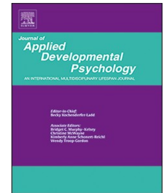
Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology 70 (2020) 101188

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jappdp



The political socialization of Latinx youth in a conservative political context

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Immigrant families
Civic associations
Political participation
Youth
Immigrant
Political incorporation
Political socialization

ABSTRACT

Drawing on semi-structured interviews, participant observations, surveys, and voting records, this mixed-methods study investigates Latinx youths' political socialization and grassroots organizing efforts in a conservative, anti-immigrant regional context. This investigation makes three contributions. First, findings suggest that under hostile political contexts, vertical (adult-to-youth) forms of political socialization may rarely guide Latinx youth in taking political action, and may sometimes even discourage participation. Second, we show that, despite political opposition, youth organizing groups can function as vehicles of horizontal (peer-to-peer) socialization, bolstering members' political engagement and providing them with valuable civic knowledge and skills. Third, youth-led grassroots mobilization efforts can increase young voter turnout, as evidenced by our experimental findings. We argue that grassroots youth organizing groups can empower their members to operate as agents of political socialization among a peer constituency that extends far beyond their friendship networks and schoolmates.

Introduction

Latinx youth now comprise over one in six adolescents in the United States, in part due to international migration. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, political elites and established residents in conservative parts of the country have been particularly outspoken in their open opposition to immigration from south of the border (Flores, 2018; Newman et al., 2020; Zepeda-Millán, 2017). While this has created a climate of fear in some Latinx immigrant communities (Zepeda-Millán & Wallace, 2018) and contributed to contentious classroom environments (Rogers, 2019), it has not altogether suppressed political activity among young people. As members of youth organizing groups, some young people have engaged their peers and broader communities in grassroots campaigns to change social policies and get out the vote (Valladares et al., 2020, forthcoming). This article aims to contribute to a growing body of research on civic and political engagement among contemporary Latinx youth (Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, & Casanova, 2015; Wray-Lake et al., 2018; Wray-Lake, Rote, Gupta, & Godfrey, 2015). How do conservative and anti-immigrant regional contexts shape the political participation of Latinx youth? How do immigrant parents and school personnel orient Latinx youth to political participation? What role can youth associations play in supporting youths' political participation and empowering them to engage their peers? Bridging research on immigrant contexts of reception, youth political socialization, and grassroots youth organizing, we examine how Latinx youth acquire the capacity to take action and mobilize their peers in one conservative geographic region characterized by anti-immigrant opposition: California's agricultural Central Valley (also known as the San Joaquin Valley). We begin by reviewing relevant research.

Immigrant context of reception

Where immigrants settle upon their arrival in the United States impacts how they become incorporated into society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014) and engage in politics (Mollenkopf & Pastor, 2016). Geographic contexts can be welcoming, hostile, or neutral toward Latinx immigrants (Burciaga & Martinez, 2017). Local leaders, institutions, political parties, and community organizations may—or may not—engage immigrants and their descendants in electoral and other forms of politics (Bloemraad, 2006; Mollenkopf & Pastor, 2016).

In areas where political conservatives dominate, attitudes are generally less welcoming toward immigrants. In some cases, elected leaders and longtime residents may express open hostility to immigrants and their children, while perpetuating rhetoric that presents Latinx immigrants as a threat (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015; Chavez, 2013; Hopkins, 2010; Newman et al., 2020). Studies suggest that hostile social conditions sometimes lead first-generation adult immigrants to avoid government services and civic activities that require contact with non-

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101188
Received 1 November 2019; Received in revised form 7 August 2020; Accepted 12 August 2020
0193-3973/ Published by Elsevier Inc.

immigrants (Armenta, 2017; Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2015; Pedroza, 2019).

Research on the children of immigrants—including the 1.5 generation born abroad and raised in the United States and the U.S.-born second generation—indicates that they can be more politically active than their parents (Abrego, 2011; Ramakrishnan, 2006). In some cases, they have been motivated to advance immigrant rights (Nicholls, 2013; Terriquez, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Experiences with social exclusion and rejection, however, may also dampen some Latinx youths' participation and reduce their willingness to participate in politics (Wray-Lake et al., 2015, 2018). Moreover, unwelcoming and hostile contexts may suppress opportunities for involvement and increase the social costs of engagement (Koopmans, 2004; Menjívar, 2016). This raises questions of whether or not and how youth from immigrant backgrounds become socialized to participate in politics in such contexts, which we address here.

Latinx youths' political socialization

A developmental approach provides insights into whether youth acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that would motivate them to vote (if eligible) and participate in politics in other ways. The transition to adulthood represents a critical stage in the life course, when socialization can shape an individual's long-term political interests and commitments (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Key socializing agents include adult figures, particularly parents and school educators, who can impart the information and dispositions for political involvement, engaging in vertical (or top-down) forms of political socialization. While much of the research on young people's political socialization emphasizes the role of adult figures and education systems, we know that political socialization can also occur horizontally—among youth—through civic associations (Wasburn & Adkins Covert, 2017), and potentially among a broader network of peers.

Vertical political socialization

Parents who are politically active tend to model political behavior and attitudes for their children (Wasburn & Adkins Covert, 2017). As immigrants predominantly from humble origins, many Latinx individuals encounter challenges to their own political engagement, including language barriers, insufficient knowledge about the U.S. political system, blocked pathways to citizenship, and histories of repression in their home countries (Terriquez & Kwon, 2014). Although some Latinx parents effectively orient their children toward collective responsibility (Pinetta, Martinez, Cross, & Rivas-Drake, 2020), many may lack relevant resources and experience to guide them through the U.S. political processes.

In turn, high school educators could bolster Latinx and immigrant youths' participation through social studies curricula (Callahan & Muller, 2013). Yet quality curricula are often lacking in high schools because of a focus on accountability testing in education (Levinson, 2012). Some educators may ignore the societal inequities and exclusions experienced by Latinx youth, immigrants, and other people of color (Rubin, 2007), or they may avoid discussions of contentious issues such as immigration enforcement (Rogers, 2019).

