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ISSUE BRIEF: IMMIGRANT STATUS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

Keywords: immigration, naturalization, mobilization, Latinos, Asians, socioeconomic status (SES)

Description: The United States currently has the highest proportion of immigrants that it has had since the 1920s. These immigrants represent a powerful voting block with behavior that differs in important respects from that of their native-born counterparts.

Key Points:

- 13% of the total U.S. population is foreign born
- Latino and Asian immigrants make up the bulk of immigrants who have arrived in the past 40 years
- Since the decline of party machines, religious and labor organizations have played a key role in politically mobilizing immigrants
- Time spent in the country, English language proficiency, and country of origin are important factors in determining the likelihood that a given immigrant will vote
- Immigrants are more likely to identify as independent and far more likely to identify as Democratic than native-born Americans

Brief:

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 13% of the U.S. population was born outside of the country. In the broader scheme of American history, this is by no means an unusually high percentage. Indeed, in the first three decades of the 20th Century, immigrants – primarily from Ireland and Southern and Eastern Europe – made up as much as 14.7% of the population (Migration Policy Institute). Although the vast majority of immigration that has taken place within the last 40 years has been from Latin America (53.1%) and Asia (28.2%), there still remains a very large number of these European-born immigrants (12.1%) who arrived during the early- to mid-Twentieth Century (Census Bureau). There are also smaller but significant numbers of recent immigrants from Africa and the Middle East (around 5%).

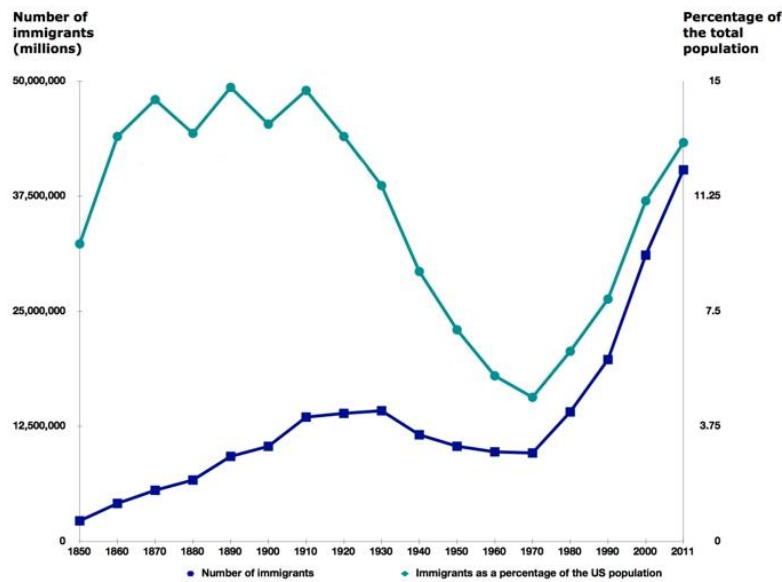


Image 1: Immigrants and total population over the last 160 years
 (Source: Migration Policy Institute - <http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/charts/final.fb.shtml>)

The current immigrant population – especially that of Latinos – is often regarded as an electoral “sleeping giant” in American politics. This may be the case, but as shown above, this by no means the first time that America has come face to face with such a giant (Ramakrishnan 2005, 34). The enormous immigrant populations during the 1930s were an integral part of the New Deal Coalition and thus played a vital role in changing the nature of social and economic policy in the country. Today’s immigrant population, having reached similar levels, may become a part of yet another major political movement.

It is thus no surprise that political parties have historically been key in mobilizing immigrant communities. Today, however, this is no longer the case; political parties do not do nearly as much as they used to in order to draw immigrant support (Andersen 2008, 26). This may be due to the diminished institutional capabilities of political parties that have resulted from the collapse of party machines (they can no longer offer jobs as patronage, etc.) or some fundamental change in their political calculus. Whatever the reason, today it is independent organizations like churches that do the most to mobilize immigrants to naturalize and register to vote. The tight-knit and highly religious nature of many Latino, Asian, and black immigrant communities puts churches in a particularly

strong position to perform this role. Organized labor has also played a significant role in mobilizing immigrants. Cesar E. Chavez, one of the most famous American Latinos, helped organize migrant farm laborers in California's Central Valley into the National Farm Workers Association in the 1960s. Chavez's efforts made these disadvantaged Latino immigrants a political force in agricultural states across the country.



