

Adult roles build skills for children of Latinx immigrants

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Children of Latinx immigrants who take on adult responsibilities exhibit higher levels of political activity compared with those who do not, according to University of Georgia researcher Roberto Carlos.

Immigrant communities often display low levels of political engagement, but a new study by Carlos indicates that when children of Latinx

immigrants take on adult roles because of parents' long work hours, immigrant status or language deficiencies, they develop noncognitive skills associated with higher rates of political participation.

"There is thriving in spaces that we wouldn't necessarily expect because of the hardship related to these environments," said Carlos, assistant professor of political science in the School of Public and International Affairs. "Instead of dismissing groups as inactive or disengaged, we just need to figure out where to look—sometimes in places we haven't typically examined—to see how they participate in the political process."

Previous research has described the noncognitive skills developed during adolescence that are positively associated with voter turnout. Some of these skills include general self-efficacy, even-temperedness, hard work, patience, altruism and follow-through.

Language brokering affects behavior

In the paper, published in *American Political Science Review*, Carlos posits that taking on adult responsibilities—language brokering, specifically—helps the children of Latinx immigrants develop the noncognitive skills associated with higher rates of political participation. Language brokering, when children translate or interpret for parents or other family members, runs the gamut from everyday interactions like a trip to the grocery store to high-stakes situations like hospital visits or interactions concerning immigration status.

"Young people are providing these services roughly from the time they're 6 or 7, and my argument is that if they can prevail in these spaces, they're going to be able to overcome the obstacles typically associated with political participation," he said. "And it's clear that they do."

Carlos combined three studies—a survey of Latinx college students, a survey of young adults known as GenForward, and a 10-year longitudinal study—to examine how mundane household experiences translate to political engagement.

The survey of Latinx college students indicated that respondents on the high end of the language brokering scale are substantially more likely to report political activity: 19% more likely to rally, 12% more likely to attend political meetings, and 20% more likely to sign petitions, compared with the average college student in the sample who does not serve as a language broker.

The GenForward survey, taken just after the 2016 presidential election, examined the effect of language brokering in the Latinx community and other ethnic groups including Asian and Black respondents. In the survey, 33% reported that both parents were immigrants, and of those 33%, more than half (59%) reported having served as a language broker for their parents. The results revealed that responders who acted as language brokers were 11% more likely to talk politics with their parents, 12% more likely to suggest a political party or candidate to their parents, and 7% more likely to start political conversations at home with their parents, compared to nonbrokers.

The impact of household chores

The Educational Longitudinal Study, conducted with high school sophomores starting in 2002 through 2012, examined the frequency of household responsibilities. Results revealed that children who were assigned [household chores](#) were 5%-6% more likely to vote in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections and 8% more likely to vote in local and midterm elections than children who did not take on any chores.

Previous research on the effect of household chore assignment suggests

that it is likely weighted along racial and social class lines because children of color and children in low socioeconomic environments are more likely to have to step up to help parents. Results of the ELS indicated that nonwhite students frequently assigned household chores were 8% more likely to vote in the 2004 [presidential election](#) and 9% more likely to vote in off-year elections, compared with other nonwhite students who did not take on any chores.

The largest differences were revealed in household chore assignments' effect by class. Household chore assignment had no influence on those who had at least one parent with a college degree. But for those whose parents had not earned a college degree, taking on household chores meant they were 6%-8% more likely to vote in local or midterm elections as well as the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, compared with those who did not take on any chores.

"The frequency of chore assignments actually has a pretty big impact on turnout compared to traditional influences we think about, like parents' education or a young person's own educational status, income, even access to newspapers as a kid," Carlos said. "Sometimes those effects wash away, but this chore assignment variable is persistent even in midterm elections that typically have low-level turnout."

These findings provide new insights into how the cycle of generational political inequality is overcome in unexpected ways and places. If these kids can be relied on at a young age to contribute, we shouldn't be surprised that they contribute to society through these participatory avenues when they're adults, Carlos said.

The prevalent views on political socialization and the ways people participate took a foothold in the 1960s, when immigration flows were at their lowest levels and immigrant communities weren't really being examined, according to Carlos. That led to a mainstream narrative that

tends to be largely white and heteronormative—it's not wrong, but it's incomplete, he said.

"My question was: What about [immigrant communities](#)? There's no top-down political socialization, necessarily. Values are, of course, being transmitted from immigrant [parents](#) to their children, but there's not always a clear indication that those values neatly map on to the American two-party system, especially if you're a new [immigrant](#)," he said.

"This paper highlights that we should consider looking at other political behaviors beyond voting. People who do this type of language brokering may be unable to vote, but that doesn't mean that they're not involved in the political process."

More information: Roberto F. Carlos, *The Politics of the Mundane*, *American Political Science Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055421000204](#)

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