms of their proportion of the population; Latinos register and vote at higher rates than Asians; Immigrant Latinos register and vote at higher rates than either whites or Asians, and almost as much as blacks (Logan, Darrah, & Oh, 2012)

Immigrants with lower income and education levels are said to have a lower rate of political participation. For example, Wang and Kim (2011) stated that in 2008, only 65 percent of citizens in households making less than \$25,000 per year were registered to vote compared to 85 percent of those in house-

holds making \$100,000 or more. These authors noted that naturalized Latinos are disproportionately in the low-income and lower level of education strata of American society and therefore, less likely to vote than their native-born counterparts. However, socioeconomic factors seem to play an insignificant role among Asian American immigrants (Wang and Kim, 2011). Asian Americans are generally well educated and tend to have higher income than other immigrant groups, yet they have lower rates of political participation.

Research studies have identified four major influences on individual decisions to engage in the voting process: 1) social and demographic traits, 2) psychological resources, 3) electoral rules, and 4) the mobilization efforts of parties and their candidates (Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Stein & Vonnahme, 2008). Furthermore, Harder and Krosnick (2008) cited the following demographic factors in voter turnout:

1. Education: Citizens with more formal education are more likely to vote; each additional year of education is associated with higher turnout.
2. Income: Wealthier people vote at higher rates.
3. Occupation: There is little evidence that working in an authoritative or high-status job substantially increases an individual's turnout. Workplace authority might be expected to create a greater feeling of social entitlement, which often translates into political participation.
4. Age: People appear to become increasingly likely to vote as they progress from early adulthood through middle adulthood; after about the age of 75, people become less likely to vote.
5. Gender: The effect of gender on turnout has changed dramatically over the years. From the beginning of women's suffrage until the 1980s, women voted less than men. Women then felt less efficacious and were less informed and politically interested than men and often had less power and responsibility in the workplace. Since the mid-1980s, though, women have voted at the same rate as men, and sometimes at even higher rates.
6. Mobility: Residential mobility seems to depress turnout. Just after moving, people are less able to vote, because they must learn how to register with a new address and must make time to do so amidst an inevitably busy post-move life.
7. Residency: People who live in rural areas are more likely to vote than are people who live in urban areas. And farmers vote at substantially higher rates than would be expected based on their levels of education and income.
8. Race: Whites have voted at higher rates than some other racial groups. Compared to whites, turnout among African Americans has been relatively low. Latinos have lower turnout rates than Whites, even after controlling for socio-economic status. Asian Americans turn out at lower rates than Whites when controlling for socioeconomic status (p.530-534).

In addition to demographic factors social and psychological factors also have a significant impact on electoral participation. Living in a high status neighborhood will encourage a person to identify with the political affiliation of that neighborhood. According to Harder and Krosnick (2008) living in a neighborhood with close to evenly balanced party affiliations could increase political participation of the people. Political participation is generally motivated by the citizen's belief that his or her vote will actually influence the outcome of local elections. Other factors are political efficacy, group solidarity, civic duty, and habit. Harder and Krosnick (2008) describe voting as a habitual exercise, meaning that voting once increases the likelihood of voting again. Voting is also a vehicle for social inclusion. Bevelander and Pendakur (2011) defined social inclusion as follows:

A process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society which they live. It ensures that they have a greater participation in decision-making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights (p.71-72).

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF IMMIGRATION AS AN ELECTION ISSUE

Immigration policies are at the center of electoral decision making for new Americans (Ewing & Cantor, 2014). As people of color become an even larger share of the electorate, the political implications come into sharp focus (Oakford, 2015). Although demographic changes in the general population do not automatically translate into electoral votes by the same margin, it is naïve to assume that such changes have no implications in terms of election outcomes (Oakford, 2015). In some states such as California, the electorate of color makes up the majority of all eligible voters. While these demographic changes are occurring at different paces in different states, one trend is also noticeable, the number of non-Hispanic white voters is shrinking (Oakford, 2015). The impact of minority voters on the outcome of presidential elections is increasing, and in order to win elections, both major political parties will require significant support among this growing segment of the electorate. Neither Republicans nor Democrats can afford to ignore the powerful force of the minority voters in this year's election (Oakford, 2015).

