

CIVIC AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM: UNDERSTANDING IMMIGRANTS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

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black youth project™

Civic and Political Activism: Understanding Immigrants in Civil Society

Immigration has been a major concern of the American public in recent years. In 2006, thousands of immigrants and supporters took to the streets of various U.S. cities in an effort to protest legislation criminalizing both unauthorized immigrants and anyone associated with helping them enter or remain in the country. More recently, Arizona governor Jan Brewer signed Senate Bill 1070 into law. The bill makes it illegal to be in the state without proper documentation¹ and requires police officers to ask for proof of residency or U.S. citizenship if they have a “reasonable suspicion” that an individual is undocumented. Moreover, if an individual feels that a police officer did not ask a “reasonably suspicious” individual for their papers, that citizen has the right to sue the police officer.² Because the law seems to target particular racial groups, most notably Latinos and Asians, this led to a mass mobilization of individuals resulting in a national boycott of Arizona, protests outside of baseball stadiums where the Arizona Diamondbacks were playing, an increased number of people at the annual May 1 immigration marches across the country, and now, a lawsuit by the U.S. government against the state of Arizona.

However, immigration into the United States is not a recent or even a novel phenomenon. Clearly, the foundation and establishment of the United States relied on the immigration of people from European nations. Since the 1965 changes in immigration law,³ however, the majority of immigrants have come from countries in Asia and south of the U.S. border (i.e., Mexico and Central America).

Along with the demographic changes of immigrants, views about immigrants and immigration have mostly been driven by the media’s negative discourse on the subject.⁴ Further, scholars have paid little attention to how immigrants feel

about varying political issues, their place in society, and how they have shaped different aspects of American life. Using data from the 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political & Civic Engagement (MCPCE) project, this memo will explore the varying role immigrants have in civic and political matters.

The 2008 MCPCE project is composed of three waves of data with largely the same respondents. The first survey was fielded during the presidential campaigns, from October through November 2008. Many of the questions that are important for this memo are found only in wave 1 and therefore will be the focus of the paper. The wave 2 survey was

¹Contrary to popular belief, being in the country illegally is considered a civil offense and is classified as a misdemeanor, not a felony. For the most part, misdemeanors are punishable by a fine.

²G. Rough and D. Gilbertson, “Governor out to Rebrand Arizona Over Immigration Law Criticism,” Arizona Central, May 14, 2010, <http://www.azcentral.com/news/election/azelections/articles/2010/05/13/20100513governor-rebrand-arizona-over-immigration-law-criticism13-ON.html>

³1965 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). <http://www.justice.gov/crt/cor/byagency/doj1255a.php>

⁴Otto Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphoric representations of Latinos in Contemporary Public Discourse*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002

Table 1: 2009 Citizenship Status (MCPCE project, Wave 1)

Race and Age	Born Citizen, %	Naturalized Citizen, %	Noncitizen, %
White:			
18–35 <i>n</i> = 263	97.15	1.00	1.85
36 and older <i>n</i> = 645	97.72	1.71	0.57
Black:			
18–35 <i>n</i> = 288	93.29	2.03	4.68
36 and older <i>n</i> = 525	98.02	1.46	0.52
Asian:			
18–35 <i>n</i> = 128	41.47	30.28	28.25
36 and older <i>n</i> = 244	41.08	40.98	17.94
Latino:			
18–35 <i>n</i> = 405	34.79	9.99	55.22
36 and older <i>n</i> = 505	35.65	21.36	42.99

fielded from May to July 2009, while the third and final wave of data gathering took place from November 2009 to January 2010. All three waves have an oversampling of African American and Latino respondents. One-third of Latino respondents came from Spanish-language homes and as a result the questionnaire was given to them in Spanish.

