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Immigrant Civic Participation

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Senior Honors Thesis
Spring 2007
Tara, an immigrant from Albania, first came to the United States in 1981. Over the last two decades, she has worked to build her English language skills, her education and her career. Throughout this process, Tara has also become an active participant in the social life of her new community. Upon her immigration,

“[She] became involved in the Albanian community by helping with immigration papers, writing in Albanian newspapers, representing the Albanian community, participating in advocacy efforts that included a visit to the White House, and serving as vice president of a public interest group of Albanian women (Berger 81).”

Mary, a 26-year-old woman from Egypt, found it difficult to become involved in the community when she first moved to the U.S. three years ago. She spent much of her time caring for her family and studying to pass her Test of Spoken English in order to get a job. Mary has passed her exam, received her professional license, and has found a job. She and her family have also become involved in a Coptic Orthodox church, where a large number of Coptic Orthodox Egyptians also attended.

While Mary’s community involvement has come mainly through work and religious organizations, and Tara’s work has been primarily within nationality groups, both women’s activities falls within the larger category of “Civic Participation.” Tara and Mary embody two features which have characterized the United States since its inception—they are both immigrants and civic participants. As arguably the first liberal democratic country since its official founding, the United States has long relied on a vibrant and pro-active basis of social capital to achieve a functioning, effective democracy. Throughout its history, the U.S. has also been a leading receiving country for immigrants. Much ink has been spilt in trying to understand how these two

1 Name changed to protect privacy.
characteristics, so often viewed as disparate and inherently unable to co-exist in a stable manner, have managed to succeed for over two hundred years.

The interaction between non-native born populations living in an adopted society and the realm of public participation has generated much interest and research, with much of it focusing on the political participation of immigrants. Existing literature suggests that non-native born residents in the U.S. are less likely than native born citizens to vote or to actively engage in campaign activities (Jones-Correa 551). While studying the political participation of immigrants does indeed lead to increased knowledge of their political participation (as it has traditionally been understood), it cannot form the sole basis for our understanding of the way in which immigrants engage public life in the U.S.

Public participation includes political participation and civic participation, with both political and civic engagement drawing from each other to form a healthy, functioning society. Researchers and students of immigration issues must be willing to explore each facet of this relationship in order to create a truly comprehensive portrait of the public lives of immigrants. Of key importance to understanding the public life of the U.S. is examining the civic participation of immigrants. Although the subject requires more exploration, immigrants do appear to participate civically, and do so for both personal and public benefits. Immigrant populations feel a greater inclination to participate civically than they do to participate in traditional or conventional ways due to the absence of legal and social barriers surrounding civic participation and the presence of tangible, recurrent benefits that civic participation brings with it. Ultimately, the key to understanding how subsequent wave of immigrants have been able to integrate into
U.S. society lies as much with (if not more with) civic participation than with political participation.

**Public and Political Participation**

In order to set the context of civic participation, one must first distinguish it from public and political participation. The concept of public participation, quite simply, consists of all those actions taken by private citizens (those not acting on behalf of the government), in conjunction with other citizens, with a purpose other than private benefit. An important means of participating publicly comes through participating in the political structures and activities of a nation. Throughout the United States’ history, political participation has been closely scrutinized as a result of its close relationship to democracy. Systematic studies of political participation in the United States began as early as Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1831 treatise Democracy in America. In his oft-quoted writings, Tocqueville explores and marvels at the freedom that Americans possessed concerning participation in government and politics. In particular, he separates public participation into political and civic realms (the latter of which will be discussed further on in this work). Political associations, beyond clearly governmental organizations, encompass spheres such as public security, commerce, and industry (Tocqueville 215). To Tocqueville, participation lay not just in interacting with governmental institutions, but also in forming associations to shape, re-direct, challenge, support, and mold government.

In the twentieth century, scholars began to challenge Tocqueville’s view of political participation and associations. Several competing views of political participation emerged. Some approaches separate civic from political participation
entirely, while others acknowledge a connection (of varying degrees) between the two. Verba, Nie, and Kim offer this definition, “Political participation is the means by which the interests, desires, and demands of the ordinary citizen are communicated...[and are] aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the decisions that they make,” (9). Whereas considerable disagreement abounds as to what exactly constitutes each, many scholars agree that there exist conventional and unconventional forms of political participation. Verba, Nie, and Kim discuss four “modes of participation” (voting, campaign activities, cooperative activities, and citizen-initiated contacts) that constitute conventional participation. Noticeably absent from their modes of participation are protests, demonstrations, and other highly conflictual, highly visible activities.

Russell Dalton re-classifies the four modes of participation into three conventional forms of political involvement and a non-conventional branch (36-38). Voting, campaign activities, and communal activities are listed as “conventional” activities. All three seek political participation through stable, lawful means. Dalton’s unconventional form of participation includes protests, demonstrations, and unlawful strikes or occupations (65). Dalton seeks to classify participation based on legality and promotion of democratic stability. Yet, the activities which he places under the labels “conventional” and “unconventional” are potentially misleading. Few would argue that voting and campaign activities do not constitute a conventional, or status quo, activity. Such actions support political institutions, reinforce existing democratic norms, and allow for a means of checks and balances between the citizenry and their elected officials. Beyond voting and campaigning, the terms suggest that activities such as
protests and demonstrations do not have political change as their primary goal, that to protest against the policies or actions of a state is in some way unusual or exceptional. Likewise, terming communal activities as conventional implies that all communal activities expressly seek political or social change, that they are activist, or that they fall within a single category of participation.

For the purposes of this essay, political participation is divided into two subheadings—conventional and ultra-political. Conventional participation includes voting, campaign activities, and directly contacting elected officials. Demonstrations, strikes, and the like are best classified as ultra-political activities. Far from being an unlikely form of participation (as “unconventional” implies), protests extend the boundaries of participation from merely expressing the will of citizens to elected officials to forcing those officials to do (or at least negotiate) citizen propositions. Therefore, protests, strikes, and similar activities are best understood as ultra-political in that they seek highly political goals through often radical actions. Whether conventional or ultra-political, political participation forms only one facet of public life. Civic participation also plays a role in shaping the nature of a society.

Civic Participation

While political participation has been given pride of place in participation literature, a newer body of research has focused on how people participate civically. Specifically, civic participation literature looks at the associations that people join and the activities that they perform as a means of supporting democratic values and of impacting formal governmental structures through non-governmental groups. Although the civic participation of native-born citizens in the U.S. is beginning
to be more fully understood, there remains a dearth of analysis on the civic participation of immigrants. In reference to immigrants, specifically, many scholars and researchers to date have focused on the conventional political participation of immigrants in the United States. Such a focus is, perhaps, the most poorly chosen measure of immigrants’ involvement in the U.S. that can be selected. Many immigrants face significant barriers to participating by conventional political means. Yet, immigrants, both by necessity and by choice, must take part in the public life around them. Conventional forms of participation, due to their infrequent and unique natures, do not provide an accurate portrait of the daily lives of immigrants. Thus, immigrants turn to civic participation in order to fulfill the needs brought about by living in a society.

