U.S. Citizen Children of Undocumented Parents

Examining Political Activism and Immigrant Generation Identity

By

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Abstract

How do U.S. born children of undocumented parents politically act given their indirect experiences with ill-calibrated immigration policies? As immigration becomes a growing concern for undocumented communities and their mixed-status families, U.S. born children of undocumented parents may be more likely than children of U.S. citizen parents to engage in democratic activism demonstrating opposition to anti-immigrant policies. Experiencing fear of a parent's deportation, U.S. born citizens of undocumented parents act in resistance to policies that are overly restrictive to the livelihoods of their mixed-status family and policies that appear anti-immigrant. Given their citizenship and account for a growing population in the United States, these individuals can engage in electoral politics and influence the abolition of punitive immigration laws. Little research exists addressing whether a parent's legal status impacts the political engagement of their U.S. citizen children, despite the existence of nearly 17 million Americans living within a mixed-status family. By examining civic engagement data from first-generation children of undocumented immigrants and children of U.S. citizen parents, I will identify whether exposure to navigating "illegality" through their parents and the impact it has on their family's livelihoods politically mobilizes them and if it surpasses the activism of their third-plus generation counterparts.

Part I. Introduction

An influx of Latino/a immigration produced an offspring of U.S.-born children with the right to vote and the freedom to protest, organize, and advocate for their parents and family members. Punitive immigration policies pushed by anti-immigrant lawmakers impact the livelihoods of the 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States, with 4 in 5 of undocumented immigrants belonging to a Hispanic origin (Lopez, Morin, Taylor 2010). Accounting for 4 percent of the country's population, the undocumented community are targets of destructive legislation which creates roadblocks to a pathway to citizenship. With the growing number of mixed-status families in the United States, American citizen family members may increasingly begin to influence immigration legislation.

Today, millions of people in the United States has at least one undocumented family member living in the same household as them (Mathema 2017). The current administration under President Donald Trump has instilled fear for mixed-status families across the country, threatening strong enforcement of deportation for unauthorized immigrants and the separation of families at the border. Undocumented immigrants arriving to the United States between the 1960s and 1980s largely came from Latin American countries and accounts for the millions of U.S.-born citizens living in mixed-status families today, witnessing firsthand the negative consequences of strict immigration enforcement. Given the hardships of this lived experience, I expect to observe civic engagement among children of undocumented parents through data indicating increased voter turnout, participation in political organizing, and demonstrated support for pro-immigrant policies. Considering this spill-over effect on destructive immigration policies impact on undocumented immigrants and their U.S. citizen family members, this may indicate stronger Latino/a influence on future democratic elections.

Methodology & Definitions

Unauthorized and *undocumented immigrants* include all immigrants who reside in the United States without legal status. These include those who arrived without inspection from a federal border patrol official and those who entered with legal status and then remained after visa or duration of status date has expired. Parents falling under this category will be considered in the following research. The U.S. born parent counterparts include all individuals born in the United States (third generation and so on). Latino/as include all individuals with origins in Mexico, Central and Latin American countries. First generation comprise of individuals born in the United States by foreign-born parents.

To analyze political participation, I focus on research dedicated to surveying areas where there are higher populations of mixed-status families; California, Texas, and New York (Mathema, 2017). I separate electoral engagement from activism to distinguish a possible difference in levels between the U.S. born offspring of undocumented parents and third generation Americans. By looking at the political participation of U.S. citizen family members of mixed-status families, I hope to find a correlation between immigration generation and political engagement.

I will be looking at support for immigrant rights and voter registration rates among U.S. born Hispanics and first-generation immigrants through case studies and previous research conducted on first and second-generation Latino/as while incorporating members' shared stories.