At four-year colleges and universities, professors sometimes galvanize political participation through course materials (Hillygus, 2005). However, Latinx youth remain underrepresented at four-year institutions and instead are likely to attend community colleges, where students often enjoy fewer opportunities to become civically engaged (Newell, 2014).

The prior literature suggests that Latinx youth may disproportionately lack access to vertical socializing agents that could bolster their active political participation; it also shows that immigrants in less welcoming contexts sometimes avoid government agencies (Armenta, 2017; Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2015; Pedroza, 2019). Additionally, educators and other elites may be unaware of or even disagree with the political perspectives of immigrant and other marginalized youth (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodriguez, 2013; Michaels, 2020). They may also avoid discussions out of concern that conservative students could express anti-immigrant sentiments that would further intimidate immigrant students (Rogers, 2019). Given these potential barriers, the vertical socialization of Latinx youth in conservative and anti-immigrant contexts merits empirical investigation.

Horizontal political socialization

In understanding how young people learn about politics, it is important to recognize that youth tend to identify more with people of the same age and less with their parents' generation as they transition to adulthood (Stewart & McDermott, 2004), increasing the possibilities of horizontal forms of political socialization. For example, young people can collectively engage in developing their civic skills, knowledge, and dispositions within youth associations, including school-based organizations (Glanville, 1999; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). As such, youth associations may create avenues for young people to inspire political action among their peers in cases where adult figures may fail to do so.

This study focuses on one specific type of activist association—-grassroots youth organizing groups—which explicitly seek to engage low-income, immigrant-origin Latinx and other youth of color in campaigns related to environmental justice, immigrant rights, health equity, voter education, and social justice. Importantly, youth of color tend to be drawn to these groups because they affirm their identities, allow them to take risks, and enable them to advance social justice (Akiva, Carey, Cross, Delale-O'Connor, & Brown, 2017).

Often staffed by young adults or former members, youth organizing groups have grown in number across the country, providing their members with extensive political education and guidance so that they can lead campaigns that affect the well-being of their communities (Valladares et al., 2020, forthcoming). Case studies largely based in progressive urban centers (such as Los Angeles, Denver, New York, Oakland, Boston, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia), indicate that these organizing groups often involve their members in research on local issues, require them to conduct outreach to their peers and other community members, and offer hands-on coaching on how to take political action (for examples, see Akiva et al., 2017; Clay, 2012; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2015; Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012; Warren & Mapp, 2011). This study extends research on youth organizing by examining possibilities for horizontal political socialization among Latinx youth in a conservative agricultural region generally hostile to immigrants.

This research also assesses whether, within such a context, youth organizing groups can prepare Latinx youth to function as agents of political socialization among nonmember peers. Indeed, prior research indicates that peer networks facilitate recruitment of participants in civic activities (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), elections (Rolfe, 2012), and social movements (Almeida, 2019). Research explicitly examining peer effects among adolescents demonstrates that young people influence their immediate friend networks (Pancer, 2015; van Goethem, Hoof, Aken, Castro, & Raaijmakers, 2014; Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008).

Less is known, however, about impacts beyond immediate peer networks. Ajilore and Alberda (2017) identify some of the conditions that may facilitate peer-to-peer political socialization. Drawing on longitudinal Add Health survey data, they found increased political participation in young adulthood among students who took coursework with high-achieving peers (as measured by social studies grades in high school) and those who participated in youth associations and other extracurricular activities. Ajilore and Alberda's analysis found peer effects among clusters of students who weren't necessarily friends but were simply enrolled in the same classes. As such, their study identified certain types of peers as being influential, even outside close friendship

networks. Moreover, their study highlights the importance of local institutional contexts—specifically high school classrooms and youth associations—in facilitating peer effects.

In extending Ajilore and Alberda's (2017) research, this study proposes that grassroots youth organizing groups may function as a local institutional context that fosters broader peer-to-peer political socialization. Such groups produce the equivalent of "high-achieving peers" in members who are knowledgeable about civic issues and proficient at in-depth analysis (Conner & Rosen, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Rogers et al., 2012). As extracurricular associations promoting public outreach around civic and political issues, youth organizing groups encourage their members to address both their peers and other audiences about politics through in-person presentations in classrooms, rallies, youth-led workshops, and cultural events. Some youth organizing groups also train their members to conduct effective outreach via social media—another agent of political socialization (Kahne, Hodgin, & Elyse, 2016; Maher & Earl, 2019).

One way to assess peer impacts on political socialization is to examine the ways in which nonpartisan voter outreach campaigns among Latinx youth effectively increase turnout among young voters. Aligning with research demonstrating that Latinx immigrants are particularly responsive to voter outreach by those of the same demographic backgrounds (Barreto & Nuño, 2011; Bedolla & Michelson, 2012; Ramirez, 2015), our study examines the effectiveness of youth-led voter outreach efforts targeting young Latinx voters, allowing us to test whether horizontal socialization can extend beyond close friendship networks and schoolmates.

Current study

This study examines the ways in which a conservative, anti-immigrant context shapes the political socialization of Latinx and other marginalized youth, demonstrating how Latinx youth, in spite of barriers, can learn to take action and effectively engage their peers. We set this study in California's agricultural Central Valley (as opposed to the state's progressive coastal regions) to provide insights into the political socialization of Latinx youth.

Tucked between the Sierra Nevada to the east and the Coast Ranges to the west, the Central Valley extends from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta south to the Tehachapi Mountains. Latinx immigrants and their descendants comprise the majority population in seven out of eleven counties in the region. Most are of Mexican origin, and adults disproportionately work in low-wage agricultural, construction, and service industries. The region is characterized by a populist conservatism that can be traced to the Dust Bowl influx of poor Whites from the Midwest. Today, older White residents, who dominate the active electorate, tend to lean to the right and overwhelmingly supported Trump in the 2016 election.

Within a context where Latinx residents remain significantly underrepresented among the electorate, 501(c)3 grassroots youth organizing groups seek to engage Latinx and other low-income young residents in leadership development, grassroots campaign implementation, and voter mobilization programming. While involving their members in immigrant rights, education equity, reproductive rights, and/or environmental justice campaigns, these organizations explicitly seek to increase the representation of young voters of color at the ballot box.