Before analyzing the various views about immigrants and their role in America’s civic and political matters, it is important to understand who these “new” immigrant are. Data from the first wave of the MCPCE project indicates that, in our sample, close to 98 percent of the white and 96 percent of the black population are U.S.-born citizens, compared to 42 percent of Asians and 35 percent Latinos. These numbers, however, do not take into account the naturalization status⁵ of

many immigrants. When broken down into two age groups, (1) 18–35 years and (2) 36 years and older, we can observe the pattern of naturalization these two groups take. According to table 1, Asians tend to naturalize at a higher rate than Latinos. For example, among the younger age group, 30 percent of Asians are naturalized Americans, compared to 10 percent of Latinos. This means that while only 42 percent of Asians in the younger age group are born citizens, 72 percent of Asians in the same age group are American citizens. This is comparably different to the younger Latino population in our study, where only 45 percent respondents are American citizens. The same can be said among the older age group, where 82 percent of Asians are citizens,⁶ while only 57 percent of older Latinos are classified as citizens. It is important to keep in mind that

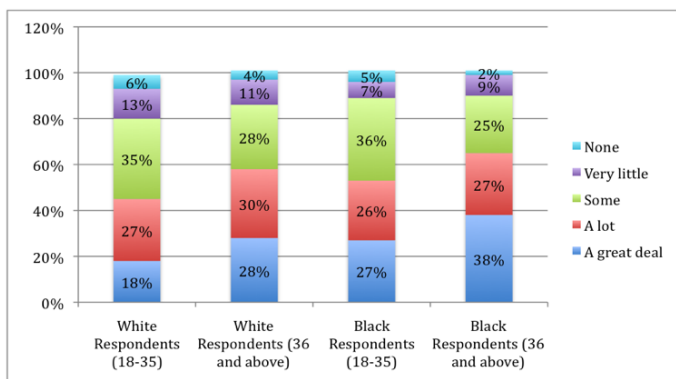
⁵ Naturalization refers to the process immigrants must go through in order to obtain citizenship status in the United States. When referring to naturalized citizens, both born citizens and noncitizens are excluded. However, if the term “citizens” is used alone, then it is the combination of both born and naturalized Americans.

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, “citizen” includes both born and naturalized citizens while “immigrant” combines naturalized citizens and noncitizens.



Responses to the statement “In general, how much attention are you paying to news about the campaigns for President?” (from the MCPCE project, Wave 1).{AU: Is this accurate?}

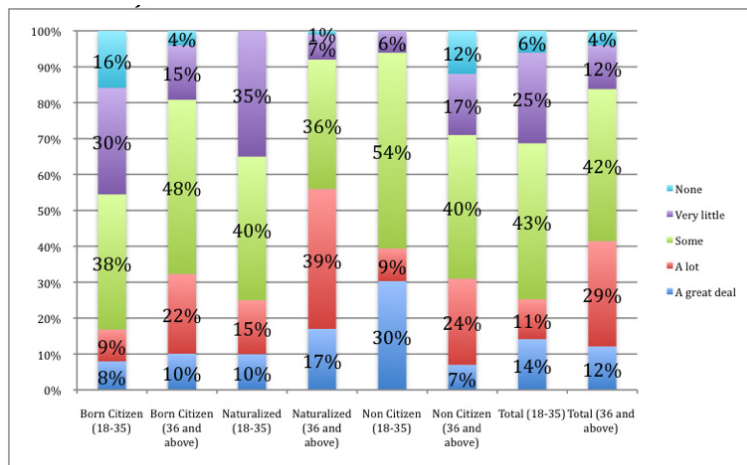
Graph 1A: White and Black Respondents



Note. White respondents: 18-35, n = 261; 36 and older, n = 641. Black respondents: 18-35, n = 261, 36 and older, n = 476.

{AU: Graph 1B Edits: In the age ranges, use en dashes (–) to separate ages, rather than hyphens (-). Make “Non Citizen” one word: Noncitizen. Change “and above” to “and older.”}

Graph 1B: Asian Respondents



Note. Asian respondents: 18-35, n = 115; 36 and older, n = 209.