Part II: Literature Review

A. Mixed-Status Immigrant Families

Research on children's transition to adulthood finds that Latino/a emerging adults from immigrant families are more likely to take on obligations to their families when compared to their White emerging adult counterparts (Arnett 2003). With lack of access to low-cost health care, job security, and high wages, legal limitations placed on mixed-status families extend to limit U.S. citizens as they take on financial obligations to support their family. The majority of reported family income for undocumented immigrants demonstrate that 55 percent belong to the 150% or above that of the national poverty level (Migration Policy Institute). Experiencing "illegality" as a child of an undocumented immigrant more often than not experience repercussions as well. Living in a mixed-status family as a U.S. citizen can be a complex situation. Policymakers might believe that there is a clear divide between U.S. citizens and undocumented immigrants when pushing anti-immigrant reforms. This is not the case for mixed-status families as family separation laws and border openness which, despite having citizenship status, family members do in fact experience these social and economic barriers perpetrated by public policy. While these policies might have unintended effects on U.S. citizens, it's given rise to awareness among Latino/a voters.

B. Social Origins, Political Preferences, and Political Mobilization

Existing literature determines that having unauthorized parents "powerfully affects children from young ages…because parents may be less likely to access the sorts of public programs, health services, and subsidies available to low-income families" (Brown and Sanchez 2017). While U.S. born children may have the privilege of birth-right citizenship, their experiences throughout their childhood and even emerging adulthood are largely concentrated in

navigating their parent's deportability and access to services. This can have a long-lasting impact on them and can influence their identity as a first-generation immigrant. There is no doubt that Americans from varying social origins, racial backgrounds, and economic classes demonstrate different levels of political participation.

Political participation is defined as the major mechanism by which citizens in a society express their wishes and place demands on the government. Nie and Verba, 1972, argue that the relationship of this mechanism of political participation to major social cleavages "is particularly crucial because of the importance of political participation to deprived groups." Deprived groups may strive as individuals "to advance, or… may work as a group to pursue a political or governmental path" (Nie and Verba 1972). Living with undocumented parents can have political implications. American citizens may lose trust in their government when insensible immigration policies threaten the well-being of their families. Personal experience and family socioeconomic status are strong indicators of political mobilization. However, past research tests the correlations of personal experience to political engagement and find only weak connections. The issue with this though is that many of these studies "rely on self-reports of experiences" hence making it unreliable and a "consequence of specific attitudes about politics and public affairs, rather than bias-free measures of their causes" (Egan and Mullin 2012).

Existing literature (Vargas and Ybarra 2017) determine that "mutigenerational punishment" exists within a mixed-status family, arguing that "U.S. citizen children and their undocumented parents often share in the risks and punishments associated with undocumented immigration status…making life hard on working families and their children." As these children of undocumented immigrants become old enough to vote, it is important to monitor the processes

of their childhood and most notably how the rise in punitive immigration policies has motivated political mobilization among those affected.

C. Political Incorporation, Collective Identity, and Immigration Generation

The United States experienced a peak in undocumented migration between the 1990s and early 2000s, with the peak having plateaued around the Great Recession in 2008 (Gelatt and Zong, 2018). A large percentage of the immigrants that arrived came from Latin American countries including Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras (Gelatt and Zong, 2018). Those who arrived during this time of the peak, have either settled or returned back to their home country. Many immigrants who decided to stay in the United States permanently formed families; marrying U.S. citizens, having U.S. born children, or a combination of the two.

Enrollment in American schools allows for the introduction to voting and civic engagement for immigrant children born in the United States. While their parents may not be actively involved due to their lack of voting rights, exposure to public education allows for the teaching of the American legislative system. Brown and Sanchez, 2017, present political incorporation as involving the extent to which immigrants have been integrated into a host country's political processes and structures. Citizenship and voting are primary factors to political incorporation, factors that for many U.S. born citizens belonging to mixed-status families are the first in their family line to hold those "rights" to political participation.

It is important to note however, the groundbreaking movement driven by the immigrant *DREAM*ers- undocumented immigrant youth that were brought to the United States by their parents at a young age. Despite lacking legal status, undocumented youth are in the United States unwillingly, and in many instances, were unaware of their undocumented status.

In 2001, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act was a proposal introduced for eligible unaccompanied minors to be granted a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship. While it received modest support from both Democratic and Republican Congressmembers, it was never officially passed into law. Shortly thereafter, in 2006, the state of Arizona, in an effort to deter undocumented youth from being eligible to receiving financial government support, passed a ballot initiative barring undocumented students to receive in-state tuition rates at public universities and colleges. This sparked a movement for many undocumented youth who were brought to the United States, with many of them raised believing they were U.S. citizens. The movement uplifted the Dreamers and ignited activism, creating an emerging civil rights issue that U.S. politics is intently paying attention to.

