Original Article

Latino civic participation: Evaluating indicators of immigrant engagement in a Midwestern city

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Abstract This article builds on theories of political participation and civic engagement that evaluate Latino immigrant civic participation in a non-traditional immigrant destination city. The growth of the Latino population in the Midwest makes the question of Latino civic participation germane for emergent Latino communities across the region. This research examines civic participation for 560 Latino immigrants in St. Louis, Missouri. Using quantitative methods, we explored the major factors associated with civic engagement for Latino immigrants. We provide evidence that civic habitus, party identification, years in the United States and education played an important role in explaining civic engagement among Latino immigrants.


Keywords: civic engagement; Latinos; politics; Midwest; habitus; St. Louis

Civic Participation in an Emergent Latino Community

When Mike Davis (2001) famously referred to the Latino population in the United States as a “sleeping dragon,” he raised the specter of the powerful demographic changes that have emerged across the United States. Latino immigration and the Latino population growth have contributed to the “browning” of regions outside the traditional gateways such as Texas, California and New York (Aponte and Siles, 1994; Gozdziak and Martin, 2005; Massey, 2008).
Emergent Latino communities and the corresponding exponential growth of Latinos across the South, Midwest and Pacific Northwest have changed the demographic map of the Latino presence across the United States (Massey et al., 2003).

The growing Latino presence in non-traditional destinations raises important questions about the structure and composition of these communities. International immigration has been a key factor in transforming communities, particularly immigration from Mexico. Chain migration, the emergence of “sister cities” in the United States and Mexico, and increased immigrant flows have shaped the growing Latino communities in the Midwest (Massey, 2008). Many communities are also increasingly shaped by internal migration often representing a second or third stop by low-skilled workers seeking to escape from saturated labor markets (that is, Southern California or Texas).

Demographers forecast that the majority of the Latino population increase in the coming decades will result from natural population increase as the children of migrants come of age (Johnson and Daniel, 2008). Latino immigrants are an increasingly powerful demographic, economic and even political force across the United States, and their ability to participate in society will help shape the contours of democracy and citizenship in the United States for at least the next century.

The geographic diffusion of immigrant groups, particularly Latinos, across the United States has been well documented (Bean and Stevens, 2005; Gozdziak and Martin, 2005; Fry, 2008). Although the geographic patterns of Latino immigration are well established in the literature, our interest is on understanding the social and political implications of new Latino settlement patterns in a city that is not a traditional destination or magnet for Latino immigrants. This article was motivated by one question: What are the major factors associated with civic engagement among Latino immigrants in St. Louis?

This is the first study that explores civic engagement for Latino immigrants in the St. Louis metropolitan region. We believe that the findings from this study will make a significant contribution to Latino Studies. On the basis of the findings we present in this article, we argue that civic habitus, party identification, years in the United States and education played an important role in explaining civic engagement among Latino immigrants in St. Louis. We begin with background information regarding the Latino presence in the Midwest and St. Louis. The next section explores several key strands in the recent literature on immigrant civic engagement, particularly focusing on examples of civic engagement by Latinos. The subsequent section explores traditional models of civic engagement. In the section after that, we hypothesize that legal status, previous political participation in their home country, and paying taxes will foster a culture of civic engagement among Latino immigrants. The section next to that discusses our data sources and methods of analysis, outlining our logic for constructing a Civic Engagement Index (CEI).
The following sections outline the caveats and key findings from our research. The article concludes with a discussion section and an analysis of the contributions that this study makes to our understanding of civic engagement by Latino immigrants.

**Background on St. Louis**

Many Midwestern states, although not experiencing the exponential growth seen in hyper-growth destinations in the “Nuevo South” (Smith and Furuseth, 2006), have undergone significant population increases in the past two decades. Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska and Missouri, for example, have all experienced large increases since 1990 in the number of Latino residents, particularly among individuals of Mexican descent (Paral, 2009). Latino immigrants arriving in Midwestern cities often face different social realities than they would face in cities located in Texas, California or New York. Immigrants arriving in a Midwestern city, for example, may find minimal culturally and linguistically competent social and health services, limited resources for non-English-speaking students in the school system, law enforcement officers who lack cross-cultural experience or training, and other factors resulting from a majority population with a limited understanding of the different Latino cultures, language or material needs (Gozdziak and Martin, 2005).

These factors may also influence immigrants’ civic engagement in a number of ways. First, government policies and practices may facilitate or deter immigrant participation in civil society. Local governments that value the diversity brought to a city by international migrants may take a different approach to immigration policy than a government that is concerned about non-citizen competition for local jobs (Bloemraad, 2006). Likewise, political and bureaucratic attitudes may influence immigrants’ willingness to participate (de Graauw, 2008). Emergent populations in non-traditional destinations may also depend on local elites who are citizens or permanent residents to establish the social norms. Each of these examples is particularly relevant for the emergent Latino immigrant population in St. Louis.

