

# Building from Within: Family and the Political Membership of Immigrants

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A father drops off his children at school. A family attends a farmers' market. A couple goes to the movies. People live their lives, regardless of where they are born or their legal status. Immigrants, in particular, relocated to the United States to strive for the quintessential "American Dream"—the promise of a better life, in a home with a white picket fence and all the trappings of American economic might. Central to this imagery is the family—the hub around which all other activity is centered, making the house a home, and connecting it to the community outside of the white picket fence.<sup>1</sup> However, the American Dream is not accessible to immigrants, who are deemed under the current Trump administration unworthy of compassion or leniency regardless of their contributions, character, or achievements (Trump 2015).

Anti-immigrant sentiments create a hostile atmosphere with little empathy for immigrants. These sentiments strain the immigrant communities that they target and isolate them from the government, forcing them into the shadows. Prior anti-immigrant sentiments, around for centuries and seeing a resurgence today, led to restrictions of Chinese-laborer migration in the 1800s, deportation of Mexican immigrants and their US-born children in the 1930s and 1940s, and various state- and federal-level restrictions on immigration in the past 30 years (Ngai 2004). However, this hostility also reinforces civic, community, and familial resources; brings together individuals into a collective identity under threat; and triggers the politicization of the immigrant identity toward naturalization and engagement (Chavez, Lavariega Monforti, and Michelson 2015; Ramakrishnan 2006; Wong 2006). Although under siege, immigrant communities have demonstrated in previous waves of attack that they cannot be deterred and, in fact, can pull together to mobilize and push back on these external pressures (Pantoja and Segura 2003).

This study argues that the central mechanism for pushing back is the interconnected nature of an immigrant's experience, particularly as established through familial contacts and networks. Co-workers, friends, teachers, and others interact with immigrant families in ways that provide counter-pressure and reassurance that they are not alone and that there are others like them. Moreover, they provide information, opportunities for engagement, and even motivation or encouragement to further pursue the American Dream. I tested this theory using 2012 Developing as Civic Actors Survey data (García-Castañón and Reedy 2012) and further illustrated this phenomenon among San Francisco Bay Area immigrants

in 2016 with analyses of the 2016 Bay Area Politics Survey (García-Castañón 2016).

In this world, immigrants find avenues for both engagement and learning from necessity (and often desperation), which allows them to become more thoughtful, informed, and active members of their communities. Over time, as familiarity with their new system (and opportunities to engage) increases, they extend their community beyond their immediate contacts and out toward neighborhood, city, state, and even federal communities.

I argue that familial ties, such as those of spouses and children, root immigrants into the community locally, if not more broadly, which results in increased knowledge and engagement about their host nation. Whereas anti-immigrant policies shape those external spaces and push immigrants back into their local community, immigrants often push back and increase their engagement rather than retreat. The pivot point for each reaction? The connectedness of immigrants to their communities, starting with their family. My findings from analyses of Mexican-immigrant and native-born populations in 2012 and in the Bay Area in 2016 demonstrate that an immigrant's family facilitates engagement—if not in the formal areas of voting, then in the informal areas of civic and community engagement. Despite the breadth of literature dedicated to immigrant integration, internal family dynamics remain understudied. This article outlines the framework in which immigrant families play a central and active role in facilitating immigrant citizenship development.

## FRAMEWORK

Immigrants must be resourceful as new arrivals in the United States; they must readjust to new political and cultural systems, new currency, and often a new language. Moreover, they must do so as adults, when opportunities for formal learning are more limited. In the United States, there are no state or government resources for such adaptation, leaving much of this work to be done by the immigrants themselves.<sup>2</sup> Thus, immigrants rely on any of their available resources in ways that are absent from native-born people's experiences. Immigrants have relied on children for translation or indirect learning opportunities; on family members for information about public services, cultural events, and job opportunities; and on co-workers for legal, economic, and political advice. They take their home-country experiences and adapt, creating new networks and expectations about their new host nation (Bloemraad 2006; Lien 2008).

Civic engagement, or connection, root a family in the community—a precursor to more formal ties such as voting and campaign activities (Wong and Tseng 2008). For many, their first roots are in their local immigrant community, often through familial ties. It is among friends, co-workers, neighbors, and family that they gain exposure to American culture, practices, and politics. It is through family that they experience, indirectly, American education as their children attend K–12 and participate in school. These experiences create the

Immigrants, however, outpace both native-born Mexican-origin (71%) and white (81%) respondents as parents, with 88% identifying as parents.

For those immigrants whose children reside with them in the United States, opportunities for civic and political engagement increased as they engaged<sup>4</sup> with their children. Fewer parents identified as “engaged” overall, but immigrant parents were the most engaged with their children of the three groups: a combined 38% identified as engaged at some level,

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framework in which their prior experiences can map onto new contexts—specifically, as they and their families gain familiarity, knowledge, and confidence in newfound membership in their host nation.