Our study relies on data collected through twelve youth organizing groups that span the region from Bakersfield to Stockton. Front-line youth staff are fairly young, although some of the more established groups have managers and directors over the age of 30. All of these organizations engage their members in local and/or regional grassroots campaigns.

However, we pay particular attention to the efforts of five (out of twelve) of the groups that were part of a coordinated "get out the vote" campaign during the 2018 election, led by Power California, a network that focuses on educating and mobilizing young low-income voters of color. As part of the network, youth leaders (the overwhelming majority of whom were from Latinx immigrant backgrounds) conducted voter registration and education workshops in high schools and community colleges or at community events. From late September to Election Day on November 8, youth leaders spoke to young voters in their own or a neighboring county and reminded them to post their mail-in ballot or go to the polls. Callers identified themselves as members of their youth organization. Phone calls reminded voters of the upcoming election, using a nonpartisan message focused on how important it was for youth of color to have a voice in the November 2018 election. During calls, youth leaders asked voters about their plans to mail in their ballot or vote in person, clarified any questions about the process, and reminded those voting in person of their polling location. By focusing on voting as a key outcome, this campaign offers an opportunity to assess peer-to-peer political socialization among a large constituency of youth.

Our study thus advances research on contexts of reception, political socialization, and peer effects by addressing the following questions: (1) How does a conservative, anti-immigrant regional context shape the political socialization of Latinx youth? (2) What is the role of vertical versus horizontal agents of political socialization (specifically parents and school educators vs. youth organizing groups) in orienting young people toward politics in such a context? (3) How and to what extent can grassroots youth organizing groups effectively prepare their members to serve as agents of political socialization among a broader constituency of their peers?

Methods

This study draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observations, surveys, and voting records to provide insights into the political socialization of Latinx adolescents and young adults residing in a conservative regional context.

Data sources and samples

Semi-structured interviews

Our study leverages semi-structured interviews and participant observations to answer the first two research questions regarding the conservative context of reception and the roles of socializing agents in shaping youths' political socialization.

Between August 2018 and August 2019, the authors and a select group of trained undergraduates conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews with 55 Latinx youth, aged 14 to 24, who had not attended a four-year university and who had at least one foreign-born parent. They were recruited from twelve Central Valley youth organizing groups, including the five Power California-affiliated groups. Given our time constraints, we interviewed the first available respondents, and thus our sample is not intended to be representative of organizations or youth in the region. As shown in Table 1, interviewees averaged 19.6 years of age; 87% came from an immigrant family, 60% identified as female, and 85% were from low-income backgrounds (as measured by their high school free and reduced lunch eligibility).

Guided by the above literature review, probing questions asked youth to discuss whether and how they received information about social and political issues affecting their lives. They were also asked to describe opportunities for and reactions to their political involvement. Questions gathered insights about both vertical and horizontal forms of political socialization by asking study participants to elaborate on the role of their parents, high schools, community colleges (if applicable), civic associations, and social media in providing them with political information and opportunities to get involved. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 2.5 hours.

Using deductive coding, research assistants coded fully transcribed interviews according to a set of broadly identified themes, including

Table 1
Central Valley Latinx Youth Study Participants.

	Interview Sample	Youth Organizing Survey Sample
Sample size	55	56
Average age	19.6	19.5
From an immigrant family	87%	82%
Low-income family background	85%	84%
Gender		
Female	60%	71%
Male	40%	25%
Other gender identity	0%	4%
Educational attainment		
Current high school student	16%	36%
High school graduate/GED	35%	27%
Some college	49%	20%
BA degree	0%	18%

context of reception, political engagement in the household, political engagement in classrooms and schools, and experiences in civic associations. Excerpts from the first round of coding were reviewed by the first three authors to ensure consistency. Then, the authors inductively recoded larger thematic excerpts based on more specific themes that emerged from the data. Here we present findings from dominant patterns and share representative quotes, which have been edited for clarity.

Participant observations

We also utilized field notes collected by the authors and undergraduate research assistants. As part of a larger research project, twenty undergraduate members of the research team provided field notes that recorded their observations in over 1,600 combined hours of activities during the summer of 2018. Observations were conducted at the five Power California-affiliated groups. Besides nonpartisan voter registration efforts in high schools and community colleges, activities included community-based youth leadership conferences, workshops, youth organizing meetings, school board meetings, and social gatherings. Five research assistants continued to observe voter mobilization efforts into the fall.

All researchers were trained to take field notes and conduct observations prior to entering the field. Observations were documented through both open narratives and prompts that guided notes on voter registration and outreach efforts. The second and third authors initially deductively coded field notes, focusing on broad themes, including context of reception, interactions with school personnel, socialization within youth organizing groups, public outreach to peers, and phone-banking activities. After inductively recoding larger thematic excerpts based on relevant emerging themes, they analyzed specific themes in order to triangulate patterns found in the interview and survey data.

Surveys of youth organizing group members

To address the third research question—examining how youth organizing groups prepare members to function as agents of political socialization among a broader constituency of their peers—members of the research team administered paper surveys to Latinx youth leaders in the five organizations in Power California's fall 2018 "get out the vote" campaign. The 56 respondents accounted for 90% of those regularly involved in the Power California campaign; occasional volunteers were excluded. In addition to questions about their demographic background and history of involvement in the organization, the survey asked members to rate how much their group involvement altered levels of civic knowledge and skills: Did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of impact*? Arguably, such self-reports are subjective, may suffer from social desirability bias, and are less valid than tests of actual civic skills and knowledge. However, the range of survey responses indicates that participants were not reluctant to express negative opinions, and participant observations generally support the varying results across groups. For example, surveys and observations both indicate that some groups offered their members more guidance on social media outreach than others. In one organization, two-thirds of members reported learning "a lot" about how to use social media; in that group, we observed training sessions on how to use Instagram and Facebook to publicize campaigns. We also observed the organizer coaching youth members on messaging they might use when sharing posts. In a second group, only 14% reported learning "a lot"; to our knowledge that group did not conduct formal social media training.