The St. Louis metropolitan area has not been a major Latino destination (Rynearson, 1979). During much of the last half of the twentieth century, St. Louis experienced slow but continuous demographic growth among the Latino population. Valdes (2000) notes that until the 1990s, the US Census indicated that Latino residents in the St. Louis metropolitan area maintained higher household incomes than the majority white population. These figures reflected the highly integrated status of Latinos (many of whom were employed in the white-collar professions) living in St. Louis before the 1990s. The demographic composition of the Latino population in St. Louis changed significantly beginning in the early 1990s, with much of the shift driven...
by immigration from the central states of Mexico. A combination of factors, including population growth in Mexico, the Mexican peso crisis, the implementation of NAFTA and increased US–Mexico border security each contributed to the increased number of Mexican immigrants (often entire family units) settling in the St. Louis metropolitan area (Jennings, 2009).

During this period of rapid economic growth in much of the United States, the St. Louis region offered attractive entry-level employment opportunities, less expensive housing stock and lower levels of immigrant “saturation” in the employment markets. Census figures suggest that the Latino population in the St. Louis metropolitan region grew by 82 per cent between 1990 and 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2010).¹ Many Midwestern and “Nuevo South” cities shared some of these economic, demographic and population growth trends. Thus, we argue that an analysis of Latino civic participation in St. Louis can provide insight into the dynamics of emergent Latino populations in other “heartland” cities.

The Latino population in St. Louis generally comprises a majority of individuals of Mexican descent (64 per cent), followed by much smaller number of Puerto Ricans (8 per cent), and individuals from Central (7 per cent) and South America (7 per cent) (US Census Bureau, 2010).² The research suggests that a majority of the Mexican population has arrived in the past 15 years, tends to have lower levels of education and socio-economic resources, and often works in entry-level types of employment (Jennings, 2009). Latino professionals comprise a smaller, but increasingly visible and organized group that is working to establish an ethnically centered economic and political presence in the region (Jennings, 2009). The emergence of the Latino population in St. Louis offers an opportunity to evaluate how well various models explain the civic engagement by Latino immigrants.

Civic Engagement: The Contexts of Latino Immigrant Participation

A reasonable point of inquiry for our study lies in the question: Why would Latino immigrants (and particularly non-citizens) become civically engaged in the United States? A number of factors may be at play here: a sense of personal responsibility to their adopted communities, the reality that political decisions may affect their lives (for example, immigration reform legislation), and the prevalence of the campaign processes (for example, political advertising) during election seasons (Leal, 2002). These underlying reasons for civic engagement may be facilitated by social service organizations, civic groups (for example, nationality-based societies) and mutual aid associations (Bloemraad, 2006; de Graauw, 2008). Regardless of the reasons that Latino immigrants become civically engaged, the reality is that they do participate. Our aim here is to

1 In 1990, there were 26,014 Latinos compared to 72,019 Latinos in 2010.

2 The remaining 14 per cent of Latinos were classified in other Latino ethnic groups.
understand more about how this participation develops among Latino immigrants.

Research indicates that Latinos generally have lower formal political participation rates than other ethnic groups in the United States. Pantoja and Gershon (2006) suggest that according to the US Census 2000, “out of 23 million adult Latinos, only 13.2 million, or 57 per cent, are US citizens. In other words, close to half of the voting-age Latino population is ineligible to vote because they are non-citizens” (1117). They go on to argue that “it is of little wonder that scholars of Latino politics have long considered lack of citizenship as the single most important obstacle to Latino political empowerment” (1117). A recent study by Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there are approximately 11.2 million unauthorized Latino immigrants in the United States (Passel and Cohn, 2011). These new estimates underscore the importance of Latino political and civic participation in United States. The presence of undocumented immigrants raises important questions about social justice and representation in the context of a liberal democracy. Although many undocumented Latino immigrants work, pay taxes and have children in schools, they are excluded from participating in formal politics. Non-citizen and undocumented immigrants are not, however, excluded from participating in non-electoral politics or other forms of civic engagement.

**Latino Mobilization: Examining the Social Contexts of Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement among the US immigrant population and Latino immigrants in particular, has become an important topic in academic literature. Research examining citizenship, integration and non-electoral political engagement provides particularly useful points of departure, and this section offers a targeted overview of several studies that are helpful for theorizing Latino political mobilization in non-electoral politics.

Scholars investigating citizenship and political integration have made a number of important contributions to the current understanding of immigrants’ civic engagement, particularly in the last decade. Legal theorist Linda Bosniak (2006) notably advances an argument for the notion of “citizenship for non-citizens,” which entails undocumented immigrants participating in non-electoral politics, exercising rights and meeting some of the responsibilities normally associated with legal citizenship status. Others have explored the ways that non-profit organizations facilitate immigrant participation through a diverse set of processes including everything from advocacy and education to direct service provision (Bloemraad, 2006; de Graauw 2008; Jennings 2009). Marrow (2009), in the context of a non-traditional destination, explores the ways that government policies and officials influenced Latino immigrants in an
emergent population in North Carolina. She finds that bureaucratic officials in service-oriented agencies “responded to Hispanic newcomers in ways that demonstrated greater, not less, substantive responsiveness to their interests than did local and state politicians” (Marrow, 2009, 772). However, she notes that this responsiveness was also dictated, and at times restricted, by external government policies.