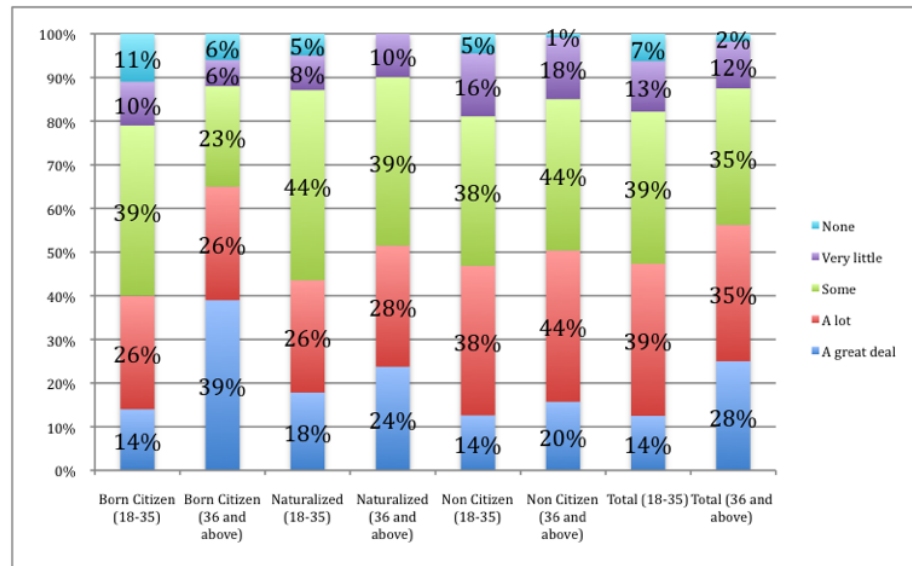
while a large majority of immigrants are from countries in Asia and Latin America, that does not mean that these communities are not active participants in the American polity and do not have clear views about American politics. The following sections will show the varying views of immigrants on a range of civic and political issues before and after the 2008 election.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG IMMIGRANTS

Part of the reason it is so important to understand the opinion of immigrants on various political matters is because most anti-immigrant claims suggest that immigrants tend to be apolitical generally or less politically and civically active than their U.S.-born counterparts. More recently, studies have suggested that immigrants are not only more politically active in the United States than previously thought, but that they

also engage in civic society as much as or at higher rates than U.S. born citizens. According to the data provided by the MCPCE project, the latter argument seems to hold some truth, even if it simply suggests that participation is similar among the groups. Graphs 1–3 show that when it came to listening to news about the presidential campaign, Latino immigrants in both age categories paid as much attention to the news as American-born citizens. And while the percentage of Asian immigrants who followed that news a great deal or a lot was lower in some cases, when it came to younger, noncitizen respondents, they were more likely—by 12 percentage points—to pay a great deal of attention to the news, compared to their white counterparts. For the most part, everyone was interested in knowing how the election was coming along.

Graph 1C: Latino Respondents



Note. Latino Respondents: 18–35, *n* = 404; 36 and older, *n* = 499.

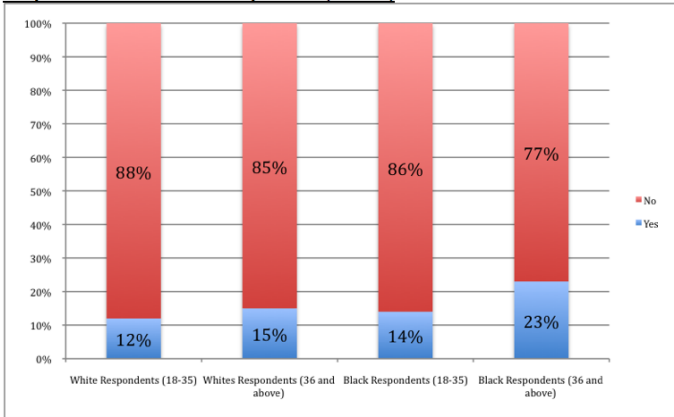
When it comes to forms of civic engagement, the data seems to suggest that immigrants are just as likely to not participate as their U.S.-born counterparts. As mentioned above, immigrants are often portrayed as higher civic engagers through forms of participation that extend outside the realm of what is considered “political” in most discussion of politics, such as being members of hometown associations which inherently make people active participants in their communities. When analyzing questions that embody mainstream questions about participation, it is clear that immigrants are just as likely to ignore their civic duties as born citizens. For example, when asked if “during the election season [they had] worked with people in [the] community

