THE SOUTHERN IMMIGRANT CIVIC ADAPTATION STUDY

BUILDING THE FUTURE TOGETHER: PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG LATINO YOUTH

Final Report

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This report focuses on the civic engagement of Latino high school students in North Carolina who were enrolled in 10th grade during the 2007-08 academic year and 12th grade during the 2009-10 academic year. Civic engagement is broadly defined to encompass attention to politics, the development of a political identity and national interest, and individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern (Levine 2008; García Bedolla 2006). Civic engagement includes both electoral (e.g., voting) and nonelectoral activities (e.g., participating in voluntary organizations) and encompasses daily activities and routines that promote an individual's understanding of political systems and knowledge of current events (e.g., reading the newspaper).

In this report, we provide an overview of the individual and family characteristics of Latino students. We then describe their civic engagement and the factors which promote or hinder their civic engagement. Below, we summarize a few of our key findings.

- **Extracurricular Activities:** Latino students' participation in academic and civic extracurricular activities at school increases dramatically from their freshman (10% and 4%, respectively) to senior years (31% and 28%, respectively). By their senior year, the majority (63%) of Latino students participate in at least one type of extracurricular activity including sports.

- **Civic Activities:** Latino youth were actively involved in their communities. In the past year, 35% of seniors had either worked in a group to solve problems in their communities or engaged in community services or a volunteer activity. When combined with engagement in extracurricular *civic* activities, 50% of seniors engaged in some civic activity.

- **Political Activities:** While engagement in extracurricular and civic activities is high, most (84% of sophomores and 82% of seniors) Latino high school students do not participate in political activities, such as volunteering for a political campaign or attending political party functions. In their senior years, those who do engage in political activities have typically attended a public meeting or demonstration (11%), contacted an elected official (4%), attended a party function (6%), or volunteered for a campaign (7%).

- **Attention to News and Current Events:** In contrast to engagement in political activities, attention to news and current events is high. The majority (60%-85%) of Latino high school seniors in North Carolina report reading newspapers in Spanish or English; watching TV news in Spanish and English; listening to Spanish or English News radio; or obtaining news through the internet. In addition, these students routinely discuss current events and politics with friends (51%) and family (58%).

- **American Identification:** The majority of Latino high school seniors have embraced both their American and ethnic identities. Nearly 60% report strong American identities as well as strong or very strong ethnic identities. Nevertheless, they have different ideas of what it means to be an American. Over eighty percent of Latino high school students see belief in the U.S. Constitution as an essential aspect of inclusion in American society. In addition, Latino high school seniors believe that speaking English (76%), becoming a US citizen (56%), and voting in US elections (60%) are essential to inclusion in American life.

- **Promoting American Identification**: Among seniors, the prevalence of strong American identification is slightly lower for females (63% vs. 71%) and significantly lower for foreign-born youth (57% vs. 76%). High levels of perceived discrimination and a low sense of school belonging are associated with weaker American identifications.

- **Promoting Civic Engagement**: Information gained from student interviews indicates that more Latino students would like to participate in civic life, but are unable to become involved due to time constraints and lack of transportation. Although few of our results reached statistical significance, females, students with weak ethnic identities, and students who perceive more discrimination were less likely to engage in civic or political activities (not including any extracurricular activities). Foreign-born students, students with strong American identifications, and those who had courses requiring them to keep up with political news were more likely to engage in civic or political activities.

Nationally, 57% of youth ages 15-to-25 are disengaged – they do not participate in any civic or political activities (Keeter, et al. 2002). Only 26% of youth are involved in any political activities and only 28% are involved in any civic activities.[1] Latino high school seniors in North Carolina were somewhat less engaged in political activities (18%) but more engaged in civic activities (35%) than youth nationally.[2] Overall, 58% were disengaged. The recommendations outlined at the end of the report suggest ways that schools can facilitate the civic engagement of Latino youth and their families.

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[1] 11% are involved in both types of activities.

[2] Due to the younger age of our study participants, our questions regarding civic and political activities differ somewhat from those asked by Keeter et al. (2002). The LAMHA study did not include questions about charitable contributions as a form of civic activity. Given the large number of immigrant non-citizens in our sample, the LAMHA study also did not include questions about the intention to vote, canvassing activities to persuade someone how to vote, or displaying a bumpersticker, button or sign on behalf of a candidate in political activities.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The fastest growing population group in North Carolina, Hispanics now comprise 8.4% of the total population and 12% of the child population ages 0-19 (U.S. Census, 2010a). While the vast majority (90%) of Hispanic children in North Carolina have been born in the US, many have parents who are recent immigrants to the US (U.S. Census, 2010b). Nationally, the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 62% of Hispanic children have immigrant parents (Fry and Passell, 2009).

The influx of Hispanic children, especially the children of immigrants, into the U.S. profoundly affects states' educational systems (Wainer, 2004) and has the potential to profoundly affect political systems in the U.S. U.S. citizens and non-citizen residents influence public policy through their participation in politics and their involvement in civic life provides the foundation for a strong democracy (Wong, 2006). Yet current research on the civic and political engagement of minorities and immigrants, especially those from Latin America, shows that these groups often find themselves on the periphery of the American political system (Ramakrishnan, 2005; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman, 2003).

Initiated in the 2006-07 academic year and focusing on youth in 9th grade, the *Southern Immigrant Academic Adaptation* (SIAA) study was established to understand both the academic experiences of Latino youth in North Carolina. In 2007-08, the study was expanded to collect data on the civic engagement of Latino youth as they transitioned into the 10th grade. Youth were then re-interviewed about their academic experiences and civic engagement in the 12th grade as they transitioned out of high school and into college or the workforce. Overall, the project aimed to:

(1) Identify how the civic engagement of Latino youth in 10th grade varies by psychosocial factors (e.g., gender, immigrant generation, strength and centrality of ethnic identifications, family identification, school/college orientations, and work orientations) and assess the inter-relationship between academic and civic engagement;
(2) Examine how psychosocial factors and daily acculturation experiences in 9th and 12th grades (e.g., daily family obligations, work obligations, and experiences of discrimination and social acceptance) shape the civic engagement of Latino immigrant youth in 12th grade and changes in civic engagement between 10th and 12th grades;
(3) Describe the types of community activities that Latino youth are involved in, what motivates them to (not) get involved and stay involved, and what they learn from their involvement; and
(4) Explore how Latino youth learn about politics, what it means to be a good citizen, and what it means to be an American.

METHODS

This report utilizes data on the civic engagement of Latino youth from Waves 2 and 3 of the SIAA study. [3] Data for Waves 2 and 3 were collected between January 2008 and May 2008 and between September 2009 and June 2010, respectively.

In Wave 2, 67% of the 239 Latino students who had participated in Wave 1 of the study were re-interviewed over the telephone.[4] All students participating in Wave 1 were enrolled in 9th grade in a high school in North Carolina. At the time of the Wave 2 data collection these students were either enrolled in 10th grade or had dropped out of high school.

In Wave 3, data were collected on a total of 219 Latino students who were either enrolled in 12th grade or who had dropped out of school in North Carolina. Forty-two percent (N=92) of the students participating in Wave 3 of the study had previously completed interviews during their 9th grade year in a participating high school (see Potochnick and Perreira, 2007 for findings from 9th grade interviews). An additional 127 students who had not participated in 9th grade and were now enrolled in participating school also agreed to take part in the 12th grade survey. Additionally, 95 students who had participated in the 9th grade survey could not be located and were no longer enrolled in a participating high school in 12th grade. Among those whom we were unable to locate, we confirmed that 21 had transferred to a different school, nine had dropped out of school, and two had graduated early. Overall, 49% of Latino 12th graders enrolled in participating schools agreed to take part in our Wave 3 interview.[5]

Students participating in the SIAA study attended one of nine high schools in North Carolina.[6] These high schools were selected during Wave 1 of the study to ensure economic variation in the communities in which Latino youth live. High schools with at least 24 Latino students enrolled in 9th grade in 2000 were stratified into two groups—urban and rural. Urban high schools were defined as high schools serving counties where over 50% of the population was living inside an urbanized area or urban cluster. Rural high schools were defined as serving counties where 50% or less of the population lived in an urbanized area or urban cluster. At Wave 1, four high schools from the urban stratum and five high schools from the rural stratum were selected using a probability proportional to the number of 9th

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[3] Our analysis utilized the unweighted data. However, all statistics were re-evaluated using the weighted data. Though percentages varied slightly (0-4 percentage points) from those reported here in some cases, the interpretation of the results remained the same.

