

Article

Religious Conversion and Political Incorporation: An Event-Based Model of Immigrant Political Socialization

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Abstract: Political socialization in the United States is circuitous and influenced by numerous outside sources, including parents, teachers, and peers. Moreover, civic organizations and political parties often work directly to recruit and mobilize citizens into politics. However, many foreign-born immigrants are denied these opportunities to acquire socialization. Immigrants are also often further overlooked or ignored by the civic and political organizations that incorporate most native-born Americans into politics. While a range of previous scholarship has sought to demonstrate and explain these disparities, few studies have examined alternative routes to political socialization or reconsidered the paradigm of incremental socialization as it applies to foreign-born populations. We argue that immigrants may instead become involved in the U.S. political system through religious conversion—a pivotal event in their lives. Using surveys of the two predominant U.S. immigrant groups, Asian Americans and Latinos, we show that religious conversion can catalyze the socialization process. Among both groups, religious conversion in the U.S. is associated with increased rates of political participation. These results suggest that immigrant socialization may follow different pathways than those of native-born populations, and that scholars should take into greater consideration the role of critical life events when modelling political socialization among foreign-born populations.



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1. Introduction

As the foreign-born population of the United States has increased nearly fourfold over the last fifty years (Pew Research Center 2015), immigrants are an increasingly critical and politicized segment of the American electorate. Despite their potential numerical influence, however, a significant portion of the immigrant population has yet to be politically incorporated: both native- and foreign-born Asian Americans and Latinos are less likely to identify with a political party or vote in an election than native-born whites (Hajnal and Lee 2011). These gaps in political identification and participation are at least partially explained by immigrants' relative lack of political socialization. In addition to the myriad challenges facing immigrants to the U.S., many are also deprived of the traditional socializing processes that spur political engagement. Native-born Americans develop political values and attachments throughout an extensive period of socialization in their formative years under the influence of family, peers, educators, and political actors, but those born and raised abroad often lack such socialized ties to the American political system and, consequently, are often far less likely to participate in politics (e.g., Li and Jones 2020).

However, alternative pathways of political socialization may exist, as prior research has shown that immigrants from both Latin America and Asia may form partisan attachments as the result of religious conversion (Audette et al. 2017; Weaver 2015). The preceding shift in these immigrants' religious identities as an adaptive response to the American religious environment facilitates the subsequent formation of attachments to other distinctly American institutions, such as political parties. Even without decades of exposure to American political messages during their formative years and the political knowledge and experience gradually acquired over that period, significant and relatively sudden changes in one's life in the U.S. may serve to propel the socialization process.

Major events in an immigrant's experience in the U.S. may range from relatively mundane changes such as educational attainment, employment, home ownership, or marriage to rarer events such as major illness and interactions with the criminal justice system. Even immigration and relocation within the U.S. may constitute a major shift in one's life sufficient to spark political interest and lay the foundations for future political attachments. Many of these events also encourage political action by directly generating a desire for political change. Such events may be disruptive, but discontinuities also allow for redirection. Whereas many native-born Americans develop political interests slowly via exposure and social pressure over a long period of time, foreign-born Americans may be jolted to political attention, so to speak, through events that both change their lives and provide some link to politics.

We expect this to be especially true for a critical event and adaptation in an immigrant's identity in response to the religious marketplace of the U.S.: religious conversion. Though it is seemingly apolitical in nature, American religion has long been politicized (Layman 2001; Legee and Kellstedt 1993; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that individuals in the U.S. may choose to join a church for political purposes (e.g., Hafner and Audette 2023; Margolis 2018; 2022; Higgins and Djupe 2022). Thus, converts are not only undergoing a significant change in their core beliefs and identity, but are doing so by joining organizations with both direct and indirect political ties and beliefs. In this way, we contend that conversion serves as a potential catalyst in the process of immigrant political socialization. Prior work on the effects of conversion has focused exclusively on the formation of partisan attachments (Audette et al. 2017; Weaver 2015), but while partisanship can be crucial in navigating the American political system, full political incorporation requires broader participation in politics beyond the adoption of a partisan label. Therefore, it is necessary to determine whether immigrant conversion is similarly associated with increased political participation.

To test this theory, this article examines the relationship between religious conversion and political participation among immigrants to the United States. Using data from the 2006 Hispanic Religion Survey and the 2012 Pew Asian-American Survey, we show that among both Asian-American and Latino immigrants who have attained citizenship, those who convert in the U.S. are significantly more likely to register to vote in U.S. elections. Beyond simply identifying with the two major parties, voter registration represents a much more substantial step toward full electoral participation. This suggests an alternative model of immigrant political socialization and incorporation, by which a major life event such as conversion can serve as a shortcut in the path of political socialization. While there may be no substitute for a lifetime of engagement with the American political system, these life events can serve as useful stepping stones.

2. Immigrants and Traditional Sources of Political Socialization

The concept of political socialization has been ascribed a number of definitions over the years (Sapiro 2004; Sigel 1995), but it is essentially the process by which individuals

acquire attitudes, beliefs, values, and attachments relating to the political system under which they live (e.g., [Almond and Verba 1963](#); [Campbell et al. 1960](#); [Easton 1968](#); [Hyman 1959](#); [Langton 1969](#); [Niemi and Hepburn 1995](#)). Some political systems have mechanisms for teaching part of the requisite knowledge of the governmental process to their citizens, such as mandatory civics classes or a citizenship exam, but the primary process for political learning occurs through long-term interaction with less formal sources (e.g., [Campbell et al. 1960](#); [Campbell 2006](#); [Popkin and Dimock 1999](#)). For example, children in the U.S. often learn the social patterns of citizenship over time, through social interactions with their family, school teachers, peer groups, and perhaps even complete strangers. These micro-interactions with American politics combine with formal education to prepare individuals for political participation ([Almond and Verba 1963](#); [Dahl 1998](#); [Dalton 2009](#); [Pateman 1970](#); [Verba et al. 1995](#)).