Civic participation, like its political counterpart, covers a wide range of definitions and characteristics. Some scholars, such as Dalton and Verba, Nie, and Kim, take a narrower view, while others (namely Robert Putnam) relax the boundaries of civic participation to include even the most informal of events. Although a newer body of research than traditional political participation, civic participation has roots stretching back to the 19th century, with the works of Tocqueville.

On Tocqueville’s journey through the United States, he continuously observed the wide-spread phenomenon of civic associations.

“Americans associate to give fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to erect churches, to distribute books, and to send missionaries to the antipodes. This is how they create hospitals, prisons, and schools. If, finally, they wish to publicize a truth or foster a sentiment with the help of a great example, they associate.” (595).

Tocqueville’s list of associations draws many interesting corollaries. His civic associations are voluntary, communal, and work to some kind of greater good (although
that good might not be expressly political). This, then, is the starting point for an understanding of civic associations. Like political organizations, civic associations rely on groups of citizens working in concert for a common goal. A critical difference between political and civic groups thus comes from differences in the purposes of both types of organizations.

Verba, Nie, and Kim expand on Tocqueville’s expression of community. As a mode of democratic participation, cooperative activities reinforce democratic norms and increase the likelihood that such participation will be for the benefit of multiple people or groups. They do not distinguish between civic and political participation, treating all actions as political. This strict view of the field creates a conception of civic participation as an arm of political participation. Non-political organizations, instead of being classified as civic, become “social” organizations.

Russell Dalton accepts a more mediated view of communal activities than Verba, Nie, and Kim. Like those scholars, he rolls civic participation into political participation. Dalton’s conception of civic organizations includes only those associations and activities which are overtly political in nature, yet he accepts diverse organizations (such as the PTA and neighborhood improvement committees) as meeting that criteria.

On the opposite end of the continuum lies Robert Putnam. His groundbreaking work, *Bowling Alone*, defines civic participation in far broader terms than most other scholars allow. Putnam identifies two loose categories into which civic participation can fall—formal and informal connections. Formal connections result in political, religious, and civic participation, while informal connections yield greater social capital, an important aspect of civic participation (informal connections will be discussed in greater
Putnam’s conception of political organizations includes all associations which seek socio-political change through traditionally political means, and religious associations consist of any organization run by or through a faith-group (31, 63). He also includes a separate category for work-related organizations, such as labor unions and professional development societies (Putnam 80). Nearly all other associations, organizations, groups, and clubs fall under the “civic participation” category (Putnam 48). Such groups cover a broad range of purposes, goals, sizes, locations, and commitments. Yet, they all share in common the thread of volunteerism and some sort of collective interest (Putnam 49).

In light of the multitude of definitions for “civic participation,” an explicit working definition of the concept must be developed. While Verba, Nie, and Kim’s view of civic participation unnecessarily limits the ways in which a member of society may be viewed as contributing to society (both to the community and to democracy), Putnam’s view stretches the opposite boundary. By equating informal gatherings with the overall health of society, Putnam reaches into speculative territory. Are nations where people host others for dinner more often than others really healthier, wealthier, and stronger than those that do not, as Putnam suggests? Rather than accepting either of these two somewhat extreme views, I suggest that civic participation lies somewhere in between. In order to be considered “civic participation”:

1.) The organization must involve more than one person

2.) The organization must have a common interest or purpose that ultimately benefits a wider range of people than simply the group’s members.

3.) The organization must not promote anarchical or nihilistic beliefs or behaviors
The first criterion addresses the social nature of civic participation. The purpose of civic participation is to engage with and affirm one’s membership in a society. Society cannot be affirmed by one’s self; hence, the necessity of more than one person.

The second measure confines the definition of civic organizations to those groups which have some sort of over-arching purpose or goal. It can be argued that many groups that fall under this category exist only to perpetuate the self-interests of group members. While that may be the case, civic organizations also positively impact (either directly or indirectly) a wider range of people. Thus, examples of civic organizations include PTAs, women’s groups, and local community groups. What about associations with an inward focus, such as literary clubs, sports clubs, or cooking clubs? None of these examples, nor many others, directly benefits members outside the organization. However, each has the opportunity to draw in more members from the community and to engage with a wider range of persons outside the group (as through community fundraisers, advertising, etc.).

The third criterion bars groups which ultimately seek the destruction or elimination of some segment of politics or society. Some groups which might classify as “civic” can, and do, encompass organizations which do not support part or all of a government, its institutions, or some facet of society. However, as stated in the second criteria, civic organizations must seek some sort of wider benefit. Based on their fundamentally anti-social and often violent nature, any claim that anarchy or nihilism benefit society cannot be substantiated.

Utilizing these three criteria, “civic participation” encompasses any activity or organization which seeks to positively impact society, through explicitly political means,
mixed socio-political channels, or by entirely social avenues, and which involves more than one person. While this understanding of civic participation differs significantly from other scholarly definitions, it best underscores the type of connections and associations which relate to immigrants lives, which are measurable, and which meaningfully derive from social capital—an indicator of the overall health of a society.

The social capital of a society can be viewed as a thermometer of a society’s overall wellness, which produces civic participation as a sign of good health. As Putnam defines it, social capital, “refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (19).” Viewed in this light, social capital is the networks that connect one person to another in a society. These networks offer both private and public benefits, resulting in a multi-layered, multi-purpose web. While personal benefits resulting from social capital undoubtedly improve the lives of individual persons, it is in the capacity of social capital to spur a person to deeper and more meaningful social connections, which often result in public benefits, that social capital is most useful to understanding societies. The denser the social capital network of a society, the more people interact with and trust one another, and thus a more effective society will exist (Putnam 136). Dense networks, like the benefits derived from them, occur on both personal and public levels. If many individuals in a community actively participate in organizations and groups within and around that community, those individuals plus the community in which they live benefit from this social density. Thin networks do not work as effectively as thick ones. If one or two connections break, those ties cannot be easily replaced. While civic participation and social capital rely on each other and are intertwined, they should not be mistaken as interchangeable terms. Social
capital refers to the over-all levels of trust and connectedness that a society has at its disposal to utilize towards the further accruement of social capital and for public good. Civic participation measures how a person is or is not involved with, participates in, or associates themselves with a group. Social capital measures how many people are involved civically and how this involvement benefits both citizens and the nation as a whole.

Civic engagement comes as a result of civic participation. It is the degree to which a person’s over-all connectedness to society can be measured. It answers the question, “How involved with society are you?” Social capital yields a higher degree of civic engagement, which yields higher civic participation. More civic participation yields greater civic engagement, spurring even higher levels of social capital. This concurrent process of give-and-take forms the means by which humans are able to live in close contact with each other. In any population, but especially among immigrants—uprooted from their former communities—social capital networks are essential to creating a functional society.

**Immigration**

The concept and practice of immigration has a long and varied history. While specific definitions vary, all scholars agree that immigration involves the process of moving from one place to another. Throughout history, immigrants--all those persons committing the act of immigration--have shown themselves to be a fluid, continually shifting population, both in terms of who qualifies as an immigrant and in the impact that they have had on the United States. A common measure of the immigrant population of the United States derives from the total percentage of foreign-born persons living in the
country (Hirschman 2005). All those persons residing in the U.S. who were born in a
different country to non-U.S. citizen parents count as immigrants. This standard,
Hirschman asserts, proves highly problematic, providing only an insufficient
understanding of the true size and nature of the immigrant community. Immigration, far
from being a simple measure of the number of foreign-born persons living in the U.S.,
draws from a variety of dynamic, compounding factors.

