

Civic Exclusion and Subjective Well-Being: The Changing Impact of Naturalization and Documentation Status on Immigrants' Life Satisfaction and Health Appraisals

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Abstract

Government policies divide the foreign-born population into distinctive administrative categories (e.g., naturalized citizens versus non-citizens, non-citizens with legal recognition versus the undocumented). Scholars are paying increasing attention to how these distinctions affect political involvement and incorporation into American society. We extend this work by assessing how civic status shapes subjective well-being among immigrants. Drawing from two large national surveys of Latino immigrants and a smaller survey of Mexican immigrants in Texas and Indiana, we find that naturalization and documentation status has a significant impact on self-reported life satisfaction and health. These effects vary considerably, however, across temporal and regional contexts, a phenomenon that may be attributable to variations in political climate. These results speak to the conditional impact of administrative policies on the quality of life for immigrants.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Subjective well-being is an important predictor of educational advancement, success in the workplace, sociability, and engagement in civic and political life. See, e.g., Diener & Chan (2011), Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), Oishi, (2012), and Bazargan et al. (1991).

Satisfaction with life is influenced by changes in the economy, disruptions in social networks, the quality of representation and accountability within government, and other contextual factors (see, e.g., Deiner et al. 2013, Tavits, 2008, Rodríguez-Pose & Maslauskaitė 2012, Radcliff 2001, Jones-Correa & SoRelle 2013).

For immigrants, subjective well-being could depend in particular on civic status, as determined by government policies. An estimated 37% of the 40 million foreign-born residents of the U.S. are naturalized citizens. Nearly as many are permanent or temporary legal residents who must abide by certain restrictions. The rest lack residency authorization, which means being at risk of deportation and barred from many occupations and government services. Immigrants who are in this latter category have been found to experience greater stress and anxiety (e.g., Arbona et al., 2010; Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2007; Hacker et al. 2011).

These potentially debilitating effects, however, likely depend on political climates. Government policies concerning the foreign-born are interpreted and implemented within particular temporal or regional contexts. In periods or places with significant social, ethnic, or economic tensions, formal legal distinctions among immigrants have been more salient (Ngai 2004; Ramirez and Félix 2011, 2012).

In recent years as debates concerning comprehensive immigration policy reform have become more acrimonious and polarizing (Figure 1, handout), we anticipate that civic status has become more closely associated with subjective well-being among immigrants (H1). Moreover, in regions where local authorities have passed anti-immigrant measures (Figure 2, handout), we hypothesize that civic status has a more significant effect on well-being compared to areas where there has not been as much anti-immigrant legislation (H2).

Research Design- Study 1 (Comparisons Over Time)

Datasets

- 2007 *National Survey of Latinos*, Pew Hispanic Center (N=1,179 Latino immigrants).
- 2012 *Latino Immigrant National Election Study*, sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Purdue University, and Cornell University (October wave, N=855 Latino immigrants).

Measurements

• **Independent Variable:** Civic Status, coded as “*Naturalized U.S. Citizen*” (N=422 in 2007 and 301 in 2012); “*Non-Citizen with Currently Valid U.S. Government-Issued Photo Identification*” (N=541 in 2007 and 337 in 2012); “*Non-Citizen without Photo Identification*” (N=152 in 2007 and 142 in 2012)

• **Dependent Variable:** Life Satisfaction

-How would you rate the overall quality of your life – excellent (coded 1.0), fair (.67), good (.33), or poor (0)? (2007 questionnaire)
 -All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life these days – extremely (coded 1.0), very (.75), moderately (.50), slightly (.25), or not at all (0)? (2012 questionnaire)

• **Control Variables:** English Language Proficiency; Family Income; Education Level.; Gender; Age; Number of Years Living in the U.S.; Church Attendance; Country or Region of Origin

Results – Study 1

- Statistically Significant Bivariate Relationship Between Civic Status and Subjective Well-Being in Each Survey ($p < .001$)

Figure 3



Results – Study 1 (cont.)

- Introduction of Control Variables Greatly Reduces the Effect of Civic Status *in the 2007 Sample*; Impact of Civic Status Remains Powerful in 2012

	2007 B (SE)	2012 B (SE)
Non-citizen with ID	-.038 (.030)	-.064 (.036) #
Non-citizen without ID	-.019 (.019)	-.067 (.027) *
Controls:		
Language Proficiency	.017 (.016)	-.006 (.013)
Gender (Female)	.062 (.016) **	.011 (.022)
Family Income	.070 (.012) **	.044 (.011) **
Education Level	.028 (.007) **	-.002 (.010)
Age (Years)	-.001 (.001)	.002 (.001) *
Years in the U.S.	.003 (.001) **	-.001 (.001)
Church Attendance		.013 (.007) *
Born in Mexico	.039 (.022) #	-.009 (.041)
Born in Central America	.062 (.029) *	-.003 (.046)
Born in Cuba	.111 (.041) **	.030 (.057)

Note: The excluded dummy category for Civic Status is “Naturalized Citizen.” Constant term included in each model.
 # = $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.