[4] Only 4 participants refused to participate. Seventy-one students could not be located for follow-up at Wave 2.

[5] At Wave 3, one urban high school declined to participate. This high school had had several changes in leadership in the intervening 2 years.

[6] To protect the confidentiality of participating students, the SIAA project does not release the names of participating schools or school districts.

grade Latino students in each county.[7] After receiving active consent from parents, all students in the school who self-identified as Hispanic or Latino were recruited.

At Wave 2, interviewers called students' parents and asked if they would consent to have their child participate in a brief 30-minute phone interview and mailed a $10 thank you gift upon their completion of the interview.

At Wave 3, interviewers returned to students' schools to conduct interviews and mailed questionnaires to students who had dropped out of school but had participated in Wave 1 of the study. Students who agreed to participate in Wave 3 received a $15 thank-you gift for their participation in our study.

The sources of data in the SIAA study include the students themselves, the parents' of the students, and the students' academic transcripts. Participating students in Wave 3 completed an in-school questionnaire, a take-home questionnaire, and 14 daily diary checklists. The two questionnaires gathered information regarding the students' immigration histories, socioeconomic backgrounds, language use, family relationships, cultural and ethnic identifications, educational attitudes, physical and mental health, and civic engagement. The daily diary checklists were used to study how students adapt to various challenges and stressors in their everyday lives. Table 1 provides a summary of the content covered by each data source at both Waves 2 and Wave 3. Due to the limited time allowed for a phone interview, far less data were collected at Wave 2.

In addition to completing questionnaires and daily diaries, 24 students and their mothers completed separate, in-depth personal interviews at Wave 3. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with six students who had dropped out of school, eight students who were close to completing high school, and ten students who intended to attend college. These interviews helped provide in-depth information on the work and family lives of students, their civic engagement, and the strategies youth and their parents use to complete high school and/or transition into the workforce in North Carolina. All participants in these interviews received an additional $15 thank-you gift.

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[7] At Wave 3, one urban high school declined to participate. Therefore, only students from the 9th grade who had previously participated could be contacted and re-interviewed via phone and mail. Because many Latino students move frequently and have disconnected phone numbers, we were only able to reach 6 of these students in this non-participating school.

Table 1. Content of Student Questionnaires and Daily Diary

In-School and Take Home Questionnaires	2006-07	2007-08	2009-10
(1) Immigrant history	X		X
(2) Socioeconomic background	X		X
(3) Language use	X		X
(4) Family identification and obligations	X	X	X
(5) Cultural and ethnic identification	X	X	X
(6) Educational attitudes	X	X	X
(7) Rejection sensitivity	X		X
(8) Perceived discrimination	X	X	X
(9) Physical Health	X	X	X
(10) Mental health	X	X	X
(11) Civic Engagement		X	X
(12) Future Plans			X
Daily Diary			
(1) Negative events and stressors	X		X
(2) Time spent on school, work, and family activities	X		X
(3) Academic engagement	X		X
(4) Feelings and moods	X		X
(5) Role fulfillment	X		X

Note: Several components of the 2007-08 interview are abbreviated versions of the 2006-07 and 2009-10 interviews

OVERVIEW OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Most students in our study have direct ties to migration either through personal experience or from the experiences of their parents. At the onset of our study (2006-07), 70% of students were foreign-born, predominantly from Mexico, but by 2009-10 only 51% were foreign-born. This decrease reflects high dropout rates and residential mobility among foreign-born Hispanic youth with English as a Second Language.

Table 2. Selected Student Participant Characteristics

	2006-07		2007-08 Sophomores		2009-10 Seniors	
	%/Mean	N	%/Mean	N	%/Mean	N
Student Characteristics						
Boys interviewed	46%	239	38%	152	45%	219
Girls interviewed	54%	239	62%	152	55%	219
Average age of youth (mean)	15 yrs	237	16 yrs	152	19 yrs	217
Foreign Born	70%	239	66%	152	51%	219
Mexico	54%	166	52%	100	49%	108
Central America/Carribean	33%	166	31%	100	29%	108
South America	13%	166	17%	100	22%	108
Age at arrival (foreign born)						
12 years old or younger	64%	167	66%	100	75%	110
13 years old or older	36%	167	34%	100	25%	110
U.S. Born	30%	239	34%	152	49%	219
Second generation	89%	64	92%	52	90%	105
Third+ generation	11%	8	8%	52	10%	105
Family Characteristics						
Youth lived with two biological parents	57%	232	64%	152	50%	172
Student has lived apart from one or both parents	63%	224	55%	147	68%	166
Average household size (mean)	4	232	5	152	3	214
At least one parent graduated high school	48%	223	55%	152	55%	219
Both parents are employed	60%	210	57%	131	47%	197
Language Characteristics						
English spoken in the home	59%	220	58%	148	75%	162
English primary home language	16%	221	28%	85	26%	160
Student speaks/understands English very well	42%	224	46%	149	65%	166
Student reads/writes English very well	37%	224	41%	147	57%	166
Student speaks/understands Spanish very well	69%	212	71%	140	63%	158
Student reads/writes Spanish very well	47%	212	48%	128	44%	158

Demographic differences between participants in Wave 1 (2006-07) and Wave 3 (2009-10) not only reflect dropout rates and mobility differences between foreign-born and US-born youth but also reflect economic changes that occurred between 2006 and 2009. In 2006-07, 60% of youth were living with one or more employed parents. After the onset of the great recession, only 47% of youth were living with one or more employed parents. This was true despite the fact that parents of the youth interviewed in 2009-10 were more likely to have at least a high school degree than those interviewed in 2006-07 (55% vs. 48%).

The demographic changes that we observe across waves of our study may influence civic participation rates. In particular, limited English language proficiency in the US can hinder some forms of civic engagement such as participation in letter writing campaigns, public forums, and community groups. We find that participating seniors in 2009-10 were more likely than participating freshman in 2006-07 to speak English in their homes (75% vs. 59%) and to speak and understand English very well (65% vs. 42%). Thus, the rise in English fluency during high school should promote greater civic engagement in the US over time.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Political psychologists have found that political attitudes first take shape between adolescence and young adulthood and that these attitudes become stronger over time (Sears and Levy, 2003). However, minorities and immigrants, particularly those from Latin America, tend to be disengaged from American political life and this disengagement can persist across generations (Ramakrishnan, 2005; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman, 2003). Therefore, as the Latino population grows, the future health of democracy in America will depend upon the successfully incorporation of the children of Latino immigrants into the political system.

Civic engagement reflects the political incorporation of Latino immigrant youth and includes involvement in voluntary organizations (both in and out of school), working individually or collectively to address community issues, electoral activities (such as volunteering for a campaign), political voice (such as contacting an elected official), and attention to politics. In the following section, we exam each of these forms of civic engagement.

Extracurricular Activities

We consider participation in extracurricular activities in-school and out-of-school an important component of students' civic engagement for three reasons. First, comprehensive definitions of civic engagement include involvement in voluntary associations in the community as an indicator of civic engagement, and the school community is the community in which the student spends a large portion of his or her time. Second, the literature has demonstrated that participation in school extracurricular activities predicts future civic participation (Youniss et al, 1997; Fredricks and Eccles, 2006; Lay, 2007). Third, involvement in civic activities in high school significantly increases a student's likelihood of later graduating from college (Davilá and Mora, 2007).

Our data show that participation in extracurricular school activities increases between students' freshman and senior years (Figure 1; 33% to 63%). This suggests that the longer students stay in their school community, the more they become involved. This increase in participation stems primarily from increases in participation in academic activities (10% to 31%) such as the visual and performing arts and future professional associations and increases in civic activities (4% to 28%) such as student government, community service organizations, political issue organizations, and ROTC. Even participation in religious activities and activities representing the student's nationality increased between the students' freshman and senior years (from 0 % to 13%). However, a decline in participation between the sophomore and senior years suggests that religious and ethnic affiliations may ultimately weaken as youth transition into adulthood and begin participating in less culturally familiar activities.