Portes and Rumbaut (1996) identify four main groups of immigrants, whose,
“socioeconomic origin and reasons for departure…tend to be associated with different
courses of adaptation once in the United States.” (1996). According to Portes and
Rumbaut, manual labor migrants, foreign professionals, entrepreneurial groups, and
refugees constitute the vast majority of immigrants (1996). The first three groups are
typically considered “voluntary migrants,” signifying that the choice to leave the home
country did not arise from fear of some type of persecution (http://www.unhcr.org/basics/
BASICS/3b0280294.html#migrants). Refugees, those persons forced to involuntarily
flee their homeland, can be, and often are, considered as a distinct group. Yet, the
situations of both voluntary migrants and refugees share fundamental characteristics in
common, such as residence in a new country with a different political system and culture,
and less inclination to participate in conventional forms of political participation (Harles
102-103, 168).

A common theme running throughout all types of immigration, from refugees to
labor migrants to professional workers, is that of employment. The overwhelming
majority of immigrants come to the U.S. for reasons of economic self-improvement, a
goal which can only be realized by seeking work (Suárez-Orozco 58-59). Marcelo
Suárez-Orozco stresses the heterogeneous nature of the immigrant-employment relationship in the U.S., with many immigrants found in the highly-skilled, highly educated top bracket, and many more in the semi- or un-skilled, poorly educated category (63-64). Immigrants naturally gather in areas where employment opportunities abound, contributing to either the social upkeep or social decline of population centers. Caroline B. Brettell identifies Providence, Rhode Island as a city which depended on a continuous flow of new immigrants for much of its history (179-180). When immigration slowed in the late 1900’s, the city experienced profound decline (Brettell 180).

While the variety and number of different types of immigrants and quasi-immigrants prohibits their full explication, two sub-categories merit discussion. The children of immigrants pose difficulty in defining immigration, as they do not fit neatly into any given demographic category. Of specific note is the 1.5 generation—those children born in another country to immigrant parents who arrived at a very young age. Although open to debate, the country of origin will likely play a formative part of the identity of the 1.5 generation (as cultural transmission will occur through parents, through contact with extended family and friends in the county of origin, and through other immigrants in the U.S.), even though such persons might not remember or feel closely connected to that country. In comparing the 1.5 generation with subsequent cohorts, it becomes evident that they are more likely to be impacted by values and norms of the country of origin, to observe traditional celebrations, and to speak the language of the country of origin, due to their sustained contact with their immigrant parents during their formative years (Hirschman 597-598). Hirschman argues that the lingering impact of immigration extends to the children of immigrants born in the U.S., and even on to
grandchildren (the second and third generation). Since the second and third generation typically has ties to another culture, political and social structures, and language, their impact equals that of an immigrants’. At the same time, these cohorts re-shape U.S. politics and culture with their relatively high levels of political participation (sometimes exceeding that of native-born citizens who do not have immigrant parents). However, their inclusion in a discussion of the civic participation of immigrants changes the nature of the understanding of “immigrant.” By including a population who receive a different set of cultural influences than their immigrant parents and grandparents, our understanding of how the people who decided to leave their home country and come to the U.S. interact with public life. As such, they will not be included.

The second common type of quasi-immigrant concerns children born to U.S.-citizen parents who grow up abroad, or non-resident citizens. Typical members of this group include children of diplomats, government workers, multinational corporation employees, missionary children, and children of U.S. émigrés. Like the second and third generations, the inclusion of non-resident citizens in a study of immigrants skews the overall portrait of immigrant life to include a population that has been views and engages the public world in a potentially different manner than an immigrant.

Additional Considerations

To this point, it has been determined that immigrants include labor-seeking migrants, foreign professionals, entrepreneurial groups, and refuges, but not the second or third generations nor non-resident citizens. Two major groups of non-citizens living in the U.S. escape the definition of “immigrant” as it has so far been described. Most prominently, illegal immigrants and foreign exchange students comprise sizeable
populations, yet both impact civic participation in a manner different from that of an immigrant, as understood in traditional terms. It is these two groups which cause the boundaries of “immigrant” to stretch and blur significantly.

Illegal immigrants come for a variety of reasons and in a number of different manners. Some enter the country by means of illegal entry, while nearly 40% overstay their visas (Vaughan 1). Illegal immigrants form a large percentage of the overall foreign-born population of the U.S. Although estimates vary widely, experts estimate that around 10 million illegal immigrants reside in the U.S. (Vaughan 1). In taking a general definition of immigration, illegal immigrants meet all criteria. They come from a home country and take up residence in a host country. Illegal immigrants, as a whole, come to find work, placing them in the same category as legal manual labor migrants. Finally, they bring with them many of the same cultural, social, and political norms found in legal immigrants. Yet, many illegal immigrants negatively skew civic participation (as compared to the positive skew of the second and third generations). Due to their formal status, many illegal immigrants attempt to live as low-key lives as possible, strongly discouraging their participation in civic associations for fear of being reported to authorities. The inclusion of illegal immigrants in a definition of immigrants has the potential to create a framework which shows that immigrants as a whole participate civically at far lower rates than a less inclusive definition might show. Another complicating factor in deciding this matter revolves around the highly mobile nature of the illegal immigrant community. Many illegal immigrants migrate back and forth across borders, making them not permanent residents (as the word “immigrant” often evokes, but trans-state mobile workers. For this work, illegal
immigrants will not be included, although the benefits and barriers derived from participation by legal immigrants may be expected to have similar effects on illegal immigrants.

The United States hosts a large number of foreign students, from high-school exchange students up to foreign nationals who come to the U.S. for doctoral studies. As with illegal immigrants, an abundance of factors exist to both include and exclude foreign exchange students. As non-nationals living in a host country, students have incentive to become active in public life as a means of engaging in American culture. Verba, Nie, and Kim demonstrate the importance of education in conventional political participation, and the same likely holds true for civic participation (97-99). Students, then, can be expected to demonstrate a relatively high degree of civic participation. However, does the strong presence of civicness among students skew results in the same way that the political awareness of the second and third generations skews conventional political participation? Furthermore, since students are temporary residents, it is more difficult to measure their civic engagement in terms of longevity. Students also do not fit any of the four criteria for immigrants discussed previously. The differences between immigrants and students outweigh the similarities (at least as defined in this study) and therefore preclude students’ inclusion. As with illegal immigrants, it should be noted that that which is applicable to traditional immigrants regarding civic participation shares similarities with characteristics of foreign exchange students.

