

Naturalizing the Party: Party Registration and Voter Turnout of Foreign-Born Citizens

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Abstract

Scholarly research suggests that foreign-born citizens do not register as Democrats and Republicans or turn out to vote at comparable rates to native-born citizens. These findings are derived from survey data, often with very small sub-samples of self-reported naturalized citizens. Leveraging a unique dataset cultivated from multiple public records requests in Florida, we use observational data (specifically, the “country or state of birth” as reported on official voter registration forms) to test the long-held assumption that naturalized citizens are less likely to “join the party” or turn out to vote than native-born citizens. Drawing on actual party registration and 2016 General Election voting records of more than 9 million Floridians, including nearly 1.2 million foreign-born American citizens, we find that naturalized citizens register with the two major political parties and turn out to vote at even higher rates than those born in the United States.

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Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election sent an alarming message to millions of immigrants—from naturalized American citizens to undocumented—residing in the United States. Unlike his predecessors, including Republican Ronald Reagan who in 1986 signed into law a sweeping reform bill providing amnesty for upwards of 3 million illegal immigrants (Tichenor 1994), President Trump has shown animus towards immigrants. Calling Mexican immigrants “criminals” and “rapists” on the campaign trail, claiming he would build a wall with America's southern neighbor and have the government of Mexico pay for it, vowing to ban Muslims from entering the country, and maintaining he would have won the popular vote if not for some 3-5 million illegal votes cast for Hillary Clinton (Henderson and Graham 2017), the embattled scapegoats of Trump's “Take America Back” mantra were immigrants.

President Trump, of course, did not invent xenophobia, nor was he the first to exploit anti-immigrant tropes on the national stage. Beyond abject racism and nationalist prejudice, an undercurrent of skepticism, if not outright hostility, towards immigrants has remained a constant throughout American history. Foreign-born naturalized citizens are often viewed in a negative light regarding their understanding of the American political system, especially inept at navigating the currents of partisan politics. Unfamiliar with the traditions, values, and policies of American political parties due to their distinct cultural backgrounds, non-liberal ideological priors, and lack of political socialization, naturalized citizens are alternatively portrayed as willing dupes of party bosses, uninformed clients of partisan politics, and ill-suited for democratic participation (for a review, see Rosenbaum and Tivig 2014).

Today, nearly all scholars of immigration and party politics have abandoned the nativist rhetoric against the incorporation of immigrant populations into the political process generally, and into the party system. Yet an undercurrent in the scholarly literature persists: immigrants,

who are often portrayed as less engaged in the American political process than their natural-born counterparts, are seen as less likely to register with a major political party and less likely to vote. We challenge this dominant view. Drawing on an original dataset that records the birthplaces of more than 9 million registered voters in Florida, we find that the propensity of foreign-born citizens to register with a major political party and turn out to vote is comparable to, if not greater than, native-born registered voters.¹ We suggest that the incorporation of foreign-born American citizens in Florida to register with a major party and turn out to vote at similar rates as voters born in the U.S. should not be all that surprising. To be sure, our party registration and turnout patterns among Florida's naturalized citizens may not hold for similar populations in other states, as the Sunshine State is a heterogeneous melting pot of migrants, both foreign and domestic (Colburn and deHaven-Smith 2002). But the patterns we find in Florida belie the conventional wisdom, much of which is based on national survey data with small sub-samples of naturalized citizens that may not capture realities on the ground.

Our study proceeds as follows. We begin with an overview of the literature on the partisan affiliation and turnout patterns of naturalized citizens, which suggests that citizens not born in the U.S. tend to abstain from registering with a major political party and vote at lower rates compared to native-born citizens. We then offer some reasons why these findings may not be accurate, why foreign-born citizens may actually register with the major parties and vote at rates comparable to native-born citizens. Drawing on observational data from Florida, we examine party registration and turnout patterns of foreign- and U.S. born registered voters,

¹ We use the terms "foreign-born" and "naturalized" citizens interchangeably, as they refer to voters who were born outside of the United States. We use the terms "native-born" and "natural-born" to refer to voters who were born in the U.S.

with specific attention to naturalized citizens born in Cuba and Haiti, and American citizens born in Puerto Rico. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings with regard to immigrants' broader participation in American politics, beyond Florida.

Our study could not be more well-timed given the heightened anti-immigrant tenor of political discourse in the U.S. According to recent estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), over 21 million foreign-born naturalized American citizens live in the U.S., with 97 percent of them over the age of 18 and thus theoretically eligible to vote. Challenging the longstanding understanding of party registration and turnout rates of naturalized citizens, we find that immigrants do register with the two major parties and do turn out to vote at impressive rates.

Potential Barriers to Partisan Incorporation and Turnout of Naturalized Citizens

Scholars of immigrants and party politics have largely abandoned the nativist rhetoric against the incorporation of immigrant populations into the political process and party system more specifically. A century ago, such negative portrayals of "aliens" subverting the democratic process and the two-party system were commonplace (Hall 1906; Mayo-Smith 1890). Even during the post-World War II era, Handlin (1951) argued that the level of democracy in an immigrants' birth county was vital in determining their participation rates and their acceptance of the democratic process in the U.S. In contrast to scholars of a bygone era who placed the onus on immigrants themselves for their lack of political incorporation, contemporary scholars point to two reasons why America's newest citizens do not become adherents to the two major parties or turn out to vote at the same rates as their native-born compatriots.