or neighborhood on any issue or problem,” 12 percent of younger white respondents stated they had worked with the community. That was only slightly lower than the 14 percent and 18 percent⁷ of younger blacks and immigrant Latinos, respectively, who had participated. However, those percentages are lower than the 29 percent⁸ of younger Asian immigrant respondents who stated that they had helped out the community during the election season. As with the previous questions, when compared to postelection data, there are a couple of changes in the percentage of respondents who stated they were involved in community work. Most notably, the percentage of young black respondents who had been working with people in their community increased by 5 percent.

⁷This number is an average of the naturalized and noncitizen Latino youth (20 percent and 15 percent, respectively). They make up the entire immigrant youth regardless of citizenship status.

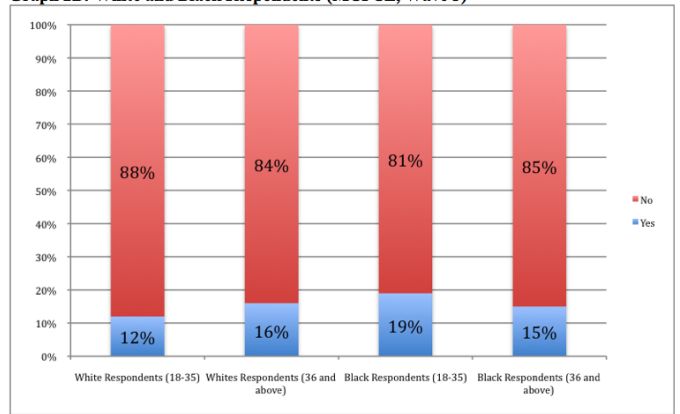
⁸This number is an average of the naturalized and noncitizen Asian youth (16 percent and 41 percent, respectively). They make up the entire immigrant youth regardless of citizenship status.

Graph 2A: White and Black Respondents (Wave 1)



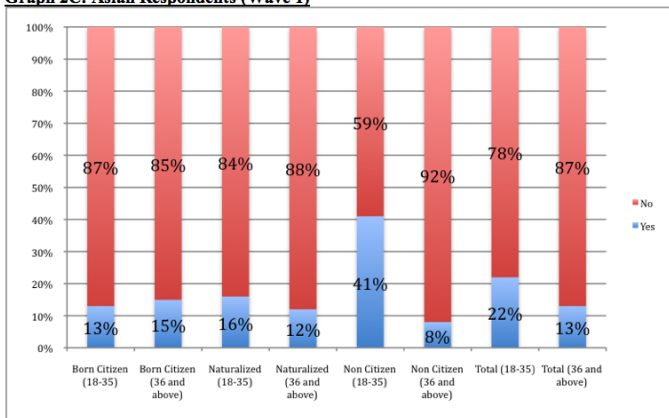
Note. White respondents: 18–35, *n* = 263; 36 and older, *n* = 642. Black respondents: 18–35, *n* = 261, 36 and older, *n* = 475.

Graph 2B: White and Black Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 3)



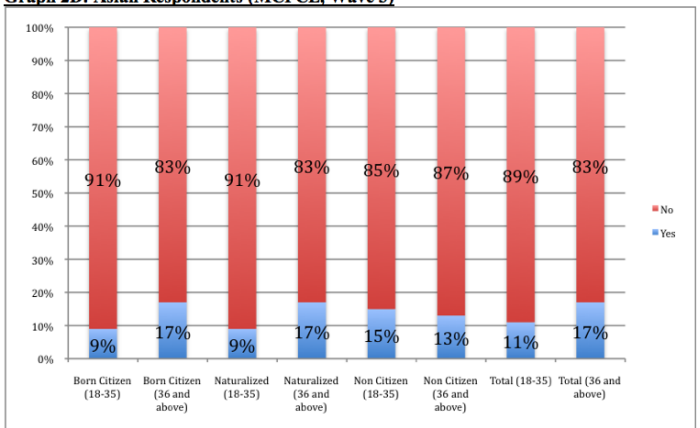
Note. White respondents: 18–35, *n* = 199; 36 and older, *n* = 545. Black respondents: 18–35, *n* = 185, 36 and older, *n* = 446.