Among the different sources of political socialization, one's immediate family is often recognized as the most influential in determining political outcomes (e.g., [Almond and Verba 1963](#); [Campbell et al. 1960](#); [Langton 1969](#); [Urbatsch 2014](#)). Formal education is often recognized as being a close second in terms of socializing agents. Scholars have long pointed to schools and civics programs as helping to develop democratic citizens, and faulting them when research fails to show better civic outcomes ([Callahan and Muller 2013](#); [Campbell 2006](#); [Galston 2001](#); [Settle et al. 2011](#)). Whether directly through the curriculum and extra-curricular activities or indirectly through increasing socioeconomic status and social standing, education is believed to transmit the political information and values necessary for political action ([Callahan and Muller 2013](#); [Campbell 2006](#); [Galston 2001](#); [Settle et al. 2011](#)). In addition to the formal opportunities available at one's educational institutions, schools also form the primary social environment for America's youth. Peers from school, neighborhoods, religious organizations, work, or other social groups also have a significant effect on an individual's political socialization and participation ([Campbell 2006](#); [Putnam and Campbell 2010](#); [Settle et al. 2011](#); [Verba et al. 1995](#)).

Of course, the decision to engage in politics is furthermore derived from non-social sources: self-motivation and personal preferences also influence one's politics ([Cassel and Lo 1997](#); [Coppock and Green 2015](#)). However, as [Popkin and Dimock \(1999, p. 142\)](#) suggest, "[n]onvoting results from a lack of knowledge about what government is doing and where parties and candidates stand, not from a knowledgeable rejection of government or parties or a lack of trust in government." Voters and nonvoters are differentiated not so much by their desire to participate, but by having the requisite skills and knowledge necessary to do so. Indeed, [Galston \(2001\)](#) compares wanting to participate and having a lack of civic knowledge with the experience of trying to follow a sports competition without knowing the rules of the game. As a result, groups who lack such information due to a lack of political socialization are at a distinct disadvantage.

The traditional model of socialization posits an environment where small social interactions accumulate over the course of several years beginning in early childhood. While socialization continues to occur throughout one's life, adult socialization primarily serves to reinforce the values and norms learned at a young age. As many immigrants spend childhood and adolescence in a different social and political environment, they are unfamiliar with the rules, norms, and procedures of the receiving country ([Li and Jones 2020](#); [Tam Cho 1999](#)). Due to their relative lack of socialization within the U.S. political context, immigrants often lack the skills, resources, and attachments that drive political participation. Even immigrants who come to the U.S. at an early age experience socialization differently from their native-born counterparts, largely due to differences in language acquisition, educational barriers, and citizenship status (e.g., [Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009](#)).

The two largest populations in the U.S. affected by these challenges to political socialization are immigrants from Asia and Latin America. Asian immigrants are proportionally the fastest growing immigrant group in the U.S., while Latinos are numerically the fastest growing group (Wong 2006). The growth of these populations is of enormous consequence for U.S. politics, yet the influence held by these groups may be somewhat inhibited by comparatively low rates of political participation. Scholars of U.S. political participation have consistently observed significantly higher levels of political participation among native-born Americans than among immigrants (e.g., Bloemraad 2006; Ramakrishnan 2005; Tam Cho 1999; Wong et al. 2011). Compared to other major racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., Latinos and Asian Americans are the least likely to engage in a host of participatory acts (Tam Cho 1999; Verba et al. 1995; Wong et al. 2011). This is the result of many factors, including lack of representation and outreach by U.S. politicians and political parties, barriers resulting from lack of citizenship or social discrimination, and individual-level factors such as income, education, or language differences. However, one cannot overlook the obvious challenge brought on by having to adapt to a considerably different political environment.

This is not to say immigrants arrive in the U.S. as blank slates; political experiences and socialization in one's sending country can significantly impact one's politics in the U.S. (Wals 2011). Many international migrants continue to follow or even participate in politics in their home countries, which tends to actually increase the likelihood of participation in U.S. politics (Ramakrishnan 2005; Wals 2011; Wong 2006). These opportunities may be made available through hometown associations, which promote connections to sending countries and (occasionally) their political systems. Moreover, these hometown associations tend to promote participation in the U.S., not detract from it (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

However, participation in the social and political life of one's sending country does not fully replace the political socialization necessary to participate in U.S. politics. Short of planning to participate in politics prior to arrival, post-migration participation necessitates some adaptation and learning. For example, while one may know they are ideologically conservative and vote that way in their sending country, it will take time to learn which U.S. candidates represent conservative ideals, how those ideals are articulated specifically on the range of issues unique to the U.S., and how to vote or otherwise support their candidates.

Furthermore, traditional sources of socialization often function differently for immigrants. While the family is still a broad source of socialization for immigrants, the opportunities for long-term socialization into the U.S. political system are limited by family members' lack of socialization (e.g., Raychaudhuri 2020). Similarly, because many immigrants move to ethnic enclaves or areas concentrated with persons of the same national origin or ethnic background (due to increased economic and social opportunities), immigrant communities may have fewer opportunities to learn about U.S. politics from those who have spent more time within the U.S. political system. Schools provide a number of opportunities for the children of immigrants to experience political socialization, but this varies based on time spent in the U.S. and the quality of the schools (Callahan and Muller 2013). The workplace, too, may provide some opportunities for migrants to develop political skills and socialization, but these opportunities may be comparatively low in number; many individuals who migrate to the U.S. begin work within the lower strata of occupations, which generate fewer civic skills (Verba et al. 1995). Thus, immigrants may find many traditional paths to socialization steeper or even closed altogether.

3. Life Events, Socialization, and Political Participation

The field of psychology, however, offers some insights into the process by which immigrants may adapt to the political system of a receiving country. In their study of

learning and induction, [Holland et al. \(1986\)](#) suggest individuals are “triggered” to revise their knowledge structures under two conditions: “the failure of a prediction and the occurrence of some unusual event” (p. 80). Applied to political socialization, experiencing new phenomena (through a cycle of fulfilled or unfulfilled predictions) is one means of generating political knowledge, but little attention has been paid to the “unusual events” that bring people into the political process. The usual events have received some attention as means to socialization—[Sears and Valentino \(Sears and Valentino 1997; Valentino and Sears 1998\)](#) proposed a form of event-based socialization surrounding a presidential election—but we seek to extend this to the unusual (that is, non-routine and/or non-political) events that influence levels of socialization.

Life events, as defined by psychologists utilizing longitudinal life-span survey designs, are noteworthy or impactful occurrences during one’s life ([Reese and Smyer 1983; Baltes 1987](#)). The events range from the relatively mundane, such as a minor injury, to the extraordinary, such as the birth of a child ([Holmes and Rahe 1967](#)). These pivotal occurrences in an individual’s life are also shown to affect psychological outcomes ([Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1974; Block and Zautra 1981; Abbey and Andrews 1985; Garnefski et al. 2001](#)). Importantly for the present study, [Henderson et al. \(1981\)](#) note the uniqueness of events such as “[experiencing] a religious conversion or a real deepening of faith.”