First, many scholars emphasize the reality that naturalized American citizens often grow up having very different cultural and political experiences than native-born citizens. Because naturalized citizens are often understood as not being fully versant in American politics, they

are seen as having more difficulty placing themselves on the traditional liberal-conservative spectrum that undergirds the two-party system in the U.S. (Lee, Ramakrishnan, and Ramírez 2006; Lien 1997). In perhaps the most comprehensive study of why immigrants are less inclined to join political parties, Hajnal and Lee (2011) point to ideological ambivalence, or immigrants' dissatisfaction with the two-party system that is a result of being unfamiliar with the liberal-conservative continuum. Unlike the "seasoned democratic citizens in America," immigrants are not as accustomed to the liberal and conservative ideologies, resulting in them remaining unaffiliated when they register to vote (Hajnal and Lee 2011: 90). Drawing on national survey data, they suggest that information uncertainty, ideological ambivalence, and identity formation helps to explain why immigrants, specifically Asian Americans and Latinos, are more likely than native-born citizens to remain unaffiliated with the major political parties. In addition, they find that immigrants tend to be issue-based voters, and that these many issues do not align with the positions of either the Republican or Democratic parties. According to Hajnal and Lee (2011: 92), naturalized immigrants also avoid joining a political party because they lack the identity formation intrinsic to native-born citizens, as "the political and social group identities of Asians and Latinos" may "interact in often complex ways to influence how different immigrants and their children think about the major parties, the American political process, and the utility of civic and political engagement." In sum, Hajnal and Lee (2011: 90) write, many immigrants have "no familiarity with the U.S.-centric left-right ideological continuum, no knowledge of issue differences between Democrats and Republicans, and no sufficiently habituated loyalties to the two-party system in the United States."

Second, some scholars suggest the reason why foreign-born American citizens are less likely to join the party or vote is that the major political parties have failed to actively reach out

to and engage immigrant populations (Andersen 2008; de la Garza 2004; Edsall and Thompson 2001; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Lien 1997). Rather than blaming naturalized citizens for not joining the party, this institutional perspective shifts the onus on the two major parties themselves. Naturalized citizens are often perceived by the parties as being more difficult to mobilize to vote or persuade to support their party's candidates for office. Andersen (2008: 36) observes that political party operatives even see newly naturalized immigrants who have taken the affirmative step to register to vote as "non-immunized," and thus they are not targeted by the parties to join their ranks or be mobilized to turn out to the polls. When calculating whether to invest in activating naturalized citizens, Republican and Democratic party leaders sometimes fear a potential backlash from vocal or lurking anti-immigrant forces among their own party's adherents (Andersen 2008). For example, Lien (1997) finds that political parties in the U.S. have not tried to attract Asian American voters to their ranks due to limited resources. From a rational choice perspective, the two major political parties want to maximize their candidates' chances of winning while spending as little as possible to mobilize new voters, especially naturalized citizens who might not have a voting track record or be solid votes for their party's nominees. In part because the two-party system has neglected these new Americans, Andersen (2008) finds that many nonparty organizations have replaced the traditional function of political parties to conduct outreach to naturalized immigrants. This may indeed lead to naturalized citizens affiliating as Independents at higher rates than native-born citizens because of the "modest attention" that is given to them by the two major parties (Andersen 2008: 22).

Most of these studies examine the party registration and turnout rates of immigrant populations—regardless of whether they are native-born or naturalized citizens—compared to native-born whites or African Americans. For the most part, they have focused on the party

registration and participation rates of Asian American and Latin American immigrant populations (Uhlener, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). With regard to Latinos, several scholars have documented their lower participation rates relative to other ethnic groups, with some scholars placing at least some of the blame on the “weak participant political cultures” of Latin American countries (Nelson 1979: 1037; Calvo and Rosenstone 1989; García 2016; Garcia and Sanchez 2007; Hero 1992; MacManus and Cassel 1988). In one of the most extensive studies of party identification of immigrant populations, Hajnal and Lee (2011), drawing on the 2006 Latino National Study, report that both foreign-born and native-born Latinos are more likely to identify as Independents than affiliate with a major political party. Although not reported in their book, a closer look at raw data relied upon by Hajnal and Lee (2011: Appendix 6A) reveals that there is actually no statistical difference between the rates of foreign-born and native-born Latinos who identify as Independents.

With respect to Asian Americans (both native-born and naturalized), scholars report that like Latinos, they too are less likely to register with a political party or vote when compared to white and African American citizens (Lien et al. 2001). According to Hajnal and Lee’s (2011) analysis of the 2008 National Asian American Political Survey, of which 88 percent of respondents were foreign-born, 31.4 percent considered themselves to be Democrats and 30.8 percent said they were uncommitted. Although native-born and naturalized Asian Americans have comparable registration and voting rates (Wong, Lien, and Conway 2008), “Asian Americans have not experienced an easy alliance with political parties” more generally (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004: 99), which could explain why they tend to have relatively low party registration and turnout rates compared to other ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, few scholars have differentiated between native-born and naturalized citizens of different ethnic or national groups when examining party registration and turnout rates. One early study drawing on Current Population Survey (CPS) data by Ong and Nakanishi (1996) finds that naturalized citizens tend to have lower voter registration rates than native-born citizens, specifically among Asian Americans, African Americans, and non-Hispanic whites, but the study does not delve into whether foreign-born citizens register with a party (because the CPS does not ask respondents about their party affiliation). Drawing on survey data with small sub-samples of naturalized American citizens, other scholars find foreign-born immigrants, compared to native-born offspring of immigrants, are more likely to be unaffiliated with the two major parties (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Bass and Casper 1999; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004). Foreign-born Asians are especially less likely, some scholars have found, to affiliate with a party than native-born citizens from the same group (Wong, et. al 2011). First-generation emigres from Anglophone countries are more likely to vote at higher rates than those who emigrate from non-English speaking countries (de la Garza, Abrajano, and Cortina 2008; García 2016; Gordon 1964; Pantoja, Ramírez, and Segura 2001; Ramakrishnan 2005). There are exceptions to these findings. In the aftermath of both the Kennedy Administration's Bay of Pigs fiasco in the 1960s and the Clinton Administration's botched Elian Gonzalez child custody case in the late 1990s, there was a surge of naturalized Cuban American in Florida who registered with the Republican Party and who voted for Republican candidates (de la Garza, Abrajano, and Cortina 2008).