Voting records

To assess the extent to which youth organizing groups effectively socialize their peers to take political action, we drew on de-identified voting records to examine whether surveyed youth effectively increased turnout among 37,240 Central Valley voters aged 18 to 24, who were "likely Latinx," a designation imputed based on Spanish surnames and other information. Power California obtained the voting lists from Political Data, Inc. (PDI), a private company that regularly compiles and updates public voting records for California-based political campaigns and imputes racial/ethnic classifications (including Latinx heritage) into the voting files. Using Stata software, we provided Power California staff with programming (what is called a "do" file), allowing them to set aside a randomly selected control group. In this study, the control group that was not targeted for outreach by youth leaders comprised 27% of Central Valley voters. The treatment group, representing the remaining 73% of cases, received phone calls from youth leaders of the aforementioned five Power California-affiliated organizations. As is the case with many voter outreach experiments, the treatment group is larger than the control group because participating organizations want to target as many voters as possible within their financial constraints. After the election, Power California provided us with de-identified voting records purchased from PDI that indicated whether an individual had voted and whether they were part of the control or treatment group. For those in the treatment group, Power California created a variable to indicate if the voter answered the phone or not. The file also contained variables for voting history and zip code (scrambled); additionally, the file contained gender and race/ethnicity variables, imputed by PDI.

In this study, we focus our analysis on the 37,240 voters who were 18 to 24 years old, "likely Latinx," and residing in 11 Central Valley counties: Calaveras, Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for our sample. The average age at the time of the study was 21.4 years old, and the average registered voters per household was 2.6; 47% had voted at least once before the 2018 general election, 45% were likely to be female, 45% reported a Democrat

Table 2
Summary Statistics, Latinx Voters Aged 18-24.

Central Valley Peer-to-Peer Phone-Banking Efforts, 2018	
Number of voters	37,240
Percent in control group	27%
Average age	21.4
Gender	
Female	45%
Male	55%
Voter Information	
Voted in a prior election	47%
Average number of times voted in prior elections	0.74
Registered Democrat	45%
Registered to vote by mail (ref: poll voter)	70%
Average number of registered voters in household	2.6
Answered phone call made by youth leader	21%
Data Source: Political Data, Inc. and Power California	

party affiliation, and 70% were registered as absentee voters. The 2018 election turnout rate for these young adults was around 35%.

Analytic plan

Semi-structured interviews and participant observations

We analyzed semi-structured interviews using Dedoose mixed methods software, which linked fully transcribed and de-identified interviews to respondents' demographic characteristics. In a first round of coding, undergraduate assistants coded fully transcribed, de-identified transcripts based on broad themes identified in the above literature. The first three authors then reviewed these broadly coded themes to identify emerging patterns regarding the roles of the regional context and socializing agents in facilitating, hindering, or having little/no impact in shaping respondents' civic knowledge, skills, and action. In presenting findings, we share quotes that reflect patterns in the data. We edited quotes for clarity and used pseudonyms to protect respondent confidentiality.

The second and third authors divided up field notes and deductively coded them, focusing on broad themes of context of reception, political engagement in schools, political engagement within youth organizing groups, public outreach to peers, and phone-banking activities. They then inductively recoded larger excerpts based on emerging themes that were relevant to our research questions. They analyzed patterns in order to triangulate semi-structured interview and survey findings.

Surveys

We present descriptive statistics from surveys of youth leaders.

Voting records

Finally, we present experimental results testing the effectiveness of efforts to get out the vote via the peer-to-peer phone bank outreach project of the youth organizations. Using the de-identified voting records, we conducted an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to measure the percentage-point impact of phone outreach on turnout. In other words, we looked at the extent to which eligible voters in the treatment group turned out at higher rates than those in the comparison group. Our analysis controlled for voting history, gender, Democratic Party registration, age, number of registered voters per household, voting method (mail or poll), and zip code-level fixed effects (using data from de-identified zip codes). The OLS regression, which measures what is sometimes referred to as the intend-to-treat (ITT) effect, does not account for the fact that only 21% of the voters picked up their telephones. We therefore analyzed the direct impact of an actual telephone conversation on turnout, after controlling for the aforementioned variables. We applied a two-stage least squares regression to estimate the treatment-on-the-treated (TOT) effect (Green, Gerber, & Nickerson, 2003), with the "treated" representing those who answered the phone. The two-stage least squares regression accounts for the likelihood that someone will answer the telephone and thus estimates the actual impact of a peer-to-peer phone conversation on voter turnout.

Results

Semi-Sstructured Iinterviews and Pparticipant Oobservations

Anti-immigrant and conservative political context

According to our semi-structured interviews and participant observations, racial tensions and anti-immigrant sentiments characterize the context in which youth are learning about politics in the Central Valley. In a region where Confederate and "*Don't Tread on Me*" flags associated with the Tea Party movement fly freely on trucks and in the front yards of some White residents' homes, youth commonly reported hearing anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican rhetoric in the media (including social media) and in public, sometimes voiced by elected officials. At meetings and events, youth would sometimes share their personal experiences with racism and anti-immigrant sentiment and openly discussed establishments or neighborhoods where they felt unwelcome because of their racial and immigrant backgrounds.

A frequent topic of informal discussion during the summer of 2018 was the death of a farmworker couple in Delano, CA, who crashed their car while fleeing an unmarked vehicle driven by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. Noting the apparent cooperation between sheriffs' departments and ICE, youth often distrusted law enforcement. In this context, young people and their families navigated certain public spaces with strategic forms of visibility, taking precautions to avoid threats of deportation or police harrassment. Thus, they modified their behavior as needed to protect themselves from unwanted attention, outward hostility, and—in extreme cases—from arrest, detention, and/or deportation. Like older undocumented immigrants, who exercise caution when engaging in political activity (Abrego, 2011; Ramakrishnan & Viramontes, 2010), undocumented youth in our study often kept a relatively low profile when engaging in organizing efforts, especially around law enforcement. As in other studies, Latinx youth took on responsibilities that made them more visible than their undocumented parents, siblings (Enriquez, 2020), or peers (Enriquez, 2014), but many also sought to avoid contexts where conservative White residents or police were a significant presence.