Scholars within the field of Latino Studies have also examined civic engagement by Latino immigrants in a wide range of political contexts. Research by William Flores and Rina Benmayor (Flores and Benmayor, 1997; Flores, 2003) describes Latino efforts to challenge the Immigration and Nationalization Services at the community level in San Jose, CA through the creation of coalitions that work to ensure access to medical services, and fight against policies that target undocumented immigrants. Susan Bibler Coutin (1998; 2000) highlights a different context in her work, analyzing the ways in which Central American refugees (particularly Salvadorans) participated in informal politics to challenge and reshape both US laws and immigration policies. Her studies highlight the ways in which US residents and citizens work to provide protection for political refugees (though not legally identified as such by the US government). These efforts included public organizing, holding rallies and developing communications plans. The Sanctuary Movement, as it became known, ultimately evolved into a national and transnational movement designed to influence US federal immigration policies. Its success was due, in no small measure, to the political efforts of undocumented refugees from Central America who told their life stories of living as immigrants in the United States.

In a more recent context, Monica Varsanyi (2006) provides an excellent account of the ways in which progressive labor unions, such as the Service Employees International Union, are organizing both documented and undocumented workers (particularly Latinos) to participate in non-voting electoral politics in Los Angeles. These efforts include attending rallies, reminding individuals about voting times and places, and supporting candidates backed by the unions. Each of these examples provide clues to the ways in which Latinos of all legal statuses may be civically engaged; however, it is also important to recognize that each of these case studies occurred in a “traditional” Latino destination (that is, a state that is located along the US–Mexico border and has a history of sustained Latino presence).

The immigrant rights rallies of 2006 offer a more recent instance of Latinos from many legal statuses and cultural backgrounds participating in civic engagement through a movement that took shape across the United States. Scholars have examined a number of issues around non-electoral participation in these immigrant rights marches (Vargas, 2007). The immigrant rights marches of 2006 provide evidence that a new Civil Rights movement has begun, drawing both documented and undocumented Latinos who are supportive
of immigration reform into a civil struggle to reform federal immigration laws. Johnson and Hing (2007) deal with the same issue, however, they argue that any new civil rights movement must include African Americans to be successful. They draw on lessons from the 1960s civil rights movement to highlight both the challenges (for example, conservative-oriented courts) and opportunities (for example, multi-racial alliances) raised by the 2006 immigrant rights marches. Pantoja et al (2008) provide important insight into the characteristics of the marches in a special edition of American Behavioral Scientist that examined, among other things, the roles of pan-ethnicity and the civic engagement of children in the 2006 marches. These accounts re-emphasize the diversity and potential power of immigrant civic engagement in the ongoing debate over US immigration reform. Despite these accounts of non-electoral participation by Latinos, Pantoja et al (2008) note that “there is a dearth of scholarly research on immigrant and youth civic engagement” (358). While the 2006 immigration rights marches have again brought this issue to the forefront, there remains a need for knowledge outside the scope of the immigration reform movement.

The diversity of contexts and methods in the research described above makes it difficult to know which factors are the most significant in terms of Latino participation. Most of these studies adopt either normative approaches or qualitative methods for understanding immigrant engagement. Our aim in this research is to understand more about how Latino civic engagement develops, focusing on which personal characteristics influence civic engagement (in terms of generating higher levels of civic engagement by Latino immigrants) through a quantitative evaluation.

Models of Civic Engagement: Evaluating Individual Factors

Having examined some recent accounts of Latino civic engagement, we now shift to a discussion of models that incorporate individual characteristics to explain immigrant participation. Much of the existing research on immigrant civic participation has traditionally focused “primarily on the determinants of naturalization and differences in citizenship acquisition across different nationalities” (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001, 871). Other studies have examined the issues raised by immigrant participation in formal electoral politics (Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999; Leal, 2002). In recent years, investigations have included a wider range of factors that may influence both formal and informal civic participation including: gender, socialization and ethnicity (Verba et al, 1995; Jones-Corra, 1998; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001; Leal, 2002). Our investigation draws on the current framework of civic engagement, but also moves beyond much of the existing literature by empirically exploring the influences of legal status on Latino immigrants’ civic participation.
We draw on two diverse theoretical frameworks concerning civic participation in an effort to account for participation by documented and undocumented Latino immigrants. First, we use the literature around the civic voluntarism model advanced by Verba et al (1995), which suggests that political participation can be understood based on three themes: resources, motivations and opportunities. For Verba et al (1995), resources may include variables like income, education and civic skills. Motivation in this model usually refers to variables such as awareness and interest in political events or perceptions of group-based discrimination. Moreover, opportunity for civic engagement may be conceptualized as shaped by the rules governing participation (for example, the exclusion of non-citizens from voting) as well as by institutions that may facilitate political participation (for example, unions organizing a rally). The civic voluntarism framework provides a useful theoretical underpinning for examining political participation.