It is important to note here, that the aforementioned studies are largely informed by survey data. National representative surveys, of course, provide many benefits when trying to assess the political behavior of individuals, including their party registration and voting

patterns. Asking respondents a wide variety of questions allows scholars to control for an array of demographic, socio-economic, partisan, national origin, and generational factors, and scholars have relied heavily on national surveys to draw conclusions about immigrants' affiliation with political parties and voter participation in the U.S. Unfortunately, the number of foreign-born naturalized respondents in most nationally representative samples of registered voters include a small sub-sample of these registered voters. In addition to concerns over tiny samples of naturalized citizens, there are additional problems concerning various types of survey response biases, such as misreporting, social desirability, and evasive answers to sensitive questions (Holbrook and Krosnick 2009).

Challenging the Conventional Wisdom: Why Might Naturalized Citizens Join the Party?

Given the salience of the anti-immigration political atmosphere today, might the Cuban emigration experience—long held as an exception to the assumed low party identification and turnout rates of naturalized American citizens—now be the rule? We suggest now more than ever there is ample reason for naturalized citizens to join a major political party and turn out to vote. We offer two main reasons why naturalized citizens not only are likely to join a political party, but turn out to vote. First, the American liberal-conservative political spectrum exists well beyond the borders of the U.S., functionally reducing most ideological barriers that in the past may have intimidated naturalized citizens when making the decision to register with a major political party, much less turn out to vote. Second, regardless of whether their country of birth has a high or low level of democratic governance, once immigrants go through what is often an arduous naturalization process, they are singularly motivated to join a major party and exercise their right to vote.

A left-right ideological scale is commonly used to compare political systems across countries (Caprara and Vecchione 2017; Castles and Mair 1984). Although those living in different countries do not necessarily have identical political views or concerns, they may share ideological affinities. The left-right ideological spectrum is not unique to the U.S. Caprara and Vecchione (2017: 132), in their study of roughly 9,000 respondents from 16 different countries, argue that presence of a left-right ideological spectrum “may act as attractors that enable people to take a stance with regard to the positions of others, to strengthen consensus, and to commit themselves to coordinated action.” As such, we suggest that when immigrants go through the naturalization process to become American citizens, many have already placed themselves on the liberal-conservative scale and have thought about themselves as a Democrat or a Republican.

Furthermore, we suggest there are good reasons for naturalized citizens emigrating from communist and authoritarian countries to join a major party and to vote, contrary to previous studies (García 2016; Handlin 1951). Unlike those born in the U.S., immigrants usually go through a long and exhausting process of becoming a citizen. This process is not only costly, it requires mastering political knowledge of American government as well as English language proficiency (Fuchs 1990; García 2016). The naturalization process, thus, entails both time and monetary costs. Immediately upon their swearing in ceremony to become a citizen, immigrants are offered the opportunity to register to vote; many, of course, do so, as embracing one of the most important rights afforded by their new U.S. citizenship. Although one study finds that voting among white immigrants may be lower for those immigrants who arrive from repressive or communist countries than European countries (Ramakrishnan 2005), there is evidence that emigres from repressive countries from other areas of the world actually participate at high

rates upon their American naturalization. For example, Ramakrishnan and Espenshade (2001) find that for Latinos who become naturalized U.S. citizens who emigrated from repressive regimes (such as Cuba) have impressive political participation rates, as xenophobic attitudes may actually provoke immigrants to register and vote. Many Asian immigrants who migrated to the U.S. following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act fled communist regimes (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004), and like naturalized citizens from Cuba, many naturalized Americans from these repressive regimes became engaged in the political process. Cuban Americans, who were granted favored status by the Kennedy Administration to facilitate their emigration from the authoritarian regime under Fidel Castro (Portes and Mozo 1985), are assumed to have higher party registration and turnout rates once becoming American citizens compared to other Hispanics (García Bedolla 2009; Garcia and Sanchez 2007; Hajnal and Lee 2006; Hero 1992). We suggest that Cuban emigres—once an anomaly regarding their high rates of party registration and voting turnout (Pedraza-Bailey 1985)—may now be the norm for other naturalized citizens from Latin America countries and beyond (Preston and Alvarez 2016).

Native- and Foreign-Born Registered Voters in Florida: Data and Findings

As the foregoing studies broadly suggest, naturalized citizens, compared to native-born citizens, tend to be less likely to register to vote with a major political party or turn out to vote. Rather than drawing on survey data to interrogate this conventional wisdom, we use a dataset compiled from Florida's statewide voter registration database that is typically not made available to the public. These original data avoid problems inherent with survey data, as they are observational, that is, they are drawn from administrative records and are not subject to the inherent biases of survey data (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Holbrook and Krosnick 2009; McDonald 2007). In addition, our data on foreign-born and native-born citizens are not merely

a sample drawn from registered voters in Florida—they constitute the entire population of registered voters who voluntarily provided information about where they were born on their official voter registration forms.

All told, our comprehensive dataset includes information about the “country or state” of birth of more than 9.36 million (of the roughly 13.2 million) voters registered in Florida as of May 2016.² Of these 9.36 million registered voters whose country or state of birth we were able to successfully code, 7.8 million were born in the U.S., including the more than 190,000 individuals who were born in U.S. territories (mostly Puerto Rico), or on military bases, or in the Panama Canal Zone. In turn, our dataset includes birthplace information from the statewide voter file concerning the nearly 1.2 million registered voters born beyond the U.S. mainland or its territories. Reflecting the diversity of Florida voters, then, one of every eight registered voters in the state who offered their place of birth when registering to vote were born outside of the U.S., including its territories. Our dataset of registered Florida voters includes information about American citizens born in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. Territories, as well as more than 200 sovereign nations, territories, and principalities. Registered voters born in Cuba represent by far the largest share of foreign-born registered Florida voters in our dataset; we have data on 325,000 Cuban-born American citizens, accounting for roughly 3.5 percent of the 9.36 million registered voters for which we know where they were born, and more than one in four of the nearly 1.2 million foreign born voters registered in Florida.