Graph 2C: Asian Respondents (Wave 1)



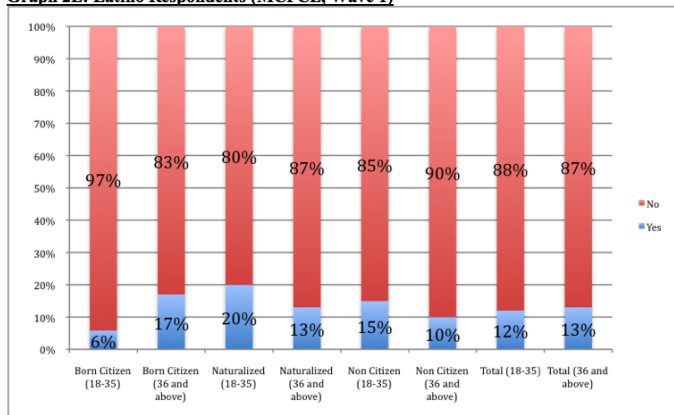
Note. Asian respondents: 18–35, *n* = 115; 36 and older, *n* = 209.

Graph 2D: Asian Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 3)



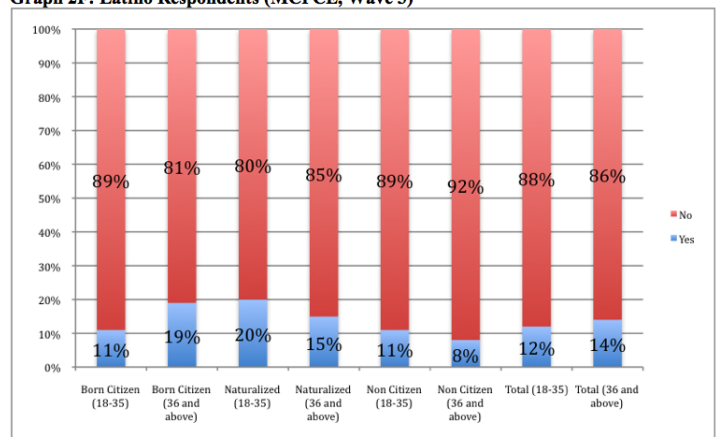
Note. Asian respondents: 18–35, *n* = 121; 36 and older, *n* = 254.

Graph 2E: Latino Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



Note. Latino respondents: 18–35, *n* = 404; 36 and older, *n* = 501.

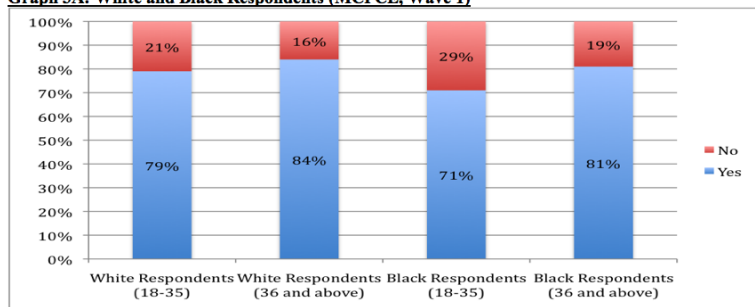
Graph 2F: Latino Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 3)



Note. Latino respondents: 18–35, *n* = 322; 36 and older, *n* = 421.

