



How Immigrants Not Yet Able to Vote Feel about Representative Democracy in the United States

Deborah Schildkraut, Tufts University

Immigrants who have not yet gone through the process to become naturalized citizens cannot vote in the United States, but they are still involved in American democracy. Immigrants are included in Census counts used to allocate elected representatives, and of course officials at all levels of government craft and implement policies that affect immigrants as well as other residents. From the point of view of democratic theories that stress government responsiveness, elected representatives are obligated to take account of the interests of all constituents. But do the immigrants themselves believe this is happening? The answer matters, because they, too, need to respect and participate in governance if U.S. democracy is to flourish.

My research probes and compares the political views held by immigrants and native-born citizens. To what extent are immigrants' feelings shaped by their status as new arrivals and their membership in ethnic minority groups? Do newcomers and native-born citizens offer similar or different political assessments and explanations for judgments? Which group is more optimistic about representative democracy in the United States?

Listening to Newcomers and Native Citizens

I developed insights by convening focus group discussions in the greater Boston area, two with Spanish-speaking immigrants and two with native-born white citizens. The immigrants were recruited through English-language learning classes and, even though I was not permitted to ask about citizen status, the discussion made it apparent that virtually all were not yet naturalized and some were undocumented. From these group discussions, I learned how and why immigrants tend to assess political representation in the United States differently than native-born citizens.

- **Should political representatives do what constituents want or use their own judgment?**

Immigrants were more likely than the native-born discussants to say that representatives should act as delegates and do what people want, whereas the native-discussants were more likely to feel that representatives should be trustees, using their own best judgment even if it goes against the wishes of their constituents. This divergence of opinion seemed to emerge from the fact that immigrants know they are outsiders whose views are easy to ignore. Immigrants wanted a tighter lease on representatives. Interestingly, the immigrant discussants were more trusting of "the people" than native-born discussants, whose remarks made it clear that they were more skeptical about the intelligence and abilities of ordinary Americans.

- **Is it better to live in a community where people agree – or disagree – about politics?** Immigrants were more likely than the native-born to say that they would rather live in a community where people

have many different views about politics. Native-born discussants said they prefer to live in communities where everyone shares political outlooks. This divergence of opinion stemmed from the comparisons immigrants made with their home countries, which many described as lacking in freedom of expression. They found America appealing by contrast and tended to view debate and disagreement as essential – and desirable – components of the U.S. political system. The native-born discussants, on the other hand, expressed a preference for being in the majority and an aversion to holding minority viewpoints.

- **Should representatives come from the same backgrounds as those they represent?** When asked if it matters if elected representative come from the same social and ethnic backgrounds as their constituents, immigrants were reluctant to say yes, but also showed clear concern that political leaders do not really understand the challenges unique to immigrants. Having more people like them in office could be beneficial, they said. By contrast, the native-born white discussants had trouble even understanding the question. They cared most about whether representatives shared their partisanship and ideology and could not see why I would even ask about the demographic characteristics of representatives. These reactions underscore just how differently insiders and outsiders understand their place in America's representative democracy.
- **Why is "politician" a dirty word?** Both groups had only negative things to say when asked what comes to mind when they hear the word "politician." Nevertheless, immigrant discussants praised the American system of government for preventing wayward politicians from doing too much damage, whereas the native-born tended to speak nostalgically about mythical "good old days" in which politicians were allegedly less corrupt than they are today.

Immigrant Status is Salient – And Leads to Optimism as Well as Pessimism

Throughout the discussions, newcomers invoked their immigrant identity as they wrestled with these complex questions, even when my questions made no mention of immigration. Clearly, their immigrant identity was ever-salient as the lens through which representative democracy in the United States is understood. Immigrant status, more than ethnicity, language, national origin, party, or ideology shaped how they spoke of themselves as constituents, how they view their relationships to elected officials, and how they assess American-style representative democracy.

Awareness of their outsider status leads immigrants to wariness about political representation in their new home. In my focus groups, it was clear that newcomers' preference for highly responsive representatives stemmed from worries that they, as outsiders, could readily be ignored. Similarly pessimistic assessments led to worries that the needs of immigrant minorities could be misunderstood and not properly addressed by government officials.

But pessimism was not the whole story for these newcomers, who also pointed to real advantages in the U.S. system of representative democracy. What is more, compared to the native-born discussants, they were more comfortable with political debate and more optimistic about the intelligence of fellow constituents. Overall, my findings give reason to believe that even immigrants who have not yet become citizens, and therefore do not vote, can be constructive participants in U.S. democracy. That is very good news in this era of renewed mass immigration, when many American communities and states need to find ways to hear the voices and meet the needs of all residents, citizens and non-citizens alike.

Read more in Deborah Schildkraut, "**The Complicated Constituency: A Study of Immigrant Opinions about Political Representation.**" *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 1, no. 1 (2013): 26-47.