Immigrants from Africa make up a relatively small number of the total immigrant population, but the numbers are steadily growing—doubling since 1970 (Pew Research Center Analysis of U.S. census). In 2013, there were 1.8 million African Immigrants living in the U.S. as compared to only 80,000 in 1970. They accounted for 4.4% of the immigrant population in 2013, up from 0.8% in 1970. Africans are a rapidly growing segment of the black immigrant population in the U.S., increasing by 137% between 2000-2013. Foreign born blacks

sometimes get lost in the mix when people fail to distinguish between U.S. born blacks of several generations (Race Files, 2013). Most studies have focused on Latino and Asian community participation in elections. There is little to no research conducted to demonstrate the impact of African immigrant participation on American elections. Most studies have lumped black voters together regardless of their country of birth, whether they are recent arrivals or their ancestors were brought here as slaves. (Race Files, 2013).

The current rhetoric on immigration on the campaign trail is likely to have some far reaching effects on how immigrants vote in the 2016 elections. According to Taylor (2015), Democrats are beginning to be more cautious as to how they address immigration reform and refugee policies. For voters who have been politically conservative or moderate, the tone of the ongoing debate may be the impetus they need to make their voices heard. Consequently, it is projected that there may be an increase in voter turnout among the immigrants who have been complacent in the past (Taylor, 2015).

#### BARRIERS TO MINORITY VOTER PARTICIPATION

Voter participation is tied to an individual's social location, his/her psychological dispositions, the procedures involved in voting, and events that occur at the time of each election (Harder, & Krosnick, 2008). If voters are subjected to strict registration requirements, then these potential voters are less likely to register and to vote. These strict requirements include but are not limited to: annual registration, literacy tests, and early cutoff dates for registering before an election (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). In the past poll taxes, and literacy tests were also used as requirements for voter registration in the United States aimed at restricting immigrants (including legal ones and newly naturalized citizens), non-white citizens, Native Americans, and any other locally "undesirable" groups from exercising voting rights granted under the Constitution (Voting Rights Act, 1965).

States with restrictive voter registration laws are much more likely to pose a substantial barrier to voter turnout of minority groups. Stein and Vonnahme (2008) believe that the cost of voting is significantly tied to the time and inconvenience associated with the act of voting. The cost of access and inconvenience as described by Stein and Vonnahme (2008): include time that must be expended to vote, waiting in long lines to vote, inaccessible voting places (distance to travel, limited parking, etc.), and unfamiliar voting technology (p.488). Other factors which may contribute to lower voter turnout among naturalized citizens as cited by Wang and Kim (2011) are: socioeconomic factors, length of time in the United States, variations based on country of origin, location of the immigrant community (e.g., does it comprise a majority-minority electoral district and is it an established community or a new immigrant destination), the extent of voter mobilization by political parties and candidates, language bar-

riers, and the persistence of discriminatory practices (p.3). Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act requires jurisdictions with large numbers of language minority voters to provide translated voting materials including registration forms and instructions (Wang and Kim, 2011). A report by the Pew Hispanic Center on the 2004 election as cited by Logan et. al (2010) stated that:

A high percentage of Hispanics are either too young to vote or are ineligible because they are not citizens. As a result, a population increase of 5.7 million Latinos between 2000 and 2004 yielded only 2.1 million new eligible voters. In addition, Hispanic voter participation rates lag those of whites or blacks so that the number of Hispanic voters increased by just 1.4 million (p. 1203).

Some common factors that inhibit immigrants' political participation include low levels of income and educational attainment (Barretto, 2005; Le, 2009). The immigrants who were more politically active in their home countries are more likely to participate in America's politics (Eckstein, 2006). The immigrant's country of origin has an influence on his/her ability to participate fully in the host country's political affairs. For example, immigrants tend to have a weaker political predisposition to American politics if they emigrated from undemocratic states (Tam Cho, 1999). The length of stay in the host country also affects immigrants' participation in the election process. The longer immigrants have lived in the United States, the more likely they will be to have learned and formed preferences about American politics (Alvarez & Bedolla, 2003; Tam Cho, 1999; Wong, 2000). Failure to participate in the political process of the country would mean that the interests of the minority are not well represented. (Klofstad & Bishin, 2014).