Native-Born Citizens

To this point, the identity of one important group has been alluded to, but not yet defined. Native-born citizens, as the name suggests, include all those members of the
U.S. who were legally born U.S. citizens. Given this definition, it is worth noting that naturalized citizens neither fall under the strictest interpretation of immigrants, nor can they be classified as native-born citizens. Owing to the unique attributes and activities of naturalized citizens, they will here be treated as a separate group and will largely not be included in considerations. This is not to deny the importance of the several million-strong naturalized citizen community, but rather to separate out their unique influence. In both civic and political participation, native-born citizens demonstrate the highest willingness to participate. As compared to immigrants of all categories, native-born citizens routinely (and solidly) demonstrate higher levels of voting, campaigning, and other conventional activities (Clark 179-180). In terms of civic participation, native-born citizens traditionally have founded, run, and been actively involved with nearly all forms of civic organizations. However, throughout generations of native-born citizens, the cultures and impact of immigrants have been intertwined.

**History of Immigrant Participation in the United States**

Immigration has profoundly affected the history of the United States, in both the role that immigrants have performed in forming civic society and in shaping the political mechanisms of the country. Numerous in-depth histories of immigration in the U.S have already been written, and will not be expanded upon here. Instead, a more relevant area of focus concerns the direct impact that immigrants have had in the arena of civic participation. Many of the immigrants who came to the U.S. before 1965 originated from Europe, especially Western Europe (Tichenor 46). Upon arrival in the U.S., they faced both discrimination and a dominant cultural model that pushed for their rapid
assimilation. Within the span of two or three generations, immigrants had been woven into the fabric of the United States’ public life (Huntington 178). In the political arena, immigrants became naturalized and involved themselves in the electoral process. On the civic side, immigrants joined with native-born citizens in civic activities across the spectrum. From churches to sewing circles to farmer’s groups, trade unions, professional associations, etc, immigrants became involved in the everyday life of the U.S.

In the post-1965 period, immigration has once again increased (after a noticeable decrease from the early 20th century until after World War Two) (Huntington 195). At the same time, Anglo-conformist assimilation no longer holds as much societal weight as it once did (Huntington 129-130). Culture is now viewed as a natural right, and paradigms such as cultural pluralism and multiculturalism have arisen, challenging the idea of any level of assimilation. In the civic arena, this has meant that (along with a drop in native-born citizen civic participation), immigrants are no longer expected to join in overt forms of political participation. More sweeping versions of multiculturalism argue against immigrant participation in mainstream society, fearing that it results in a loss of immigrant culture and in assimilation to the dominant group.

**Immigrants and Civic Participation**

Existing research on the public lives of immigrants indicates that immigrants are less likely than their demographically matched, native-born counterparts to participate in conventional forms of politics (Harles 102). Many scholars accept that immigrants, owing to a variety of factors, generally take little interest in the formal political processes of the U.S., yet lingering questions remain regarding the impact of social connectedness, social trust, and civic participation. Leighley and Vedlitz, Putnam, Stepick and Stepick,
and Harles explore the connection between immigrants, civic participation and engagement, and the U.S. democratic structure. Stepick and Stepick raise a number of questions regarding the civic participation of immigrants.

“The presence of immigrants in large numbers certainly does raise concerns and questions as to how they can socially, politically, and, more generally, civically incorporate into U.S. society…Do immigrants’ foreign, transnational roots mean they are less civically engaged in the United States? Do they relate to the broader community any differently than earlier immigrants or the native-born; are they more insular, more family oriented?” (247).

Previous research has indicated that the answer to these questions is yes—immigrants have traditionally been viewed as non-participants, both politically and civically. A possible exception centers on naturalized immigrants, who appear to vote and become involved in community activities more frequently than non-naturalized immigrants (Harles 103). Thus, the prevailing thesis in approaching the issue of immigrants and political-civic participation has been that immigrants rarely participate civically, and even less politically, owing to factors of citizenship, culture, and identity. While it would be difficult indeed to deny that immigrants participate in conventional political activities far less often than do native-born citizens, it is precisely the presence of such factors as lack of citizenship, and different cultures and identities that encourage the civic participation of immigrants in the U.S.

If they do not participate in conventional political manners, how exactly do immigrants participate on the civic level? In many areas of the country (predominantly urban areas), immigrants form close to or over half of the total population (Clark 38). Civic organizations continue to function in those areas, suggesting that at least a
portion of the immigrant community becomes involved in those activities. As Putnam
discusses, the ways in which immigrants participate civically (that is, the groups which
they join) tend to mirror that of native-born citizens, with the exception of nationality
groups (292). According to Tichenor, some such groups have risen from civic
organizations with non-political purposes to civic organizations who also seek political
change and who have garnered substantial measures of political power (9).

One striking way in which immigrants have the potential to participate civically
can be seen in school organizations. Immigrant populations have repeatedly brought with
them higher than average fertility rates vis-à-vis native-born citizens. Studies have
shown that an increasing number of schoolchildren come from immigrant homes (Stepick
and Stepick 247). Thus, an ideal measure of civic participation is to examine the role of
the PTA in schools. As a civic organization that is broadly applicable to the lives of
many immigrants, the PTA allows immigrant parents the opportunity to participate
publicly in a group which can put the skills and abilities of parents to use despite
language and cultural barriers. Although Robert Putnam laments the decline of the PTA,
the organization continues to exist nationwide and maintains an active role in schools
across the country. As more and more U.S. schoolchildren have come from immigrant
families, a greater percentage of immigrant parents and families have come into contact
with the PTA and similar organizations. While exact data for PTA membership and
nation of origin is not available, Putnam’s state-by-state breakdown of levels of civic
participation and social capital indicate that the states with the highest levels of
immigrants fit the national average for civic participation and social capital (292-
293). By extension, states with larger immigrant populations are maintaining their civic
participation levels—including in organizations such as the PTA. Although little conclusive evidence can be offered at this point, the impact of immigration on the ever-changing dynamics of American public life can be captured in the microcosm of the PTA. Monitoring the changing nature of parent participation in schools over the coming decades will provide a glimpse into how immigrants interact with the U.S. public on a sensitive issue—their children’s education.

Another useful category of organizations to examine are sports clubs. Unlike PTA’s and other formal civic organizations, which by nature have the potential to intimidate, sports clubs provide a level meeting space for immigrants of all backgrounds to participate civically. Due to their widespread availability, the common understanding of sports, the limited dominant-language and formal education skills needed, and the chance to make social connections, sports clubs offer an ideal venue in which immigrants can participate. Putnam cites sports as one of the few group activities which have seen an increase in participation over the last three decades (59). Interestingly, Putnam notes that participation in soccer (not a traditionally popular sport in the U.S.) has increased in that same time, while sports such as baseball, softball, and football have seen a decrease in involvement (Putnam 109).

Although the focus of this study is not on informal activities, it is worth noting that such connections can form a valuable component of an immigrant’s social integration. Social webs, daily contact with a variety of other people, and a larger sense of identity and purpose form the bases by which a society coheres. The same is no less true of the U.S. immigrant community. Immigrants, like native-born citizens, engage in continual, meaningful informal activities. Of the eight respondents in a case study
conducted for this work, all eight reported engaging in informal activities, from having friends over for dinner to chatting with neighbors, with both immigrants and native-born citizens. While not overtly civic in nature, informal activities expand an immigrant’s social network, solidify interpersonal ties, and produce knowledge capital. For instance, an immigrant who invites another immigrant friend over for a social evening has the opportunity to compare activities, to learn about organizations and opportunities available in the area, and to discuss needs or problems that the two friends have witnessed. This “knowledge capital” can then be taken to a larger group (say, a neighborhood association or church group), and the transition from informal to civic has begun. Due to demographic factors (such as the concentration of immigrants in urban areas, and immigrants’ increased likelihood to be among lower socio-economic classes), the shape that informal activities takes on is likely different than among native-born, suburban Americans. However, to believe that immigrants are less likely to form and maintain informal social connections perpetuates stereotypes of immigrants as fundamentally “different” than native-born citizens.