² Some 4.9 million out of the 14.2 million registered Florida voters provided no information about their birthplace, which is not required information to register to vote. Although we have raw birthplace data for an additional 446,000 individuals, we were unable to code their “country or state” of birth due to unrecognizable or non-determinative entries.

Using the unique voter ID given to all Florida voters, we merge our place of birth dataset with the May 2016 statewide voter file, which provides us with individual-level data on the party registration, race/ethnicity, age, gender, and physical address of Florida's registered voters, data that scholars have mined for voter participation in the state (see Herron and Smith 2014). We then merge this combined dataset with the January 2017 statewide vote history file, which provides the vote histories of registrants. Here, we focus our attention on voter turnout of native- and foreign-born citizens in the 2016 General Election. Although our data have some limitations—for example, we do not know why or when foreign-born registered voters emigrated to the U.S. or why or when they became naturalized American citizens—they do provide us with accurate rates in which foreign-born American citizens join the two major parties and turn out to vote in the most recent presidential election, compared to those registered voters born in the U.S.³

Party Registration of Native- and Foreign-Born Florida Citizens

We begin our analysis by examining the party registration of more than 9 million native-born and foreign-born registered voters in Florida.⁴ Figure 1 displays the percentage of U.S.

³ Through multiple public records requests, we received raw data from the Florida Division of Elections of the “country or state of birth” of all registered voters in Florida, circa May 2016. This particular information collected on voter registration forms is voluntarily disclosed by individuals registering to vote; however, roughly three-quarters of Florida's 14 million active and inactive voters provided such information when they registered. The state's 67 county Supervisors of Elections (SOEs) enter this information into the statewide database; unfortunately, this self-reported place of birth information is not uniform or standardized, and there is likely some data input error by the county SOEs that may lead to some minor inaccuracies. There is no *a priori* reason to expect that foreign-born or native-born U.S. citizens are more or less likely to voluntarily disclose their place of birth which might systematically bias our findings. All told, we coded more than 27,000 discrete places of birth of some 9.36 million registered voters.

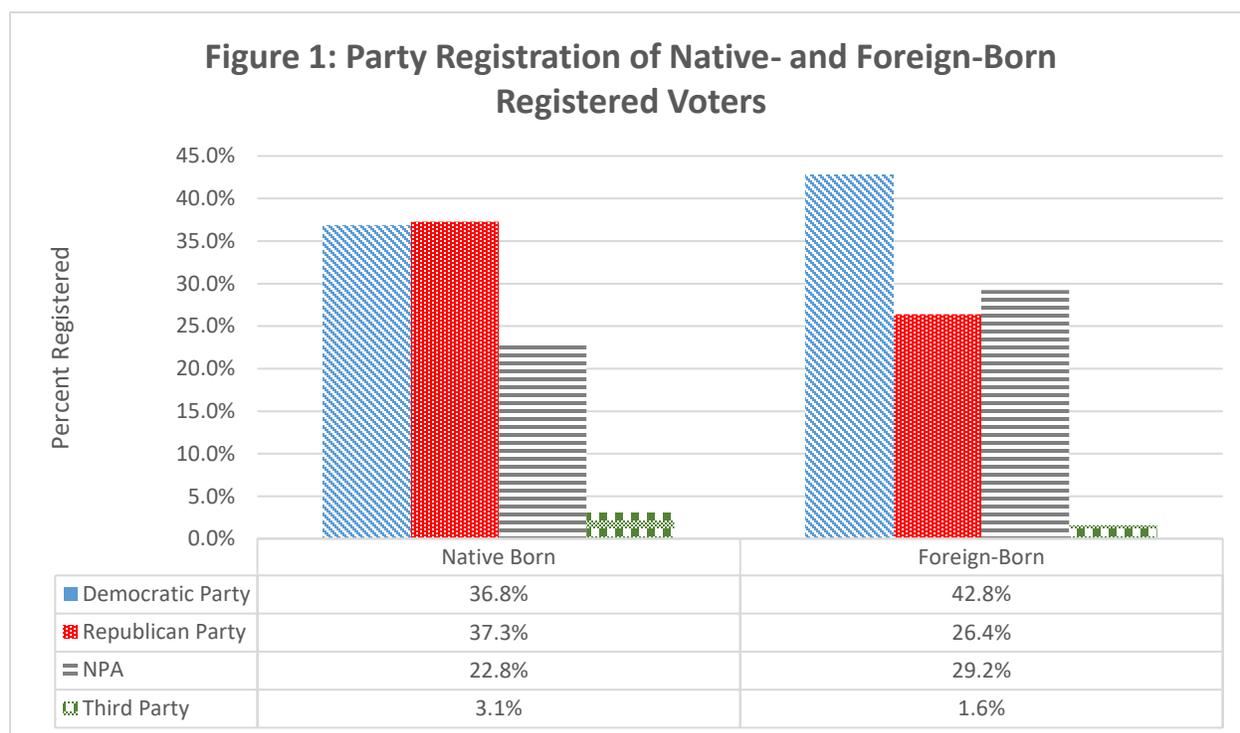
⁴ For consistency, we restrict the following analyses to the slightly more than 9 million registered voters for which we have complete voter registration and birthplace data from the

born and naturalized U.S. citizens who as of January 2017 were registered as Democrats, Republicans, Third Parties, No Party Affiliates (NPA). We find that foreign-born citizens register with the two major parties at comparable rates as their native-born counterparts. Among the 7.84 million native-born citizens for which we have a full array of data, some 74.1% are registered with the two major parties. In contrast to the scholarly conventional wisdom that naturalized citizens do not join the party at equivalent rates as their native-born brethren, however, we find more than two-thirds (69.2%) of the roughly 1.2 million foreign-born American citizens in Florida are registered as Democrats or Republicans, just 5 percentage points less than native-born American citizens who are supposedly more politically socialized and more likely to be recruited by the two major parties than their foreign-born counterparts.

