

Issue Brief: Immigrant Status and Voting Behavior

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Description:

This issue brief examines the current key issues involving both immigrant status and voting behavior in the United States. As non-citizen immigrants are prohibited from voting in all major elections, this brief emphasizes the factors determining both the rate of voting participation among naturalized immigrants and the rate of naturalization among immigrants in general.

Keywords:

immigration, naturalization, foreign-born, citizenship, voter turnout

Key Points:

- Immigrants are an increasing proportion of the electorate due to both immigration and naturalization
- Both legal and illegal immigrants without citizenship cannot vote; this disproportionately affects racial and ethnic minorities
- Naturalized citizens vote at lower rates than native-born citizens
- Immigrant voter turnout has been shown to vary with time-based issues, country of origin characteristics, and the American context
- The “American Dream” issue: Immigrants tend to prioritize economic success over political participation, but they need to participate politically in order to resist marginalization

Issue Brief:

America is a nation of immigrants. Foreign-born people represent a significant portion of the American population, and with the continuous stream of immigration, their numbers continue to increase. Between 1991 and 2000, over 9 million immigrants entered the country legally, representing one of the highest rates of immigration the US has ever seen. Despite the political backlash against immigration following the September 11, 2001 attacks, this inflow continues, and close to 3 million immigrants entered legally from 2002 to 2004 (Bueker 2006). The increasing representation of immigrants within the American electorate has made them an increasingly important voting bloc and has correspondingly drawn more attention from politicians and political scientists alike.

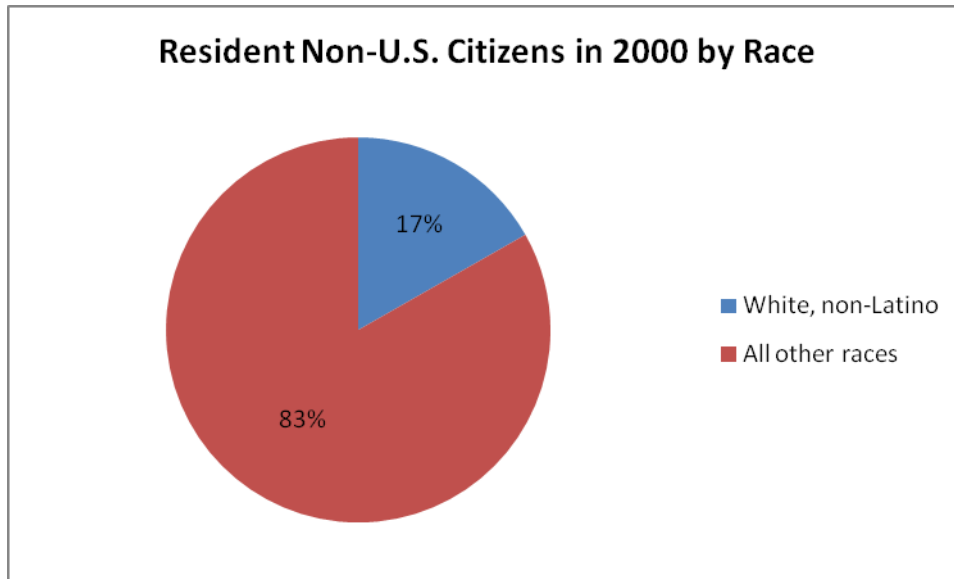


Figure 1. Source: <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/stp-159/noncitizen.xls>

fifty states, meaning that both illegal immigrants and legal immigrants who have not naturalized have no say in the American political process. In the 2000 Census, 83% of non-citizen U.S. residents identified as Non-Latino White; thus beyond disenfranchising non-citizen immigrants as a group, it is evident that such laws also disproportionately limit the political participation of ethnoracial minorities in America.

Despite this apparent unfairness, it is unlikely that the citizenship requirement for voting will be waived. As a result, immigrants must naturalize in order to vote—and thus substantively participate—in the American political system. According to an article written by Brown University professor Catherine Bueker, the likelihood of immigrants to naturalize and take the first step toward political participation depends largely on income level, education level, and country of origin. Wealthier and better-educated immigrants are more likely to naturalize than their counterparts, as are immigrants from certain countries (Bueker 2005). Surprisingly, Bueker also finds that these factors influencing rates of naturalization are not always good predictors of voting rates; those whose demographics make them likely candidates to naturalize will not necessarily be the most likely to vote.

However, all immigrants entering the US face a major obstacle to voting: the requirement of citizenship. Citizenship is required to vote in all

This may be related to the fact that immigrants have historically participated in the American political process at lower rates than other groups and continue to do so. The reasons for this are several and complex, and even more obscured

Figure I.