#### FACTORS INFLUENCING IMMIGRANTS' AND THEIR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Immigrant children who have positive experiences with their host country in addition to being assimilated are more likely to become politically active. Additionally, some studies have found other contributing factors to being politically active are language acquisition, personal resources, and political engagement (Klofstad, & Bishin, 2014). Another critical factor influencing children of immigrants is the process of socialization into the political system. Lim, Barry-Goodman, and Branham (2006) explained the propensity for immigrants to be Democrats due to experiences with discrimination after arriving in the United States. They have watched one or both parents navigate a new society and culture and witnessed how U.S. society reacts and treats immigrants. In addition, the academic rigor of the courses taken in high school is reported by Humphries, Muller, and Schiller (2013) to have a significant impact on the likelihood of registration and party identification for Latino children of immigrants compared

to white third-plus-generation young adults. Moreover, different minority groups experience discrimination differently. Lim et al. (2006) reported that discrimination experienced by Latinos is economic (dealing with issues like getting a job or getting an apartment) and therefore more devastating and in need of political action; discrimination against Asians, on the other hand, is more likely to be discrimination faced in a social situation (insults, jokes, etc.), and therefore does not warrant immediate political action. In the case of African immigrants, the assumption is that discrimination against them is both economic and social. Therefore, political engagement for this group demands immediate political action.

Some measures that can be taken to encourage immigrant youth to engage in political participation are: a) informing them about the voting process; b) removing barriers to the voting process and thus making it easy for youth to participate; c) encouraging the youth to volunteer in varied activities related to the election process; d) encouraging the youth to hold their elected officials accountable at all times by their activism.

#### THE ELECTORAL POWER OF THE “NEW AMERICANS”

According to Ewing and Cantor (2014), “New Americans” refers to the immigrants who are naturalized U. S citizens together with native-born Americans who were born not earlier than 1965 to at least one foreign-born parent. These new Americans, Latinos, and Asians are the fastest growing segment of the electorate (Ewing & Cantor, 2014). This rising force is one that political candidates cannot afford to ignore. Alienating these voters will have significant repercussions on results in both national and state elections, especially in a closely contested race (Ewing & Cantor, 2014). In 2012 there were 18.1 million new Americans registered to vote totaling 11.8% of all registered voters. In some states such as California, new Americans account for over one third of registered voters, the highest percentage in the nation. This is followed by New York where a quarter of registered voters are new Americans. In Nevada, New Jersey, and Florida new American voters make up one fifth of all registered voters (Ewing & Cantor, 2014).

Moreover demographic projections indicate that by the year 2043, America will be a majority-minority country. In 2014 California became a majority-minority state. There are more non-whites than whites in California. Despite the increase in the number of eligible minorities in the electorate, low voter turnout among Latinos and Asian Americans has been evident in the last elections, with non-participation numbers above 40%. It is clear that minority voters are participating below their potential (Oakford, 2015). Immigrants are less politically active than native-born citizens. Consequently this lack of participation presents a challenge to the strength of participatory democracy because

the needs of this population might not be recognized by the government (Klosford & Bishin, 2014).

According to naturalization data from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, if the majority of residents who came to the United States after 1985 were naturalized and registered to vote, their numbers would have been large enough to change the results of the 2008 election (Persaud, 2012). Given the potential of immigrant voters to impact election outcomes, it is worth investigating

*Immigration policies are at the center of electoral decision making for new Americans*

the best ways to reach out to this group and motivate them to get fully involved in the electoral process.

The changing demographics of the U. S. is equally tipping the electoral balance of power (Charney, 2009). Targeting the votes of minorities and immigrants is no longer just a choice but a priority for any party or candidate to win an election. The big challenge is how to reach the minority and immigrant voters, bridge the cultural barriers, and motivate them to register as voters amid the growing dissen-

sion with regard to immigration reform. (Charney, 2009). Both parties need to take this data seriously and give attention to this voting bloc (Persaud, 2012). Furthermore, the unrealized voting potential of the children of immigrants makes the power of the combined eligible voters even greater (Persaud, 2012). The challenge for political organizers is to persuade all the immigrants who are eligible to become citizens to do so and then to take advantage of their voting rights. No party or candidate can afford to ignore the immigration reform agenda without having some political repercussions.

#### EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE IMMIGRANT MINORITY VOTER PARTICIPATION?

Research has shown that foreign-born voter turnout has always been lower than for native-born citizens. In particular, Latino immigrant voters have demonstrated low levels of political participation, owing to the lower levels of education, low incomes, low English language skills, and lack of exposure to the American political institutions (Barreto, 2005). In addition to a lack of resources, naturalized citizens are rarely the target of voter mobilization drives, further limiting their participation (Barreto, 2005). Given the rising number of naturalized citizens and the power inherent in their votes, political parties on both sides need to have an understanding of how to reach out to this population and bring them to the

voting booth. Failure to do so will constitute major implications on election outcomes.