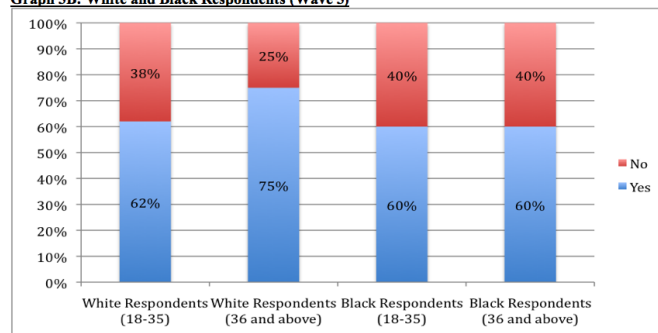
Responses to the statement “Have you talked with family or friends about a political issue, political party, or candidate?” (from the MCPCE project).

Graph 3A: White and Black Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



Note. White respondents: 18–35, n = 262; 36 and older, n = 642. Black respondents: 18–35, n = 261; 36 and older, n = 473.

Graph 3B: White and Black Respondents (Wave 3)



Note. White respondents: 18–35, n = 200; 36 and older, n = 543. Black respondents: 18–35, n = 185; 36 and older, n = 446.

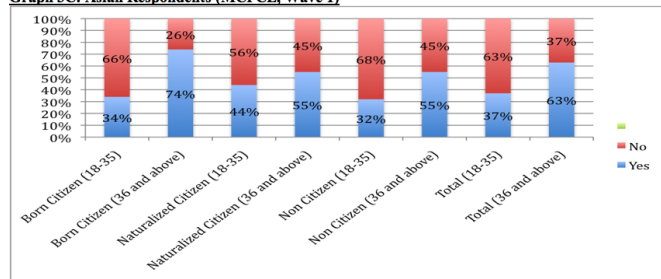
When it comes to questions that deal with community involvement, the numbers across racial groups and between the two different age categories are consistently similar. From the data collected above, it is apparent that while immigrants might have varying reasons for their disinterest in many different forms of civic engagement, unfortunately, they are uninterested at the same rate as most Americans. Therefore, though people may make claims against immigration on the grounds that immigrants are less politically active or interested than other Americans, the data analyzed above provides evidence to the contrary.

Another important aspect of being an active member of political society is the conversations one chooses to have with friends and family members. If immigrants were not interested in the political life of the United States,

clearly they would have no reason to discuss those matters within the realm of their private lives. More importantly, we would see a gap in the data between immigrants and citizens who say they have “talked with family and friends about a political issue, political party or candidate.” The data seems to suggest, however, that the majority of immigrants were engaged in political conversations within their private spheres to the same degree that whites, blacks and Asian and Latino citizens were, especially during the 2008 presidential campaign season. Moreover, younger noncitizen Asian and older naturalized Asian respondents, had the highest percentage of those who stated they did have conversations about politics with friends and family. Even though the percentage of those who answered “yes” was lower among immigrant groups than among citizen respondents (except for those mentioned

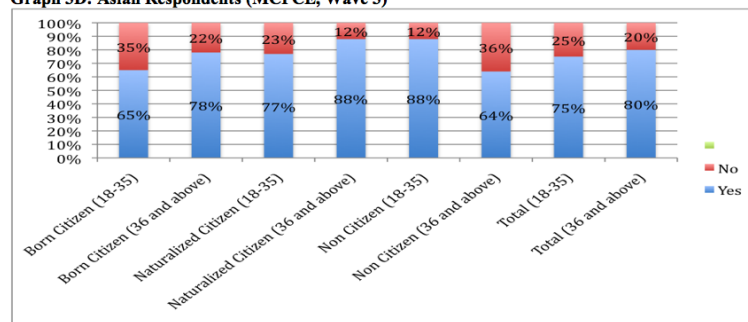


Graph 3C: Asian Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



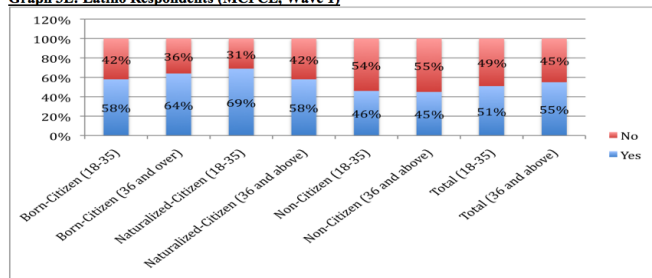
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 Note. Asian respondents: 18-35, n = 116; 36 and older, n = 209.

