



# Immigrant group size and political mobilization: Evidence from European migration to the United States<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Immigration to democratic nations generates new groups of potential voters. This paper investigates how the electorate share of immigrant groups influences their likelihood of becoming politically mobilized, focusing on the mechanism of coalition formation with the Democratic Party. Using newly assembled data on ethnic enclaves in American cities at the start of the twentieth century, I show immigrants were more likely to mobilize politically as their share of the local electorate grew larger. This effect is driven by political mobilization in voting districts where the Democratic Party likely needed an immigrant group's vote to win elections. I also consider the shape of the electorate share effect, showing it is nonlinear and consistent with a political economy model of coalition formation.

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## 1. Introduction

The question of how minority groups access public goods has received a great deal of attention in economics, particularly from the perspective of ethnic fractionalization studies. Economists have documented that more diverse municipalities spend less on education and infrastructure and have residents who are less likely to participate in civic organizations or support welfare programs (Alesina et al., 1999; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000; Luttmer, 2001). However, the question of how minorities, and particularly immigrants, many of whom are from undemocratic sending countries, come to participate in the political process themselves remains largely unexplored. Of particular interest to scholars and policy makers is whether immigrants are more

likely to vote as their ethnic group's share of the electorate grows and their political clout increases. Empirical investigation of this question has been thus far limited by measurement problems in contemporary voting datasets.

The first measurement problem that complicates empirical investigation of immigrant political mobilization is that many foreign-born individuals in the present day United States are undocumented and thus ineligible for citizenship. However, existing datasets do not contain information on legal status, rendering it impossible to know which immigrants are potential voters and hence what share of the electorate is composed of foreign-born individuals eligible to participate in the political process. The second measurement problem is that few datasets combine measures of political participation, detailed demographic characteristics, and political geographic identifiers below the state level.<sup>1</sup> Previous work has necessarily relied on aggregate regressions using voter turnout as the dependent variable, making it difficult

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is the November CPS supplement which has measures of voting behavior and county-level geographic identifiers. This data source was used by Jang (2009) to study immigrant group size and voting behavior and by Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2005) to study group size and black political participation. Although counties are smaller than states, they are not an important political unit and hence cannot be used to study the role of electorate share on immigrant political participation unless they are aggregated to the state level.

to know what is driving any correlation between immigrant electorate share and turnout.<sup>2</sup>

To overcome the limitations of contemporary data for studying immigrant political mobilization, I turn instead to the mass migration from Europe to the United States in the early twentieth century. This setting has several key advantages for the study of why immigrants vote. The United States maintained a nearly open border to immigration until 1921, when the Emergency Quota Act was passed, and every European immigrant who arrived prior to this date had equal capacity to initiate citizenship proceedings and participate in the political process.<sup>3</sup> With the open border, citizenship was optional for immigrants simply interested in living and working in the United States. Becoming a citizen was necessary only to obtain the right to vote or run for public office, and there were virtually no publicly provided benefits that were available to citizens only.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, naturalization can be used as a proxy for political mobilization in this time period, before the barriers and economic motivations faced by immigrants wishing to become American citizens in the present day became important.

To construct a dataset covering immigrant citizenship attainment and local electorate share in the early twentieth century, I collected the universe of census records from the genealogy website [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) and computed the size of ethnic enclaves in wards, the political unit used to elect city councilmen, for five major cities in 1900 and 1910. City governments invested substantial resources in infrastructure related to sanitation and transportation at the start of the century. Immigrant groups could compete for a share of the associated patronage if they became citizens, registered to vote, and translated their numbers into credible voting blocs. The Financial Statistics of Cities give a glimpse of the magnitude of these turn of the century municipal investments: the replacement value of New York's sewers rose from \$46 million to \$53 million dollars between 1907 and 1910 alone, an increase of 14% (1910 dollars).<sup>5</sup> The value of Baltimore's sewers more than doubled over the same period, and the value of paved roads in the city rose by 16%.

This process of political incorporation was often encouraged and facilitated by the local Democratic Party, whose positions on allowing ethnic parochial schools and opposing the prohibition of alcohol appealed to immigrants. Because the newly arrived immigrants I consider in the paper were all minorities in their wards, coalition formation with other Democratic voters was the most likely mechanism through which immigrants became politically mobilized. Using a simple model, I show that immigrants should be more likely to mobilize politically as their ethnic group grows larger and is more likely to be decisive in local elections, increasing the expected return from including the immigrant group in a coalition with existing Democratic voters. However, this effect should taper off or even reverse as ethnic groups grow beyond the size needed to form a minimal winning coalition with the Democrats, reducing the return for mobilization additional members. The model thus predicts a nonlinear relationship between electorate share and political mobilization.