Figure 1. Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities, In School

Legend:
- Freshmen (2006-07, N=239)
- Sophomores (2007-08, N=152)
- Seniors (2009-10, N=219)

Categories: Any Activity, Sports, Academic Activity, Civic Activity, Ethnic or Religious Activity
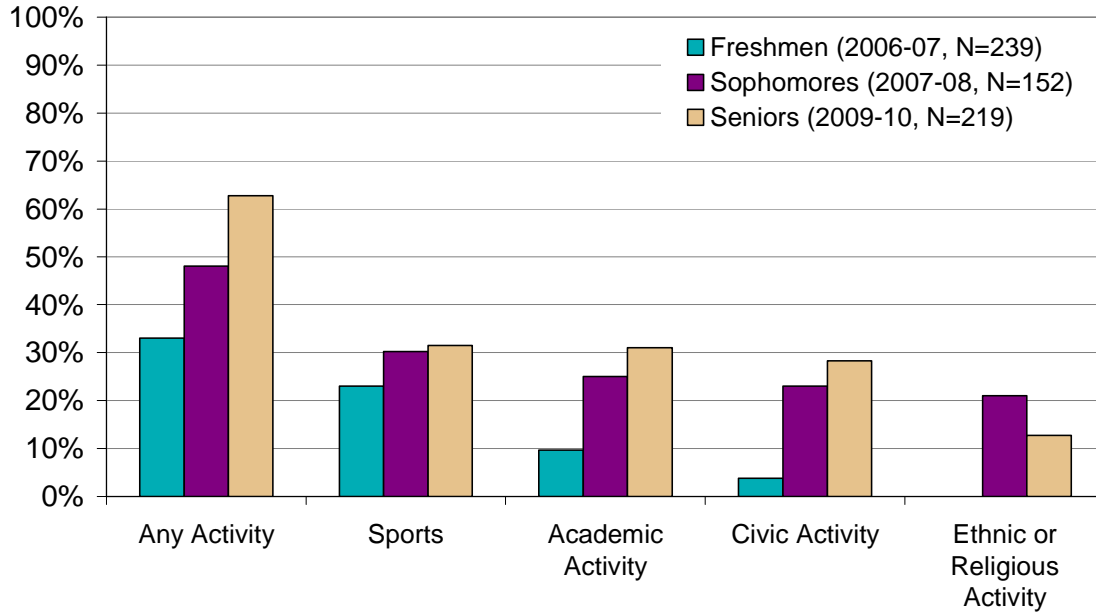
Figure 2. Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities, Outside of School

Legend:
- Freshmen (2006-07, N=239)
- Sophomores (2007-08, N=152)
- Seniors (2009-10, N=219)

Categories: Any Activity, Sports, Academic Activity, Civic Activity, Ethnic or Religious Activity

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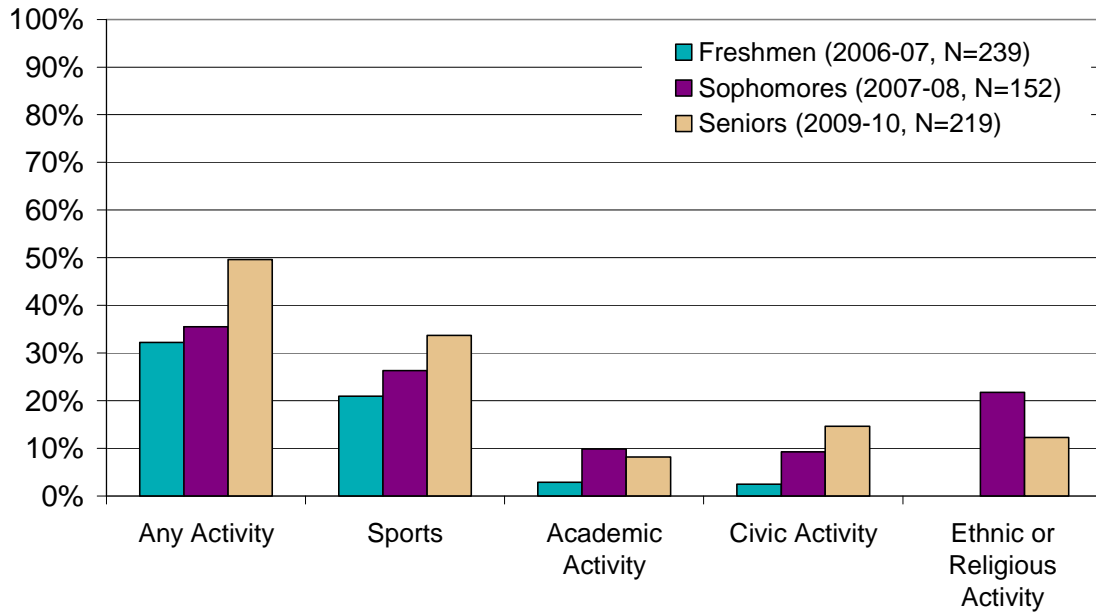
Participation in extracurricular activities outside of school follows a similar pattern as in-school participation (Figure 2). Students become more involved the longer they remain in their communities. Although sports activities are the most popular outside of school, participation in academic and civic activities is substantial (8% and 15% respectively) by students' senior years.

Our qualitative interviews with youth and their parents suggested that a lack of transportation can sometimes prevent student from engaging in both school and extracurricular activities. Approximately, 22 % of seniors indicated that they did not have access to a car and 57% did not have a driver's license though they were all over the legal driving age. Though students parents might be able to assist with transportation to school and extracurricular activities, many Latino parents are experiencing substantial economic hardship, work multiple jobs and have limited time off work (Potochnick and Perreira, 2007; Spees and Perreira, 2010). Additionally, parents who are undocumented cannot obtain a drivers' license and legally drive in North Carolina and often limit local travel to reduce the risk of detection (Gill, 2010).

In one particularly dramatic case, a student discusses how he was forced to dropout of school when the school required he attend evening classes where he could get intensive math instruction. No transportation was provided to the night school and, not realizing he might be able to transfer back to the day school, he dropped out.

> *I was in the normal school and was not passing mathematics. Then, the school did an experiment to see if students [like me] could study through a [specialized] computer program. These classes were at night. So, they sent me to the nigh school. I was there for 6 months and passed the grade. They said that the next year I could return to the daytime school. But, when I returned to the day school [the next year], they said that I had to go to the night school for another 6 months... I had no ride to go to the nigh school because the school buses don't run in the afternoon. So, ... I had to leave school... I left because I had no transportation to go to school.*
>
> **Juan, Case ID 47013a**

Engagement in Civic and Political Activities in the Past Year

Not including participation in extracurricular civic activities such as school government and participation in community service clubs or organizations, 15% of seniors reported working with a group to solve a problem in their communities and 32% reported engaging in community services or a volunteer activity in the past year. Thus, a combined total of 35% engaged in a civic activity in the past year. When combined with engagement in extracurricular civic activities, 50% of seniors engaged in some civic activity.

However, over 80% of Latino students did not participate in any political activity during the year preceding their sophomore-year interview or their senior-year interview (Figure 3). Nevertheless, between their sophomore and senior years, we observed increases in engagement in particular activities such as volunteering for a campaign, attending public

meetings or demonstrations, and attending party functions. The most common political activity among both sophomores and seniors was attending a public meeting or demonstration. National data available on youth ages 15-25 indicates that approximately 10% of youth have contacted a public official, 10% have attended a public meeting or demonstration, and 6% have donated money to a candidate or party in the past year (Keeter et al. 2002). Thus, Latino seniors in North Carolina participated in these types of activities at a rate similar to youth ages 15-25 nationally.