Evaluating the Political vs. Civic Claim

Thus far it has been claimed that immigrants are more likely to participate civically than they are to engage in conventional political forms of participation. A number of factors encourage civic participation over political involvement. Of these numerous causes, four main factors form the basis of participation.

First, immigrants bring with them a diverse set of cultural principles and practices. Language and outward appearance provide easily identifiable markers of immigrants, but worldviews, patterns of behavior, interpersonal relationships, and ways
of relating to society as a whole constitute the meat of immigrants’ differences with native-born citizens. While not universal, collectivist and communitarian values are more likely to be witnessed in immigrant communities than in native-born U.S. citizen populations (Pipher). In many cultures, the needs and rights of the group take precedence over needs of individuals. This value has the potential to clash strongly when introduced into the highly individualistic society of the United States. As a liberal democracy, the U.S. has placed strong emphasis on individual rights (in exchange for freedom and other “American” values). Sweeping generalizations do little to further our understanding of other societies, but it is simultaneously difficult to measure the degree of collectivism in a society owing to variations within each society. However, many countries exhibit higher tendencies towards collectivism than does the United States. Thus, many immigrants bring with them a stronger emphasis on the centrality of community in a person’s everyday life.

Second, unlike the highly abstract forms of political participation, civic participation confirms a person’s group and personal identity. By joining a group, a person can better define not only who he or she is, but also who he or she is in relation to others. While at times this reinforcement can serve to undermine a person’s overall sense of self, in most cases one’s personal, cultural, social, and religious aspects are reaffirmed through group membership. For instance, Tara—the woman from Albania featured at the beginning of this work—reinforced her sense of self by participating in Albanian nationality groups (Berger 82).

On a very basic level, civic participation emerges as a unique category in public life, especially for immigrants, due to the general openness of many civic
organizations. In particular, civic groups will accept most people who seek to become members, including non-naturalized immigrants. Discussions of the conventional political participation of immigrants (or lack thereof) have often focused on the negative effect that lack of citizenship, waiting periods before naturalization, and other bureaucratic mechanisms have regarding conventional political participation. By examining civic participation instead of conventional participation, we can see that civic organizations remove the barrier of citizenship. Researchers have typically asked, “Why don’t immigrants participate politically? Why don’t they naturalize at higher rates to achieve this participation?” instead of asking, “How do immigrants participate in ways that don’t require citizenship (or fluent English skills, or intense knowledge of American culture)?”

Finally, the benefits that civic participation offers are tangible and recurrent. Unlike voting and campaigning, which occur sporadically (and are what Verba, Nie, and Kim refer to as “high pressure” activities), civic participation is an ongoing activity (Verba, Nie and Kim 14-16). Members join organizations because they expect to receive some sort of tangible benefit from it. Conventional political participation offers immigrants the knowledge that they have helped further the ideals of the country in some way, or have acted in a manner befitting an American. Civic participation, on the other hand, offers immigrants a tutorial in what it is to be American and in what Americans believe. The benefits gained from civic participation can include increased social contacts (leading to further tangible benefits, such as mutually reciprocal friendships or job leads), a cause or a passion to pursue, fulfilling a personal interest, personal satisfaction derived from doing the activity, or increased sense of social worth.
due to helping others (Putnam 338). Likewise, civic organizations of all types offer recurrent benefits to members. Conventional political activities are a low-initiative, low-commitment form of participation (Verba, Nie, and Kim 17). Once the ballot has been cast or one’s candidate successfully elected to office, any benefits that can be derived from that discrete activity have been extracted. Conversely, if a civic organization does not provide a member with enough ongoing benefits for the member to deem the activity worthy of his or her time and effort, the member is free to withdrawal and find another activity from which the person receives benefits more in line with his or her wants or needs.

The benefits of civic participation provide much-needed help to immigrants, yet questions continue to exist as to the absence of immigrants in civic life. As with conventional political participation, a number of factors exist which seek to discourage the civic participation of immigrants. Immigrants do bring more than different cultural traditions and the “American Dream” with them when they arrive in the U.S., yet demographic forces impress themselves upon immigrants as strongly (if not stronger) as on native-born citizens.

Immigrants form a varied and diverse segment of the population, making generalizations difficult. However, immigrants tend to be younger and less likely to have completed high school as compared to demographically matched, native-born counterparts (Hirschman 595-596). If age and education patterns hold as true for immigrants as they do for native-born citizens (a likely proposition), the youth and relatively low levels of education among many immigrants serves as a deterrent from civic participation. Why account for age and education? Youth tend to be more
concerned with starting and developing their own careers, families, goals, and identities. During this time, less emphasis is placed on helping one’s community than on finding a job, establishing a stable, autonomous home, and starting a career. Furthermore, young people are generally more highly mobile than older adults (Putnam 259). As people age, their lives become more stable, and they are able to devote more time to less self-involved pursuits. Older adults, especially those who have retired, have traditionally exhibited the highest level of civic participation, stemming from the cultural climate into which they were born (Putnam 261). In terms of education, more years of formal schooling have been associated with increased civic and conventional participation (Putnam 301). Since many (though by no means all) immigrants arrive in the U.S. with either gaps in their education, or little education at all, overcoming the “education hurdle” and becoming a civic participant adds to the already daunting challenges faced by immigrants.

Robert Putnam explores other social factors which may discourage native-born citizens from participating civically, and which may be applied to immigrants as well. Putnam examines the impact that race, mobility, sprawl, technology, and mass media have had on rates of civic participation in the U.S. (187). On each count, Putnam finds that the supposed impact of the factors explains only a portion of the variance (283-284). That is, no one factor can fully explain why or why not a person participates civically. For immigrants, Putnam’s findings suggest that such forces may tip the scales when an immigrant makes the decision of whether or not to become civically involved, but does not provide a comprehensive explanation.
Given that not all immigrants participate civically, and given that demographic and social factors do not fully explain why, one additional force must be mined before moving onward. The act of immigration itself discourages immigrants from participating civically. Harles suggests that immigrating from one country to another has the potential to cause such trauma as to render an immigrant unwilling or unable to participate civically. “Yet because the act of migration is so psychologically compelling, it is likely that remembrances will endure…before the legacy of the lifeboat completely vanishes (85).” When examining civic participation, this factor must be continuously considered. Immigrants may not participate (either conventionally or civically) not for demographic reasons, but because the act of immigrating has discouraged their participation in and of itself.

