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## Won't You Be My Neighbor? The Effect of Place and Legal Status on Undocumented Immigrants' Civic Participation

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Undocumented immigrants' lives in the United States are shaped by a multitude of factors. First and foremost, their lack of legal status is an ever-present condition that affects how they interact with the world around them. In addition, the context in which they live also greatly determines how they navigate their daily lives. In this brief, we ask how the presence of local nonprofits, the concentration of coethnics in one's neighborhood, the level of trust among neighbors, and the political climate shape civic engagement, specifically participation in voluntary associations. We find no evidence to suggest that a lack of legal status diminishes the likelihood of participation. Moreover, we find that the political climate impacts volunteering behaviors. Specifically, undocumented immigrants are less likely to participate in voluntary associations if they live in counties that voted heavily for Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

### *Undocumented Immigrants and Civic Engagement*

A central component of civic engagement is participation in local associations such as neighborhood organizations, faith-based groups, educational organizations, and ethnic associations.<sup>1</sup> For undocumented immigrants, this type of engagement can be a major stepping-stone toward integration. Since undocumented immigrants are precluded from participating in formal modes of civic participation, such as voting, local associations can provide an alternative way in which they can advocate for their needs and improve the quality of their daily lives in the receiving society. Associations might be particularly important for undocumented immigrants because they may increase one's awareness of, and access to, resources. These resources can include access to health and human services, assistance making legal claims



against discriminatory employment practices, or information about employment opportunities.<sup>2</sup> In addition, participation in informal associations can be a pathway towards more formal methods of political engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Although undocumented immigrants may benefit from participating in local associations, few studies examine how participation varies by legal status. Legal status is important because it can impact one's willingness or ability to participate. Studies of undocumented immigrants have shown multiple ways in which a lack of formal legal status shapes everyday behaviors, including various forms of civic engagement. On the one hand, there is evidence that immigrants without legal status may avoid behaviors that are perceived to increase the risk of interacting with law enforcement, such as driving, applying for a new license, taking children to medical appointments, or attending church.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there is evidence that undocumented immigrants actively participate in local politics and community activities.<sup>5</sup> As civic participation is one of the touchstones of integration,<sup>6</sup> we ask whether a lack of legal status encourages or inhibits participation in local voluntary associations.

Civic participation requires individuals to engage with the broader community. As such, the communities where undocumented immigrants live may also determine whether they get involved in local associations. There are several characteristics of a community that could shape participation. First, community-based organizations (CBOs) might increase participation if they provide undocumented immigrants with culturally and linguistically appropriate resources. For example, CBOs could guide immigrants through complicated bureaucracies and keep them informed of their rights. Second, the degree of trust among residents within a community might shape participation, as immigrants who trust their neighbors might have more information about opportunities to get involved. Third, ethnic enclaves might lower barriers to participation, as immigrants rely on close family and friends for the social support and encouragement necessary to engage in civic

activities. Finally, the political climate, such as the existence of restrictive immigration policies, may dissuade immigrants from getting involved in their local communities for fear of retribution that could lead to deportation.

#### *Findings: Legal Status, Context, and Civic Engagement*

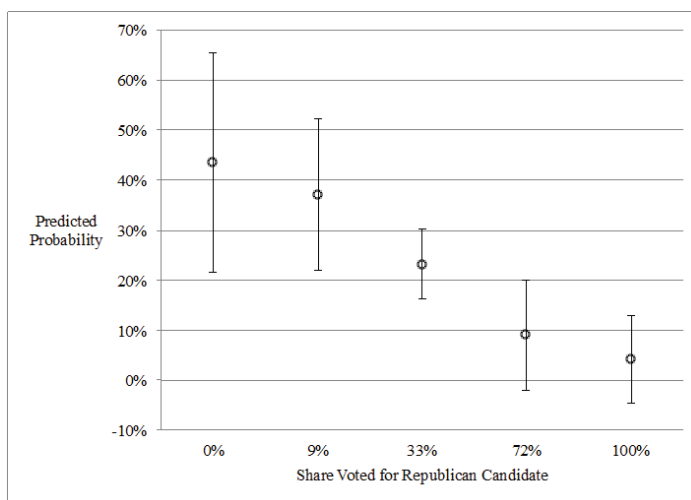
We estimated the likelihood of participation for immigrants with different legal statuses living in a variety of contexts within California. We drew primarily on pooled data from the confidential files of the 2015-2016 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), which provided sufficient information for identifying immigrants, their legal statuses, and the neighborhoods where they live. To estimate participation in voluntary organizations, we constructed a dichotomous dependent variable from the following CHIS survey question: "In the past 12 months, have you done any volunteer work or community service that you have not been paid for?" To construct several of our independent variables, we relied on data from the American Community Survey, the National Center for Charitable Statistics, and voting results from the 2016 presidential election.