Turning to their partisan allegiance, as Figure 1 reports, naturalized Florida citizens are 60 percent more likely to be registered as Democrats than as Republicans. Nearly 43% of foreign-born registered voters in Florida are Democrats; just over 26% are registered as Republicans. In fact, the much higher rate of naturalized citizens registering with the Democratic Party more than offsets the Republican Party's numeric advantage over Democrats among native-born voters. (Slightly more U.S. born citizens are registered as Republicans (37.3%) than Democrats (36.8%), with the balance registered as NPAs (22.8%) or with third parties (3.1%). In keeping with the prevailing scholarly literature, our Florida data reveal that foreign-born registrants are indeed more likely to be registered as NPAs than their native-born counterparts, but not by a wide margin (just 6 percentage points). Our findings, which are

May 2016 statewide files, as well as demographic and partisan, and vote history data from the January 2017 vote history file that includes information about voting in the November 2016 election.

grounded in official records and not survey responses of more than 9 million registered Floridians cut across the grain of some of the most persistent findings of who joins the parties. In the Sunshine State, at least, native-born and naturalized citizens have similar registration rates with the Democratic and Republican parties. Equally importantly, our data reveal that foreign-born registrants are more than twice as likely to join the two major parties than to register as an independent (NPA) or with a third party, a finding not anticipated by the existing scholarly literature.

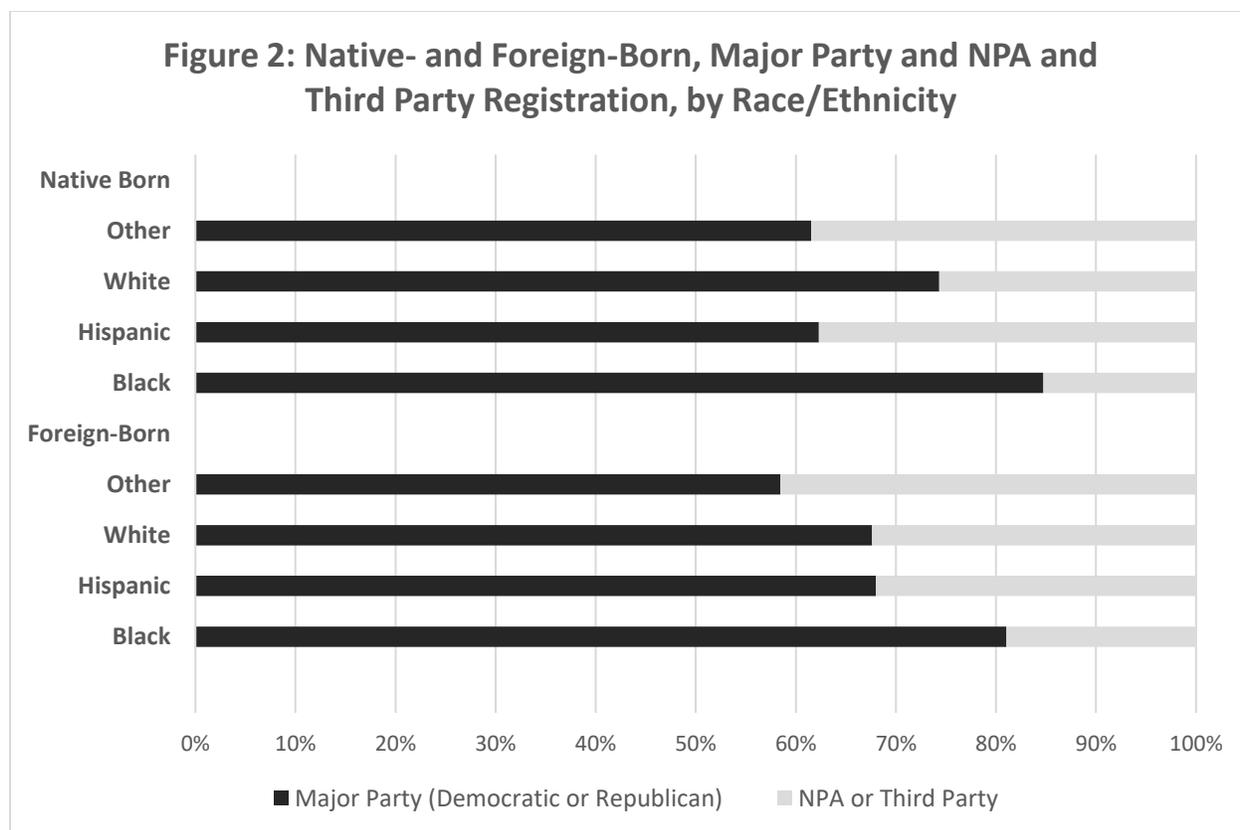


Party Registration and Racial/Ethnic Composition of Native- and Foreign-Born Florida Citizens

Because the statewide Florida voter file also provides a wealth of demographic information, we are able to differentiate between the party registrations of racial/ethnic groups that are native or foreign-born. Figure 2 provides the racial/ethnic composition of the Florida

electorate registered with the two major parties or NPAs and with third parties who were born inside or outside the U.S. We begin by examining the party registrations of registered voters who identified themselves as “black” when they registered to vote, both native- and foreign-born U.S. citizens. Not surprisingly, given the high rate of African Americans who register as Democrats, nearly 85% of the more than 1 million native-born black Florida voters in our dataset are registered with a major party (primarily as Democrats). This high major party registration rate among African Americans born in the U.S., though, is nearly attained by the more than 215,000 naturalized black voters who were born outside of the U.S. A full 81% of foreign-born black citizens in Florida are registered with one of the two major parties.