Second, we incorporate two dimensions of civic *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1980) as a theoretical lens for interpreting and incorporating the socialization that Latino immigrants experienced in their countries of origin or in the United States. The two dimensions of civic *habitus* we employ in this article are: inherent civic *habitus* (that is, socializing obligation) and extrinsic civic *habitus* (that is, socializing rights). First, although the civic voluntarism model can provide an important understanding of immigrant participation in the United States, it was not developed to account for immigrants’ political experience and socialization in their countries of origin. Despite its usefulness in many immigrant-related studies, the civic voluntarism model was generally intended for interpreting political participation by citizens in the United States. The dimension of inherent civic *habitus* suggests that acts of voting in a home country before emigrating to the United States fosters a set of norms and values that are conducive to civic participation (Bourdieu, 1980). Civic *habitus*, in this context, emerges simply because voting inculcates a sensibility within an individual that he or she has an obligation to actively participate in society. In addition, inherent civic *habitus* privileges individuals with a specialized knowledge and a cultural awareness regarding spaces of opportunity to engage in civic participation (Martinez-Cosio, 2006). Inherent civic *habitus* can also be viewed as the routine activities in civic matters that are anchored by institutionalized experiences in civic engagement (that is, voting in a national election). Individuals who have never voted may lack this dimension of civic *habitus* and, therefore, may be less likely to have an internal disposition that encourages them to get involved in local activities. Finally, we note that, although there are areas of overlap between the civic voluntarism and inherent civic *habitus* (for example, the civil voluntarism model accounts for the acquisition of civic skills under the rubric of resources, which resonates with the concept of civic *habitus*), we believe that integrating the strengths of these two frameworks provides the strongest theoretical model for understanding civic participation by Latino immigrants in our research.

The second dimension of civic *habitus* relates to the relationship between civic entitlement and paying taxes on wages. We call this dimension extrinsic...
civic habitus. Paying taxes entitles individuals to certain rights in the United States. As a matter of fact, all immigrants pay taxes (that is, sales taxes), however, immigrants who pay taxes on wages earned may believe that they are entitled to certain rights associated with taxes on wages – one of which is the right to civic participation. In fact, the act of paying taxes is one dimension of perceived citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Therefore, paying taxes fosters a sensibility that encourages individuals to “actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national level” (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, 270). Extrinsic civic habitus instills a sense of responsibility within individuals that they have an obligation to pay taxes on wages earned. In return, individuals internalize the right to engage in civic activities. In contrast to inherent civic habitus, extrinsic civic habitus is acquired through a gift-and-exchange relationship (Mauss, 1950), which is embedded in the US legal system, rather than learned through everyday experiences. Paying taxes is the gift and the exchange is the right to participate in civic activities.

Theorists of civic participation widely recognize the influence that demographic variables have in shaping civic engagement. Our models incorporate several demographic variables: gender, age, education level, number of children, marital status and country of origin. Gender is widely recognized as influencing both resources and opportunities related to participating in politics, and there have been a number of studies examining Latino/a political participation in the United States (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Kam et al, 2008). Jones-Correa (1998), for example, builds on earlier research on the gendered nature of Latino/a socialization to argue that “while men are more likely to remain involved in first generation immigrant organizations, women more often take on the role of intermediaries between the immigrant community and surrounding society” (346). Other scholars have examined Latinas’ participation in formal and informal political contexts, thereby enhancing knowledge about the political role of Latinas and Latina immigrants in US politics (de la Graza et al, 1994; Montoya et al, 2000).

An individual’s age, education level, number of children, marital status and country of origin may also influence an immigrant’s civic participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Rosenstone et al, 2003). Research shows that “age has a positive, curvilinear relationship with voter turnout, older citizens tend to have higher levels of political knowledge and partisan identification” (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001, 873). The presence of children in a household may also influence participation, as individuals with children may be more likely to be exposed to interactions with the mainstream culture. Jones-Correa (1998) notes that immigrant women may often experience an increase in social status tied to opportunities for engagement with the larger community through their children (that is, parent–teacher conferences or community participation). However, it could also be argued that immigrants
with more children have fewer resources and less time available to commit to participating in political and civic activities, thereby decreasing their overall likelihood of participation (Wilkin et al., 2009). Likewise, it has been argued that marital status (that is, being single) has an influence on the likelihood of political participation (Simpson Bueker, 2004), though the literature on this point is mixed (Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999).