In semi-structured interviews, Latinx youth in our sample explicitly spoke about the constant fear of ICE. For example, 22-year-old Lupe, whose mother was undocumented, explained, "We hear things like, 'Oh, don't go to *Vallarta* [supermarket] today because ICE is around there.' It has greatly affected my family because you never know when it is going to happen to you." Moreover, Lupe is well aware that traveling to and from work poses risks for her mother: "I constantly worry whether she is going to make it home or not." A few others mentioned that undocumented family members minimize travel and let those with documents run household errands. Victor, 21, said his mother "is afraid of everything going on, so she just hides at home, and doesn't really drive. She's very paranoid about getting caught or deported."

In the Central Valley, sheriffs have appeared next to President Trump at promotions of the proposed border wall, and they have aggressively opposed any sanctuary measures. A few young people spoke of their distrust of police and unwillingness to call 911. Among them was 18-year-old Elena, who had been attacked and robbed on her way home from school. After debate, she and her family decided not to take the risk of calling the police because of their family's mixed status. "It's the fear [that it] is only going to backfire on us, you know? It shouldn't be like that, we shouldn't fear our own safety net, you know?" Other youth described their distrust of local sheriffs in Kern County and dismay over anti-immigrant efforts. As 17-year-old Karla put it: "When that person that is supposed to keep us safe and protect us is anti-sanctuary, it's hard to trust them."

In addition, youth are regularly exposed to racist remarks online and in public. For example, Jorge, 18, was bothered by a local high school student's tweet, which stated: "Lazy Mexicans. They rely on social welfare." Similarly, 19-year-old Emily recalled the piercing words of a pedestrian, who yelled at her during a march supporting DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals): "You guys should walk to Mexico, you wetbacks!" Another youth told an interviewer about an interaction with a woman who "went off for like 10 minutes about the Confederate flag, saying all gangsters are Mexican."

Sometimes openly conservative and anti-immigrant sentiments entered classrooms, as well. For example, field notes captured an instance when, during a youth-led voter registration drive, a social studies teacher made negative comments about immigrants, referring to them as "illegals." In gatherings and interviews, youth mentioned instances where teachers openly opposed progressive initiatives that they supported, including local sanctuary efforts, the March for Our Lives protests, the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance on their school campus, and advocacy efforts to increase access to affordable clean water for immigrant farmworker communities. This opposition

sometimes silences students. For example, Karina, age 18, described her response to a conservative teacher: "Most of the things she said I had to pretend I didn't hear it [because] I wasn't in the stage where I could fight back."

This racialized anti-immigrant sentiment not only affects interactions with public agencies but also shapes how Latinx youth are socialized to participate in politics.

Vertical political socialization

Our findings align with prior research suggesting that Latinx youth experience limited exposure to politics from parents and school personnel, agents of vertical politicization. In interviews, youth often talked about their parents' views of President Trump's election and the subsequent immigration raids and detentions. A few also reported that their parents supported local immigrant rights activities or other efforts, and a handful had parents who regularly voted. As immigrants from humble backgrounds, most parents were not actively involved in politics and instead focused primarily on economic survival and gaining a foothold in the country. Nineteen-year-old Carmen's response reflected most youths' experiences: "My mom didn't go to college, and my dad didn't even go to high school. They are more into working and making a living. They don't have time to educate themselves on what's going on in the community."

Youth also found relatively little support from educators in their high schools and community colleges. Although a handful praised teachers who taught them about "things that matter," most youths said teachers largely engaged students in shallow discussions of politics, with limited to no instruction on how youth can get involved in their own communities. Teachers may be trying to avoid discussions that could ignite anti-immigrant or other negative sentiments among conservative students—and thus raise anxiety among Latinx students (Rogers, 2019). Our data, however, showed that high school and community college educators provided little support and scant information about elections or civic involvement. Twenty-two-year-old Kati's recollection was typical: "Teachers would encourage us to go vote, but they wouldn't really tell why. They wouldn't really explain." As for political involvement, 22-year-old Amelia reported, "Teachers didn't really get involved themselves in the community. A lot of them weren't even from the community. So, I honestly felt like I didn't learn anything about getting involved from them."

Besides not being able to or failing to provide education and support for political involvement, our study found that adult figures sometimes actively *discouraged* youth participation within this conservative context. Eighteen-year-old Elena said her mother fiercely opposed her participation in an immigrant rights protest: "If I'm being honest, the fear is strong." Nineteen-year-old Ana's mother is especially afraid of police presence at marches and therefore instructed her daughter not to attend them, although she said, "You can keep participating in Mi Familia Vota, like meetings, trips, but not marches." Given the openly hostile attitude toward immigrants, 18-year-old Sofia expressed her mother's concern "that something is going to happen, like some crazy radical is just going to come with a truck and run us all over or start shooting or something."

Interviews also revealed instances where educators explicitly discouraged youths' political participation and viewpoints. For example, 19-year-old Adolfo had been planning a walkout for March for Our Lives along with other high school seniors, but "the principal at the time just cut it off, was like, 'No one's walking out of class,'" Adolfo said. "So instead [the principal said], 'I'm going to organize a vigil for the victims, it's going to be after school, and no one's going to bring up Parkland, or Trump, or guns, or anything.'" When 18-year-old Elena's Mexican cultural club wanted to discuss immigration issues because so many people were affected by recent deportations, "The teacher said, `We're not going to get into things like that.'" In one case, an interviewee was shocked by a teacher's attitude toward voting. Eighteen-year-old Briseida claimed: "[In] my senior year, my government teacher told us that there was no point. He would tell us maybe not everyone should vote, [that] maybe we shouldn't register. Or he'd be like, 'There's no point in doing a rally or a march or a protest.'"