Graph 3D: Asian Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 3)



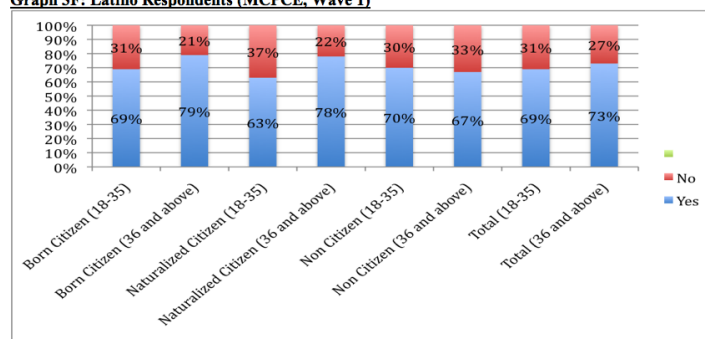
{AU: Remove green square from key above.}
 Note. Asian respondents: 18-35, n = 121; 36 and older, n = 254.

Graph 3E: Latino Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



{AU: Remove 120% from graph above, and remove hyphens from "born citizen" and "naturalized citizen."}
 Note. Latino respondents: 18-35, n = 403; 36 and older, n = 503.

Graph 3F: Latino Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



{AU: Remove green box from key.}
 Note. Latino respondents: 18-35, n = 325; 36 and older, n = 422.

above), the majority of Asian and Latino immigrants still answered positively across the two age groups. Among those younger in the racial and ethnic groups under consideration, all groups had lower numbers of individuals who engaged in political conversations than their older counterparts. White respondents had the highest numbers of engagement across the two age categories. For instance, 79 percent of younger white respondents had engaged in political conversation with friends and family, while 71 percent, 75 percent and 69 percent of younger blacks, Latinos

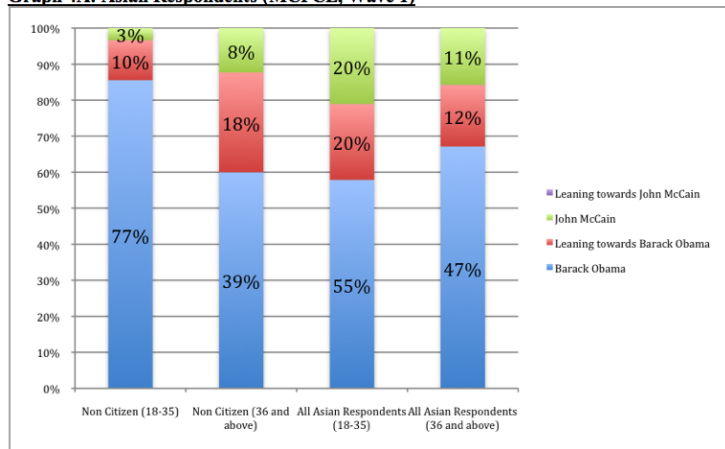
and Asians, respectively, indicated that they had engaged in political conversations. When comparing this data with the postelection data, it is clear that all racial and ethnic groups decreased their political conversations by an average of 10 percent. Clearly, as the data from the MCPCE project demonstrate, when it came to the 2008 presidential election, immigrants were not apolitical or uninterested in politics.