Using the newly assembled dataset on naturalization and immigrant group electorate share in city wards, I show that immigrants mobilized

<sup>2</sup> A recent paper on the impact of the Voting Rights Act sidestepped this problem by instead studying the shift of public resources towards black localities after African Americans' voting rights increased ([Cascio and Washington, 2014](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Immigrants from European countries were de facto permanent residents in the sense that they could live and work in the United States indefinitely without a visa or initiating naturalization proceedings. Indeed, the notion of an undocumented immigrant (e.g. an alien without a valid immigration visa) did not exist until the Immigration Act of 1924.

<sup>4</sup> The federal government offered little in the way of retirement benefits or welfare to citizens that could serve as motivation for immigrants to begin the naturalization process. Access to education was also not a motivation for resident aliens to naturalize: illiterate immigrants above the compulsory schooling age were encouraged to attend publicly-funded evening schools in many cities ([Hill, 1919](#)).

<sup>5</sup> These data come from the Financial Statistics of Cities published in 1907 and 1910. The 1907 volume was the first to report replacement value of public infrastructure in the twentieth century.

in a pattern consistent with the model. The predicted nonlinear relationship between electorate share and naturalization attainment is evident for all enclaves in the data, but the effect is driven by immigrants living in wards where there was good potential for coalition formation with the local Democratic Party. To measure the size of the existing Democratic Party in a ward (and hence determine where a new immigrant coalition partner would be attractive), I use the share of the population composed of individuals whose ethnic ancestry made them likely to align with the urban Democratic Party. For immigrants living in enclaves that could likely form a winning coalition with the local Democratic group, an increase in electorate share from 8 to 16% (a standard deviation below the mean to the mean electorate share) is associated with a 15 percentage point increase in naturalization likelihood, an increase of 30% with respect to the mean naturalization rate. Using English speaking as a placebo test, I show that sorting on propensity to assimilate generally is unlikely to explain these results.

My findings contribute to the literature on the social and economic assimilation process of immigrants to the United States. Economists have investigated many aspects of immigrant assimilation and convergence, particularly earnings and education ([Chiswick, 1978](#); [Borjas, 1985](#); [LaLonde and Topel, 1991](#); [Abramitzky et al., 2014](#); [Card, 2005](#); [Lleras-Muney and Shertzer, 2014](#)). This paper studies the political dimension of immigrant assimilation, which previously received much less attention in economics. My methods also provide insight into the question of why people vote more generally. The primary finding of this paper, that ethnic electorate share influences an immigrant's decision to participate in the political process, underscores the importance of considering social structures in models of voter turnout and provides new evidence for the validity of group-based approaches (for instance, [Uhlener, 1989](#); [Morton, 1991](#); [Shachar and Nalebuff, 1999](#)).

The paper is organized as follows: [Section 2](#) describes the relevant historical context and develops a simple model of immigrant political mobilization. [Section 3](#) covers dataset construction and sample selection. [Section 4](#) addresses the econometric specification and identification issues in the analysis. [Section 5](#) provides the main results on electorate share and naturalization. [Section 6](#) concludes.

## 2. Immigrant political mobilization background and theory

### 2.1. Historical context

The United States maintained an open border to European immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and local patronage politics played a prominent role in the lives of the millions of newcomers who settled in the industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest. Locally elected ward aldermen, or city councilmen, served as a vital link to services and favors from the central city government ([Kornbluh, 2000, p. 129](#)).<sup>6</sup> To secure the loyalty of new immigrants and remain politically competitive, aldermen strategically provided informal public assistance to their constituents as well as formal representation before relevant city boards.<sup>7</sup> It was possible for aldermen to strategically focus their efforts to benefit a particular group in their ward due to the prevailing custom of "aldermanic courtesy" in which council committees deferred to an alderman on any issue that dealt solely with his ward ([Teaford, 1984, p. 26](#)). The political mobilization of these new immigrants, most of whom had never participated in an

<sup>6</sup> Some cities switched to at-large elections in the early twentieth century. The cities in my sample were still using a system of ward-level elections to choose aldermen between 1900 and 1909.

<sup>7</sup> In the colorful collection of talks by George W. Plunkitt about his career in the Tammany Hall political machine in New York City, the former aldermen describes how he bought clothes for fire victims, gave candy to children, and matched up young men to jobs with local businesses ([Riordon \[1905\] 1994, p. 64](#)). Aldermen were also responsible for presenting public works and licensing proposals to the city council.

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