In addition to psychological outcomes, life events may also influence an individual’s political views and participation ([Hatemi 2013](#)). Although they are rarely characterized as such, life events and processes are already at the center of examinations of political socialization. Education, marriage, and social network exposure are just a few examples of attributes psychologists might classify as certain types of life events, which have been reliably demonstrated as having an impact on political participation. Other events that occur in adulthood have also variously been shown to influence political participation. Mothers, for example, quickly undergo significant transformations in their political attitudes after motherhood ([Greenlee 2014](#)), as do divorcees ([Fahs 2007](#)). In a cross-regional study of crime exposure and political participation, [Bateson \(2012\)](#) shows that exposure to a crime event can motivate political participation, instead of hindering it, as did knowing a victim of the 9/11 terrorist attacks ([Hersch 2013; see also Walker 2020](#)). Being incarcerated also significantly affects political attitudes and engagement ([Gerber et al. 2017](#)), as did being drafted into the military ([Erikson and Stoker 2011](#)), and experiencing psychological trauma ([Marsh 2023](#)). This impact extends to other governmental contact; involvement in welfare and other social programs may also influence rates of political activity ([Swartz et al. 2009; Bruch et al. 2010](#)). These disparate events demonstrate the potential link between events and participation. Each is also highly contextual; their positive or negative impact on participation depends on the group affected and the nature of the event. However, the effect of long-term life processes on political participation can be interrupted by relatively sudden events.

Major disruptive events such as childbirth, divorce, and crime exposure can form, reshape, and dissolve our attachments to other people and institutions, and they can also reorient how we view ourselves. Political attachments and identities are included in this reorientation. Becoming a parent leads one to view political issues through a new lens redefined by one’s new responsibilities and priorities. Labels such as “parent” and “crime victim” can quickly become part of our identities, and our relationship to institutions such as schools, police, etc., are altered—or formed for the first time if they were absent before—by these new roles. Major disruptive life events can suddenly up-end our sense of self, but they can also serve as catalysts for the development of new identities and attachments distinct from those we had before and rooted in how we now see ourselves. Rather than a

slow, passive process of socialization, this form of political socialization can happen quickly and much later in life.

Figure 1 illustrates two potential processes for political socialization. In a piecemeal process, individuals develop political proclivities slowly over time, beginning early in life. This process consists of numerous minor activities and mechanisms that develop slowly over time and accumulate to produce the necessary motivation and skills for political participation. Again, this process in the American context is germane to native-born individuals as it requires continual, extended interactions between the individual and the sociopolitical context. Because many immigrants lack exposure to the process of piecemeal political socialization experienced by native-born Americans, we suggest that they are particularly susceptible to the effects of marker life events, which can serve as potential supplements for lower rates of life process socialization in the U.S.

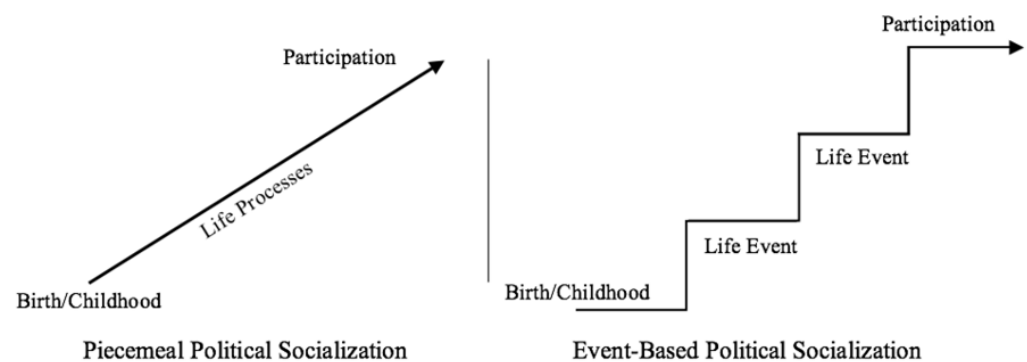


Figure 1. Models of political socialization.

The differences in immigrant experiences of socialization are rooted in the unique psychological relationship between immigration and contextual events and processes. In response to the typology of stressful events developed by [Holmes and Rahe \(1967\)](#), [Cervantes et al. \(1991\)](#) develop a scale of stressful life events particular to the Latino immigrant experience. Many of these items examine the effect of discrimination, for example, which has been shown to have a negative impact on immigrant well-being and subsequent political participation (see also [Rodriguez et al. 2002](#)). Among all immigrant groups, the process of acculturation into a new context carries psychological challenges that have a predominantly negative impact on cultural and political socialization and political participation.

Yet these studies overlook the potentially positive role of transformative life events. Immigrants may marry, purchase a home, have children, own a business, or expand their social circle. Such life events may serve to facilitate socialization and participation. This alternative model of event-based political socialization is depicted in Figure 1. For many immigrants, reorienting life events can serve to rapidly establish connections, provide information, or motivate political action. Although this may be no true substitute for the traditional, circuitous socialization process, these events may represent “shortcuts” in the path to political incorporation.

4. Religious Conversion and Immigrant Political Participation

We focus on one transformative event, religious conversion, to demonstrate the potential influence of singular life events on political participation. Religious conversion is common around the world, and it entails the adoption of a new religious identity, which can include a change in beliefs, religious practices, and associations. While conversion can be driven by a number of unique individual motivations, the most common factors in voluntary conversion are spiritual experiences, moral commitments, and social pressure

from peers and family (Barro et al. 2010). While conversion can sometimes be gradual, it typically involves a specific decision point wherein one formally begins identifying as a member of a new religion. This can be relatively sudden.

In essence, religious conversion signifies a significant shift in an individual's religious orientation. Taken broadly, conversion and other life-changing events may be one key to unlocking the process of political socialization when few other options exist. Religious conversion has a well-documented impact on psychological orientations, life outlook, stress adaptation, and general acculturation but its impact on political socialization and participation has yet to be examined among immigrant populations.