Their "DREAMer" identity, as Pedro de la Torre III and Roy Germano, 2014, defines it, has a fundamental role in the immigrant youth movement. Existing literature on collective identity- an individual's connection with a community or category- demonstrates how it serves as "a basis for collective action" and potential for solidarity and belonging (Daro, Fox, and Holland, 2008). For undocumented immigrants and family members of undocumented individuals, their identity is enshrined to an "illegality" with shared lived experiences that produces collective mobilization. The "Latino panethnic identity" (Masuoka, 2006), has demonstrated that with higher degrees of group consciousness, such as "perceptions of Latino/a inequality," has resulted in greater political participation (Atiya Kai Stokes, 2003). Immigrants and their citizen family members are on the front lines of protest movements and labor-organizing campaigns. In 2017, New York City experienced the "A Day Without Immigrants" protest which stood against the harsh immigration policies initiated by the Trump administration. Immigrant workers did not show up to work for one day to prove a point that the city could not function without their

presence. Many shops, restaurants, and businesses were understaffed and unable to meet city demands. While this is not indicative of the engagement entirely of children of immigrant parents, their exposure to the civic stratification via their parents may be experienced directly or indirectly (Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger, 2018) and can encourage mobilization.

Time after time, research has determined low levels of engagement in electoral politics among Latino/a immigrants (Potochnick, Stegmaier, 2020) however, it should not dictate their ability to organize and support in an effort, especially as legal status is creating an increasingly more powerful impact on mixed-status family members with or without status.

Part IV: Case Study

A. Civic Engagement & Public Opinion of White U.S. Citizens (Third-Plus Generation)

It's been argued that white, third generation Americans demonstrate higher rates of political action; voluntarism, voting, and organizing in comparison to their foreign-born Americans counterparts. While educational background is largely tied to political participation and civic engagement, third generation Americans continue to show higher levels of engagement in electoral politics (e.g, voter turnout and attendance to political town hall meetings or public hearings) in comparison to people of color and first-generation immigrants (Chen, 2018). Testing for ethnic and generational differences in voting participation (Potochnick and Stegmaier, 2020), white third-plus generation individuals take the lead against first, second, and third generation Latina/os.

Researchers have suggested that the disparities between Whites and Latino/as in civic engagement was due to the different ways in which democratic processes are exposed to different groups. For students belonging to minority groups, exposure and participation in

democratic processes related to an issue in their community and the fact that they are politically and racially socialized could result in reaching higher levels in obtaining civic knowledge as their White peers (Cohen and Littenberg-Tobias, 2016). For Whites, that democratic exposure put them at the highest levels of having civic knowledge and performing the best in engaging in electoral politics. Their racial privilege and belonging to a native-born group place this population as having far greater political knowledge and skills in comparison to their low-income youth of color (Levinson, 2010).

Measures of group consciousness has historically been dedicated to explaining Black Americans and marginalized groups' political participation. Until recently, right-wing, native-born Whites have felt that their dominant status and racial hierarchy is being threatened following the era of large-scale immigration within the past few decades- suggesting the reasons for support of immigration policies backed by President Trump and the Tea Party movement. Berry, Ebner, and Cornelius, 2019, have determined that those belonging to the "white linked fate"-white, native-born identity linked by a shared history of privilege- are more likely to vote in elections (Berry, Ebner, and Cornelius, 2019). Under the Trump administration, the conversation on immigration has changed drastically for both sides of the political spectrum. Democrats and mainstream media are careful with their words when mentioning immigration and refugee politics (e.g., using the term undocumented versus illegal). For white Republicans, the movement spurred by President Trump on his campaign trail was the right energy and momentum needed to give supporters of anti-immigration policies a voice (Nkabinde and Wambu, 2016).