Harder and Krosnick (2008) concluded that allowing Election Day registration, simplifying ballots, and permitting absentee or online voting make turning out easier. Other methods which may improve voter turnout are: voter registration drives or campaigns; relaxed absentee voting; vote by mail; use of bilingual ballots; and in-person early voting (Stein & Vannahme, (2008). The application of these electoral reforms is more likely to remedy the inconvenience of voting and in turn will motivate the infrequent voters. Voters need to be educated about the electoral process and be motivated by canvassing face to face and minimizing hardships by permitting Election Day registration (Harder & Krosnick, 2008).

Voter participation especially for infrequent participants is increased when more opportunities to vote are made available. These opportunities include but are not limited to simplifying voter registration by allowing individuals to register to vote when renewing their driver's license or at the polls on Election Day (Stein & Vannahme, 2008). Since voter motivation and interest in the political process are tied to voter participation, Stein and Vannahme (2008) suggest that attempts must be made to reconnect Americans to politics with the focus especially on ways to encourage psychological involvement in politics and promote a sense that the government is responsive to the ordinary citizen. This in turn might increase voter turnout among immigrants and minority groups.

Allowing individuals to vote at multiple locations according to Stein and Vannahme, (2008) will allow them to choose the site that is most convenient and might increase their probability of turning out to vote. The authors cite three benefits to multiple voting centers:

- a) First, by affording voters a choice about where they can vote, it allows them to vote at a time and place that is most convenient for them.
- b) Second, Election Day vote centers might also better distribute voter arrival times throughout Election Day.
- c) Open polling locations might also lower the informational costs of voting, as individuals do not need to have specific information as to their voting district and the polling place that has been established for their particular voting district. Rather, individuals will only need to know which sites are available for county-wide voting (p.490).

Naturalized citizens still lag behind native-born citizens in their overall voter participation. Wang and Kim (2011) cited structural barriers to registration such as restrictive requirements and lack of language access as key factors in why naturalized citizens remain registered at lower rates. In order to close the voter turnout gap between naturalized citizens and the native-born citizens, Wang and Kim (2011) suggested the following recommendations:

9. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) should fully implement its newly adopted policy

of ensuring that new American are provided with a voter registration application at all administrative naturalization ceremonies, and ultimately should be designated as a full voter registration agency under the National Voter Registration Act so that every newly naturalized American is automatically and systematically given the opportunity to register to vote.

10. Nongovernmental voter mobilization groups should focus a good portion of their efforts on unregistered naturalized citizens including, if possible, in "new destination" states.
11. The donor community should fund year-round activities around voter registration, including in immigrant communities wherever they may be.
12. State and local elections officials should be active in registering new citizens to vote by reaching out to these communities through a variety of means and working with USCIS to provide voter registration services at naturalization ceremonies. These officials should also provide as much material as possible in alternative languages spoken prevalently in their jurisdictions, whether required to by federal law or not.
13. Political parties should be much more pro-active in reaching out to naturalized citizens, tapping into a huge potential pool of new voters. The parties also have a role to play in civic education especially regarding the electoral process in immigrant areas.
14. Candidates must appeal to and speak to the issues of concern to immigrants. Having paid advertising in Spanish is insufficient.
15. The civic education and civic skill-building process must start early on upon an immigrant's arrival in this country so that by the time they are eligible to register and vote they understand the process and the importance of participating. This means more government resources for such services, including English as a Second Language instruction.
16. Every means possible must be explored for eliminating administrative practices and legal requirements that discriminate against eligible immigrant voters. These include certain types of database matching policies, laws unduly restricting the means of confirming citizenship for purposes of registering to vote, and unnecessarily restrictive voter identification laws. Swift and serious action must be taken against any election administrator or other actors who engage in discriminatory practices (p.26).

The language provision under the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965 and which has been recently amended in 2007 is said to have had a significant and positive effect on the voting rates of covered linguistic minorities (Jones-Correa, 2005). It is reported that by 1996, Spanish language assistance was provided in all or part of the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. Chinese language

assistance was provided in six counties, Tagalog assistance in four counties, and Japanese and Vietnamese assistance in two each (p.553). Recognizing the inherent power in the immigrant vote and its potential impact on election outcomes is something that political parties should be cognizant of, especially in the on-going political campaigns.

## CONCLUSION

America is known as a nation of immigrants and therefore must allow its newcomers, especially its naturalized citizens, to have an equal voice in how the country is governed. These newcomers must be incorporated into the democratic process by being encouraged to participate in the electoral process. Immigrants who are accepted into their newly adopted communities and have developed stronger ties with them are more likely to participate in the political process. According to Davis (2010) voting is yet another contributor to empowerment, and it is an important factor in community membership.

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