Our focus on the conversion event among the many possible life events is motivated by the accessibility and transformative nature of religious conversion to immigrant populations, along with its function as a form of cultural adaptation. Unlike life events such as purchasing a home, marriage, opening a business, or having a child, religious conversion can be easily and freely attained by any new immigrant from early in arrival in a new context. Conversion certainly depends on contact and availability but does not require monetary costs. This allows us to isolate the impact of a transformative event independent of socioeconomic considerations. Furthermore, religious experiences and conversion can have sudden, transformative impacts on an individual's psychological makeup (James 1985; but see also Stronge et al. 2021). In addition to one's identity, religious transformation may in turn influence feelings, attitudes, and behaviors connected both directly and indirectly to one's religion (Burge 2021; Paloutzian et al. 1999; Holman et al. 2020).

Religious identification itself is often linked to political participation, political identification, policy attitudes, and candidate evaluations (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Harris 1999; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Verba et al. 1995). Churches and centers of worship assist in the development of civic skills, social connections, and social capital, which shape political orientations (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Harris 1999; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Verba et al. 1995). Churches and religious organizations are particularly important for immigrants as they are geographically widespread, more egalitarian than other social institutions, and proximate to the daily lives of immigrants through their provision of social services (Harris 1999; Huckle and Silva 2020; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Sterne 2001). Their role is all the more critical given the relative lack of political party outreach to immigrant and racial or ethnic minority populations (Bloemraad 2006; Huckle and Silva 2020; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Sterne 2001).

Although some differences exist in the relationship between different immigrant groups, religions, and political orientations, religious affiliation and churches play significant roles in the formation of political identity and political involvement in every major immigrant ethnic group. For example, immigrants who attend church more frequently are more likely to participate in politics (Lien 2004; Wong et al. 2011); religious tradition can impact ideology and partisanship (Wong and Iwamura 2006; Wong et al. 2008); and churches were highly significant factors in the immigrants' rights protests of the mid-2000s (Gonzalez III and del Rosario 2009; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Rim 2009). Churches have also long been agents of socialization through their efforts to fill the gap between sending country context and the U.S. context, effectively reinforcing and facilitating additional long-term incorporation into a new society.

However, religious affiliation and involvement alone do not completely explain the impact of immigrant religious orientations in a new context, nor do churches fully make up for disparities in immigrants' rates of political participation. Staying in a familiar church may ease the transition to a new country, but it does little to influence the psychological orientation of a new citizen. If religions are important in immigrants' political lives, then changes in religious orientations among immigrants must also be important.

The potential for the conversion event to positively impact political participation rests on the psychological relationship between attachment to a new religion and openness to greater participation through socialization. Religious conversion must be impactful in a way that facilitates adaptation to a new context for immigrants. In the American context, religious conversion has a well-documented impact on general socialization through the acquisition of knowledge about American culture and the psychological impact of identity alteration (Hang Ng 2002; Yang 1998; Yang and Ebaugh 2001; Gans 1994; Lofland and Stark 1965; Buckser and Glazier 2003). The influence of the conversion event among immigrants is also shaped by the new and less-familiar context of American culture (Yang and Yang 2023). In other words, among native-born populations, religious conversion does not itself facilitate socialization into the American context because native-born populations experience socialization through the standard piecemeal process.

Immigrants, who lack the typical process of cultural socialization, are susceptible to the effects of the conversion event because there is a “vacuum” of identification within their new social location. About 23% of foreign-born Latinos in the U.S. were raised Catholic but have converted (Pew Research Center 2023a). Similarly, around 30% of foreign-born Asian adults in the U.S. have converted (Pew Research Center 2012). Latinos have largely converted from Catholicism to Evangelical Protestantism, and Asian-American converts are most likely to have converted to Christianity and converted from Buddhism.

Immigrants may utilize religious identification to structure the process of political and social incorporation, especially if that identification is the result of conversion into a new religious tradition germane to the U.S. context (Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas 2012). However, conversion is not necessarily motivated by politics. The vast majority (90%) of Latino Evangelical converts say they converted due to a desire for a more direct, personal experience of God (Pew Research Center 2006). Most Latino converts said they first heard about their current religion from family members or friends, but 81% of Latinos also say church in the U.S. is at least somewhat welcoming to immigrants (Pew Research Center 2006). Exposure to Christianity in particular is an almost unavoidable part of American culture. Among Asian Americans, 18% said they felt close to Christianity even though they did not identify as Christian (Pew Research Center 2023b). A new religion more associated with American culture makes it easier to view oneself as fitting into American culture and politics.

Conversion often also requires changing behaviors to fit in. Compared to their religions of origin, majorities of Latino and Asian-American converts describe their new faith as having different, more engaging worship styles and typically attend worship services more often (Pew Research Center 2006; Pew Research Center 2012). Among Asian-American Buddhists, 63% say they have an altar or shrine in their home, and only 17% say they attend religious services outside their home at least once a month. In contrast, 55% of Asian-American Christians attend worship services, and only 39% say they have an altar or shrine at home (Pew Research Center 2023b). While religious practices need not necessarily be mutually exclusive, 87% of Asian-American Protestants do not have a home shrine.

The impact of this change in religious identification is compounded by what can be a relatively sudden or rapid religious conversion for certain immigrant populations. While there are few studies on the exact process of immigrant religious conversion, ethnographic work by Wang and Yang (2006) points to the “declaration” and “baptism” of immigrants into Evangelical Christianity as conversion event markers. Importantly, these events often occur among immigrant populations with little previous exposure to Evangelical Christianity (Kivisto 2014). Given the association of Evangelical Christianity with conservative politics, conversion to this type of religion, in particular, seems to have obvious political consequences. Indeed, the effect of conversion may be specific to conversion to Christianity

or a major American Christian denomination due to the preexisting associations these religious traditions have within American politics. Conversion to a tradition less common in the United States and without any political connotations may not have the same effect on political identity and participation, as the converts' new identities cannot be easily connected to political institutions or practices.

In the American context, religious conversion also has a well-documented impact on immigrant cultural socialization through the acquisition of knowledge about American culture and the psychological impact of identity alteration (Hang Ng 2002; Yang 1998; Buckser and Glazier 2003). The influence of conversion among immigrants is also shaped by the new and less-familiar context of American culture. In other words, religious conversion among native-born populations does not facilitate socialization into the American context, because native-born populations experience socialization through the standard piecemeal process.

