

**Immigrant Civic Engagement:
New Translations**

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Introduction to a special issue on immigrants and civic engagement, in *Applied Developmental Science* (2008), edited by Network member Constance Flanagan and Lene Jensen Arnett

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On virtually a daily basis, American news media feature stories about immigrants. Many of these stories touch on questions about the balance between immigrants' civil rights and responsibilities, the extent to which they are a cost or benefit to local communities and society in general, and the nature of their commitment to the United States and American values. Recently, too, there seems to have been an increase in news stories about immigrants entering into the public debate through various forms of civic engagement, ranging from public marches to local community projects to student walk-outs to lawsuits against state and federal agencies.

This special issue of *Applied Developmental Science* spotlights civic engagement in immigrants, with an emphasis on immigrant youth whose engagement is important not only in the present but the future. While the social sciences include research on immigrant youth, much of it has focused on academic achievement and family relations. Much like the research in the broader field of youth development, attention to civic development and engagement is missing. At the same time a national political debate is taking place about immigration, citizenship, and what it means to be "American". This *ADS* issue brings a set of fresh scholarly perspectives to the discourse on immigration and civic engagement by reframing the meaning of civic engagement and casting it within the contexts of the lives of different immigrant groups.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

The disciplinary homes of the scholars in this volume are diverse, including anthropology, human development, political science, and sociology. Consequently, the authors bring diverse research questions, theories, and methods to the topic of immigrant civic engagement. For example, there is the demographic question of how levels of civic engagement for immigrants compare to non-immigrant Americans and how forms of engagement may vary by the immigrant's generational status. Lopez and Marcelo compare the survey responses of first and second generation immigrants, and non-immigrant Americans. Also, Stepick, Stepick and Labissiere compare the questionnaire responses of three generations of immigrants (first, 1.5, and second generation) to non-immigrants residing in Florida.

Stepick et al. complement their questionnaire data with a more in-depth anthropological and longitudinal lens. With participant observations, interviews, and focus groups they reveal when immigrant youth in their study feel excited about politics and community involvement, and when they are turned off. They discuss institutional contexts such as school and religion as well as specific events such as the Elian Gonzales case.

Then there is the psychological question of the internal motives and identifications that underlie civic engagement or the lack thereof. In this volume, Junn and Masuoka take an approach that is not typical for political scientists. Drawing from interviews and an experiment, they look at the links between politics and positive identifications with being Asian or Latino. Focusing more on contested aspects of identity, Wray-Lake, Syvertson, and Flanagan draw on open-ended questionnaire responses to explore the connections between perceptions of social exclusion, experiences with prejudice, and dissociation from an American identity in a sample of immigrant Arab adolescents. Also in this volume, Jensen empirically tests Huntington's

(1994) claim that immigrants who maintain a cultural identity will pull away from engagement in American civic life. Based on in-depth interviews with immigrants from El Salvador and India, this study examined how often they spoke of cultural motives to account for their civic engagement or disengagement, and it detailed the specific nature of these cultural motives of engagement and disengagement.

Taken together, then, the present articles draw on a broad range of literatures to ask fresh research questions about civic engagement in immigrant youth. They also offer a fruitful blend of quantitative and qualitative scientific methods to answer those questions.

Rethinking Definitions

What counts as civic engagement? All too often the answer to this question is narrowly conceived. Engagement is defined by conventional indicators of electoral politics – voting, participating in partisan politics, and staying informed about current events. Effectively, this leaves both immigrants and anyone under the age of 18 out of the picture. In the case of immigrants, their varied legal statuses and cultural norms add further complexity to the question.

All authors in this volume adopted a broad perspective on what constitutes civic engagement, including not only involvement with the political and legal spheres but also more general involvement with others in the community (e.g., Flanagan, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). The present findings bear out that a broad perspective yields new insights. For example, Stepick et al., Junn and Masuoka, and Jensen uncover civic behaviors where immigrants draw on their bicultural skills (such as translating for elders and completing immigrant work permits), as well as their bicultural consciousness (such as acting upon democratic opportunities more available in the United States than their country of origin, and sending remittances to families or others in their country of origin).

Collectively, then, the articles here help us to rethink the question of what counts as civic engagement by giving explicit consideration to: the sphere of engagement (such as U.S. politics, a local community group or the country of origin, or even mixed political loyalties for the sending and receiving countries), the form of engagement (such as voting, marching or tutoring), those with whom one joins in engagement (such as fellow immigrants or school peers), and the purposes of engagement (such as within-group solidarity or bridging across groups).

Diverse Research Dimensions

The scholars in this volume point to the importance of numerous research dimensions. Here, we will preview six. When it comes to the civic engagement of immigrants, it is important to take into account: a) socio-economic factors (Lopez & Marcelo), b) immigrant generation (Lopez & Marcelo; Stepick et al.), c) age or development (Jensen), d) country or culture of origin (all authors), e) local or national occurrences such as the Elian Gonzales case or September 11 (Stepick et al.; Wray-lake et al.), and f) changing relations between sending and receiving countries (Wray-Lake et al.). One way broadly to sum up these dimensions is to point out that civic engagement for immigrants is related to both individual and group characteristics, and it is related to both local and global phenomena.

This volume concludes with commentaries by three prominent scholars, Peter Levine, Ruben Rumbaut, and Mary Waters. They situate the present topic within a broader discussion of civic engagement in general (Levine) and migration research (Rumbaut and Waters). They also affirm the need for more research on immigrant civic engagement—and for scholarship that would inform the broader public discussions of immigration and the polity.

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