Beyond demographic characteristics, Latino immigrants’ civic engagement may also be influenced by their political characteristics, including: individual legal status, years in the United States and affiliation with a political party in the United States (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001). The notion of political participation by non-resident immigrants has been explored only in limited contexts. David Leal (2002) outlined a model of political participation by non-citizen Latinos that provides a useful frame of reference. On the basis of an analysis of data from the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS), Leal argued that, although there were differences between citizen and non-citizen Latinos, non-citizen status was not always an indicator for low political participation. The LNPS examines seven types of non-electoral political participation including: signing a petition, wearing a button, donating money and volunteering for a campaign. Leal (2002) used these variables “to test if citizenship status is a statistically significant influence while controlling for a large number of personal and political factors” (358). The weakness of the LNPS data is that they do not have a question regarding legal status. Thus, in our investigation, we were able to extend the current literature by explicitly questioning the influence of legal status as it relates to the likelihood of civic engagement by the Latino immigrants who participated in our study.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

Our central focus in this article is addressing the question: What are the major factors associated with civic engagement among Latino immigrants in St. Louis? We set out to test three specific hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that legal status would be a barrier to civic engagement for Latino immigrants. It has been argued that legal immigrants have a different opportunity structure compared with undocumented immigrants and that the opportunity structure creates barriers to actively participate in civic activities (Bauder, 2008; Sandoval and Ortiz, 2009). Latino immigrants who do not have legal papers to be in the United States, or who are permanent residents, do not have the right to vote in state and national elections (Leal, 2002). This barrier may spill over to the civic arena and foster low or no participation in civic activities.

Second, we hypothesize that previous political activity in home countries (that is, inherent civic *habitus*) and party identification in the United States will foster a culture of civic engagement among Latino immigrants. This hypothesis
allows us to evaluate the theoretical dimensions of both the civic voluntarism model (that is, political affiliation in the United States would increase civic engagement) and the influence of civic \textit{habitus} (that is, people who developed civic skills in their home country are more likely to exercise them in the United States). Regardless of whether an individual brings civic \textit{habitus} from the home country, we test the hypothesis that Latino immigrants who identify with a political party will be more likely to engage in civic activities. Another way immigrants, with no civic \textit{habitus} from their home country, can still develop a different form of civic \textit{habitus} in the United States is through a willingness to support other Latinos in American politics (Félix \textit{et al.}, 2008).

Lastly, we hypothesize that paying taxes on wages would foster a culture of civic engagement. As with voting, we believe that paying taxes fosters a second dimension of civic \textit{habitus} (that is, extrinsic). However, the culture of civic \textit{habitus} from paying taxes emerges from a gift-and-exchange relationship (Mauss, 1950). This dimension of civic \textit{habitus} differs from voting, in the sense that an individual internalizes civic engagement as a right rather than an obligation (Fernandez-Kelly, 2008).

\textbf{Data and Methodology}

Working with the Latino population in emergent communities often carries a significant number of challenges, particularly when addressing issues of civic participation. These challenges are often exacerbated in emergent populations, such as the one in St. Louis, where historical, social and geographical characteristics have led to a fragmented and spatially diffuse population structure. Qualitative data were collected before the construction of the survey and the findings from that research were used to construct questions that were applicable and appropriate to the St. Louis Latino immigrant population.

This investigation is based on data gathered through a non-probability survey (henceforth, the St. Louis Latino Survey or SLS 2005) that was conducted in four sites around the St. Louis metropolitan area. Data from the research were gathered between early February and mid-March 2005. All of the surveys were completed by Latino immigrants at four ecumenical locations that offered Spanish-language religious services.\footnote{Although there has been important research done regarding the role of churches as conduits for civic and political engagement (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001), this} A total of 560 valid surveys were completed. To our knowledge, this is the first survey of Latino immigrants in St. Louis at the metropolitan level. The sample size and analysis from the survey is a contribution to the field of Latino Studies because it gives us an analytical lens to study the fluid and complex environment that fosters a social structure conducive for civic participation among Latino immigrants.

The SLS 2005 was designed to evaluate several areas of interest regarding the Latino population, including basic demographics, transnational practices, social service usage and modes of political participation. By incorporating
questions related to civic engagement in the survey, we created a CEI. The CEI is derived from the following questions: Did you vote in the past year? Did you sign a petition in the past year? Did you volunteer to support a political candidate or political party? Did you attend public hearings, meetings or town hall events? Did you write a letter to the editor or a public official? Did you donate money to a political party or political candidate? and Did you serve on a board or commission? All of the questions were measured using a dichotomous yes and no nominal variable. Each question represents a unique dimension of civic engagement. Statistically, the index is expressed as:

\[ C_t = \sum_{i=1}^{n} x_i \]  

(1)

where \( C_t \) represents the civic engagement score and \( x_i \) is the measured outcome for each variable. The theoretical score will range from 0 to 7. Each respondent received 1 point if they answered yes for each CEI question. The CEI range for our sample data was 0–5. This indicates that at least one person answered yes to five of the CEI questions. Our analytical approach for this article was to use an Ordinary Least Square (OLS) approach to test our three hypotheses. To explain the variation of civic engagement (\( C_t \)), we used the following OLS equation to express the relationship of all of our theoretical variables.\(^5\)

\[ C_t = \beta_0 + \beta(L_t) + \gamma(P_t) + \delta(T_t) + \lambda(V_t) + \eta(O_t) + \epsilon_t \]  

(2)

where \( C_t \) represents the civic engagement score, \( \beta_0 \) is a constant, \( L_t \) is the legal status of the respondent, \( P_t \) represents the party identification and history of voting before coming to the United States for the respondent, \( T_t \) represents whether the respondent paid taxes, \( V_t \) represents the control variables for the respondent, \( O_t \) represents the country of origin for the respondent, and \( \epsilon_t \) is a random error term.