VOTE CHOICE

When it came to voting in the 2008 election, noncitizen respondents were

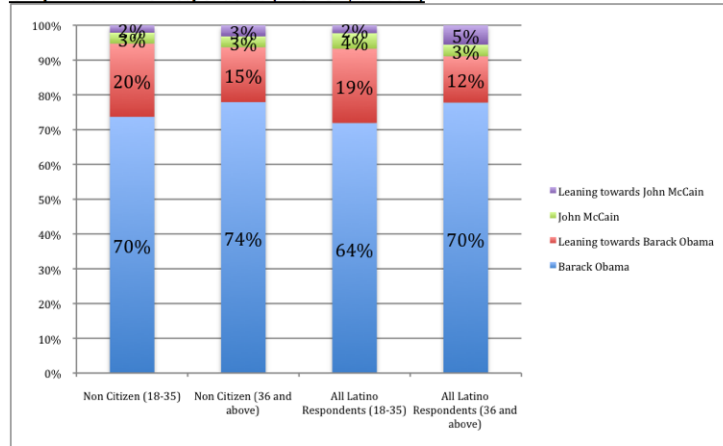
Responses to the statement “If you could or wanted to vote in the upcoming presidential election who would you vote for?” (from the MCPCE project).

Graph 4A: Asian Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



Note. Asian respondents: 18–35, *n* = 55; 36 and older, *n* = 52.

Graph 4B: Latino Respondents (MCPCE, Wave 1)



Note. Latino respondents: 18–35, *n* = 261; 36 and older, *n* = 243.

asked who they would vote for, if they could or wanted to. This is an interesting question to ask, since many politicians base their political agendas, particularly with regard to immigration, on citizens’ voting patterns. Knowing how potential citizens might vote can also motivate politicians to take particular positions on issues that matter to immigrants. Not surprisingly, both Asian and Latino noncitizens were more likely to vote for Barack Obama than John McCain. For example, Asians in both age categories were more likely to vote for Barack Obama (77 percent among younger respondents), as opposed to the 3 percent who would have voted for John McCain in the same age bracket.⁹ Similarly, those who were not sure who they would vote for were more inclined to vote for Barack Obama than John McCain.

While it is hard to say if respondents

⁹The number of Asian respondents for this question falls below the threshold needed for accurate representation. As opposed to taking out Asian respondents altogether from this question, please take note of the fact that for each category there are only about 55 respondents and therefore the percentages reflect a small number of respondents per column.

were thinking in terms of party lines or individual candidates, it is quite apparent that these noncitizens would have most likely aligned with the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate if they could have voted. This finding also highlights the smaller number of noncitizens who seem to align themselves with the Republican Party. Specifically, are noncitizens more likely to become Democrats because of the Republican Party’s anti-immigrant platforms? Or do Republicans rely on anti-immigrant policies because they know newer citizens are unlikely to become Republican? Again, among Latino noncitizens, the numbers suggest that noncitizen immigrants were more likely to vote for Barack Obama in both the younger and older age groups (70 percent and 74 percent, respectively), which follows the voting pattern that most Latinos took in the election.

CONCLUSION

Many people view immigrant groups as being made up of apolitical individuals. Since most immigrants continue to be undocumented and therefore cannot vote, it is widely believed that immigrants have no interest in knowing about political matters. That is simply not the case. Data from the MCPCE project allows us to understand how immigrants thought about and responded to various civic and political issues pre- and post-Obama's election to the presidency. Clearly, little has changed in terms of immigration policies: Latinos and Asians continue to be labeled and targeted as perpetual foreigners in this country. Recent events in Arizona demonstrate that anti-immigrant sentiment is still alive and well across the country. What the data does show us, however, is that, like the theme of 2006 immigration marches, immigrants are no different than their

citizen counterparts when it comes to civic and political activism. Even when they are threatened with deportation, documented and undocumented immigrants alike will come together and prove that they are paying attention to the political climate of the day and are active members of civil society. Most Asian and Latino immigrants come to the United States with a hard-working mentality and build on that belief. Unfortunately, they continue to be the center of attacks from xenophobic individuals and groups who falsely believe their presence in the United States constitutes a crime. Given the fact that a majority of the population will soon be composed of communities with recent immigrants, immigration reform is something President Obama should not lose sight of, as it will undoubtedly impact both the 2010 and 2012 elections.