Figure 3. Political Activities in the Past Year
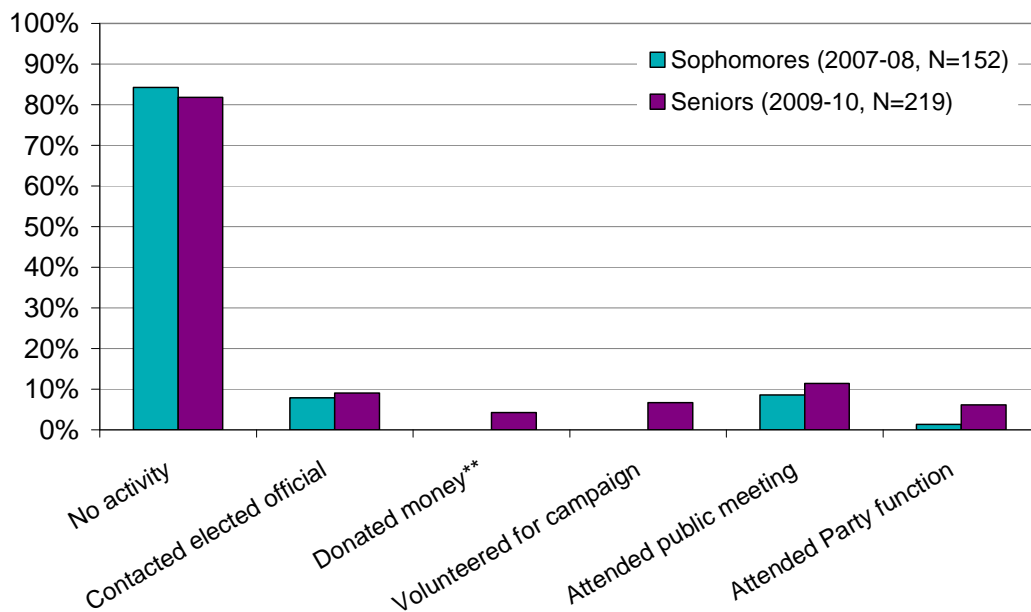
**Respondents were not asked about this activity in 2007-08.

In qualitative interviews, several students attributed their current civic involvement to opportunities to express themselves through debate or political discourse in social sciences courses. They also attributed current civic involvement to service learning opportunities where they were able to address a political issue that was meaningful to them. For example, Josefina discusses here volunteer work at a domestic violence shelter.

> *I'm volunteering at [a domestic violence shelter]. It was my [senior] project…. I liked it. So, I'm just gonna keep volunteering, I guess. I play with the little kids from the shelter and just help the ladies around.*

Josefina, Case ID 24009a

Attention to News and Current Events

Attention to politics and public affairs provides a foundation for effective citizenship. Previous research has found that attention to news and current events during adolescence can

predict future civic engagement (Galston, 2001). Thus, high rates of attention to news and current events may foreshadow increased civic participation among Latino youth in adulthood.

Figure 4. Sources of News and Current Events in Past 2 Weeks
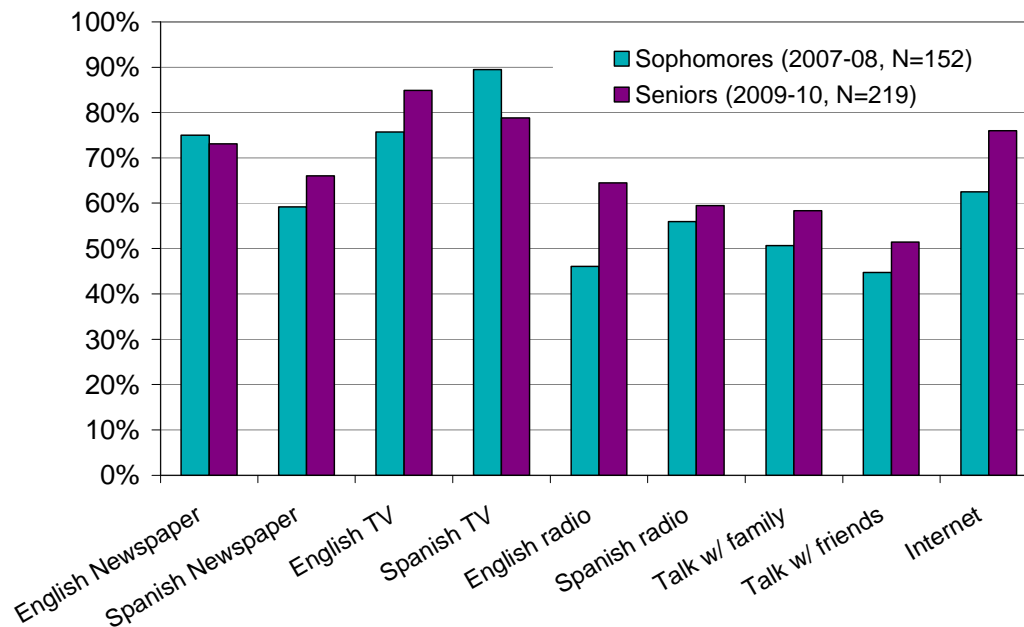
Despite relatively low levels of engagement in political activities, Latino students were highly engaged in current events and following politics through the news. When asked how much attention they pay to politics and government, 40% of seniors indicated that paid attention "a lot" or "a fair amount." Among Sophomores Spanish-language TV news was the most popular news source (Figure 4). Eighty-nine percent watched Spanish-language TV news. But, among seniors, English-language TV new was most popular. Eighty five percent watched English-language TV news. This language shift in news sources was consistent with the higher rate of English language usage in the home among seniors versus sophomores.

Many Latino youth also followed politics through the World Wide Web. The internet as a source of political news and current events increased from 63% during students' sophomore years to 76% during students' senior years (Figure 4). These data reflect a high rate of internet usage and access to computers among Latino youth. Seventy-two percent of Latino seniors had internet access at home and 80% had either a Facebook or MySpace account. Even without internet access at home, most seniors could access the internet through computers in their school libraries. As reported by the Pew Hispanic Center (Livingston, 2010), 77% of Latinos ages 16-17 use the internet regularly compared to 95% of non-Latinos

ages 16-17. Though internet usage is lower among Latino youth than non-Latino youth, it has clearly become an important source of information.

Over half of the sophomores and seniors also talked with their family about politics and current events. In some cases, immigrant youth may be informing their parents about political news and current events. Previous research suggests that immigrant political socialization is bidirectional, and is more often transmitted from child to parent in families where both parents are immigrants (Bloemraad and Trost, 2008; Wong and Tseng, 2008). During interviews, several of the students indicated that they shared their political knowledge with their parents, often teaching them about the American political system. For example, Kelsey confirmed this child to parent socialization:

> *When the election was going on…my Mom she really wasn't sure about anything because she doesn't have the education that me and my brother do. She always comes to me asking me about, well, what does this mean and what does that mean? And I have to explain to her. Like, about the healthcare situation, she isn't too sure about that so I have to explain to her about that sometimes.*

Kelsey, Case ID 47003a

AMERICAN and POLITICAL IDENTITITES

Group consciousness potentially influences civic engagement and political participation (Stokes 2003). It reflects a sense of self-awareness and belonging that can motivate individuals to act collectively to achieve a shared set of goals. Several researchers have studied ethnic identification and the development of an ethnic identity among Latino youth. However, few have explicitly examined the development of an American identity among Latino youth. In this section, we evaluate the strength of students' American identifications and their views on what it means to be an American. We also report on the political group identities being developed by students and, among the foreign born, their plans to apply for citizenship.

American Identity

Paralleling commonly utilized measures of ethnic identification (Phinney 1992), we asked sophomores and seniors eight questions about their sense of belonging to America and calculated an average of their scores on these questions. The majority of sophomores (70%) and seniors (66%) indicated a strong level of American identification (Figure 5). They are proud to be an American and being American is an important part of their self image. Yet nearly one-third of Latino high school seniors felt alienated from American life and this proportion hardly decreased during high school.