Our field notes also revealed that while the state education code allows nonpartisan voter registration groups on high school campuses, school administrators sometimes blocked youth-led voter registration drives or education workshops—even when they were led by current students or alumni. Observations also identified instances when school personnel censored or intimidated speakers at youth workshops and presentations about the importance of voting. Given that school personnel often muted youth voice and agency, it is not surprising that our field notes captured youths' surprise and enthusiasm when they learned about local histories of organizing and political issues in youth-led spaces.

Horizontal political socialization

As members of grassroots organizing groups, the Latinx youth in our study received intensive training on policy issues. While older elected officials, community leaders, and staff managers contributed to members' political development, field notes and semi-structured interviews evidence the centrality of horizontal political socialization that occurs within these groups.

In interviews, youth commonly reported that interactions with peers and youth organizers (who were their same age or a little older) expanded their awareness of the problems and challenges their communities faced. Eighteen-year-old Alejandro's view was typical. "I learned about more real-life issues here than I did in school," he said, referencing his growing understanding of immigrant rights, affordable housing, and the voting process. Eighteen-year-old Julia said peers in her group taught her about "those things that no one really talks about," such as the school-to-prison pipeline. Besides immigrant rights, many groups also shared information on issues related to environmental justice, health (including reproductive and mental health), LGBTQ rights, and education equity. According to interviews and participant observations, youth often acquired this relevant civic information through peer-led workshops and conferences hosted by their organizations. Youth also reported receiving news and updates about relevant issues through social media, often through the peer networks established by their youth organizing groups.

Peer-to-peer learning was also critical in preparing youth to engage in civic action. After receiving guidance from young organizers or other members, Latinx youth in our study often made public presentations, spoke to elected officials, or talked to voters. For example, Janessa, a notable leader in a campaign to expand health care access for undocumented youth, recalled getting hands-on training from a peer three years her senior. "Gloria taught me a lot," she said. "My first day, I thought I was just going to walk around with her and she was going to do the knocking and everything" in a door-to-door campaign. After observing Gloria speaking to a few residents, Janessa said, "Gloria was like—go out and do it. I'm glad she was the one to tell me, 'go out and try it yourself.'" Janessa soon found herself taking the lead and training other youth on how to communicate with local residents about their campaign.

Most study participants said they obtained peer-to-peer coaching on how to speak in front of large crowds, discuss issues with school administrators or public officials, talk to voters on the phone, recruit peers to events and activities, or publicize information on social media. Eighteen-year-old Emilio said he's been able to develop a public voice:

"Being a youth leader has definitely helped me get out of my comfort zone. Going up in front of all these people talking about something I stand for. If I think about it, back then, I would never imagine myself going up to those people, but 99Rootz has prepared me to speak my mind and speak from my heart."

Emilio reflected on how he prepared for his testimony before the school board. "I definitely remember going over the speech," he said. "I remember going over it multiple times and then said it to my peers."

"In some instances, role-playing was an important exercise in preparing young people to engage in civic campaigns." As 18-year-old Yelitza explained, it was helpful for her "to practice what we were going to say with peers" before talking to local residents about the impact of pesticides on children's asthma in her community. "And [you] had to be prepared for people to be mean and some people to be nice," she said. Indeed, on multiple occasions, participant observations captured adolescents and young adults engaging in role-playing exercises that prepared youth to speak to voters during the election season.

Youth organizing members often reported gaining the self-confidence to have a voice in affecting policy decisions. Seventeen-year-old Jorge, who worked with his high school peers and a 21-year-old organizer, recalled giving testimony at a public hearing: "We all knew what we were going to say and we all knew what we wanted: more funding and resources toward mental health within the schools in our community. I got that energy from them and I took it within myself and I felt empowered."

Notably, youth felt responsible to encourage voting and participation beyond their own peer networks and families to youth they did not know. They knocked on doors, gave public presentations, and set up tables at community events, using the tools and confidence developed in their groups. Eighteen-year-old Josue proudly shared: "I feel they really empowered our voices so much. We just leap at the chances we get." Conducting outreach was not always easy, but many were highly motivated. For example, nineteen-year-old Rolando gave himself pep talks: "I would just repeat in the back of my head: 'this is for my people, this is not for me.' Because whoever's elected next is going to represent us. I started being selfless and stopped thinking about myself, and thought about what it meant for the people I'm representing."

As a collective, youth organizing groups countered resistance to their civic efforts. Youth members of one group were initially denied permission to conduct nonpartisan voter registration in local high school classrooms. Undeterred and guided by young organizers, high school-aged and young adult members appealed to the school board, proposing a resolution that would facilitate nonpartisan voter outreach. After some debate, the district granted youth permission to conduct nonpartisan voter registration at all three high school campuses, thus enabling them to broaden their impact on the political socialization of their peers.

Surveys

Horizontal political socialization

Survey findings not only underscore the importance of horizontal political socialization among our study participants, they also suggest that youth organizing groups are developing members' civic capacities in ways that prepare them to politicize their peers. Fig. 1 shows the extent to which Power California-affiliated youth organizing group members feel their involvement developed their civic knowledge and skills. To be conservative, Fig. 1 shows only the percentage of Latinx respondents who reported that their associational involvement impacted their civic skills and knowledge "a lot." While these results are not definitive or precise measures of youths' increased capacities, participant observations and interview data generally align with survey findings.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly reported that their involvement significantly increased their knowledge about issues impacting their community. About two-thirds said they learned a lot about voting rights, and 73% reported developing a much better understanding of how government elections impact their community. In addition, 59% reported learning a lot about ballot propositions. Armed with such civic knowledge, youth organizing members may be better informed to impart information to their peers.