Prior studies have also identified religious conversion as a factor that may facilitate adaptation to new political systems among both Latinos and Asian Americans (Audette et al. 2017; Weaver 2015). Taken broadly, religious conversion may be one key to unlocking the process of political socialization when few other options exist. This allows us to isolate the impact of religious conversion independent of socioeconomic considerations. Because of the political importance of religious conversion for immigrant populations, we hypothesize a positive relationship between religious conversion and political participation for immigrant populations. We also suspect that this relationship does not exist for native-born populations with similar ethnic backgrounds. If true, this pattern would be evidence that religious conversion may help bridge the gap of socialization for immigrant groups.

5. Data and Methods

To examine the relationship between religion, conversion, and political incorporation for American immigrants, we utilize both the Pew Research Center's 2006 Hispanic Religion Survey of Latinos and its 2012 Asian-American Survey (Pew Research Center 2006; 2012). The former included a nationally representative sample of 4016 Latino adults and was conducted through bilingual telephone interviews from August 10 to October 4 in 2006, while the latter surveyed a nationally representative sample of 3511 Asian-American adults and was conducted via multilingual telephone interviews from January 3 to March 27 in 2012. The Hispanic Religion Survey was offered in both English and Spanish, while the Asian-American Survey was offered in English, Cantonese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. These two surveys uniquely provide both large samples of immigrants and a sufficient range of religious variables to explore the relationship between religious conversion and political participation among immigrant populations. Ideally, the surveys of immigrant populations would have been conducted simultaneously in the same time period, but no other datasets exist that track religious conversion and political participation among these immigrant populations. Moreover, while changes did occur in the intervening years, these changes ought not to have impacted the primary relationship between conversion and socialization we examine. In the analyses that follow, the data are weighted to ensure representativeness, and the survey groups (2006 and 2012 respectively) are modeled separately.

To identify religious converts, we compare the religion in which the respondent was raised to the religion with which they currently identify, which is identical for both surveys. Furthermore, due to issues of sample size, we focus on the largest conversion groups. Among Latino immigrants, 74% were lifelong Catholics, 9% were lifelong Evangelicals, and 5% converted to Evangelical Protestantism. Therefore, among Latino immigrants, we direct our analyses towards conversion from Catholicism to Evangelical Protestantism. This is

a notable and growing segment in the Latino population (Mulder et al. 2017). Among Asian-American immigrants, we focus on conversion from Buddhism (the largest sending tradition) to any Christian religious tradition (the largest receiving tradition). In this sample, 35% of those who no longer identify with their childhood religion were raised as Buddhists. Excluding those who left religion altogether, the largest receiving religions are Evangelical Protestantism, Mainline Protestantism, and Catholicism, which received approximately 36%, 21%, and 17% of the converts, respectively. We compare converts to the control category of lifelong Buddhists (Asians) and lifelong Catholics (Latinos) as well as other religious adherents, and the nonreligious. All other religious categories lack the requisite number of respondents to make meaningful inferences.

We have opted to focus our analyses on the most prevalent conversion routes for each immigrant group, but we acknowledge the experience of converting to a different Christian denomination is likely quite different from converting to Christianity from a non-Christian religion, but both involve converting within the U.S. to a religious tradition that is a minority within their country of origin. The overwhelming majority of Latin Americans are raised Catholic, and Protestants comprise less than 20% of the population (Pew Research Center 2014). Similarly, Buddhism is a popular religion in East Asian countries, while Christians are a minority (Pew Research Center 2024). Buddhism was also the only religion aside from Christianity practiced by at least some respondents from each Asian nationality group in our sample.

To measure electoral participation, we use voter registration for both groups. Because we are specifically examining ethnic groups that vote at consistently lower rates, we chose a lower threshold for political participation. Moreover, the gap in time and specific differences in elections between 2006 and 2012 make voting or vote intention a less comparable measure across our two samples, while registration is a more static measure of political participation over time. While not a perfect measure of political socialization, registration is an easily accessible form of political participation and a common proxy for political socialization in groups with lower voter turnout rates. Since registration may reflect general civic socialization, we also account for whether immigrants engage in civic behavior using a measure that asks if respondents had worked with other members of their communities to solve a problem. Our analyses demonstrate significant variation in rates of registration, giving credence to the importance of examining registration as a measure of political participation. Because voter registration is measured in the data dichotomously, we estimate binomial logistic regression models.

In addition to religious affiliation variables, our analyses include a range of controls for church attendance rates, political partisanship, income, home ownership, education, gender, marital status, age, geographic location, and English language proficiency. Because of the potential for the context of sending countries to influence socialization, we also control for country of origin, including Cuban background for Hispanic immigrants and Chinese ethnicity for Asian-American immigrants. Furthermore, we have included proxies for respondents' integration into the American Latino and Asian-American communities, respectively, by including controls for whether respondents adopt these panethnic labels. Similarly, we control for whether respondents have experienced discrimination as a proxy for alienation.

6. Results

Table 1 shows the results of binomial logistic regression models for Latino immigrant and native-born respondent groups. These results demonstrate that Latino converts to Evangelical Protestantism are more likely than unconverted Catholics to register to vote. Since voter registration is the first step toward voting, this result indicates converts are

more likely than their non-convert counterparts to participate in the electoral system—a key indication of political socialization. However, as suggested above, religious conversion only influences electoral participation for immigrants. The positive relationship for immigrants and the negative (but statistically non-significant) relationship for native-born Latinos is direct evidence for our theory of event-based immigrant socialization. Both immigrants and native-born experience the same conversion event; however, religious conversion only served as a catalyst for resocialization among immigrant populations due to their relative vacuum of political socialization. In other words, event socialization requires two elements: the socializing event itself and a lack of previous socialization through a piecemeal process.

Table 1. Religion, conversion, and Latino voter registration.