Access to resources, education, and civic knowledge place third-plus generation Americans at an advantage, especially for White Americans. A combination of socioeconomic factors plays

a significant role in political participation however despite lower income levels, third-plus generation Americans continue to take the stride in electoral engagement in comparison to first-generation Americans born in the U.S. by immigrant parents.

B. Political Activism & Public Opinion in Latino U.S. Citizen Children with Immigrant Parents

Voter turnout for immigrant communities rank consistently lower than native-born Americans. Immigrants, especially those who lack legal status, experience lower income and education levels- two important factors that contribute to lower political participation. Undocumented parents experiencing a lack of access to job security and higher wages have less mobility to participate in civic engagement beyond voting (since they do not have the right to vote). Even after controlling for socioeconomic status, Latino/as generally still experience lower turnout levels than Whites (Nkabinde and Wambu, 2019). Stegmaier and Potochnick, 2020, revealed a study on Latino political participation, comparing engagement based on immigrant generational differences which found that third-plus generation Latinos were just as likely to be civically engaged as their White third-generation peers which suggests that by the third immigrant generation, the "low parental resources and racial/ethnic discrimination" experiences from being first or second generation of immigrant parents. Political belonging essentially has been rooted in an ethnic categorization and exclusion, thus explaining the disconnect in comparing levels of electoral engagement between White Americans, the group that has been deemed as the "default" American group and Latino/as, a marginalized group excluded based on racial and ethnic barriers including citizenship status and country of origin (Masuoka and Junn 2013).

Political activism in labor organizing and political activism are largely run by immigrant communities and their allies. In a survey conducted by Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger, 2018, children of immigrants in the United States in New York and Los Angeles experience a sense of "political disenfranchisement" that can catalyze political involvement on the front lines of protest movements. Participation in labor organizing is higher among first-generation Latino/as where experiences lived through their family members and community (e.g., language barriers, "working under the table") generate mobility.

Sometimes it only takes recognizing that inequality and disenfranchisement exists for allies and community members to take a stand and organize. The online community group, *Hermanas in the Law* (Sisters in the Law), started by a Latina immigration attorney, Paulina Vera, is a group dedicated to featuring stories of Latinas practicing or interested in practicing in law. *Hermanas in the Law* is an online group across numerous platforms including *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *LinkedIn* with over 10,000 followers. The page follows aspiring "Lawtinas," those already in law school, and practicing attorneys looking to share their stories and their "why." Founders of the online community and platforms similar to it like *Latinas Uprising* have shared why they created the space for Latinas in the legal field to become a site "for legal and political discussion, problem-solving, brainstorming, and comfort." Through Hermanas in the Law, "Lawtinas often discuss ways the law can be used to help their communities" (Richard, 2019). Many attorneys and law students have shared their reasons why they decided to pursue law and have posted it publicly on the group platforms. Valeria, a Latina and aspiring law student shared;

> "*Being raised by immigrant parents, I have witnessed firsthand the flaws in our nation's laws. Since a young age, I noticed a discrepancy in the lives of people of color when I*

> *would assist my mom working at our local kiosk stand at the swapmeet. Through education, I learned more about the systemic racism in the way laws were written in such to be against Latinos and African Americans. This has fueled my passion to pursue a law degree, so that I can bring the perspective of being a Latino who is a first-generation American to lawmakers*."

Another Latina member writes;

> "*I grew up in a large undocumented community where I learned at a young age how to defend myself and my loved ones against the discrimination and injustices that were directed towards us because of the way we looked and our legal status. While I am not undocumented, I've witnessed the struggles many face and always knew I wanted to help. It wasn't until I helped a client with her credible fear interview during my internship…I realized that not only did I want to go into immigration law but people like me were desperately needed*."

As a Latina myself and a member of the online platform, I also shared my desire to advocate and pursue a career in immigration law. My father lived in the United States for 23 years. Inspired by my family's sacrifices, I became involved in community organizing for immigrant right's movements in high school with the non-profit *Make the Road NY*. Since then, I've dedicated my academic and professional career goals towards uplifting immigrant communities. The process of political socialization, whether that be increased desire to get involved in changing the laws that impact the immigrant community or standing in the front lines, children of immigrants have somewhat of a propensity to be Democrats "due to experiences with discrimination" and "watching

one or both parents navigate a new society and culture" witnessing how American society reacts and treats immigrants (Nkabinde and Wambu, 2016).