#### FINDINGS

To explore the relationships among community, family connections, and immigrants’ civic and political engagement, I analyzed data from the Developing as Civic Actors survey (García-Castañón and Reedy 2012), an original national telephone survey of Mexican-origin and white households conducted in 2012. I started with a basic descriptive analysis of the familial characteristics of three comparison groups: immigrant Mexican-origin, native-born Mexican-origin, and native-born white respondents. I then presented results of controlled bivariate analysis for those relationships in which the variation proved to be statistically significant via chi<sup>2</sup> analysis.<sup>3</sup> This article briefly discusses the survey data analysis of these relationships among Bay Area immigrants in 2016. A detailed description of variable coding, as well as more detailed analyses, is in the online appendix.

The family as an access point is central to understanding immigrant integration into civic and political life. Marital and parental status provide immigrants with invaluable resources and opportunities to learn about their new nation, develop opinions, and engage in their communities—often on behalf or because of those same familial connections. Table 1 illustrates that marriage is the norm for immigrants (63%), native-born whites (70%), and Mexican-origin (58%) respondents.

compared to 25% for native-born Mexican-origin and 27% for native-born white respondents. Thus, it is not sufficient to only have children but also to engage with them through parenting for immigrants to tap into the social, political, and economic opportunities and resources that familial connections may provide.

To what extent do differences in civic connections and engagement exist due to familial connections? My preliminary analyses (see the online appendix) revealed that marital status and engaged parenting changed the rate of civic connections and engagement for all groups. Married respondents had a higher rate of civic ties (48%) than those who were not married (36%); those who engaged with their children the most (i.e., high engagement) had the highest rate of civic ties overall (52%). Table 2 further breaks down this relationship by race and nativity. The results revealed that marriage changes the expected distribution of foreign and native-born Mexican-origin respondents but not for whites at a statistically significant level. For immigrants specifically, marriage changed the distribution of civic ties by 11 points, making those who are married more engaged in their communities (30%) than non-married immigrants (19%). The relationship holds for the native-born but does not reach statistical significance.

Meanwhile, the impact of engaged parenting dramatically changes the distribution of civic connections for all parents who engage with their children. Engaged parenting creates a bridge into civic engagement outside of the family/parenting role. Only 22% of non-engaged parents claim civic engagement among immigrants, 49% for native-born Mexican-origin

Table 1

#### Family Demographics (%) by Nativity and Ethnicity/Race (N = 985)

	Immigrant Mexican (N=500)	Native-Born Mexican (N=271)	Native-Born White (N=214)
Married	63	58	70
Parent	88	71	81
Engaged in parenting (any level)	38	25	27

Source: Developing Civic Actors Survey (2012).

respondents, and 71% for native-born whites. For the most involved immigrant parents (i.e., high engagement), only 35% claim civic engagement, which is significantly lower than the least involved white parent (71%) but 13% higher than the least involved immigrant parent. Thus, engaged parenting helps immigrants bridge the gap in civic engagement. Moreover, the most engaged parents, across all groups, far outpace the least engaged parents in the same group, showing that familial ties encourage civic engagement across nativity, often through active parenting.

higher rates (77%) than their non-married counterparts (47%). This revealed that familial links—even as simple as a spousal connection—shift immigrants toward setting down roots in their host nation. Furthermore, when these immigrants have children, their connection to the new nation strengthens and opportunities for further engagement increase. Although I found little to no difference in naturalization rates of individuals who simply had children, I found that there was a marked difference if immigrants engaged actively with their children (e.g., helping with homework, attending PTA meetings, and

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Finally, I examined the relationship between familial ties and the formal political connections of immigrants, many of which of link to citizenship or more-difficult-to-achieve activities such as voting. Table 3 maps Mexican-origin immigrants' formal political connections and engagements by familial connections. Analyses of other groups are presented in a table in the online appendix. I found that only marital status results in a statistically significant difference for immigrants, indicating that having children or being involved in their upbringing does not yield significant differences in their political connections and engagement. However, relative to not having a spouse (53%), being married results in greater rates of political engagement for immigrants (68%). The ways in which immigrants develop their integration in a new nation may result in shifts in the pursuit of citizenship, as part of their formal political membership.

interacting with the community on their behalf). Immigrant naturalization rates differed based on how engaged parents were with their children: 76% for low engagement and 72% for high engagement, compared to only 61% for immigrant parents with no engagement with their children.