	Foreign-Born	Native-Born
Catholic→Evangelical	1.29 **	−0.42
Evangelical	0.36	−0.17
Mainline	1.22	0.37
Other religion	0.70	0.52
Nonreligious	−0.19	−0.38
Attendance	0.10	0.07
Partisanship	−0.31 **	0.02
Income	−0.12	−0.08
Homeownership	0.75 **	−0.10
Education	0.71 *	1.00 **
Married	−0.28	0.99 **
Female	−0.08	0.88 **
Age	0.06 **	0.06 **
West	−0.13	0.46
English	0.50 **	0.78 **
Panethnic ID	0.31	−0.19
Cuban	0.61	0.21
Discrimination experience	−0.44	−0.89 **
N	819	650
Pseudo-R ²	0.21	0.23

Source: 2006 Pew Changing Faiths Survey; Note: Entries are logit coefficients. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Table 2 displays the results of two separate logistic regression models for foreign-born and native-born Asian Americans. As shown, converts are more likely to register to vote than any group except Mainline Protestants when compared to lifelong Buddhists. As with Latino immigrants, Asian-American immigrants who change their religious identities are more likely to participate in the electoral process. The results for Asian-American immigrants persist even when controlling for variables typically associated with socialization and incorporation such as education, income, marital status, and age. This relationship also does not exist among native-born Asian Americans, which again is strong evidence for the importance of socializing events among immigrant populations.

This tendency is a signal that religious conversion plays an important role for immigrants in the process of political incorporation. The role of conversion may reflect the transformation from a religion germane to the immigrant's sending country (Buddhism and Catholicism) to a religion germane to the U.S. context (Christianity and Evangelicalism). Conversion into a new religious framework that is closely linked to the American context seems to facilitate political participation. The impact of the conversion event on political participation may be further established by the religiosity of American politicians, who tend to be overwhelmingly Christian. Asian-American immigrants who transform their religious identities are more likely to identify with politicians who reflect their new identities, which in turn makes immigrants more likely to participate in electoral politics.

As suggested by the link between conversion and socialization outlined above, this new identification with an American religious group allows new immigrants to feel like part of the American culture, which includes political participation.

Table 2. Religion, conversion, and Asian-American voter registration.

	Foreign-Born	Native-Born
Buddhist→Christian	1.12 **	0.59
Hindu	0.32	1.83**
Evangelical	−0.34	0.60
Mainline	1.04**	0.70
Catholic	0.47	0.43
Other religion	0.98*	10.80 **
Nonreligious	0.08	0.41
Attendance	0.05	−0.03
Partisanship	−0.06	−0.11
Income	−0.02	0.11 *
Homeownership	0.25	0.25
Education	0.36 *	0.44
Married	0.26	−0.21
Female	0.00	−0.21
Age	0.04 **	0.04 **
West	−0.07	0.11
English	0.41 **	—
Panethnic ID	0.05	0.70 **
Chinese	−0.24	—
Discrimination experience	−0.13	−0.30
N	1517	679
Pseudo-R ²	0.11	0.13

Source: 2012 Pew Asian-American Survey. Note: Entries are logit coefficients. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Moreover, these results do not seem to be driven by a generic increase in civic participation. Using a measure of whether the respondent worked with other people from their neighborhood to fix a problem or improve a condition in their community for the Asian-American dataset and a measure of whether the respondent was a member of a neighborhood organization for the Latino dataset, we included a measure of civic participation in each of the models. As shown in Table 3, conversion remains a significant predictor of increased political participation even when civic participation is included as a control variable. Although the effect of civic participation is positive and statistically significant (indicating that civic participation predicts political participation), its effects are distinct from those of conversion.

As the interpretation of the magnitude of logistic regression coefficients may be unintuitive, we calculated the predicted probabilities of electoral participation among Latino immigrant religious groups. Latino immigrant converts from Catholicism to Evangelical Christianity are 14 percentage points more likely to register to vote than their lifelong Catholic counterparts. Asian immigrants are 17 percentage points more likely to register to vote than lifelong Buddhists. In both Asian and Latino groups, converts are more likely to register to vote than any other religious group. These probabilities are displayed in Figure 2. The consistency of the relationship between religious conversion and political participation across the two largest groups of immigrants to the U.S. is good evidence for the role of religious conversion in facilitating political participation, and it also offers evidence for the potential of conversion to influence the process of political socialization.

Table 3. Religion, conversion, and voter registration (controlling for civic participation).

	Foreign-Born Latinos	Foreign-Born Asians
Converts	1.34 **	1.09 **
Evangelical	0.28	−0.34
Mainline	1.14	1.01 **
Other religion	0.42	0.98 *
Nonreligious	−0.35	0.08
Hindu	—	0.26
Civic participation	0.86 **	0.52 **
Attendance	0.04	0.03
Partisanship	−0.34 **	−0.07
Income	−0.10	−0.01
Homeownership	0.77 **	0.20
Education	0.59	0.31
Married	−0.26	0.27
Female	−0.07	0.01
Age	0.06 **	0.04 **
West	−0.14	−0.07
English	0.45 **	0.40 **
Panethnic ID	0.18	0.07
Cuban	0.67	—
Discrimination experience	−0.45	−0.12
N	819	1517
Pseudo-R ²	0.22	0.12

Source: 2006 Pew Changing Faiths Survey, 2012 Pew Asian-American Survey; Note: Entries are logit coefficients. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

While we have demonstrated the significant impact of conversion on political participation, our theory also suggests that religious conversion has a substantive effect comparable to other important influences like homeownership or speaking English. Figure 3 compares the effect of conversion to other factors that might influence socialization for the two immigrant groups. For both groups, religious conversion has the largest effect size of common predictors of political socialization.

Another potential explanation of our results is that registering to vote instead facilitates religious conversion. If, for example, an individual becomes involved in politics, that individual may be more likely to acculturate into American society more generally, which may include changing religion. Given the nature of the data, we must remain agnostic about this possibility; however, when we include a measure of civic participation, our results remain unchanged. Moreover, there is no interactive effect between conversion and civic participation—religious conversion has a similar effect for active and non-active immigrants.

We do not suggest that the mechanism of the conversion event works precisely the same for all immigrant groups; different sending and receiving contexts certainly shape the exact process of political incorporation due to the conversion event, but the identity transformation that occurs during religious conversion and the subsequent changes in attitudes, feelings, and behaviors seem to open the door for increased political participation. Interestingly, when accounting for conversion, church attendance does not seem to predict increased participation in either group, suggesting that simple involvement in a religious tradition does not influence political participation. Furthermore, our results reveal no interactive effect between conversion and participation, which indicates the effect of conversion is likely not due to an increase in civic participation through the church.