### Figure 5. Strength of American Identification
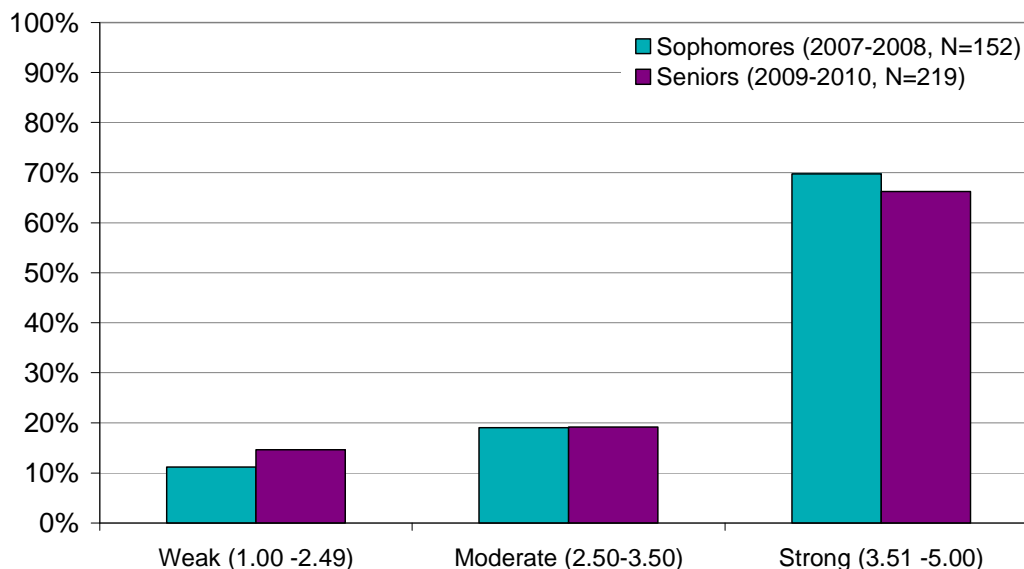
Becoming an American

Although group consciousness and a sense of attachment to America may be a necessary first-step for immigrants considering permanent residence and citizenship in the US, it is not sufficient in the eyes of the American public or in the eyes of the U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services (UCIS). Therefore, we asked Latino youth what an immigrant must do to say that they are "part of American society."

Both sophomores and seniors agreed that believing in the U.S. constitution was the important requirement for becoming an American (Figure 6). For seniors, speaking English ranked as a close second. Seventy-six percent of seniors but only 42% of sophomores agreed that speaking English was necessary for an immigrant to say they are part of American society. Perhaps as students become more proficient in English, they value this skill more. At the same time, they may also internalize the language norms and values shown in the media and held by their peers and teachers.

According to the youth we interviewed, formal citizenship and voting were not as essential for inclusion in American society. In fact, for many foreign-born Latino youth, U.S. citizenship and the right to vote may be out of reach. However, when asked, only 4% of foreign-born seniors reported that they did not plan to try to become a US citizen. Sixteen percent of foreign-born seniors were already US citizens.

Figure 6. What it Means to be an American
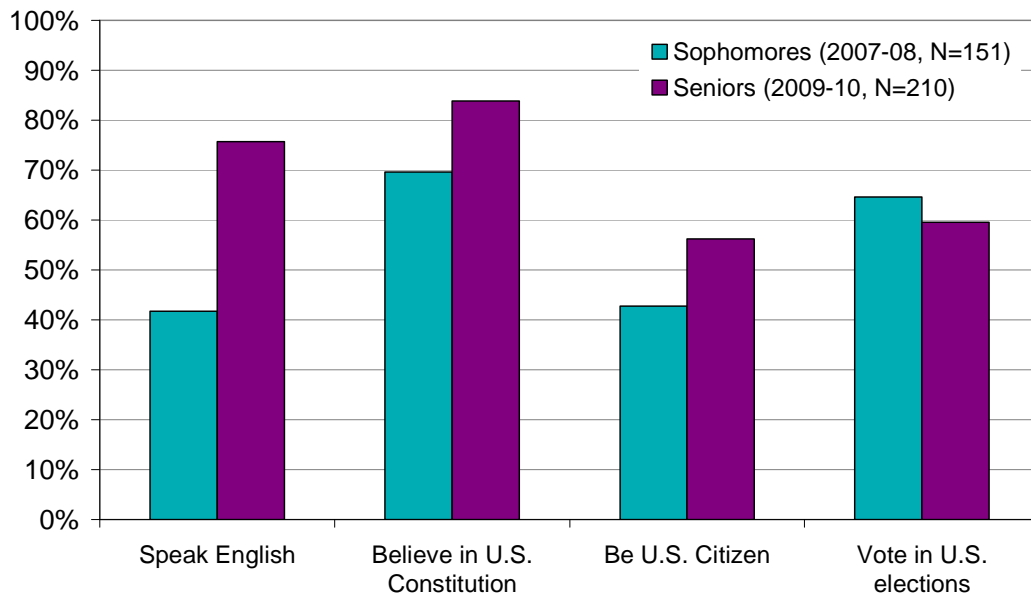
During qualitative interviews, students offered additional ideas on what it means to be an American, such as contributing to the country economically, or obeying American laws. When asked what it means to be an American, Jose stated:

> *It can be a lot of things, like just being part of the people who bring the country forward in economic ways and any way, basically, that helps the country. [My parents are American] because they pay their taxes and stuff. They've never broken a law ever.*
>
> **Jose, Case ID 23009a**

Other students echoed the idea that legal citizenship was not a necessary component of "good citizenship".

> *Something flew out of the truck, like somebody's truck that was just on the highway. And it was a box. And I was like, "Chris, go pick it up and be a good citizen." You know, take trash off the road. So I guess that's like a good citizen – doing something good for your community.*
>
> **Josefina, Case ID 24009a**

Political Identities

Still in the process of forming their political identities, the plurality of Latino youth in North Carolina leaned towards the Democratic party. They reported feeling closer to the Democratic party (38%), believing the Democratic party had more concern for Latinos (47%), or already considered themselves Democratic (31%). Few felt closer to the Republican party (7%), believed the Republican party had more concern for Latinos (3%), or considered themselves Republican (7%). The majority felt close to neither major political party, saw no difference between the parties in their concern for Latinos, or considered themselves independent or unaffiliated with a political party.
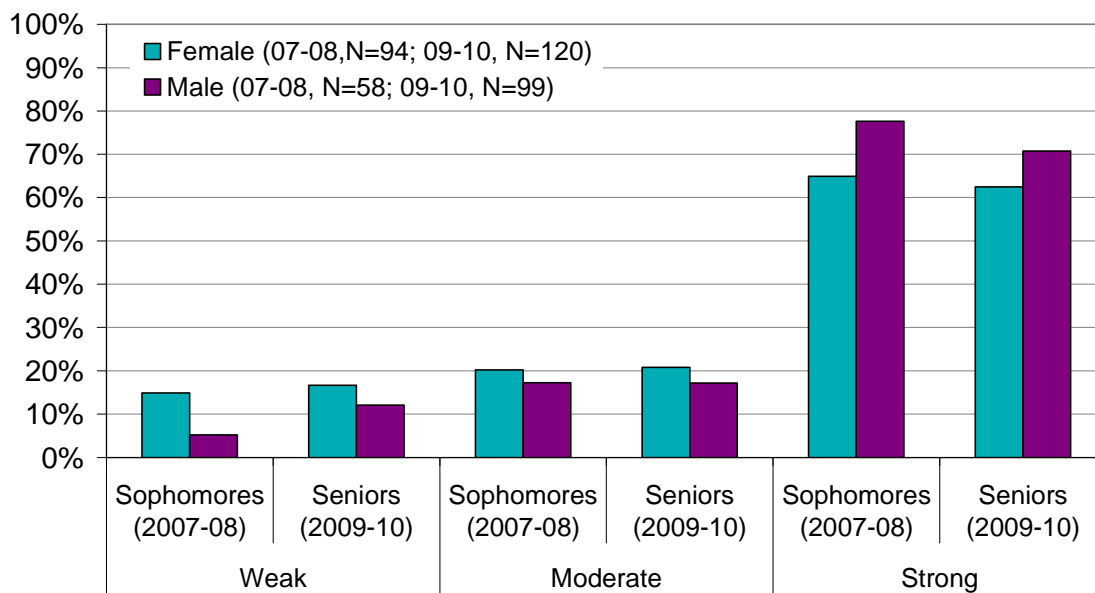
PROMOTING AMERICAN IDENTIFICATION

Given the potential importance of American identification in future civic engagement and political participation, we examine the elements of Latino student life that can influence the strength of American identification. We consider five key elements -- gender, ethnic identification, perceived discrimination, and school belonging.

Gender

Females (15% of sophomores and 17% of seniors) were more likely than males (5% of sophomores and 12% of seniors) to report weak American identification (Figure 7). In addition, we observed a slight weakening of American identification among males between their sophomore and senior years. A potentially worrisome trend, weakening American identification may reflect an increased sense of social marginalization and alienation among males as they transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Figure 7. American Identification by Gender

Nativity

In both the sophomore and the senior samples, students born in the U.S more often reported strong American identification than those who were foreign born (Figure 8; 57% vs. 94% among sophomores; 57% vs. 76% among seniors). However, among the US-born, we find a sharp decline between sophomores and seniors in strong American identification. One reason for this may be the tendency of some to treat all Latinos, regardless of their citizenship or place of birth, as foreigners based on their physical characteristics. U.S.-born Latino students may become increasingly sensitive to racial stereotypes as they mature, transition into adulthood and move from school to the workplace.

