

# For Mexican immigrants, politics is a family affair

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Imagine adapting to life in the U.S. after emigrating from Mexico. With so many confusing new processes and systems to navigate, how would you begin to understand something as complex as local and national politics? According to San Francisco State University Associate Professor of Political Science Marcela García-Castañón, who studies political socialization, you'd likely turn to your spouse. In a recent study in the journal *New Political Science*, García-Castañón shows that spousal relationships often determine how newcomers from Mexico come to understand American politics and develop a sense of community.

García-Castañón says she's one of only a few academics studying spousal political socialization in immigrants. She notes that most of the research into political socialization focuses on native-born citizens whose values start forming in adolescence. By the time they're married, their [political beliefs](#) are formed. Adult immigrants are a different story, and the limited research on immigrant political behavior doesn't account for the role that [spouses](#) play in shaping political values, García-Castañón said.

"Assuming immigrants are here on an individual basis is an inaccurate portrayal of how citizenship develops," she said. "If immigrants don't understand something they're going to turn to the person they trust the most, which is often their partner or spouse. They're engaging with their families, and those pathways shape how they see citizenship."

According to García-Castañón, most studies on political behavior simply focus on whether people are voting or not. That's too limiting, in her view.

"Immigrants don't feel like members of the community because they vote," she said. "They feel like members of communities because they can have offhand conversations about politics with their neighbors. If they feel safe enough to have these conversations they will, but they have to feel like their neighbor isn't going to call ICE or profile them."

Such concerns aren't unfounded, of course. America's attitudes on immigration have shifted in recent years, and that directly impacts conversations between spouses and shapes how couples view citizenship.

"If a government targets a person's family, family becomes a weapon against the immigrant community," García-Castañón said. "You see this in policies like DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] where immigrants are hesitant to register because they're afraid of giving out personal information that could be turned against them, or their families. If they have other family members who are undocumented, but ineligible for DACA or similar protections, there is a fear that seeking out this aid or benefit could result in their [family](#) or community being targeted."

The anti-[immigrant](#) climate has other repercussions. Immigrants also won't feel like they belong, and that mindset can leave a lasting imprint

on future generations, García-Castañón adds. "They start to see citizenship as something that should be avoided, because the message they're getting is that nobody wants them here," she said.

To conduct her study, García-Castañón used qualitative and quantitative data from surveys she conducted with Mexican-origin households in Arizona and Washington. She asked respondents to talk about their experiences with politics in their home country and in their new country. She found that not only do spouses share information and help each other grasp nuances, they can also pave the way for taking action.

"The way spouses engage with each other isn't just, 'Hey, honey—how are you doing?' but rather, 'Hey, honey—do you want to go protest?'" she said.

**More information:** Marcela García-Castañón, Amor, Que Piensas?: Spousal Political Socialization in Mexican Immigrant Communities, *New Political Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2018.1449066](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1449066)

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