We found evidence that undocumented immigrants in California participate in voluntary associations at lower rates than other groups of immigrants and non-migrants. However, we found no evidence to suggest that this gap in participation results from differences in legal status. After controlling for individual and household level attributes that might shape one's willingness and ability to participate in voluntary associations, we found no significant difference in the probability of participation between undocumented immigrants and either naturalized immigrants or non-migrants living in California.

We also found little evidence to suggest that differences in the likelihood of participation between undocumented immigrants and naturalized immigrants result from the characteristics and qualities of one's neighborhood, such as the concentration of local nonprofits, the concentration

of coethnics in one's neighborhood, trust among neighbors, or the political leanings of residents. Instead, variation in rates of participation between undocumented immigrants and all other Californians may result from differences other than legal status. It may be that undocumented immigrants less often participate in voluntary associations because they have fewer opportunities – or less ability – to do so. For example, they may have fewer opportunities as a result of having to work more hours to make ends meet, having less access to transportation that might be necessary for meeting with others, or having less information about voluntary associations due to language barriers.

Figure 1: Participation in Voluntary Associations for Undocumented Immigrants



Finally, we found evidence that undocumented immigrants were less likely to participate in voluntary associations if they lived in counties that voted heavily for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. We estimated the likelihood of participation for an individual with the average characteristics of undocumented immigrants in our sample. We made these estimates assuming residency in counties with increasing levels of support for Donald Trump. Figure 1 illustrates the results. We estimated the probability of participation for undocumented immigrants to be 37% in a county like San Francisco, where approximately 9% of voters cast a vote for

Donald Trump. We estimated the probability of participation to be 9% in a place like Lassen County, where approximately 72% of voters cast a vote for Donald Trump.<sup>7</sup> In other words, we found evidence to suggest that undocumented immigrants were less likely to participate in voluntary associations as the share of votes for Donald Trump increased.

### Conclusion

Our findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship that explains the relationship between legal status, the context of reception, and civic engagement. They suggest that a lack of legal status may not prevent participation in local voluntary associations. This finding is consistent with recent studies of civic integration showing that undocumented immigrants participate in the political process despite an inability to vote. The findings also advance our understanding about how integration processes unfold unevenly as a result of the variation in the places where immigrants settle. We know that subnational immigration policies, varying levels of enforcement of immigration policies, and different geographic landscapes can all shape the experience of settling in a new place. We contribute to these studies by showing how the political climate in which undocumented immigrants live may impact their willingness to participate in voluntary associations. Given that immigration policy is a salient topic of public debate that is oftentimes infused with overtly xenophobic rhetoric, this brief demonstrates how the broader political atmosphere can trickle down to influence the everyday behaviors of undocumented immigrants.

<sup>1</sup> Ramakrishnan, S. Karthick and Celia Viramontes. 2006. *Civic Inequalities: Immigrant Volunteerism and Community Organizations in California*. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California.

<sup>2</sup> Cordero-Guzmán, Héctor R. 2005. "Community-Based Organisations and Migration in New York City." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(5):889-909; Gleeson, Shannon. 2009. "From

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<sup>3</sup> Zukin, Cliff, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Carpini. 2006. *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Aranda, Elizabeth and Elizabeth Vaquera. 2015. “Racism, the Immigration Enforcement Regime, and the Implications for Racial Inequality in the Lives of Undocumented Young Adults.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(1):88–104; Menjívar, Cecilia. 2011. “The Power of the Law: Central Americans’ Legality and Everyday Life in Phoenix, Arizona.” *Latino Studies* 9(4):377–95.

<sup>5</sup> Bloemraad, Irene, Heidi Sarabia, and Angela E. Fillingim. 2016. “‘Staying Out of Trouble’ and Doing What Is ‘Right’ Citizenship Acts, Citizenship Ideals, and the Effects of Legal Status on Second-Generation Youth.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 60(13):1534–1552; Gast, Melanie Jones and Dina G. Okamoto. 2016. “Moral or Civic Ties? Deservingness and Engagement among Undocumented Latinas in Non-Profit Organisations.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(12):2013–30; Fiorito, Tara R. and Walter J. Nicholls. 2016. “Silencing to Give Voice: Backstage Preparations in the Undocumented Youth Movement in Los Angeles.” *Qualitative Sociology* 39(3):287–308.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, Milton Myron. 1964. *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> The non-overlapping confidence intervals surrounding these two estimates suggest that there is a significant difference in the likelihood of participation across these political contexts.





ENDNOTES



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