Figure 8. American Identification by Nativity

Figure 8. American Identification by Nativity
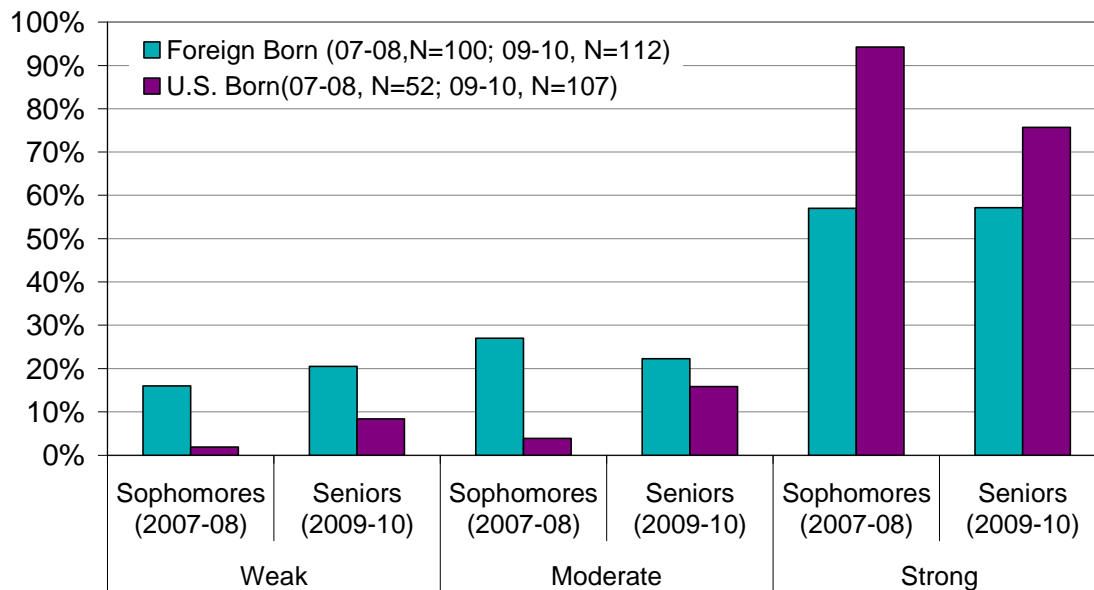
Ethnic Identification

The decline in American identification among US born Latino students could also reflect an increase in ethnic identification. Alienated from American society, some Latino students could adopt a stronger ethnic identity while rejecting an American identity. For other students, however, the adoption of an ethnic identity will not necessarily imply the rejection of an American identify.

Following Berry's (2003) conceptualization of acculturation strategies, we identified four groups of students. *Marginalized* students had both weak to moderate ethnic identities and American identities. *Separated ethnic* students had strong ethnic identities but only weak to moderate American identities. *Assimilated American* students had strong American identities but only weak to moderate ethnic identities. Finally, *integrated students* had both strong ethnic and American identities.[8]

The majority of both Latino sophomores (68%) and seniors (59%) reported integrated identities with a strong sense of belonging to both their ethnic communities and to America (Figure 9). At the same time, many – nearly 30% -- felt separated from Americans and adopted a strictly ethnic identity. Few students reported marginalization or fully American assimilation with weak to moderate ethnic identities. In short, strong ethnic identities tended to support rather than replace strong American identities.

**Figure 9. Categories of Amercian and Ethnic Identifications**

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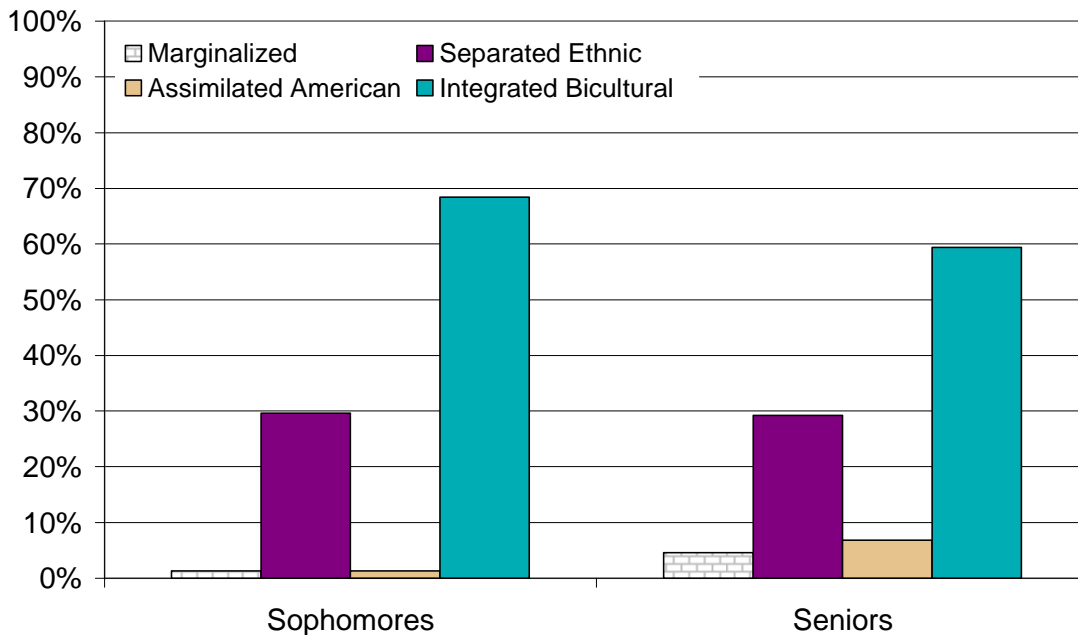
[8] Five questions from Phinney (1992) regarding each student's sense of pride, belonging, and attachment to their ethnic group to determine the strength of their ethnic identifications.

Perceived Discrimination

Experiences of discrimination are common among Latino youth and have been linked to lower levels of American identification (Jensen, 2008) as well as a variety of negative health and educational outcomes (Huyni and Fuligni, 2010). Following Way (1997), students were asked how often adults or kids treated them unfairly, insulted them, threatened or harassed them, treated them disrespectfully, feared them, disliked them, and or distrusted them due to their race or ethnicity.[9] On average 43% of sophomores and 36% of seniors reported almost never experiencing discrimination; whereas 11% of sophomores and 21% of seniors reported often experiencing discrimination (Figure 10). This suggests that perceived discrimination declined during high school.

Despite this decline in perceived discrimination, we find that high levels of perceived discrimination reduced the likelihood of strong American identification (Figure 11). Seniors who almost never experienced discrimination were more likely to express a strong sense of American identification than seniors who reported often experiencing discrimination (74% vs. 53%). The same pattern was evident among sophomores.