OLS is a conceptually simple statistical method for exploring relationships between one dependent variable and many independent variables. This technique allowed us to determine which variables significantly explained the variation in our dependent variable (that is, the civic engagement score). The Greek letters represent the coefficients and the letters in the parentheses represent the theoretical variables. We defined statistical significance using three conventional definitions \( P = 0.001, P = 0.01 \) and \( P = 0.05 \). The \( P \)-value is the probability that we would get a different result. In other words, these statistical definitions tell us the likelihood that we obtained our results by random chance. Another way to think about these definitions is if we conducted the survey 100 times, using the 0.05 definition, there is a chance that 5 times out of 100 times the regression coefficients would be different. The smaller \( P \)-values indicate a robust coefficient. With the \( P \)-value of 0.001, there is a very small
likelihood that we would get different results, regardless of how many times we conducted the survey. In our discussion section, we only make reference to variables that meet one of these three statistical definitions.

OLS is widely used because of the ease of interpreting the coefficients (see Table 2). The coefficients we present indicate how much civic engagement will change with a one-unit change in the respective variable. For the Yes/No variables, the coefficients indicate how much the civic engagement variable will change if a person responds Yes. For the other variables, the coefficient indicates how much the civic engagement variable will change with a one-unit change in the independent variable. Take, for example, Years in the United States. This coefficient tells us that, for each year in the United States, the civic engagement score will increase by 0.00952. This indicates that individuals who live in the United States for longer periods will have a higher civic engagement score compared with individuals who have lived in the United States for shorter periods of time. The key to understanding OLS analysis is to find variables that meet one of the three levels of statistical significance. In Table 2, we present the key variables that were significant, and in our discussion we describe the variables that had significant impacts on civic engagement.

For each regression model there is a corresponding $F$-value and adjusted $R^2$ score. The $F$-value indicates to the reader if the model is significant. All of the models we present in this article were significant. The adjusted $R^2$ score ranges from 0 to 1. This score indicates to the reader how well the data fits the model. A score of 1 is a perfect fit and a score of 0 is no fit. The higher adjusted $R^2$ score indicates that the model is more significant in explaining the variation of our dependent variable compared with the model with lower adjusted $R^2$ score. The final model we present in our analysis has an adjusted $R^2$ score of 0.5375. Using this model, we can explain more than half of the variation of civic engagement among Latino immigrants. This is a high score for social science research, which indicates that we found important variables that explain the variation of civic engagement among Latino immigrants in St. Louis.

**Caveats**

Before we move on to our findings and discussion sections, we would like to make a few caveats about the dependent and independent variables. Our CEI was created to measure seven dimensions. The question that measured the dimension of voting was intentionally created as a vague question. We wanted to measure any type of voting (that is, parish, school, politics and so on). We acknowledge that voting for a parish council and voting for an election are two different processes; however, we know that undocumented residents cannot vote in elections, and it is also true that legal residents may not be able to legally vote either.
A second note about the independent variable needs to be highlighted. We did not include *voted in home county* in the dependent variable because we were interested in civic participation in the United States. In addition, we did not include *affiliated with a political party* in the CEI. This question was not part of the seven dimensions of civic engagement that were identified for this survey. We recognize that identifying with a political party often encourages individuals to develop a culture of civic engagement as it is defined in this article, however, political party identification is not *necessarily* a prerequisite for a culture of civic engagement. There are many individuals who have high levels of civic engagement, but identify as independents, and have no party affiliation.

**Empirical Findings**

The mean for the CEI was 0.69. Although the mean is low, more than half (55 per cent) of the respondents reported at least one dimension of civic engagement, and 10 per cent reported at least two dimensions of civic engagement. Among survey respondents, 39 per cent reported that they were in the United States legally. More than half of the respondents reported that they pay taxes and about 45 per cent reported that they voted in their home country. The average education level was 10 years, the average length of residency in the United States was 10 years, and the average age was 34 years. Slightly less than one-third of the sample reported that they were married, and respondents’ average of reported number of children was 1.97. Finally, 77 per cent of the immigrants were from Mexico, 4 per cent were from Honduras and 2 per cent were from Puerto Rico (Table 1).