As previously mentioned, immigrants and their citizen family members are on the front lines of protest and labor-organizing events. Jones-Correa et al. surveyed Latino/a youth with undocumented parents and those with legal status parents to determine any existing political effects of being born of undocumented parents. Jones-Correa et al. found that children of undocumented parents were more likely than children of documented parents to participate in the organizing of a political event, joined a political party, and attending community meetings. U.S. citizen Latino/as from Texas and California participated in the survey, aged 18 to 31 years old, and born from immigrants arriving during the arrival peak of undocumented migration in the 1990s.

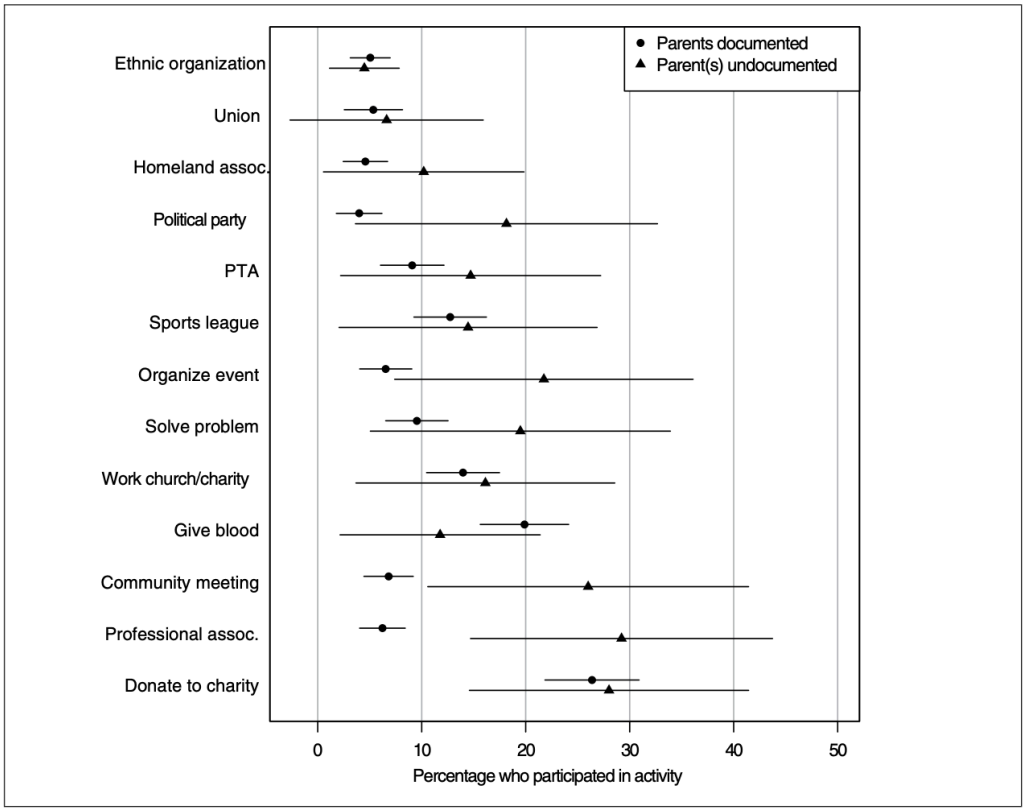

Figure 2. Offspring civic behavior, by parental legal status.
Source. The data source is the Latino Second Generation Study–ICPSR Number 36625.
PTA = Parent Teacher Association; ICPSR = Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

When testing for levels of push for political change, children of undocumented parents showed lower levels of lobbying politicians, taking issues to courts, and voting. Although their peers with legal status performed better in those activities, children of undocumented parents had a higher level of participation in legal protests (Jones-Correa et al., 2017).