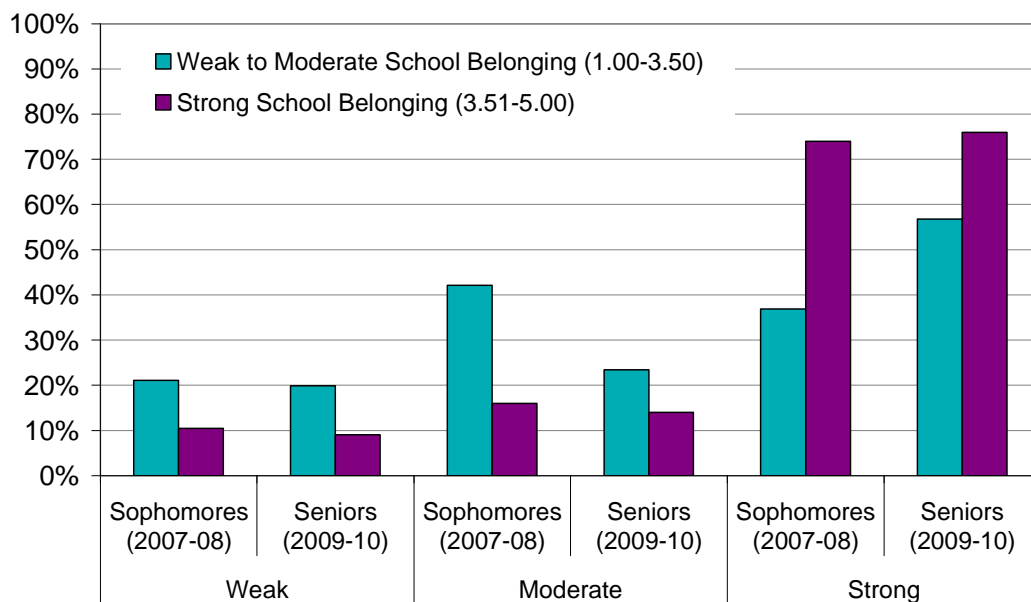**Figure 10. American Identification by Perceived Discrimination**

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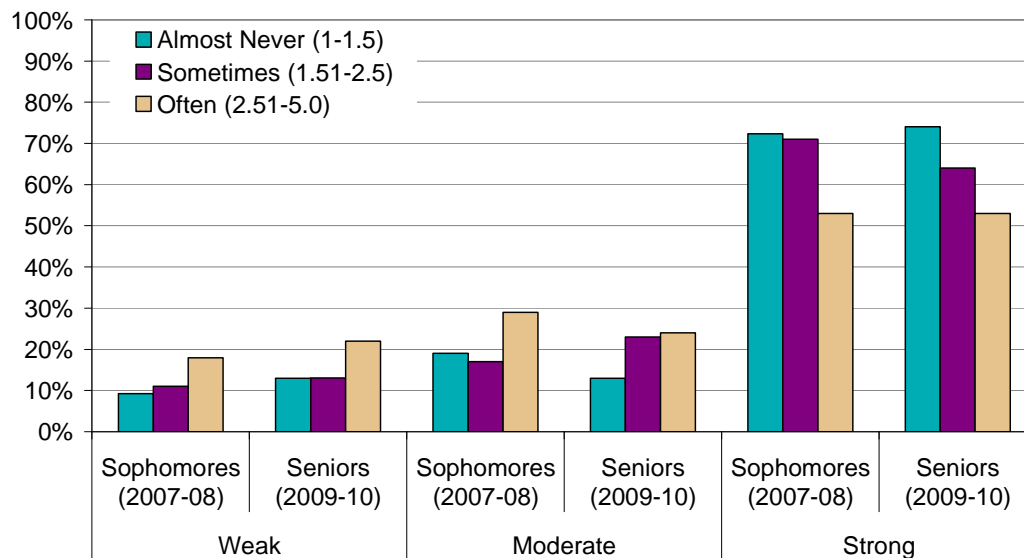
[9] In Wave 2, questions about discrimination from adults and kids were combined. In wave 3, they were asked separately.

School Belonging

Outside of the family schools are the primary socialization agents for children. Students who do not develop a sense of belonging in their schools may also be less likely to develop a strong sense of American identification. Based on six questions regarding their feelings about their schools, we created an ordinal scale to indicate students' sense of belonging to their school (Fuligni 2007). As expected, we found that students who expressed a weak to moderate sense of school belonging were less likely to have strong American identifications (Figure 11: 37% vs. 74% among sophomores; 57% vs. 76% among seniors).

Figure 11. American Identification by School Belonging

PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In addition to examining how gender, nativity, ethnic identification, perceived discrimination, and school belonging influence civic engagement, we examine how these same factors plus American identification influence civic engagement. To measure overall civic engagement, we identified whether a student engaged in (1) any civic activity which involved either community service or working informally with community members to solve a collective problems in the past year, or (2) any political activity. We did not include participation in any in-school or out-of-school extracurricular activities in our measure so that our measure was more comparable to national data on the civic engagement of young adults (Keeter et al., 2003; Lopez and Marcelo, 2008).[10,11] Because the SICA study did not measure civic activities involving community service or working with community members to solve a problem at Wave 2. This analysis focuses exclusively on seniors.

Based on this comprehensive measure of civic engagement, we find that 42% of Latino seniors engaged in some type of civic or political activity. The remaining 58% were disengaged. Thus, Latino high school seniors have civic engagement rates similar to those reported nationally by youth ages 15 to 25. Using data from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey, Lopez and Marcelo (2008) found that 60% of youth were disengaged. Disengagement was significantly lower for second generation children of immigrants (48%; US born youth with foreign-born parents) and third+ generation US-born youth (58%; US born youth with US born parents) when compared to foreign-born youth (83%).

Gender, Nativity, and Ethnic Identity

Previous research indicates that females, foreign-born citizens and non-citizens, and individuals with strong ethnic identities should be more likely to engage in civic and political activities (Foster-Bey 2008; García Bedolla, 2005; Jensen, 2008; Schildkraut 2005). In contrast to previous research, we found that male youth engaged slightly more in civic and political activities than female youth (Figure 12; 52% vs. 48%). In keeping with previous research, our results indicated that foreign-born students and students with strong ethnic identities engaged more in civic and political activities than US born students (53% vs. 46%) or students with weak ethnic identities (14% vs. 86%), respectively.

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[10] Sports participation was not included in the measure of civic engagement as studies have indicated that unlike most extracurricular activities, sports activities do not predict future civic participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

[11] When participation in any in-school or out-of-school extracurricular activities other than sports is included, we find that 72% of Latino seniors engaged in some type of civic or political activity. The remaining 28% were disengaged.

**Figure 12. Any Civic Engagement by
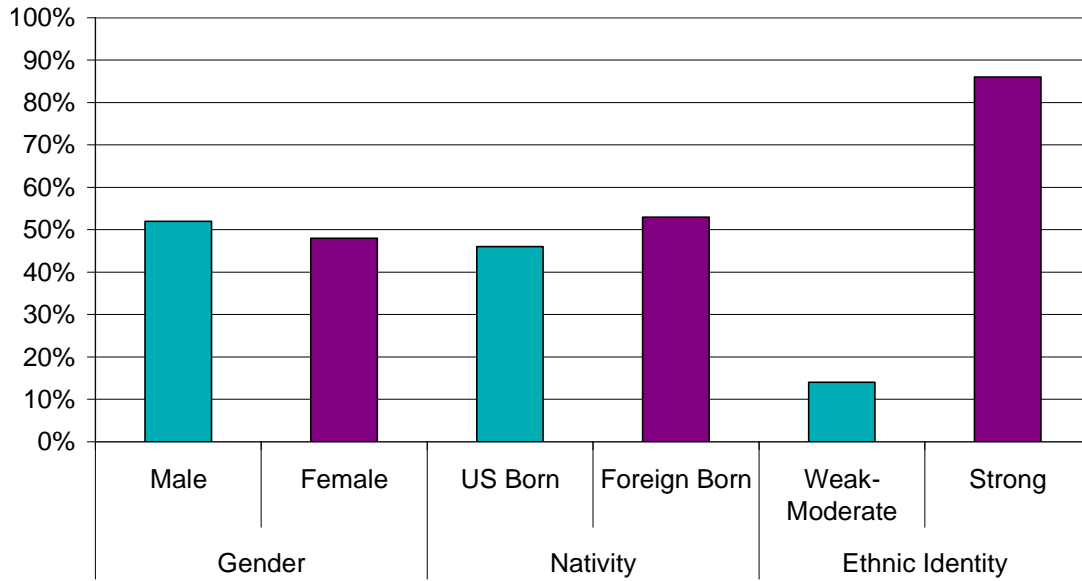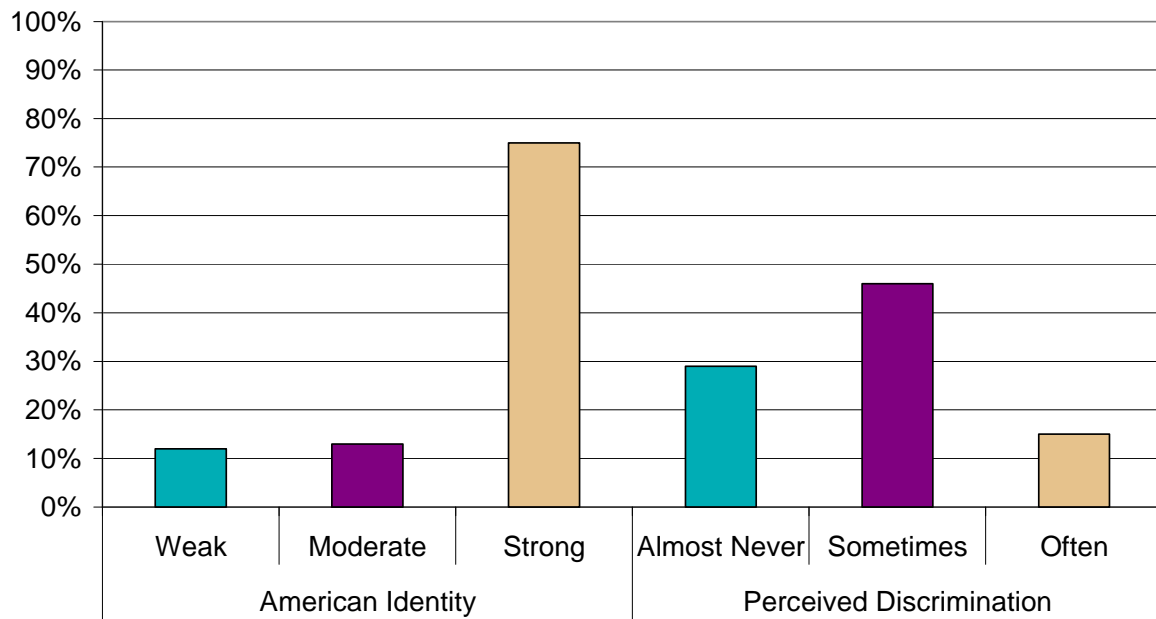Gender, Nativity, and Ethnic Identity
(Seniors 2009-10, N=219)**