Since immigration seems to discourage participation (although we have also seen that regardless, immigrants still turn to civic involvement as a vehicle of public participation), some might argue that it does not matter if immigrants participate or not. Provided that immigrants abide by the law, and fulfill their purpose in coming to the U.S. (often, employment), questions of their civic and public participation are irrelevant. Unfortunately (or rather, fortunately), the impact of the immigrant community on the U.S., as on any host society, cannot be so easily dismissed. The active civic participation of immigrants—11 percent of the United States’ total population—is vital for the continuance of democracy in the U.S. If civic participation and social capital are indeed declining as Putnam suggests, the U.S. needs a motivating force, a catalyst to jump-start social capital. Immigrants, owing to the desire of many to live up to the democratic ideals and norms of the U.S. and to prove their “American-ness” can provide
this boost to human resources. As the birthrate of native-born citizens declines, the U.S. (like many Western European nations) will increasingly rely on immigrants to maintain population replacement and to help support older Americans as Boomers retire. Likewise, as the civic participation of native-born citizens grows increasingly lethargic, immigrants will be needed to maintain organizations, associations, and connections which without them would be waylaid.

Furthermore, as a participatory democracy, the U.S. relies on the input of the people it serves to function effectively. That participation happens at multiple levels—from the conventional political level down to the simplest of civic connections. Without participation, the U.S. structure risks falling apart. Civic participation functions more efficiently than political participation for immigrants in that even those who are not citizens are still welcome to join. Thus, an additional level of society has the opportunity to participate and to add another voice to the democratic process.

Beyond bolstering the efficacy of democracy, civic participation acts as a potent form of integration. Throughout history, and over many different societies, immigrants have been feared as a potentially destabilizing force. For this reason alone, many in the U.S. have called for the restriction of immigration (Harles 60). However, a relatively strong civic culture, such as that found in the United States, mediates whatever destabilizing potential the immigrant community possesses. Immigrants who are highly involved in community activities, who know and work with their neighbors, and who feel a sense of attachment to their community have little need to destabilize society. Immigrants, like native-born citizens, may recognize the problems present in their communities and work to change them, but there is little incentive for them to
engage in destructive behaviors or attitudes—such actions would only harm themselves. Civic participation enfranchises a population that has historically had the potential to be disenfranchised. Seen in this light, instead of arguing against ethnically-based community groups (such as Hispanic community centers or Asian women’s groups), those concerned with the impact of immigration should seek to support such associations. Such groups provide immigrants with a means of peacefully and democratically expressing needs, opinions, attitudes, and dreams of an immigrant population. Not all ethnically-based groups are benign, but nor are all native-born citizen organizations (the Ku Klux Klan being the prototypical example). Of essential importance, civic organizations provide humans with a social outlet in which they can connect with others, reinforcing ties of common humanity.

Globalization, Immigration, and Social Capital

Over the past two decades, scholarly attention has turned to the phenomenon of globalization. Significant in the discussion of globalization is the role that immigrants play in both societies of origin and societies of adoption. No complete discussion of globalization—economic, political, cultural, or social—can lack an understanding of how immigrants (and the social capital they possess) both impact globalization and are impacted by it. In seeking to understand the nature of immigration in the U.S., one must also examine the broader forces of globalization.

Globalization

Historical transformation. Reduction of barriers. Process of change. Deterritorialization. The ways in which to describe the phenomenon of globalization never cease. Definitions of globalization range from emphasizing local
cultural change to describing the dynamics of the global financial market. Yet, three key words offer considerable insight into globalization—process, transformation, and interconnectedness. Globalization denotes a process, not a discrete event (Mittelman 4). The current wave of globalization began at the conclusion of the Cold War and has continued on into the 21st century (Mittelman 18). The outcome of the globalization process has been the transformation of society on all levels. From economics to politics to social and cultural interactions, ways of conducting business, meeting people, and viewing the world have changed. Vital to this change is the increasing interconnectedness of the world. As a result of globalization, people in one country or region have the ability to maintain connections with people across the world, even in formerly remote areas. For immigrants, this has meant an increased capacity to preserve ties to societies of origin. Thomas Friedman best sums up globalization by declaring,

“Globalization is not just some economic fad, and it is not just a passing trend. It is an international system—the dominant international system that replaced the Cold War system after the fall of the Berlin Wall...This new system [has] its own unique logic, rules, pressures, and incentives,” (6).

Globalization has brought about three noteworthy trends that are important in understanding the complex relationship between globalization and immigration. Principally, it has encouraged and re-directed flows of people worldwide. While immigration has always been a force throughout the globe, globalization has brought with it an unprecedented freedom of movement, with immigration levels everywhere soaring to new heights (Mittelman 59). This increase in movement has resulted from a number of diverse factors. Improved technology, especially mass transportation technology, has facilitated the movement of people
throughout the world. Globalization has brought with it shifts in employment opportunities, labor supplies, and capital flows, and these shifts have occurred on a large scale. Instead of employment opportunities shifting to another area or region of the same country, such opportunities are now likely to switch continents. Globalization has also brought with it an increase in the flows of goods and ideas (Friedman 293-296). Most noticeably, goods have tended to move from the global South to the global North, while ideas flow in the opposite direction. As globalization has emphasized capitalism, producers have sought out the cheapest production and labor costs possible, and have done so on an international scale. Developing nations in the global South have come to rely on the manufacturing of goods for export (Mittelman 42). Once finished, these manufactured goods move to the global North for consumption. In contrast, the global North has been able to develop strong research and development and high-technology sectors. Finished products from these industries then move throughout the global North before flowing down to the global South (Glasner and Rothman 249).

Finally, globalization has resulted in an intensive wave of deterritorialization. Deterritorialization refers to the process by which the importance of national borders and national sovereignty have been reduced. While globalization as a whole remains controversial, questions over the nature and extent of deterritorialization contribute greatly to the polemic. The growth and importance of both non-state actors and supra-state actors throughout the world suggests the presence of a deterritorialized system. As globalization has taken root, a variety of non-state actors—from transnational companies to non-governmental organizations to grass-roots citizens organizations—have arisen. These organizations contribute another link in the political
process. Governments must now seek to incorporate these non-state actors in the political process (or, at the very least, to manage such actors). Failure to do so may result in backlash from these organizations. For instance, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) is a grassroots organization, whose members come from across Asia and includes groups of immigrants in the U.S. They strive to promote safer, cleaner, and more affordable housing across Asia (ACHR). Using activist pressure both from within Asian nations and from their networks abroad, ACHR has gained power and influence throughout the region. While it impacts governmental policy and actions, it remains a non-governmental organization. Globalization has also resulted in the growth of supra-state actors. These groups have created structures which exceed the traditional bounds of nation-state governments. Perhaps the best illustration worldwide has been the creation and evolution of the European Union. Begun as an economic community in 1952, the European Union has grown to include 27 members (Parsons 66-67). As member-states, nations have a binding obligation to comply with EU legislation and directives. While this directly supersedes national sovereignty, countries have joined—and continue to join—the Union. Member states and other nations around the world must now work with the EU, interacting with it as with any other sovereign state.