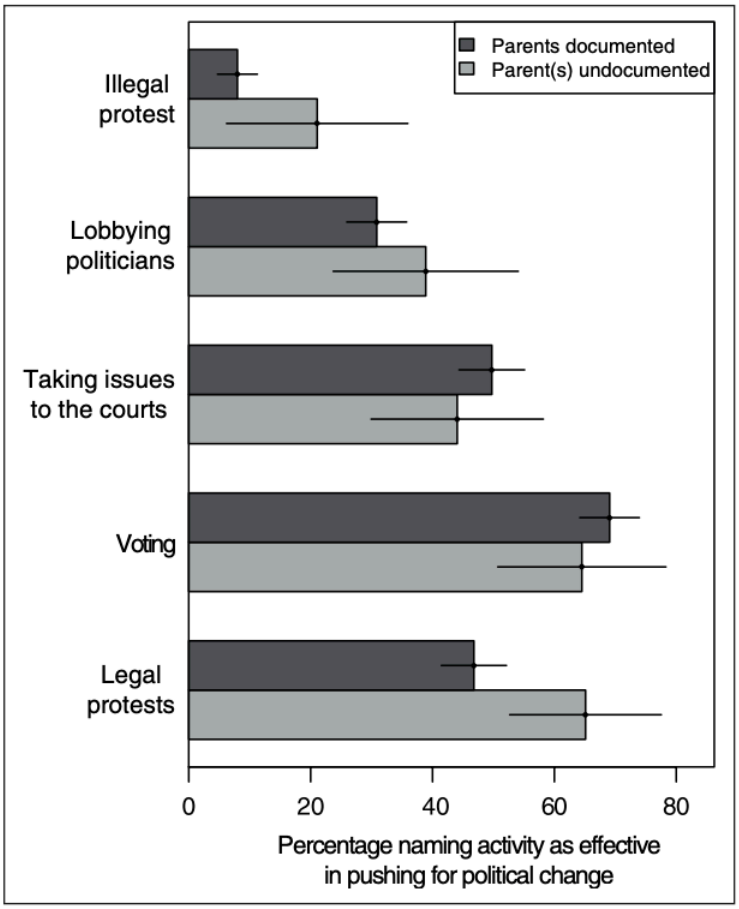

Figure 3. Perceived efficacy of activism, by parental legal status.
Source. The data source is the Latino Second Generation Study–ICPSR Number 36625.
ICPSR = Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

Part V. Discussion and Conclusion

I was inspired by my own personal experience to research this topic. The "research" part proved to be more difficult than the writing considering that there is no wealth of data available on undocumented immigrants and their families. Since high school, I have dedicated my free time when not in school or working to attend protests and be an ally for my family members and friends. My activism and decision to pursue law school all stemmed from wanting to uplift my community.

It is important to note that while Latinos make up one of the larger pools of immigrant communities in the United States, there are not the only group impacted by impactful immigration policies. The U.S. is home to a large population of Asian and African immigrants as well, who formed families and have U.S. citizen offspring. Unfortunately, despite making up nearly 17 million Americans, there is little available scholarly research for immigrant communities and their family members. Mixed-status families are growing in number and are impacted by ever changing immigration policies under the current administration. The coronavirus pandemic has opened wounds for many families living with mixed-status members. The CARES Act failed to include U.S. citizen children of undocumented parents and U.S. citizens with undocumented spouses in their stimulus package. Already faced with civic stratification, mixed-status families were met with a disappointing blow during such critical economic times. U.S. citizen children were left out of receiving financial support on the basis of their parent's legal status, despite having birthright citizenship. An act meant to help families in need also succeeded in disguising itself as an anti-immigrant policy with its impacts spilling over to U.S. citizens. My family would have been impacted by this as well had this occurred two years ago. My father is a taxpayer and files jointly with my mom, a U.S. citizen, meaning that they would not have qualified for a stimulus check.

While data shows children of undocumented parents demonstrating higher levels of political activism, it is still unclear whether immigration status of parents greatly influence civic engagement among their citizen children without strong evidence. It is difficult to study considering they are part of a vulnerable population so little information on numbers is already hard to find. As my generation of Latino/as continue grow up under the Trump administration, some of us may look to become political activism in one form or another as they watch their families be scrutinized. Civic engagement in the Latino/a community is not confined to showing up to the polls and working on a presidential campaign, but rather participating in uplifting community members in their ways that are unique and locally grounded.

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