**Figure 13. Any Civic Engagement by
Strength of American Identification and Perceived Discrimination
(Seniors 2009-10, N=219)**

American Identity and Perceived Discrimination

We know of no studies that evaluate the relationship between American identification and civic engagement. However, our analysis strongly demonstrates its importance. Strong American identity significantly increased the likelihood that high school seniors engaged in political and civic activities. Together with the data presented above on ethnic identification, these results suggest that Latino youth with integrated, bi-cultural identities are mostly likely to become civically engaged. Both marginalized and assimilated American youth are relatively unlikely to engage in political and civic activities.

As observed in the previous section, perceived discrimination reduced the likelihood of American identification. Here, we find that it has the same negative effect on civic engagement. Those who often experience discrimination report engagement in fewer civic and political activities than those who almost never or only sometimes experience discrimination. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that discrimination can lead to disengagement from civic life (Jensen 2008).

School Belonging and Classroom Activities

Given the importance of school as a primary agent of socialization for youth, we expected several school-level factors to influence civic and political engagement. Indeed, those who had had a class requiring them to keep up with politics or government in the news more often engaged in civic or political activities than those whose classes did not require attention to the news (75% vs. 25%). However, classroom discussion was not linearly related to civic and political engagement. Only those whose teachers *sometimes* encouraged discussion of political and social issues were more engaged; those whose teachers never or often encouraged class discussion were less engaged (45% vs. 25% and 30%, respectively). Finally, those with a strong sense of school belonging more often engaged in civic or political activities than those with a weak-moderate sense of belonging (53% vs. 47%).

Results from our qualitative interviews reinforce the importance of classroom-related activities in developing civic engagement. In qualitative interviews, several Latino students attributed their interest in American politics to their history, civics, or economics classes. For example, Kelsey and Rockelle stated:

> *Before you have civics, you don't really understand the terms that people are throwing at you through the news. And then I was being curious and I was testing my knowledge. That's when I started basically watching the news.*
>
> **Kelsey, Case ID 47003a**

> *I have International Relationships as my first period...it's like going back to U.S. History and talking about comparing it to now. And we were watching a lot of videos about how they're doing the new enforcements about …the new health insurance. And we're comparing, and some of the stuff we agree to, and we vote, and we discuss about it. And I think that's a really good thing because we learn more about it.*
>
> **Rockelle, Case ID 12021a**

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CONCLUSIONS

Latino students, both foreign and US born, strongly identify as Americans and actively engage in the civic lives of their communities. They not only participate in school sports programs but also participate in academic, civic, and religious organizations that will enhance their professional lives and promote the well-being of their communities. Moreover, they go beyond what is available to them at school and seek out volunteer opportunities to assist with solving problems in their communities.

Nevertheless, as with all youth in the US, substantial proportions of high school seniors are not engaged in any civic or political activity (58%) or feel alienated from American life (34%). These disengaged youth are more likely to be US-born, second generation males who have frequently experienced discrimination.

As the Latino population grows, their political incorporation and engagement in the civic life of their communities is essential to the health of American democracy. As discussed in the following recommendations, schools can play a key role in facilitating civic engagement by promoting civic education, reducing discrimination, and providing opportunities for youth to engage in the civic lives of their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Facilitate transportation for students to participate in extracurricular activities that take place after school.

> Even by their senior years in high school many Latino students did not have a drivers' license or access to a car nor were their parents able to provide regular transportation to school and after school activities. Thus, to ensure equal access to school-based programs, schools must ensure that public transportation is available. In school districts where budget shortfalls reduce the availability of funds for public transportation, schools should work with PTSAs and other community organizations to provide ride shares and car pools that facilitate transportation to school and extracurricular activities.

Increase focus on social sciences, such as civics, economics, and history, in the high school curriculum.

> A recent report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) argues that social science education is essential for the development of democratic values among youth and the maintenance of an active, engaged citizenry (Levine, et al., 2008). However, to satisfy the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), schools have decreased their focus on the social sciences. Our results strongly suggest that civic engagement begins in school social science courses. An increased curricular focus on the social sciences can help to promote the political incorporation of Latino youth.

Give students meaningful opportunities to practice civic skills and engage in community service through their coursework.

> Students who had courses which required them to keep up with politics, be prepared to debate policy issues in class, or engage in a community service project became more interested in civic issues and engaged in their communities. In qualitative interviews, students credited these high school experiences for their current interests in politics and civic engagement.

Assist students and their families with voter registration and education.

> In 2008, only 48.5% of young adults ages 18-24 participated in the presidential election (Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2008). In our study, 40% of Latino high school seniors did not see voting in US elections as essential for an American. Though high school civic education can help to create a more engaged citizenry, it may not be sufficient. To further promote

electoral participation, civic teachers can obtain voter registration cards to show their students and actively guide their students through the process of completing voter registration and voting in an election. Hands on practice in high school can make young adults more familiar with the process in adulthood. Moreover, children of immigrants, who often help their parents to navigate life in the US, will then have the experience to help their parents become more engaged in the electoral process.

Actively promote cultural understanding among all students by creating opportunities to study world histories and by developing opportunities for youth to positively interact with different ethnic and racial groups in their schools.

Perceived discrimination has a negative effect on civic engagement for Latino youth. While schools cannot prevent discrimination, they can use school activities as an opportunity to foster cultural understanding. Schools can create class projects and extracurricular activities that allow students to share information about their cultural backgrounds. They can also promote diversity in extracurricular programs by helping to make these programs accessible to students, through facilitating transportation, and making them financially accessible. As students have opportunities to learn about and positively interact with persons of different ethnic groups, the likelihood of discrimination will diminish.

LIMITATIONS

This study represents an important first step in studying the civic participation of Latino youth. However, some limitations of our research should be noted. First, the study relies on a school-based sample; it does not capture immigrant youth who move to the US in adolescence and never enroll in high school. It also does not fully capture Latino youth who drop out of school prior to the 12th grade. These youth may be far more disengaged than those who enter and complete high school. Second, our sample size is relatively small with limited power to detect significant associations for all but the most strongly related variables. Finally, the results outlined in this report are descriptive and correlational. More advanced statistical methods and longitudinal data following youth as they transition from high school to adulthood are needed to assess the strength and depth of the thematic trends identified in this report.

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NOTES

(1) Please refer all questions regarding this study to the Principal Investigator, Krista M. Perreira.

(2) More information on this study can be found on the web at www.unc.cpc.edu/projects/siaa. As additional publications and data become available, they will be disseminated through this website.