This structure of globalization has not arisen without controversy. As defined, it is an international system, one which advantages some groups while disadvantaging others. Those who do not play the globalization game, or those who do not play it well, find it difficult to make economic, political, or social gains. For instance, in the early 1990s, Thailand appeared to have adapted well to the processes and nuances of globalization. By 1997, Thailand had stretched itself too thin. As quickly as they had
come, investors pulled out, leaving the country in economic crisis (Stiglitz 89-90).

Thailand quickly learned that in the new globalized system, fortunes could be lost as easily as they could be made.

Among the more noted problematic trends of globalization has been its emphasis on urban areas, with rural areas emerging as a clear loser. Lisa Benton-Short et. al. notes, “It is impossible to understand the process of globalization without studying cities, since they are the central locales for globalization,” (945). As globalization has placed a priority on efficient communication and transportation, and high levels of integration with distant places, urban areas have fit the globalization model. Rural areas, with their remoteness, their difficulty in communication, and their lack of employment opportunities, have witnessed an upsurge in out-migration. Even before the fall of the Cold War, rural areas lost inhabitants to more urban areas, but globalization has exacerbated the trend, and done so in a surprisingly short amount of time (HABITAT 3). Increasingly, as rural areas become more depopulated, and urban areas become more prosperous, disparities between the two have grown. Capital flows often bypass rural areas completely, leaving inhabitants with little choice but to move to urban centers (to find work and make a living), deepening the trend (HABITAT 4-5).

In addition to systemic and rural-urban issues, immigration has raised important questions regarding globalization. With more and more immigrants moving to new locations within their own countries, within their own region, and around the globe, nations must adopt new immigration policies and measures. Immigration rallies in the U.S. in 2006 and riots lead largely by second-generation immigrants in France in late 2005 illustrate the necessity of confronting immigration issues. Nations across the globe
are increasingly forced to reexamine existing immigration policies, and to create new ones for issues that continue to arise. Yet, no one country is alone in witnessing this trend. If globalization has brought nothing else, it has taught the world to pay attention to the ways in which others approach issues, and to go one step beyond.

**Case Studies**

In order to further examine the nature of civic participation amongst immigrants in the U.S., eight qualitative case studies were conducted. This study explored both civic and political participation among immigrants in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania region. Respondents were drawn from a snowball-explorative survey. While the results of the case studies cannot be considered conclusive (due to the miniscule size of the study, as well as its qualitative, explorative, and non-representative nature), it does highlight some important trends and raise further questions on the nature of immigrant civic participation. Demographic information on the respondents can be found in Appendix 1.

Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 52, and represented four different countries and one U.S. territory.² Four men and four women participated in the study. Three of the eight respondents had obtained U.S. citizenship and the length of time respondents had spent in the U.S. averaged about 13 years (the range extended from 3 years to 24). Respondents were interviewed either individually or in pairs (the study included three married couples). Questions covered both civic and public participation, as well as

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² While it is recognized that Puerto Rico is a part of the U.S., and that Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. are considered migrants (not immigrants), this respondent has been included due to cultural and linguistic differences from the mainstream, dominant U.S. society. This case also provides an example of a person representing neither a mainland native-born citizen, nor a traditional immigrant.
reasons for engaging in (or not engaging in) each. Please see Appendix 2 for a detailed schedule of questions asked in each interview.

From the study, four noticeable trends emerged. As other studies have shown, non-naturalized respondents in the study demonstrated an extremely low level of conventional, formal political participation (Jones-Corra 551). The three respondents who had been naturalized did vote in the last federal election. However, none of the respondents reported any form of conventional political participation outside of voting, regardless of the respondent’s citizenship status. This trend falls in line with existing research on the political behavior of immigrants—namely, that conventional political participation among immigrants tends to fall below that of the native-born population. This study supported past hypotheses on the nature of immigrant political participation, exhibiting a clear distinction between the behaviors of naturalized and non-naturalized immigrants.

In contrast to the low levels and strict bifurcation of political participation, immigrants participating in the study showed a decided involvement in formal civic participation. Six of the eight respondents reported membership in at least one group, club, or organization, with attendance at formal group meetings ranging from a few times each year to more than once a week. Respondents joined a variety of groups, from professional organizations (such as the American Chemical Society and American Psychologists Association), to religious organizations (including Protestant Christian churches, Coptic Orthodox congregations, and Buddhist temples), to sports clubs (adult leagues). Of the formal civic participators, the three most commonly cited reasons for joining organizations included a need to meet with others of similar religious
backgrounds, a desire to become part of the community and meet those around them, and a sense of social responsibility to participate. Putnam cites all three reasons as traditional motivations for members of a society to become involved in organizations (67, 135-137).

On the other side, respondents were also asked about barriers to participation. The most commonly reported answers included cultural and linguistic differences, as well as a sense that native-born citizens did not understand or wish to fully include immigrants in group activities. While half of the respondents mentioned that most groups welcome all members with open arms and that it was very easy to join organizations, they also indicated that those same people and groups did not always know how to interact with the respondents. One respondent noted that although group members were friendly and pleasant at group activities, the interactions never went beyond group meetings. Other members never sought to include the respondent outside of the formal organization time, and did not seek any deeper involvement with the respondent. While the barriers offered by respondents did not come as a surprise (given that cultural, linguistic, and social differences constitute a significant barrier for immigrants regardless of activity), a number of factors were not mentioned that other civic participation and social capital researchers have typically considered as major barriers to public involvement. Issues such as the pressures of time (busyness) and money, urban sprawl, families with all adults involved in the workforce, technological changes, and non-traditional family dynamics did not arise in the study’s interviews. Putnam believes all of the preceding reasons to cause a part (however small) of the decline of civic participation across the U.S.
Of the two respondents who did not report any formal civic participation, demographic factors other than immigration may have caused a lack of participation. In one case, the respondent was a 23 year-old college student, who came to the U.S. as a 7 year-old (placing him fall in-between the first-generation, as he remembers immigrating, and 1.5 generation, as he was a child upon arrival). In all forms of public life, from civic to political, young adults demonstrate lower rates of participation than older adults (Putnam 247-248). This is due, in part, to their increased mobility and lack of roots in a given community. Writing about the effects of age on public participation, Putnam asserts,

“Age is second only to education as a predictor of virtually all forms of civic engagement, and trends in civic engagement are not uniform across all age categories. Middle-aged and older people are more active in more organizations than younger people, attend church more often, vote more regularly, both read and watch the news more frequently, are less misanthropic and more philanthropic, are more interested in politics, work on more community projects, and volunteer more,” (248).

While a number of factors, from socio-economic status to cultural norms to the level of the respondent’s parents’ civic involvement, could play a role in the respondent’s lack of participation, it is likely that age played a central role. The respondent cited apathy and a lack of desire in joining formal groups as reasons for not participating. The other non-participative respondent came from Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory. As previously mentioned, this unique status often leads to differences in behavioral patterns as compared to both mainland citizens and immigrants. This respondent, a middle-aged woman, did exhibit the highest level of conventional political participation, voting in every election since she came of age. However, she found the linguistic and cultural
barriers too great to become heavily involved in group activities. She noted that throughout her 22 years in the mainland U.S., she had attempted to join several groups, including a few religious organizations. Each time, pressures from linguistic differences caused her to decide to leave the groups. Cultural-linguistic differences, age and other demographic factors, as a supplement to the immigration process itself, can bring about a decreased desire to participate civically. In examining the process of how and why immigrants decide to participate, or refrain from participating, in public life, the importance of demographics cannot be ignored.