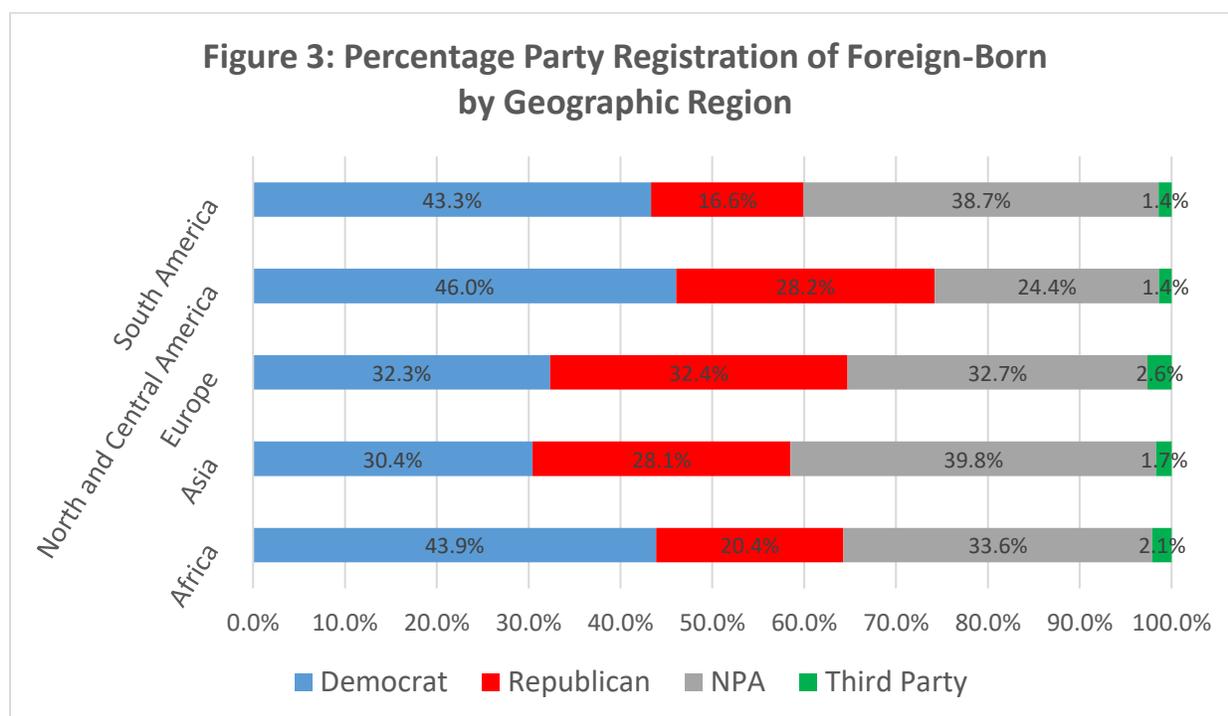
These high rates of major-party registration among native-born and naturalized black Florida citizens far exceeds comparable rates among Hispanic and white registrants—both native- and foreign-born. As Figure 2 shows, over 74% of the nearly 5.8 million white native-born registered voters in our dataset are registered as Democrats and Republicans, while nearly 68% of foreign-born white voters are registered with one of the two major parties. What is perhaps most striking, though, is that a higher percentage (68.0%) of the nearly 619,000 foreign-born Hispanic voters in our dataset are registered as Republicans and Democrats, whereas only 62.3% of the 791,000 native-born Hispanics are registered with the two major parties. It is clear from the statewide voter file, then, that naturalized citizens—black, white, and especially Hispanic—identify with a major political party at rates comparable, or even greater, than American citizens of similar race/ethnicity born in the U.S.



Party Registration of Foreign-Born by Region of Birthplace

Figure 3 breaks down the percentage of party registration of the nearly 1.2 million foreign-born U.S. citizens for whom we know their country of birth. To ease the interpretation of the data, we collapse these naturalized citizens into five geographic regions: Asia, South America, Africa, Europe, and Central and North America (so, excluding those born in the U.S., including its territories). Overall, we find that U.S. citizens born in all five regions are more likely to register as Democrats and Republicans than as NPAs or with third parties. The more than 717,000 naturalized citizens born in North and Central America (so, excluding the U.S. and its territories) are the most likely of any geographic region to join a major political party—nearly 75% are registered as Democrats (46.0%) or Republicans (28.2%). But naturalized U.S. citizens

born in other regions of the world are also more likely than not to register with the two major parties. Nearly two-thirds of the more than 20,000 African-born and the more than 125,000 European-born U.S. citizens are registered as either Republicans or Democrats. Of the five geographic regions, naturalized U.S. citizens born in South America and Asia (nearly 186,000 and more than 96,000 registered voters in our dataset, respectively) are the least likely to be registered with a major party; nevertheless, nearly three-fifths of these foreign-born U.S. citizens register as Democrats or Republicans. In terms of joining one or the other major parties, U.S. citizens born in South America are by far the least likely to join the Republican Party (16.6%) with those born in Europe the most likely to join the Republican Party (32.4%). Over 43% of registered voters born in South America and Africa are registered as Democrats, the highest rates across the five regions; only 30.4% of naturalized citizens born in Asia are registered as Democrats, but that still is a higher rate than those who registered as Republicans.