The San Francisco Bay Area provides a glimpse of the hostile environment that immigrants experienced in 2016. Given that this area is home to a wide variety of immigrant groups and has several “sanctuary” cities, the region is easily one of the more visible targets for anti-immigrant attacks. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids to detain and deport undocumented immigrants targeted sanctuary cities in several Bay Area locations in 2017. Therefore, I expected to find in this area a significant amount of evidence of immigrant familial dynamics. Based on analyses of the 2016 Bay Area Politics Survey,<sup>6</sup> I found that family functions differently for immigrants than for native-born individuals during the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric and sentiment. More immigrants viewed their spouse as an important source of political information (51%) than native-born individuals (29%), indicating a

Do differences in naturalization rates exist between married and non-married immigrants? We know that immigration policy favors spouses of citizens for residency status. In this study, married immigrants applied for and achieved naturalization at

Table 2

**Respondent Has Civic Connections/Engagement (%), by Family Characteristics, Nativity, and Ethnicity/Race (N = 985)**

	Immigrant Mexican (N=500)	Native-Born Mexican (N=271)	Native-Born White (N=214)
Marital status			
Not married	19***	46**	66
Married	30***	58**	76
Engaged Parenting			
Non-engaged parent	22***	49**	71**
Low engagement	21***	57**	43**
High engagement	35***	68**	83**

Source: Developing as Civic Actors Survey (2012).  
 Note: Pearson's  $\chi^2$  pr = \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.01.

Table 3

**Respondent Has Formal Political Connections/Engagement (%), by Family Demographics, for Immigrants (N = 500)**

Marital Status***	
Not married	53
Married	68
Parental Status	
Parents	63
Parental Engagement	
Non-engaged parent	61
Low engagement	52
High engagement	69

Source: Developing as Civic Actors Survey (2012).  
 Note: Pearson's  $\chi^2$  pr = \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.01.

different approach to acquiring and processing political information. Furthermore, when it comes to engagement, familial ties make the difference for immigrants and alter their participation rates. Compared to the native-born, more immigrants engage in politics in the Bay Area (51%) overall. Their political engagement, however, varies by with whom they participate: among active immigrants, 14% engage with their children, 45% with other family members, 42% with friends, and only 20% alone. Meanwhile, participation of native-born individuals is drastically different: most engage in political activities alone (40%) and demonstrate a generally low reliance on family for political engagement. Only 25% of native-born people participate with other family members and 5% participate with their children, matching immigrant political-engagement rates only when engaging with friends (42%). Overall, my findings of the Bay Area survey in 2016 strongly support those of the 2012 survey, revealing the importance of family connections in immigrant political and civic engagement.

**IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Research on immigrant family networks and political integration in the United States has only recently started to expand (Gonzales 2011; Wong and Tseng 2008). However, the home and the family provide alternative points of access and development in the contexts of threat and anti-immigrant sentiments present today. Immigrants in 2017 are targets of punitive policies, selective policing, aggressive treatment, and the pent-up rage of a subset of nativists. The Trump administration's rhetoric about immigrants has created conditions under which the stability of immigrant life, families, and communities are questioned. Stories of ICE agents detaining otherwise law-abiding immigrants when they are in particularly vulnerable situations (e.g., dropping off their children at school and seeking justice for crimes in a courthouse) have spiked dramatically. These detentions make previously innocuous or neutral community spaces potentially dangerous,

resulting in heightened tension and fear in quintessentially American communities. It is clear that the spousal and parental dynamics that immigrants engage in daily provide opportunities to learn, interact, and explore their new community.

The Trump presidency and its impact on immigration policy are still unfolding. The damage levied against immigrant communities and families today will be felt for multiple generations. However, emerging from the wreckage brought by this administration is a wounded but resilient immigrant community centered on the family. Modern technology and the availability of social media make the ability to communicate, organize, and self-protect more extensive and accessible, facilitating immigrant interconnections and mobilization. These moments of stress will galvanize these communities and yield new generations of citizens who will not forget the slights and cruelty of the current administration. Future research will examine the fruits of these next few years as a turning point, in which the fear of one community led it to lash out against immigrants—only to produce a generation of active, engaged, and angry new citizens.

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517002372>. ■

**NOTES**

1. Obama-era immigration policies avoided detentions at “sensitive locations” (e.g., schools, hospitals, and courthouses), citing the inherently disruptive nature of such targeting. There was recognition of the limitations of the law, the unfairness of deporting children raised in the United States, separating families, and destroying communities in the name of enforcement.
2. Contrast to Canada, where assimilation/integration programs receive government funding (Bloemraad 2006).
3. Contact the author for more information about these analyses.
4. Engagement is measured as yes/no responses to the following activities: help with homework, engage in discussion, attend PTA meetings, volunteer at school, and learn from their children. Non-engaged parents are excluded. Low-engagement parents participate in one or two activities; high-engagement parents participate in three or more activities.
5. Formal political connections and engagement capture all “institutionally” oriented activities requiring government or party contact. Naturalization is included and provides for those who achieve and/or those who are actively pursuing (i.e., applying or thinking about applying) naturalization. Additional coding detail is provided in the online appendix.
6. The Bay Area Politics Survey is a yearly survey of Bay Area residents on topics ranging from criminal-justice-system interactions, to political opinions and behavior, to familial dynamics. Data were collected from 2014 to 2016, with an approximate sample of N = 700: N = 82 Latino, Middle Eastern, and Asian immigrant respondents and N = 604 native-born respondents. See the online appendix for more information about variable coding and descriptions. Contact the author for more information about these analyses.

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