Image 2: Cesar E. Chavez speaking at an AFLCIO rally (Source: Latinzine - <http://latinzine.msn.com/politics/cesar-chavez-20-years-after>)

Although immigrants represent a potentially potent electoral force, they are hindered by the fact that unlike all other groups in the United States, getting to vote is a four-step process:

1. Immigrant is permitted into United States
2. Immigrant is naturalized
3. Immigrant registers to vote
4. Immigrant goes out to vote on election day

Getting into the United States to begin with and eventually becoming naturalized are two steps that all other members of the electorate do not need to concern themselves with. Even before considering individual immigrants' propensity to vote, one must consider their propensity to pursue naturalization. Indeed, in reality just less than half of the immigrant population – representing 5.6% of the total U.S. population – is naturalized and thus eligible to vote (Census Bureau).

With regard to these naturalized immigrants, there does not yet exist a large volume of research on voting behavior. One of the more extensive studies of the voting behavior of modern immigrant communities – primarily Latino, Asian, and black –was

conducted by S. Karthick Ramakrishnan. In the study, a number of factors were identified that can each play an important role in deciding whether or not a given immigrant votes. One major factor is the amount of time spent in the United States. For immigrants of all stripes, a long stay in the United States is highly correlated with voter registration and turnout. Another basic factor is English language proficiency. If immigrants are not able to understand political discourse, campaign ads, or even ballots, their odds of participating in an election are much lower. This can be offset, however, by access to news covering American politics in their native tongue (to which Latino immigrants certainly have access) or state and local laws mandating ballots in multiple languages. A third factor takes into account the characteristics of the country of origin of the immigrant. Interestingly, with a few notable exceptions (such as Cuban immigrants), coming from a country with a repressive regime generally decreases an immigrants' likelihood to participate in voting (Ramakrishnan 2005, 87). The Cuba exception is likely due to the specifics of the relationship between the United States and Cuba and immigrants from that country's desire to see the embargo continue.

Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: 2010

(Numbers in thousands. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/acs/www/)

Region of birth	Population	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent	Margin of error ¹ (±)
Total²	39,956	115	100.0	(X)
Africa	1,607	33	4.0	0.1
Asia	11,284	47	28.2	0.1
Europe	4,817	44	12.1	0.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	21,224	90	53.1	0.1
Mexico	11,711	83	29.3	0.2
Other Central America	3,053	46	7.6	0.1
South America	2,730	42	6.8	0.1
Caribbean	3,731	42	9.3	0.1
Northern America	807	16	2.0	–
Oceania	217	10	0.5	–

(X) Not applicable.

– Represents or rounds to zero.

¹ Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error in relation to the size of the estimates, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

² Excludes 181 persons who reported they were born at sea.

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100.0 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010.

Image 2: Immigrants by origin (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

While the aforementioned factors are specific to immigrants, classic voting predictors are also applicable to immigrants, namely socioeconomic status (SES) and local context. While higher socioeconomic status does indeed increase an immigrant's

likelihood of voting, it appears to have a weaker effect on these groups than on native-born citizens (Ramakrishnan 2005, 54). The local context of voters – the political culture of their milieu, institutional barriers to voting, etc. – is also very important in determining the voting behavior of a group of immigrants. States with strict voter ID laws, for example, are often specifically targeting immigrants, among other groups, in an effort to discourage them from voting.

Immigrant voters more likely to be independent (29% of immigrants) and much more likely to identify as Democratic (33%) than as Republican (18%) (Andersen 2008, 22). This increased propensity to be independent probably stems from a relative lack of experience with American politics and thus a reluctance to commit to one party or the other. In their propensity to support Democrats, immigrants largely reflect the political preferences of their ethnicity and economic class. The Democratic Party is well aware of the importance of the immigrant vote and has paid a lot of lip service to the need for comprehensive immigration reform – a primary concern for Latino immigrants.

Works Cited

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Informative Websites:

AFL-CIO's page on immigration: <http://www.aflcio.org/Issues/Immigration>

U.S. Conference of Bishops on Immigration Reform: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/churchteachingonimmigrationreform.cfm>

Democratic Party's current immigration platform:

http://www.democrats.org/issues/immigration_reform

The GOP lacks an equivalent for the Democrats' up-to-date online endorsement of immigration reform. Their closest analogue is this page, which is a relic of the 2012

Presidential Election: <http://www.gop.com/coalition-support/gop-hispanics/>