

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

CIRCLE CONVENES A MEETING ON IMMIGRANT YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

On April 25 in New York City, CIRCLE brought together leading scholars, practitioners and grant-makers to inform our ongoing research on the civic engagement of immigrant youth. Twenty-one participants gathered at The New School University, amidst growing political and media discussion of immigration laws and immigrants. The meeting sought to explore the specific characteristics of immigrant youth that might affect their civic engagement. However, at the heart of the meeting was the question of measuring civic engagement among immigrant youth. Participants concluded that traditional measures of civic engagement do not capture the myriad ways that immigrant youth are involved in politics and civil society.

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Similar themes had also arisen during the annual conference of the Society for Research in Adolescence in March. At a panel on "Civic Engagement in Immigrant and Minority Youth," CIRCLE grantees Lene Arnett Jensen and Constance Flanagan presented papers on immigrant youth and CIRCLE director Peter Levine was the discussant.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Quite apart from the current debate about immigration, immigrant youth are an important subpopulation to understand. As Levine noted in his opening remarks, "Immigrant youth are very diverse and not easy to generalize about. However, in general, they differ from other young people in certain respects. Their civic loyalty is sometimes questioned. They must make choices about their political identities. Members of their own families differ in citizenship status. They may have opportunities to engage in another country while in the U.S. They can experience statelessness or exile; and their legal status may be in doubt." Furthermore, immigrant youth and children of immigrants comprise nearly 20 percent of the U.S. youth population (ages 18 to 25) and their contribution to society will determine whether they will reap the benefits of a healthy democracy.

IMMIGRANT YOUTH: A MULTI-METHOD STUDY OF NEW YORK CITY

John Mollenkopf, Director for the Center of Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center, opened the discussion with an overview of an ongoing, multi-method study of New York City's immigrant population. Mollenkopf presented his findings on the voting behavior of New Yorkers by immigration status, race, and ethnicity. He noted that while "immigrants will reshape the American electoral terrain," today's "youth of immigrant origin are doubly disadvantaged in political mobilization." They are underrepresented in elected office—preventing their views from being represented proportionately—and they are concentrated in politically non-competitive sites (often the large cities of a few big states, such as Los Angeles, New York City and Chicago). In his closing statements, Mollenkopf was optimistic about the future of immigrant youth and their role in New York City politics. "The immigrant youth population of New York is a growing presence," said Mollenkopf, "and, if established elites choose to promote them, they are poised to emerge as the new leadership in New York." Mollenkopf predicts that immigrant youth, if supported by existing elites, should experience their first political impact in local legislative districts and then work upward to city, state and national politics.

PROBLEMS IN MEASURING THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Following Mollenkopf's presentation, CIRCLE's Mark Hugo Lopez and Karlo Barrios Marcelo presented some preliminary data on immigrant youth demographics and their levels of civic engagement. Their two preliminary reports used recent survey data from the Census Bureau and The Pew Hispanic Center's Latino Survey of 2004. Their goal was to elicit suggestions for how to measure the civic engagement of immigrant youth more fully and accurately. To that end, Lopez moderated a conversation that asked two main questions:

- 1) What types of civic engagement activities are we missing?
- 2) Are there other data sources that we should focus on?

Prompted by Lopez's questions, the participants' responses revolved around the validity of "traditional measures" of civic engagement. Some argued that if young immigrants are not volunteering and voting (the standard behaviors measured in

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surveys), this is a problem that should be recognized so that it can be addressed. However, many participants worried that immigrant youth are engaging in a number of activities that large surveys do not capture. Further, surveys cannot show change. Immigration is a gradual process, and longitudinal studies are necessary to follow the development of immigrant youth civic engagement over time.

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In addition to raising concerns about measurement, participants worried that large national surveys were missing important segments of the immigrant community—especially undocumented immigrants. Others took a different approach. “We need to know why immigrant youth are here and how long they expect to stay. The community or region of the country where they migrate will be a significant mediator in an immigrant youth’s level and ability to participate,” said Alfred Amado, Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Maryland.

RECONCEPTUALIZING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In her presentation, Jane Junn, Associate Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, noted that “traditional measures” of civic engagement often overlook important political behavior. For example, Rosa Parks’ famous political act on a segregated Montgomery bus might not be counted by many standardized survey questions that leave out political acts that are against the law. Also, efforts to organize business ties within an immigrant community might not be counted, even though such efforts might be the most effective way to build civic and political power. Junn pressed the participants to clarify the types of civic and political activities that should be measured.

Participants suggested other non-traditional measures of civic engagement, such as helping new immigrants to adapt to American culture or translating documents and conversations for one’s parents. Hector Cordero-Guzman, Associate Professor and Chair of the Black and Hispanic Studies Department at Baruch College, CUNY, noted, “What some people may see as a cost of

being an immigrant or a child of an immigrant [having to translate into a second language] could also be looked at as a form of civic engagement.” Moreover, many participants agreed that cultural notions of civic engagement vary and the current measurements of civic engagement do not fit the cultural notions held by many immigrant groups.

Participants advanced the idea of using focus groups as a means to reconceptualize civic engagement from the bottom up. They suspect that survey designers have been out of touch with the ways immigrant youth are involved. “The motivation for civic engagement needs to be understood,” said Tatiana Wah, Assistant Professor at Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy.

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NEXT STEPS

CIRCLE plans to disseminate in-house and commissioned research on immigrant youth civic engagement and to design its future research agenda to improve the analysis of immigrant youth civic engagement, based on the participants’ suggestions. ★