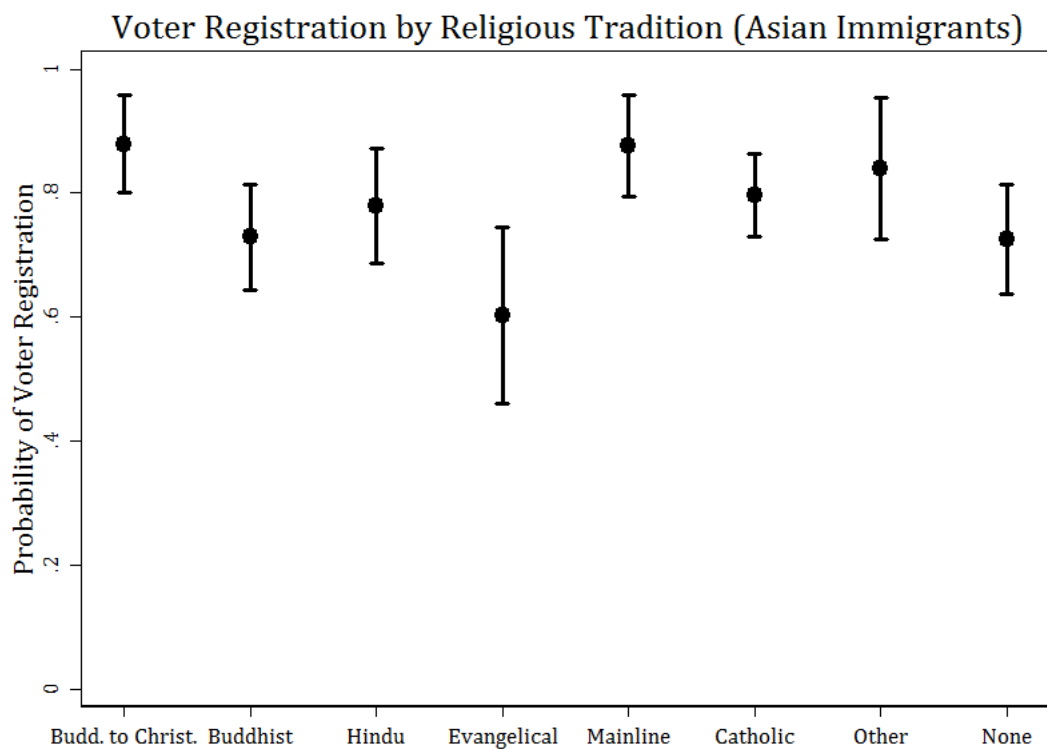
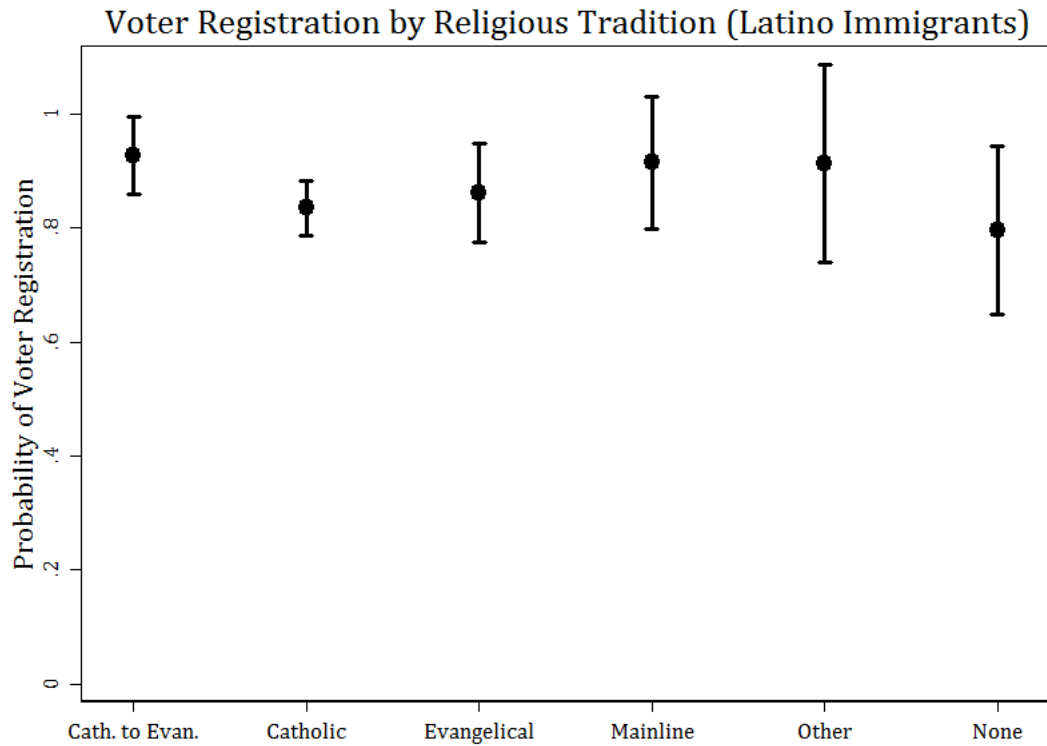


Figure 2. Predicted values of the impact of religious conversion on registration.