We ran six OLS models (Table 2). The robustness of our findings can be analyzed by comparing the results from the baseline model to the full model (that is, Model 6). Model 1 estimated the legal status variable. Model 2 estimated the inherent civic *habitus* model (that is, voted in home country). Model 3 estimated the political party model. Model 4 estimated the extrinsic civic *habitus* model (that is, pay taxes). Model 5 represents the model in which all the variables from Model 1 through 4 were included. Model 6 represents the full model where control variables and country of origin were included. The results for Model 1 showed that respondents who had legal papers were statistically more likely to participate in civic activities. According to Model 2, respondents were statistically more likely to participate in civic activities if they had voted in their home country. Model 3 showed that respondents were statistically more likely to participate in civic activities if they identified with a political party. The results for Model 4 showed that respondents who paid taxes were statistically more likely to participate in civic activities. Model 5 showed that voted in home country, affiliated with political party, education
level, years in the United States, and the number of children variables were statistically significant. Model 6 showed voted in home country, affiliated with political party, education level, years in the United States and Puerto Rican ethnic origin were statistically significant. All of the models were statistically significant, and Model 6 had the most explanatory power, followed by Model 5. For our discussion, we will focus on Model 6.

**Factors Associated with Civic Participation**

Our results showed that voted in home country was a significant predictor of civic engagement. This finding suggests that immigrants who come to the United States with inherent civic *habitus* may have a sense of obligation or a heightened awareness of the political and social processes, which motivates them to participate in civic activities. More importantly, civic *habitus* may have given these immigrants good feelings and/or a sense of satisfaction about participation. Latino immigrants with civic *habitus* may use this to their advantage, and can adapt more rapidly to the cultural expectations of civic engagement in the United States. It could also be the case that the actual process of voting gives individuals a sense of entitlement and responsibility to engage in civic activities beyond the process of casting a vote. Building a culture of
Table 2: Ordinary least squares regression results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal status</td>
<td>0.31807*** (0.06686)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.06234 (0.05555)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in home</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.00902*** (0.05141)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.07728*** (0.04985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.28047*** (0.15498)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.71936*** (0.12319)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay taxes</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.26102*** (0.06609)</td>
<td>0.07728 (0.04946)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.0212** (0.0064)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in the</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.00972** (0.00296)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.004 (0.00288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.02804 (0.04725)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.02783*** (0.01637)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.02173 (0.05555)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.001 (0.05612)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduran</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.01293 (0.07344)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.27137 (0.1382)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbian</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.38921* (0.01678)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.56725*** (-0.09282)</td>
<td>0.23701*** (0.03449)</td>
<td>0.63619*** (0.03208)</td>
<td>0.54472*** (0.04949)</td>
<td>-0.21688* (-0.10696)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-Value</td>
<td>22.63***</td>
<td>385.14***</td>
<td>68.26***</td>
<td>15.6***</td>
<td>61.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj R²</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0.4084</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.0272</td>
<td>0.5284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001 (two-tailed test).
Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Source: Calculations by authors based on data from SLS 2005.
civic engagement requires some fundamental values. Coming to the United States without knowledge or practice of voting may serve as a barrier to active civic engagement in the United States for many immigrants. However, those individuals who bring inherent civic *habitus* may experience a smoother transition to civic engagement and feel more comfortable writing letters to the editor, signing a petition or volunteering.

Political parties are a hallmark of any democracy. Research suggests that immigrants who are affiliated with a political party are more likely to engage in civic activities (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001). In our study, almost all of the immigrants (with the exception of one individual) who identified with a political party reported at least one activity of civic engagement, with the majority of them reporting at least two activities of civic engagement. This finding suggests that political parties are important institutions for immigrants as they adapt to the cultural expectations of civic engagement. If the goal is to increase civic engagement among immigrants, there is little one can do in terms of voted in home country, but certainly local political bosses can develop messaging strategies that encourage immigrants to identify with a political party. Immigrants that self-identified themselves as Democrat or Republican were already, to some extent, exhibiting a characteristic of the culture of civic engagement. Our findings suggest that the political tenor of national immigration policies has enormous consequences for immigrants trying to find a space and voice in relevant political debates.

Research has also consistently found that civic engagement is directly related to *legal status* (DiSipio, 1996). A study conducted by Janelle Wong (2000) found evidence that political affiliation was associated with citizenship status. Although we did not measure citizenship status, we did measure whether the respondent had a legal right to be in the United States. This measure included both immigrants who were citizens and immigrants who were in St. Louis on a visa. In the baseline model, *legal status* was significant, but this effect disappeared in Models 5 and 6, when we included other theoretical and control variables in the full model. Our findings do not support the view that *legal status* is associated with civic engagement. Our findings were not an anomaly and they correspond with a study by Uhlaner *et al.* (1989) that found that “noncitizens engage in non-electoral activities” (195). It is interesting to note that the Puerto Rican variable was the only *country of origin* variable that was significant in the full model. These results suggest that Puerto Ricans, because of their unique legal status with the US government and their historical treatment and incorporation into the United States, were more inclined to report to be engaged in the civic engagement activities in the United States. Our findings are a cautionary reminder that the term “Latino” encompasses tremendous heterogeneity among the ethnic sub-groups, and that Puerto Ricans (because of their birth status) may have a predisposition to participate at higher rates because they have an innate right to participate and shape the political narrative.
in their local community (Stokes, 2003; Sandoval and Ortiz, 2009). With the increased rhetoric about the legal status of immigrants, Latino immigrants may be more responsive to activities that allow them to speak for their own rights. Many immigrants without documentation have found a voice and a political space to accentuate their concerns about immigration reform. As we noted earlier, documented and undocumented immigrants have on multiple occasions marched for comprehensive immigration reform in urban areas across the United States. These marches are a sign that immigrants, regardless of status, have found the confidence to engage in political marches for social justice.