While respondents demonstrated high levels of formal civic participation, they also displayed a universal use of informal associations and networks. Such networks came from a wide variety of sources--formal civic organizations, neighbors, work acquaintances--but networks formed from other immigrants comprised the most important and valuable network for all respondents. While all respondents reported spending a majority of their time with native-born U.S. citizens, they also stressed that time spent with other immigrants formed a crucial portion of their informal civic associations. By spending time with other immigrants, respondents noted numerous benefits, such as friendship, finding employment opportunities (especially jobs within one’s immigrant community), and help in transmitting one’s native language and culture to one’s children. In half of the interviews, respondents asserted that while they had native-born friends, those within their immigrant communities understood them better and could be relied upon more. On the subject of why immigrant communities form deeper bonds with each other rather than with native-born citizens, one respondent,
familiar with Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, noted that immigrants do not bowl alone, “We’re bowling with our selves [other immigrants].”

The portrait that these eight case studies presents offers a very different glimpse of immigrants’ public participation than traditional studies focusing on political participation put forth. Although much research has yet to be done on the subject, the respondents interviewed provide insight into the benefits and barriers they face regarding political and civic participation. Many, but not all, immigrants desire to join formal groups and organizations. Demographic factors help determine, in part, who will choose to participate. Yet, demographics and personal history can be overcome. Of the eight respondents, two had lived through the height and fall of Communism in the former Soviet Union, and two had experienced religious persecution while living in Egypt. All four have become civically involved in the U.S. Civic participation, far from being the outcome of historic, genetic, or demographic factors, lies in an individual’s perceptions and attitudes towards the communities in which he or she lives.

**Conclusion**

Immigrants in the U.S. and their actions, attitudes, and behaviors have been a source of both fascination and misunderstanding for over two centuries. By viewing the participation of immigrants in public life as that of civic action, the portrait of immigrants changes from that of non-participants to that of people with similar goals, needs, and behaviors as native-born citizens. While the suggestion that immigrants participate civically at the same rates as native-born citizens stretches the idea of civic participation beyond its borders, it must be recognized that immigrants do not move into a participatory vacuum when they cross the border into their adopted homeland. From
nationality groups to PTAs to Cub Scout troops to church organizations, civic associations provide immigrants with a crucial service—interpersonal connections and social capital. In return, immigrants use civic groups to strengthen the communities in which they live, to imbed themselves in U.S. society, and to accomplish social change. Furthermore, since civic participation is agreeable to both the host society (in that they receive the benefits of the works of civic organizations and are assured of immigrants’ loyalties) and to immigrants themselves (who experience the opportunity to engage the host society, demonstrate their dedication to its principles, and receive some measure of personal benefits), the question regarding immigrants and civic participation must not be, “Why don’t immigrants participate?” but, “How can immigrants participate more?” Posing the question in this light re-frames the discussion of immigration, which the U.S. has done for the past two centuries as it has admitted successive waves of immigrants. In this period of crossroads, as nativist sentiment rises in response to record-setting numbers of new immigrants, the importance of understanding the true picture of immigrant public participation—especially civic participation—increases. Tara, the immigrant woman from Albania, writes that for an immigrant, “First you demolish, then you reconstruct.” (Berger 81). For immigrants, the demolishment often lies in the very act of immigrating. Civic participation allows immigrants to reconstruct their lives, to connect with those around them. By doing so, they experience the beliefs, freedoms, and values upon which the United States built itself. This, in turn, is how new Americans are created. If the U.S. is to tap into the social capital of immigrants, as it must do in order to successfully integrate this massive wave of immigration, then it will not be found in conventional political participation. Through civic organizations, through joining groups,
through pursuing common goals, immigrants will continue to mold democracy in the U.S.
## Appendix 1—Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity (self-described)</th>
<th>Length of Time in U.S. (years)</th>
<th>Religious Identity</th>
<th>Yearly Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>India</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>$48,000</td>
</tr>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
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<td>Coptic Orthodox Christian</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>White (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Coptic Orthodox Christian</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>Buddhist</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>White-Hispanic</td>
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<td>N/A*</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*No data is available for these responses.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
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<th>Formal Political Participation Evidenced?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>No</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2—Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to come to this interview. This information will be used in my senior project, which explores the relationship between immigrants and civic participation. Specifically, I am interested in how immigrants participate in public life, and in what sorts of groups and clubs they join. As such, I have some questions about what types of groups you are a part of, and how you participate in them.

1.) How many groups, clubs, organizations, or associations do you consider yourself to be a member of? Give examples here: use Putnam. What kinds of groups are they? How did you become involved?

2.) Are you involved in any type of religious organization, such as a church, a mosque, a synagogue, or a temple? How often do you attend? Do you do any activities related to your place of worship, but not necessarily at the place of worship (i.e. small-group meetings, service projects, small-group activities/fundraisers/events)?

3.) Are you involved with any ethnic, nationality, or immigrant groups? If so, what kinds? What activities do you do with your group(s) and how frequently? How did you become involved with this/these groups?

4.) What about other groups that you mentioned? Tell me about them—how did you find out about them, how often do you attend, how would you rate your level of involvement?

5.) What are some things that make it easy, enjoyable, or beneficial to participate in group activities, clubs, organizations, etc.?

6.) What are some things that make it difficult, not fun, or costly to participate in group activities, clubs, organizations, etc.?

7.) Informal associations are interactions/meetings with people that don’t take place in a formal, organized setting. Some examples might be having a dinner party with friends, or talking to your neighbor while doing yard work. How often would you estimate that you have informal associations with other people (this can be difficult—just a rough estimate is ok). What types of informal associations do you have? Do any of these associations/encounters lead to further interaction? Do any of them lead to reciprocity (do you get anything out of these interactions)?

8.) How many native-born U.S. citizens do you know well? How much time do you spend with native-born U.S. citizens? Where do you spend time with them? What do you do together?

9.) How many other immigrants do you know (including immigrants who are originally from a different country/ethnic/language group than you)? How much time do you spend with other immigrants? Where do you spend time with them? What activities do you do together?

10.) Thus far, we have talked about how you participate civically—how you interact with other people and join different groups. Now let’s talk about how you participate politically—that is, how you participate by using government-run activities, like voting and campaigning. Are you a naturalized citizen?
11.) For those who are naturalized citizens, did you vote in the last federal election? Since you became a naturalized citizen, in about how many elections have you voted? Why did/didn’t you vote?

12.) For everyone, in the last year (12 months), have you worked on a campaign team? Have you attended a political meeting, candidate gathering, election speech, or political rally? What are some reasons you did/did not do those things?

13.) Finally, I need some information on your background. This will be used for comparative purposes only, and your name will be held in strict confidence.
   a. Age
   b. Race/ethnicity
   c. Country of origin
   d. Country of birth
   e. Length of time in U.S.
   f. Religious identity
   g. Yearly household income
Works Cited