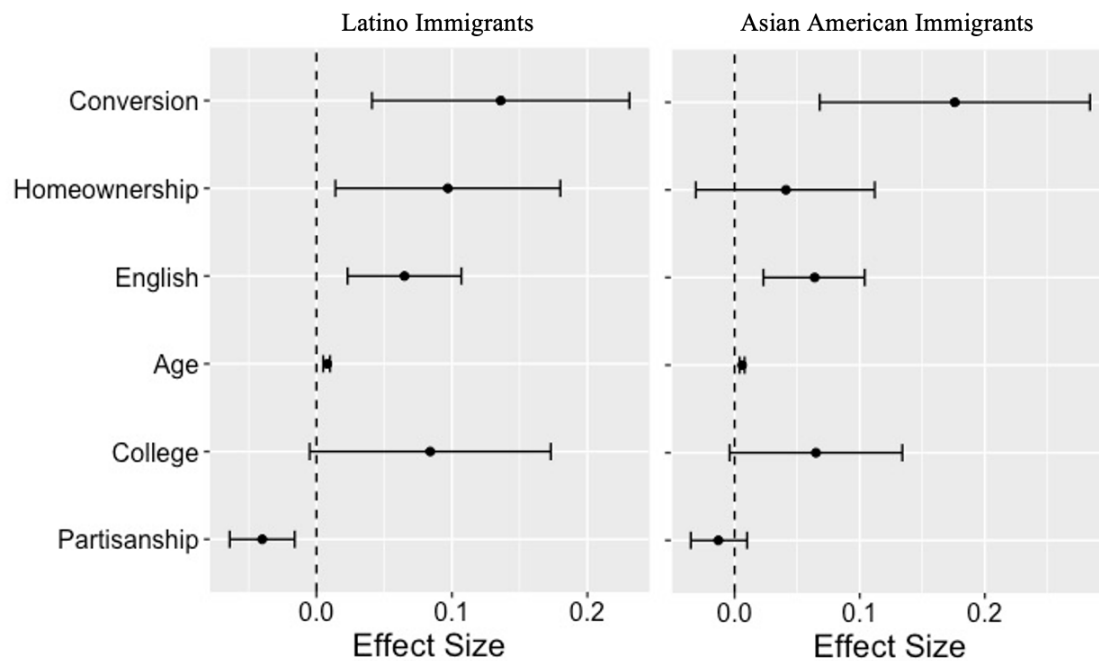


Figure 3. Comparison of effect size of conversion and other factors.

We also examine the impact of other potential life events, but these results are mixed. As shown in Table 1, homeownership, a potential socializing event, has a positive impact on electoral participation for Latino immigrants. We also include a measure of whether respondents are married, as marriage is another major life event and is often a major factor in religious conversion (Sherkat 2004; Barro et al. 2010). Indeed, 14% of Latino converts in our sample said they converted due to marriage (Pew Research Center 2006). However, marriage has no impact on Latino immigrant electoral participation. The conflicting nature of these two results suggests that reliance on these measures as proxies for event socialization may be problematic. For example, data limitations prevent analysis of the exact nature of the marriage event. Marriage outside of an individual's race or ethnic background may have a socializing impact whereas marriage within an individual's background may have the opposite impact. Tellingly, neither relationship (homeownership or marriage) persists in the model for Asian Americans shown in Table 2, which underscores the difficulty in using these rough measures of important life events in predicting electoral participation.

The large impact of religious conversion on voting behavior among both Asian and Latino immigrant groups is good initial evidence of the potential for socializing events to impact the political socialization of immigrants into the American political context. The event-based model is further supported by the lack of conversion as a socializing influence among native-born populations. If religious conversion itself were the driving force behind socialization, then the relationship between conversion and participation would exist equally for native-born populations. Immigrants and native-born populations in the U.S. are subject to different socialization *processes* as well as different socialization *contexts*. Our examination of one possible mechanism in this process for Latino and Asian immigrants is a step forward in the development of a positive theory of immigrant political socialization and participation.

7. Conclusions

The observed relationship between religious conversion and voter registration among both Asian-American and Latino immigrant groups is initial evidence of the potential for religious conversion to impact the political socialization of immigrants into the American

political context. Significant life events such as conversion can serve to simultaneously realign immigrants' identities within a new context while providing a new pathway for the acquisition of political knowledge and attachments. Immigrants and native-born populations in the U.S. are subject to different socialization processes as well as different socialization contexts. Our examination of one possible alternative process for Latino and Asian immigrants is a step forward in the development of a positive theory of immigrant political socialization and participation.

Despite their growing size as a population and increasing prominence as a focus of political debates, U.S. immigrants remain relatively alienated from the American political system. No democratic system can afford to overlook or exclude such a wide swath of those subject to its laws, but this exclusion may be particularly problematic for U.S. immigrants who face broader social and political marginalization. As it is primarily through political participation that marginalized groups work to mitigate their legal disadvantage, obstacles to political engagement—including a lack of political socialization—prevent progress and may even serve to exacerbate existing disparities. Thus, the cultivation of political ties and the acquisition of political skills that facilitate political participation may be crucial to U.S. immigrants.

In this article, we demonstrate one potential pathway by which immigrants' disadvantages in acquiring political socialization may be offset: religious conversion. We contend conversion serves as merely one example of a significant, impactful life event that can facilitate the process of political socialization for new immigrants. These events shape immigrant adaptation in a new political context. Conversion is particularly important for immigrants, as alterations in religious attachments associated with the culture of sending countries, coupled with the proximity of religion and religious traditions to immigrants, represents an important change in their psychological orientations and life cycle.

Although churches may serve immigrants to the U.S. regardless of conversion, those who change their religious affiliation upon entering the U.S. undergo a transformative experience unique to their new environment. In addition to immediate personal changes, such experiences in a receiving country can help provide a broader foundation for the construction of other ties and facilitate subsequent adaptations. Prior work has shown the acquisition of partisanship to be one such potential adaptation, but the findings above go even further to demonstrate that conversion directly increases participation in the electoral process. Taken together, these findings suggest conversion and other transformative life events can mitigate both inherent and imposed obstacles to immigrant inclusion in the U.S.

Nevertheless, further research is necessary to examine the potential impact of other such life events. How do education, marriage, parenthood, home ownership, career changes, and other events in the U.S. affect immigrants' subsequent experiences? Our theory posits that such events would also affect political and social integration, but we lack the longitudinal data on these changes necessary to test our theory more broadly. It may be that only certain changes, such as conversion, produce these effects. If so, this may be due to the relative prominence of religion in American politics.

Additionally, these data only allow us to examine the effects of religious conversion to Christianity, which is a well-established religion with existing political associations in the U.S. context. The relatively small samples of converts to other religious groups precludes us from drawing definitive conclusions about the potential effects of religious conversion to other traditions less common in the U.S. context. While it may be the case that conversion facilitates political socialization regardless of tradition, it is also quite likely the formation of a new identity without preexisting ties to political institutions does little to form political attachments or spur political participation.

Indeed, a full understanding of immigrant political socialization requires better longitudinal data on the experiences of immigrants over time both before and after migration. While scholarship has given increasing consideration to the ways in which factors in immigrants' sending countries affect experiences in the U.S. (e.g., Wals 2011), surveys rarely ask immigrants to fully compare the two, and no large-scale panel studies have yet tracked respondents moving across national borders. Though such limitations may be unavoidable, understanding how immigrants' experiences differ over time and across countries can provide insights into ways these experiences may be improved. As our findings suggest, there may exist relatively low-cost shortcuts in the socialization process. Though conversion may not be a desirable change for all immigrants, it may represent a larger set of transformative life events that increase individual participation, which may cumulatively transform the role of immigrants in American politics more broadly.

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