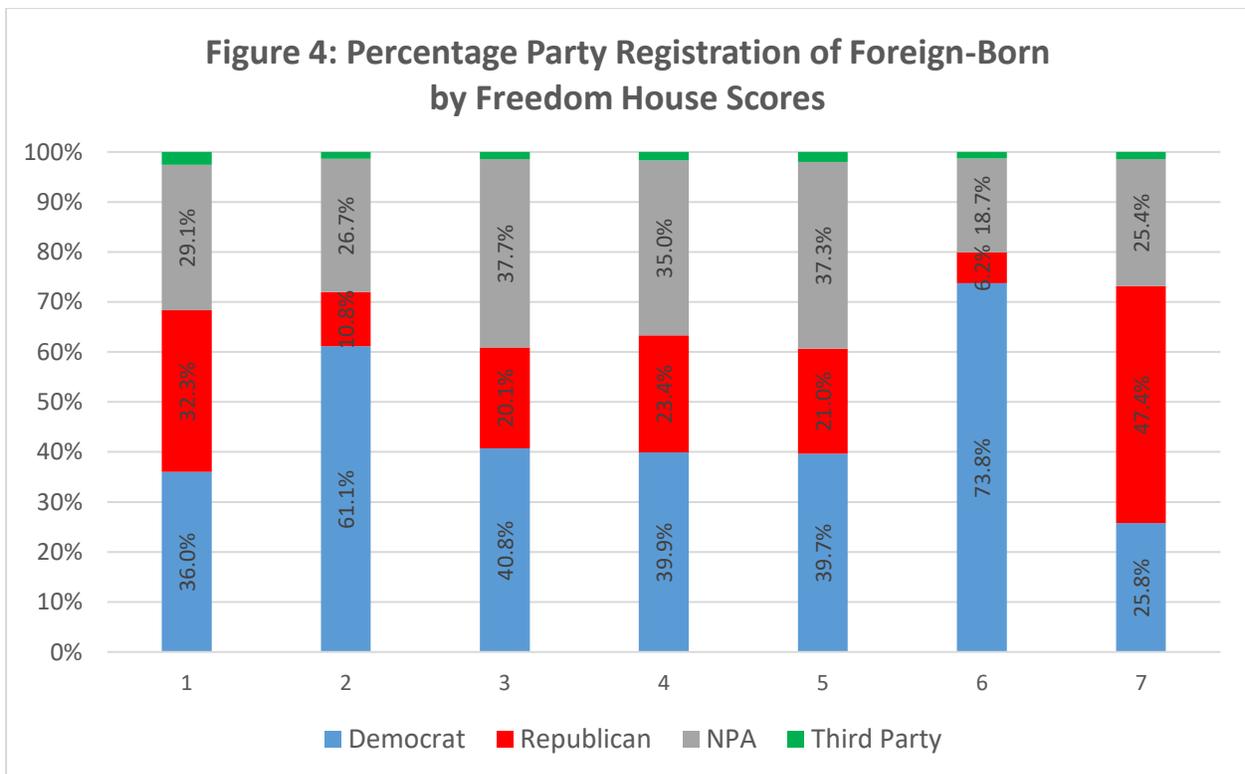
Party Registration of Foreign-Born Registered Voters and Freedom House Country Ratings

As the previous section makes clear, although foreign-born U.S. citizens are more likely to register as Democrats and Republicans than as NPAs or with third parties when registering to vote in Florida, there are differences in those rates across the geographic regions in which they were born. Here we probe whether or not party registration rates are tied at all to the relative freedom within a registrant's country of birth. Drawing on data created by Freedom House,⁵ which offers country's participatory rankings that range from most democratic (1) to least democratic (7), we examine whether party registration among naturalized citizens differs for those who emigrated to the U.S from more or less democratic countries. Previous research suggests that emigres from countries that are less democratic, such as Cuba and China, are more likely to participate in the U.S. political process (Ramakrishnan 2005).

Figure 4 reveals that naturalized citizens born in the most democratic countries (Freedom House scores of 1 and 2) and the least democratic countries (Freedom House scores of 6 and 7) are more likely to register with one of the two major parties than foreign-born from countries with mid-range scores. The more than 340,000 naturalized citizens from countries with the least democratic Freedom House scores (an average score of 7) are much more likely to be registered as Republicans. This is not surprising, as it is driven by the strong Republican ties of Cuban-born voters in Florida. In contrast, the more than 121,000 naturalized citizens from slightly less repressive countries (average Freedom House score of 6)—which include naturalized citizens from countries as diverse as Afghanistan and Angola, to Cameroon and

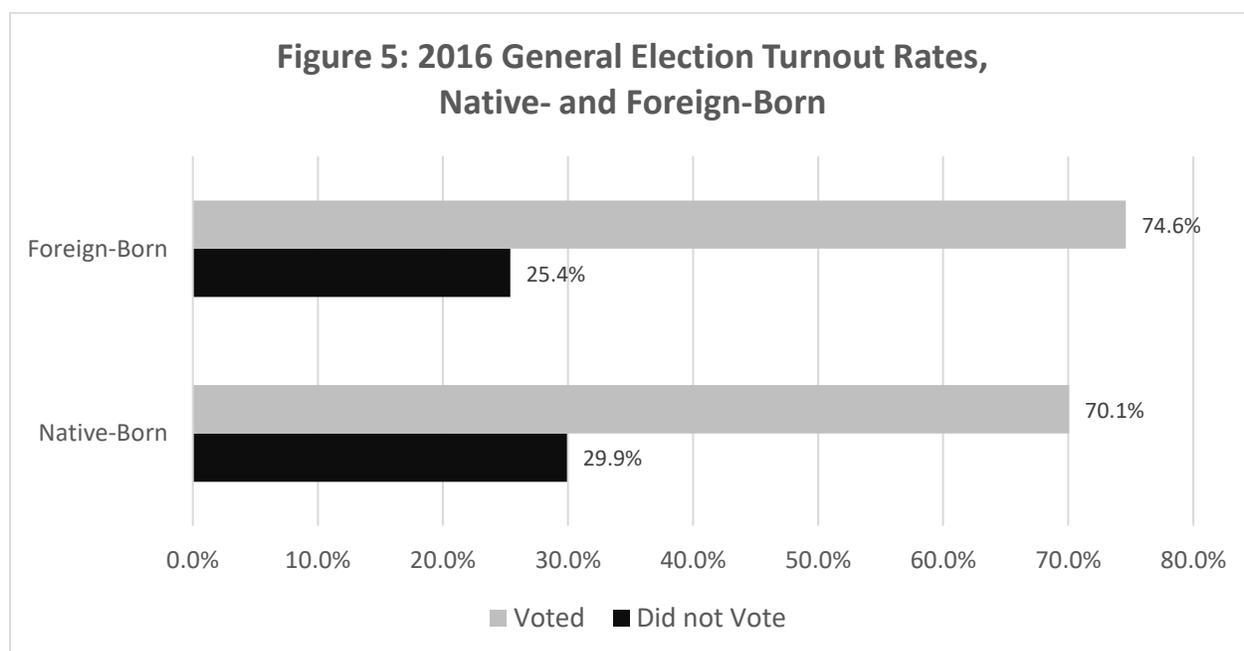
⁵ Freedom House Political Rights scores are a country's average score (1973-2016). See Freedom House (2017), "Country and territory ratings and statuses, 1972-2016." Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>.