Survey results also indicate that Latinx youth developed civic skills necessary for politicizing broader audiences and taking action. Again, only responses that indicated youth were impacted "a lot" are reported here. As a result of their involvement in their youth organizing group, 70% of survey participants reported improving their ability to communicate with others, while 59% claimed to have improved their ability to speak in public. The differing results make sense because almost all youth were involved in one-to-one communication with their peers regarding the importance of voting, but a smaller percentage were responsible for making public presentations to larger audiences. Survey results also suggest that youth learned to take action in ways that benefit their communities. For example, just over three-fourths (79%) said they learned about how they could impact policies. This result was likely driven by members' involvement in or awareness of their groups' recent successful policy change campaigns, which contributed to: a ban of certain pesticides on school grounds; school board resolutions allowing for non-partisan voter registration efforts on high school campuses; increased enforcement of park health and safety regulations; a ban on new oil drilling near farmworkers' residences, hospitals, parks, and schools; and multiple resolutions that declared sanctuary for undocumented immigrants.

Some groups focus significant energy on engaging broader constituencies in non-electoral grassroots campaigns, and perhaps because of this, over one-half reported learning about how to organize others for campaigns (55%). A slightly higher percentage indicated that they learned about how to properly register voters (59%). Meanwhile, nearly half reported learning how to educate voters through social media (46%) and how to persuade people to vote (55%). Such civic skills enable young people to function as agents of political socialization among their peers and communities more broadly.

Voting records

Horizontal political socialization

Experimental findings drawing on voting records present strong evidence suggesting youth organizing groups enabled Latinx members to function as agents of political socialization among their non-member peers, at least as it relates to voting. The intend-to-treat (ITT) results featured in Table 3 demonstrate that after controlling for other predictors, phone banking efforts increased the likelihood of turnout by a net average of 1.7 percentage points among 18- to 24-year-old Latinx voters in the overall treatment group (whether or not they answered the phone). This increase was driven by the effectiveness of peer-to-peer conversations among the 21% of voters who actually answered the phone and heard local youth organizations' messaging. The treatment-on-the-treated (TOT) results represent the effects of peer-to-peer conversations: Latinx young voters who answered the phone calls were 9.6 percentage points more likely to vote than comparable peers. Thus, regardless of any other voter outreach efforts occurring during the 2018 general election, phone conversations with members of youth organizing groups contributed to a higher turnout among young Latinx Central Valley voters.

Discussion

Drawing on multiple sources of data gathered in California's Central Valley, this study demonstrates challenges to and opportunities for the political socialization of Latinx immigrant youth within a politically conservative regional context. In doing so, this investigation makes three novel theoretical contributions to research on youth political socialization.

First, within hostile political contexts, parents and school educators—those responsible for vertical forms of political socialization (from adult to youth)—may *discourage* youths' political engagement. Because of fear and social exclusion, Latinx parents expressed legitimate concerns for their children's well-being and sometimes sought to dissuade their children from public political activities. We have noted that some educators opposed political engagement challenging the status quo. Prior research suggests that this may have occurred because educators

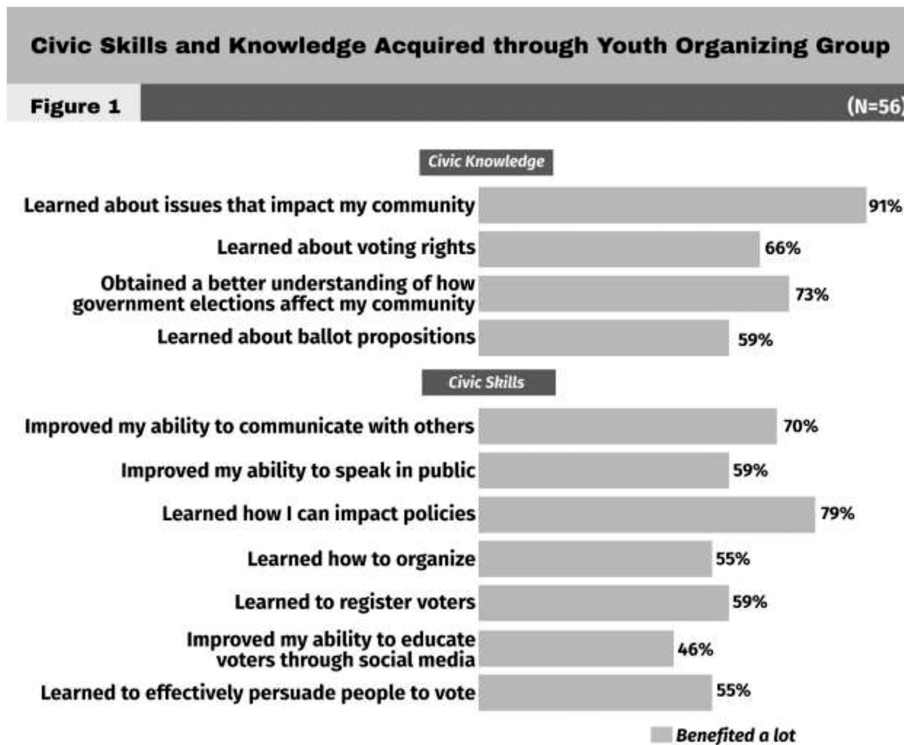

Fig. 1.

Table 3
Voter Engagement Experiments Targeting Latinx Voters Aged 18-24.

Central Valley Peer-to-Peer Phone Banking Efforts, 2018				
	Peer-to-Peer Phone Banking			
	Average Impact (ITT)		Impact on the contacted (TOT)	
	Coefficients	SE	Coefficients	SE
Treatment	1.710***	0.482		
Contacted			9.582***	2.972
Voted in a prior election	19.062***	0.246	19.041***	0.240
Age	−4.241***	0.147	−4.112***	0.134
Female	4.390***	0.473	4.519***	0.454
Registered Democrat	5.340***	0.533	5.337***	0.475
# of registered voters in household	2.862***	0.202	3.008***	0.175
Vote by mail (ref: poll voter)	4.443***	0.679	4.765***	0.500
Zip code fixed effects	X		X	
R-squared	0.177		0.178	
Observations	37,240		37,240	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$ Robust standard errors in parentheses.
Data sources: Political Data, Inc. and Power California.
Note: Zip code fixed effects (dummy variables) are included in both regressions. Represented by an X, the coefficients are not reported here.

failed to understand students' needs (Michaels, 2020), disagreed with their political ideas (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodriguez, 2013), or feared provoking anti-immigrant sentiments among conservative students in their class (Rogers, 2019).

