

# Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought

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Volume 8  
Issue 1 *Immigration: Women as Victims and  
Voices of Change*

Article 6

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Summer 8-2014

## Rebecca M. Callahan and Chandra Muller. Coming of political age: American schools and the civic development of immigrant youth

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### Recommended Citation

Bigler, Ellen (2014) "Rebecca M. Callahan and Chandra Muller. Coming of political age: American schools and the civic development of immigrant youth," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol8/iss1/6>

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**Rebecca M. Callahan and Chandra Muller. *Coming of political age: American schools and the civic development of immigrant youth***

New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, c2013, 170 p ISBN 978-0-87154-578-7 (paperback)

*Reviewed by Ellen Bigler, professor in Educational Studies and Anthropology, Rhode Island College*

Our public schools are essential not only for providing immigrant youth the skills and knowledge they need to successfully enter the work force and adulthood, but also for preparing them to assume their roles in a democratic society. In *Coming of Political Age: American Schools and the Civic Development of Immigrant Youth*, researchers Rebecca Callahan and Chandra Muller argue that social science classes in high school matter in important ways for the children of immigrants; those who take more such classes are subsequently more likely to vote. Drawing on analyses of quantitative data from two large nationally representative longitudinal surveys and findings from their own interviews with nationally board certified social science teachers and their former immigrant students, the authors convincingly speak to the need for public schools to step up and fully assume their vital role in the political socialization of this growing segment of the U.S. population. Their research could not be more timely. The children of immigrants now represent one quarter of the total U.S. youth population and are projected to grow to one-third of that population by 2050. Meanwhile the focus on standardized basic skills testing in public schools over the past 25 years has contributed to a de-emphasis on the teaching of the social studies, and youth as a whole vote at distressingly lower rates than older generations.

For the purposes of their study, the authors consider all children with at least one immigrant parent – whether the children were born in the U.S. or not – as “children of immigrants.” Their focus is more on Latino youth because of their numerical dominance and evidence that young adult children of Asian immigrants are not similarly affected by taking social science courses. Joined by researcher Molly Dondero, Callahan and Muller begin by tracking the emergence and projected future growth of this newer more racially and ethnically diverse demographic and its significance for policy makers. In subsequent chapters they explore the research on the school experiences of immigrant youth, the high schools they attend, and youth political participation. Schools, they hypothesize, operate in two important ways relevant to understanding immigrant

youth's future political participation; first as sorting mechanisms, and second in providing opportunities to participate in high quality social science classes.

Immigrant youth and their non-immigrant peers connect to the social and relational aspects of schools and the adolescent experience in relatively similar ways. Educational experiences and outcomes for children of immigrants, however, are more complicated. Callahan and Muller review the plentiful literature on the role of schools as sorting mechanisms that prepare some students better than others for future academic and economic success – through the quality of the school itself, and for many children of immigrants through the more limited academic opportunities that are likely to be available when students are held in ESL programs. In what may be a surprising take for some, they argue that a significant factor in explaining the poorer educational outcomes of children of immigrants is the extended time that language minority students are likely to spend in ESL classes. This practice limits their academic opportunities. “Together our findings suggest that most adolescent language minority students do not benefit and may even be marginalized, by the very ESL programs intended to facilitate their learning (76).” It is not the use of the language itself that disadvantages them, they maintain, but rather the school's interpretation of its significance when placing students in academically challenging environments such as upper level and honors courses, AP classes, and the like. Academic success in challenging high school classes can lead to greater rates of college attendance and success, and ultimately to higher SES, both positively correlated with political participation. When students' academic opportunities are constrained by time spent in ESL classrooms though, the likelihood of that later political participation is diminished.

The second school-related determinant of future voting patterns, and central to their thesis, involves immigrant students' opportunities to participate in more high-quality social science courses including civics and government. It is in the context outlined above – where opportunities for strong academic preparation may be more constrained for immigrant youth - that social science courses can play a central role in shaping the likelihood of their engaging politically once they leave school. For immigrant youth the more social science coursework they take, the more likely they are to vote. Here it is the school's role that emerges as the crucial variable, whereas for native-born youth, higher parental education and income predict young adult voting behavior. The authors also point to a connection between a positive school climate

and positive political socialization; students who felt a strong sense of community and belonging (for instance through extracurricular activities, volunteer work, social connections) were more likely to be politically engaged as young adults.

Immigrant youth perform well in social science classes, earning significantly higher grades than native peers when factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are taken into account. Why they flourish is noteworthy in strengthening the authors' case for promoting such classes. These social science courses are uniquely accessible to immigrant youth, with no sequencing of knowledge that might bar them from participating, as happens in upper level math and science classes. Further, these courses offer a venue in which the knowledge that immigrant families bring regarding other political systems may stimulate greater interest and promote more favorable outcomes. The experiences immigrant youth have in negotiating multiple worlds also prove valuable for negotiating the multiple perspectives of the political arena. Immigrant youth, in a sense, are invested here with the "cultural capital" they traditionally lack in schools. Given that immigrant families are unlikely to have accumulated experiences with, and knowledge of the political system, these courses are essential in that they operate to provide the political socialization linked to higher rates of voting as young adults, bringing immigrant youth into the fold of the American democratic system and ultimately strengthening our political institutions.

The rapid growth in Latino immigrant populations in recent decades, coupled with their dispersal beyond traditional areas of settlement, makes this book particularly relevant and timely for all educators, policy makers, and researchers interested in the integration of these new generations of Americans into the political, social, and economic fabric of the nation. The authors incorporate a wide body of relevant research literature across several related areas, parts of which may be of less interest to some readers but at the same time provide a solid base for their arguments. As the authors note when discussing the study's limitations, because of sample size they could not address the great diversity within the Latino immigrant population. Regional and background differences, time in the U.S., and age of entry for instance may enter in important ways into the outcomes. They also call for more research into the "more nuanced ways in which this coursework functions to shape political involvement... which aspects of curriculum or elements of teachers' pedagogy are particularly salient (p. 130)." Since it is unlikely that most immigrant youth have access to the high caliber teachers they interviewed (all National Board

Certified), supporting opportunities for social science teachers to strengthen their teaching skills is also essential. Educators and policymakers need not wait for powerful teaching ideas and the research on teaching effectiveness; there are already excellent sites that address such matters.

One such site is the Tufts University Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement ([www.civicyouth.org/](http://www.civicyouth.org/)); another is the initiative by former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor to improve the teaching of civics and government (see [www.icivics.org](http://www.icivics.org)).

One additional area that bears further consideration in future research on political attitudes and behaviors of Latino youth is the role of gender. Research suggests that Latinas come to political participation with more of a focus on issues relating to community and home, and are more likely to vote than their male counterparts. Such matters might well be grounds for discussion in a future civics class when teachers are given opportunities to develop more effective teaching strategies, and immigrant youth are assured the opportunities to participate in such engaging and intellectually challenging classes.