Egypt, to Haiti and Iran)—are decisively more likely to be registered as Democrats. To be sure, this is in large part driven by the more than 106,000 Haitian-born registrants who are disproportionately likely to be registered as Democrats. Naturalized emigres from countries formerly under the control of the Soviet Union, however, are generally much less likely to be registered as Democrats. Overall, as Figure 4 shows, we find that naturalized citizens born in countries with Freedom House scores ranging from 1 to 7 are all more likely to register with one of the two major party in Florida than register as NPAs or with third parties, belying the notion that they are not able to navigate the partisan shoals of the American party system.



Native- and Foreign-Born Voter Turnout in the 2016 General Election

Our final analysis examines the turnout rates of native- and foreign-born voters in the 2016 General Election in Florida. Overall turnout of Florida's 14 million registered voters (Active and Inactive) in the 2016 General Election was 70%. Turnout among the 9 million registered voters in our dataset that includes a registered voter's place of birth is slightly higher, at 70.7%, which is indicative that Floridians who voluntarily provided their place of birth when they registered to vote are extremely representative of the entire Florida voter file. As Figure 5 reveals, perhaps shockingly, the roughly 1.2 million foreign-born U.S. citizens in our dataset actually voted at a higher rate than the 7.8 million native born registered voters for whom we have 2016 turnout records. Nearly three-quarters—some 74.6%—of foreign-born Floridians turned out to vote in the 2016 General Election, compared to 70.1% of native-born registered voters. The extraordinary turnout of foreign-born U.S. citizens is decisively not expected by the scholarly literature.



To be sure, the turnout rate in the 2016 General Election among foreign-born citizens in several countries is quite a bit higher than the overall average. Over 76% of the more than 318,000 Cuba-born and 75% of the more than 106,000 Haiti-born registered voters turned out in the presidential election. Other groups of foreign-born voters turned out at record rates—nearly 82% of the more than 8,500 Argentina-born and 34,000 Venezuela-born U.S. citizens turned out to vote in 2016, as did roughly 80% of the more than 18,000 Peru-born, 3,500 Chile-born, and nearly 87,000 Jamaica-born U.S. citizens. Approximately 82% of the more than 1,000 Sweden-born U.S. citizens turned out; over 80% of the more than 405 registered voters who were born in Sri Lanka turned out; and over 83% of the 145 voters born in Mozambique voted. Of course, naturalized U.S. citizens who emigrated from some other countries did not vote at high rates in the election: less than half of the nearly 1,000 Jordan-born, the more than 800 Kuwait-born, or nearly 700 Uzbekistan-born registered voters bothered to cast ballots; neither of the two registered voters born in Kurdistan turned out to vote for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. Perhaps mitigating the potential effects of the influx of Puerto Ricans migrating to Florida in the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria in 2017, less than 65% of the more than 172,000 Puerto Rico-born registered voters cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election.

Conclusion

Existing research on immigrant participation in American politics continues to echo old studies that paint immigrants as inactive participants in the democratic process. In this paper we examine immigrant participation in American politics; specifically, we observe the actual voter registration and turnout rates of foreign-born naturalized U.S. citizens in Florida compared to native-born citizens. Unlike previous studies that base their findings on survey

data, which often rely on small numbers of self-reported naturalized citizens, we coded the “country or state of birth” reported on official voter registration forms in Florida. This allows us to assess party registration and turnout rates across foreign-born and native-born citizens. With more than 9 million cases from Florida, a diverse state that is home to various immigrant groups, including roughly 1.2 million foreign-born U.S. citizens, we find that foreign-born U.S. citizens register with the two major political parties at comparable rates, and turn out to vote at even higher rates, as their native-born counterparts. Our findings challenge the conventional wisdom that immigrants are not engaged in the American political process.

Why would foreign- and native-born citizens register with the major parties and vote at comparable, or even higher, rates? We suggest that there are two main reasons why naturalized citizens are not only likely to register with the major parties, but also turn out to vote. First, we suggest that the liberal-conservative spectrum exists outside of the U.S., which means that naturalized citizens do share an ideological grounding that is similar to native-born Americans. The presence of a left-right spectrum in countries outside of the U.S. may help explain why foreign-born U.S. citizens register as either Democrats or Republicans and then turn out to vote at even a greater rate as their native-born counterparts. Second, we suggest that the often arduous naturalization process serves as a motivator to foreign-born voters to not only register with the major parties, but also turn out to vote, even if their country of birth does not have an identical party system or history of democratic participation.

Our original analysis of party registration and turnout rates among foreign- and native-born citizens is not only novel; it allows us to better gauge the actual partisan and turnout rates of naturalized American citizens. As such, the old adage often expressed by the two major parties, that naturalized citizens are not worth the investment to register or turn out to vote,

seems misplaced. In Florida, at least, foreign-born citizens are joining the party and turning out to vote, even if the two major parties are not trying to attract immigrant voters to their team or mobilizing them to turnout. It is our hope that our use of Florida's statewide voter file encourages other scholars to investigate further why certain naturalized emigres register with a major political party at higher rates than other immigrants, and why the Democratic Party in Florida (and perhaps in other states) attract a greater share of foreign-born registrants. We encourage other scholars to think beyond survey research when investigating the partisan identification and political participation of immigrant populations, as we suspect that the conventional wisdom—long grounded in surveys that may have inherent biases—may now be wide of the mark.

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