We tested a third hypothesis, that paying taxes would be positively associated with civic engagement. The theory is that paying taxes cultivates a second dimension of civic habitus (that is, extrinsic). Immigrants who reported paying taxes may feel that they have a right to civic participation, and may have a sense of ownership in the community. While we recognize that all immigrants pay some taxes (that is, sales tax), less than 50 per cent of respondents in our survey indicated that they paid taxes, which we interpret as filing a tax return based on the context we provided before asking the question. Legal residents are required to file tax returns and the federal government has long allowed undocumented immigrants to procure an Individual Taxpayer Identification number, which allows them to file a tax return with the federal government. Our interest is not who is actually paying taxes, but rather how self-perception about paying taxes may be linked to a resident’s civic engagement. We believe that those immigrants who self-reported paying taxes could have more emotional, social and economic investment that would encourage them to engage in some civic activities. In the baseline model, our hypothesis was correct. However, this effect was no longer statistically significant when it was included in the full model. In addition, the magnitude of the effect dropped significantly. Therefore, we found little evidence to support this hypothesis once other variables were added to the model.

Another dimension that could explain the variation of civic engagement is demographics. There were two variables that were statistically significant in the final model. Years in the United States and Education had a significant impact on civic engagement. Years in the United States could reflect the process of cultural adaptation. Length of time in the United States for immigrants is an important variable that explains how immigrants adapt to the expectations of a culture of civic engagement. However, the magnitude of the effect is small. An average immigrant who lived in the United States for 1 year would have an estimated civic engagement score of 1.97, compared with an average immigrant who lived in the United States for 10 years, who would have a score of 2.06. Second, civic habitus may be associated with levels of education. Individuals with high levels of education may be exposed to values that embrace the entitlement of civic participation. In fact, Bourdieu (1990) argues that education is the most important ingredient that fosters habitus. The more education
a person has, the more predisposed he or she will be to act in ways that constitute success (Harker, 1984). Education embeds within a person, consciously or unconsciously, certain social rights and responsibilities. Individuals who have accumulated high amounts of human capital will be in advantageous positions, as they adapt to survival strategies and rely on their *habitus* to shape the social space and narratives to push back against anti-immigrant sentiments that demean their dignity and try to strip them of the moral right to live life without violence.7

**Civically Engaged Latinos/as**

This research contributes to the understanding of Latino/a civic participation in the non-traditional destination city of St. Louis, MO. There has often been the assumption that immigrants are excluded from political participation in the host country, particularly among newly emergent communities, such as the recently arrived Mexican population in St. Louis. Recent research, however, has challenged this assumption, and the results from this study suggest that Latino immigrants were civically engaged in some of the same modes of civic engagement as Latinos and other immigrant groups in larger coastal cities across the United States (Bloemraad, 2006; de Graauw, 2008). Undocumented Latino residents have been excluded from participating in federal elections for nearly a century, but these formal limitations do not suggest that undocumented residents were or are not engaged in the larger social issues of their communities. Our findings suggest that Latino immigrants do participate in civic activities, and that variables outside of the traditional Socioeconomic Status (SES) models may explain the levels and types of Latino civic engagement. We have strong evidence to support the view that civic *habitus* is an important factor associated with civic engagement for Latino immigrants. Latinos that come to the United States with a predisposition to civic participation overcame the legal status barrier and participated in other civic activities in addition to political elections. We also found evidence that the legal status barrier to civic participation was surmounted if Latino immigrants identified with a political party.

It is logical to think that legal status predetermines the intensity of civic participation, but this study sheds light on the fact that spaces of opportunity for civic participation are available to all Latino immigrants, and that they are taking advantage of these opportunities. Understood in this light, national political rhetoric directly aimed at Latino legal status can be viewed as an attempt to disengage and discourage Latinos from participating in civic engagement. However, these shortsighted anti-immigration strategies may have the opposite effect, as Latino immigrants may choose to identify with a political party that they believe will fight for their rights. Moreover, these anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric foster an environment that is conducive to civic engagement.

7 A third demographic variable was significant using a one-tailed test, *Number of Children*. This demographic variable supports the view that children may become a barrier for civic engagement.
for Latino immigrants who have come to the United States with the civic skills and experience associated with civic *habitus* in their countries of origin. The combination and interaction of politics and civic *habitus* may prove to be the most important socio-political mediating forces that create spaces of opportunity for Latino immigrants as they change the landscape of social exclusion that is rooted in the false belief that *only* legal status endows individuals with the ability to strengthen society by participating in civic activities.

**About the Authors**

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**References**