Potential Paths of Political Incorporation

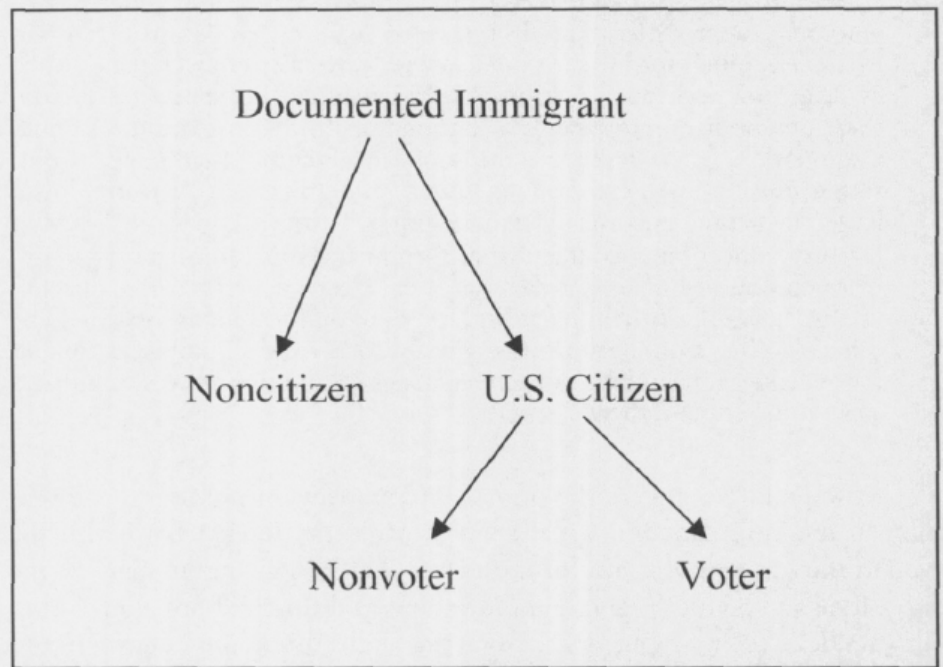


Figure 2. Source: Bueker 2005

because their low levels of participation has resulted in inadequate study of immigrant political behavior and the factors affecting their participation. However, as immigrants have emerged as a political group, several political scientists have sought to explain their still lower-than-average voting rates by identifying which factors affect voting rates and how they do so. University of California-Riverside professor S. Karthick Ramakrishnan classifies the major factors specifically affecting the likelihood of immigrants to participate politically as “time-based issues,” “country-of-origin characteristics,” and immigrants’ specific “American contexts” (Ramakrishnan 2005). “Time-based issues” include both immigrants’ generation (with foreign-born immigrants being the “first generation”) and the length of time they have lived in America. “Country-of-origin characteristics” refers to specific aspects of immigrants’ native countries, for example, whether the country has an oppressive regime or whether dual citizenship is allowed. Immigrants’ “American context” refers to individuals specific experiences within America as immigrants, including their geographic location, the existence of an immigrant community in there area of residence, and their English proficiency.

These factors can have both predictable and less-predictable effects on immigrants' voting behavior, especially when they are looked at in combination with each other. For example, Ramakrishnan finds that in areas that provide Spanish-language ballots, the presence of those ballots only significantly affects the voting turnout of third-generation Spanish-speaking immigrants, who tend to have good English skills as well. This shows the complexity of the factors affecting political participation among immigrants, and many researchers have drawn similar conclusions to Ramakrishnan.

However, despite their increasing prevalence as a percentage of the population, immigrants' political mobility continues to be hampered by significantly low political participation rates. One of the potential explanations for this is that, particularly among middle-class Asian immigrants, immigrants who have found economic success in America don't feel a need to participate in the political system. But it is still essential for

immigrants to be an active political group in order to "gain a foothold" in America. Immigrants still face marginalization, discrimination and xenophobia both in their daily lives in

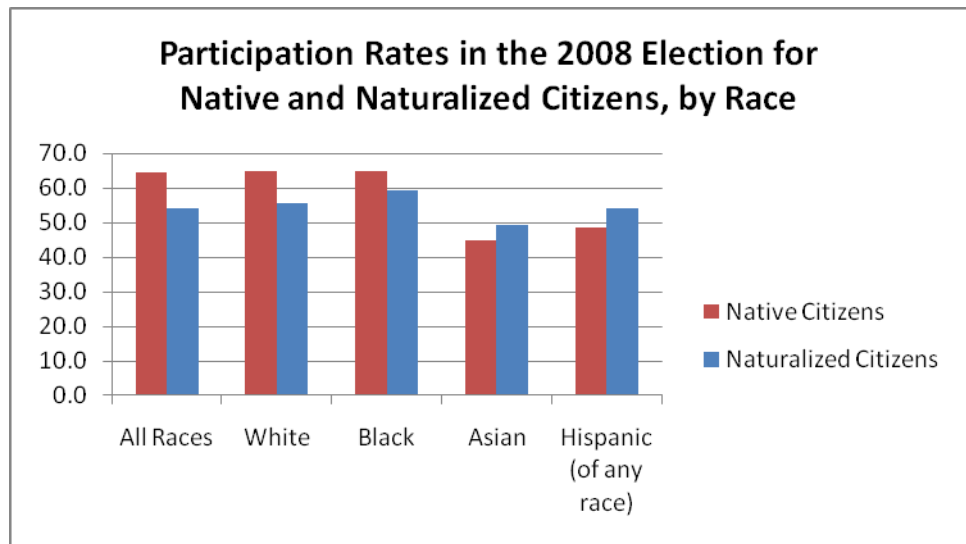


Figure 3. Source: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/Table%2013.xls>

lending, housing and the workplace, and in the political arena in the form of "anti-immigrant" legislation, including laws banning the administration of social services to non-citizens. Non-citizen immigrants are one of the largest disenfranchised groups in America, and the political non-participation of naturalized citizens only perpetuates the political marginalization of immigrant Americans.

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United States Census Bureau. <<http://www.census.gov>>

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services < <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>>

United States Election Assistance Commission < http://www.eac.gov/index_html1>