In this finding, our study builds on existing research illustrating how hostile political contexts impact immigrant incorporation (Armenta, 2017; Burciaga & Martinez, 2017; Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2015; Hopkins, 2010; Koopmans, 2004; Menjívar, 2016; Newman et al., 2020); Pedroza, 2019; Zepeda-Millán, 2017). Our research demonstrates how wider tensions with law enforcement, anti-immigrant sentiment, and racial tension in conservative contexts may increase the costs of political participation for Latinx youth as they learn how to develop a political voice and take civic action. More broadly, this research demonstrates the importance of considering how immigrant contexts of reception can shape Latinx youths' political socialization.

Second, horizontal socialization can inspire political action among youth when vertical forms of socialization fail to do so. Although unwelcoming political contexts can deter Latinx youths' political socialization, these factors may not altogether inhibit the political development and participation of youth from marginalized communities. Extending prior research on youth organizing, which has largely focused on youth organizing in urban and progressive regions (for examples, see Akiva et al., 2017; Clay, 2012; Ginwright et al., 2006; Kirshner, 2015; Rogers et al., 2012; Warren & Mapp, 2011), we show that youth organizing groups can function as vehicles of horizontal political socialization in regions hostile to Latinx immigrants and, arguably, other young people of color.

By bringing much-needed attention to horizontal socialization processes in a body of research that highlights how adults and schools socialize young people (Wasburn & Adkins Covert, 2017), our findings arguably demonstrate that young staff and group members had some success in influencing the political socialization process for marginalized youth. With the prompting and guidance of often slightly older peers, Latinx members reported acquiring knowledge and skills that enabled them to participate in elections and exercise political agency more broadly. Our results go beyond suggestive evidence of peer-to-peer socialization within youth associations (Glanville, 1999; McFarland & Thomas, 2006) by proposing that peer-to-peer socialization within youth organizing groups can play a particularly important role in inspiring civic action in hostile contexts where other support is unavailable.

Third, the effects of horizontal political socialization can extend far beyond close friendship networks and schoolmates. As our experiment shows, members of youth organizing groups increased turnout among young Latinx voters across multiple counties in the Central Valley. In other words, youth organizing groups prepared members to act as

agents of political socialization among a broad constituency of their peers, at least when it came to voting behavior. This study therefore represents a departure from prior research on peer effects on youth civic engagement, which largely focused on the influence of friends and/or classmates (Ajilore & Alberda, 2017; Pancer, 2015; van Goethem et al., 2014; Zaff et al., 2008).

Limitations and future research

Our study contains various limitations. First, because we focus on a single regional case, our claims regarding the barriers to youths' political participation in hostile contexts of reception remain suggestive. We do not assess the applicability of our findings to other conservative regions, nor can we compare our findings to those in contexts more welcoming of immigrants. Second, without a representative sample, we cannot affirm whether the instances of racism and xenophobia described in our interviews of Central Valley youth reflect a more general experience. Third, this study carefully examined widespread peer effects on one measure of political activity—voting—which members of youth organizing groups promote among young people. Youth organizing groups also conduct political education and mobilize their peers to support grassroots campaigns around immigrant rights, environmental justice, education equity, reproductive justice, and other issues. Our study does not measure how these grassroots efforts, including outreach on social media, may influence a broader peer network. Finally, our study features youth organizing groups that aim to empower young people from marginalized communities to advance change in the public arena. Notably, fairly young organizers from the community staffed these groups. As such, our study—to some degree—examines a best-case scenario for facilitating horizontal forms of political socialization among youth. The extent to which our findings apply to other youth civic associations, or perhaps even youth organizing groups with older front-line staff, may be limited. Future research would benefit from a comparative approach, not only among contexts that differ in how they respond to immigration (Mollenkopf & Pastor, 2016), but also among different types of youth associations. In exploring differences across regional contexts, researchers might consider not only assessing differences in youths' political socialization experiences, but also whether hostile and welcoming political contexts have different impacts on youths' other developmental outcomes, such as their mental health and well-being. Additionally, the findings presented here raise questions for future research regarding what types of youth-led activities and processes (including those affiliated with grassroots organizing) might facilitate horizontal socialization among proximate and distant peers. How and to want extent do youth-initiated, in-person, virtual, and social media outreach strategies encourage different forms of political participation (including voting, involvement in grassroots campaigns, contacting elected officials, etc.)? Do the outcomes associated with different outreach strategies vary in hostile versus welcoming contexts? Extensions of this study could provide more conclusive evidence about the role of regional contexts in shaping youths' political socialization, as well as broader developmental implications of peer-to-peer political socialization.

Implications for practice

This research can help inform initiatives to support civic engagement among immigrant-origin, Latinx, and other marginalized youth. Given anti-immigrant and hostile contexts of reception in parts of the United States, our findings would support a greater emphasis on developing a national or statewide nonpartisan curriculum that educates all high school students about the electoral process and different ways in which they can have a voice in civic affairs. Teacher education should also place a greater emphasis on how to deliver civics curriculum in a nonpartisan way that provides a proper scaffolding for children of immigrant origin (who may not always be oriented to U.S. politics by their foreign-born parents). Teachers should also learn how to guide students on how they might exercise agency in electoral and government decision-making processes.

Our findings demonstrate the potential for horizontal political socialization, underscoring the importance of youth organizing groups in catalyzing political participation among the children of immigrants in hostile contexts. As such, we encourage investments in grassroots organizing and other youth associations that stimulate peer-to-peer civic action, particularly when other opportunities for civic learning may be constrained. These groups could operate out of community-based organizations with a track record of supporting immigrants, when available. Additionally, schools may provide an institutional footprint for the establishment of youth organizing groups, but to counter hostile political climates, groups may require some level of independence from school administrators or teachers. In sum, this research reminds practitioners of the importance of recognizing youth-led spaces as vehicles that can amplify youth voice in shaping policy debates and electoral outcomes.

Funding

This research was funded by the Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment and the Sierra Health Foundation. Any inquiries should be sent to terriquez@ucsc.edu

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