Research Design- Study 2 (Comparisons Across Region)

Dataset

2012 *Field Surveys of Mexican Immigrants in San Antonio, TX, and North-Central Indiana*, sponsored by Purdue University and Trinity University (N=197)

Measurements

• **Independent Variable:** Civic Status, coded as “*Naturalized U.S. Citizen*” (N=36); “*Non-Citizen with Working Papers*” (N=71); “*Non-Citizen without Working Papers*” (N=90)

• **Dependent Variable:** Health Satisfaction, “How would you rate your overall health these days – very good (coded 5), good (4), regular (3), bad (2), or very bad (1)?”

• **Moderating Variable:** Region, Dummy-Coded

• **Control Variables:** Household Affluence; Education Level; Gender; Age; Number of Years Living in the United States; Church Attendance

Results – Study 2

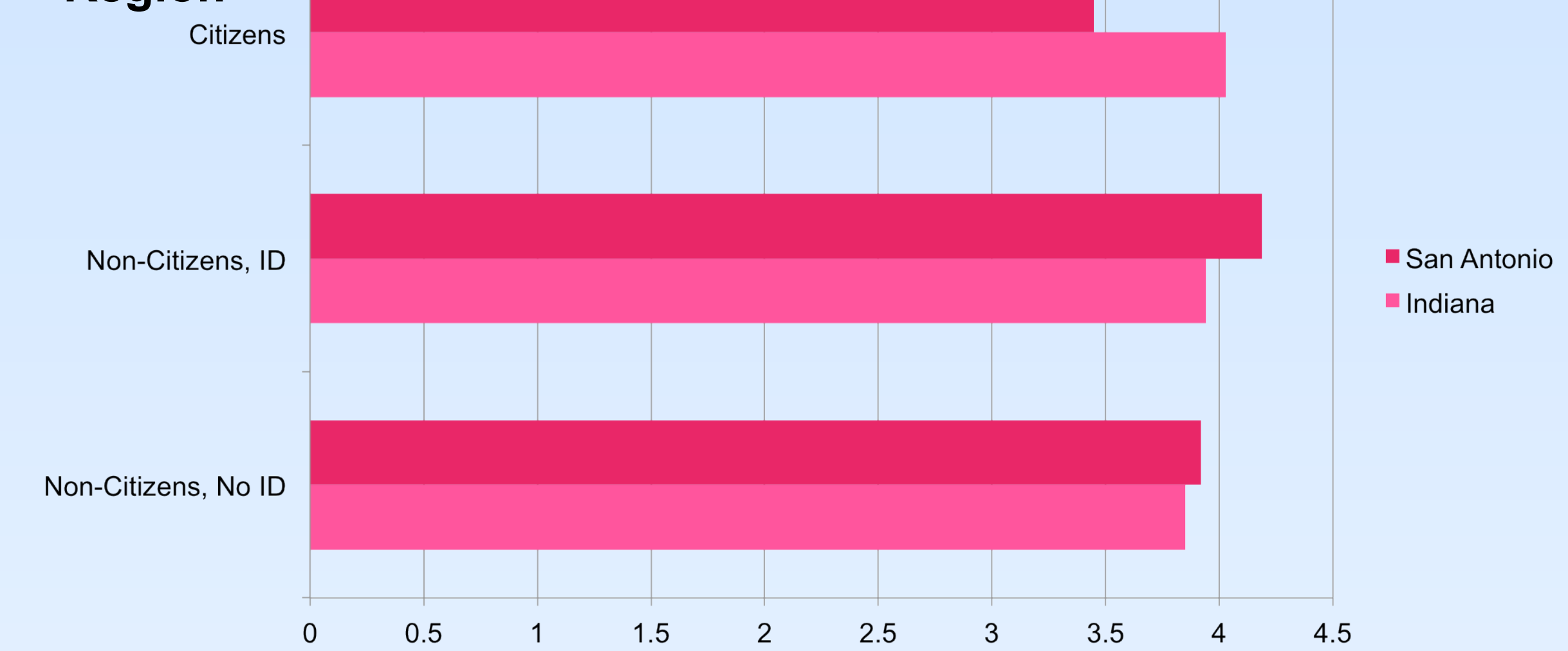
Table 3. OLS Regression Model of Self-Appraised Health: Mexican Immigrants in 2012

	B (SE)
Non-citizen with Papers	-.038 (.030)
Non-citizen without Papers	-.019 (.019)
San Antonio Resident	
San Antonio X Papers	.808 (.346) *
San Antonio X No Papers	.649 (.370) #
Controls:	
Gender (Female)	-.146 (.013)
Household Affluence	.154 (.093) #
Education Level	.037 (.028)
Age	-.017 (.004) **
Years in the U.S.	-.093 (.059)
Church Attendance	.051 (.047)

= $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.

- Lack of Citizenship Rights and Papers Associated with Worse Health Appraisal in Indiana, but not in San Antonio

Figure 3: Predicted Values of Health Appraisal by Civic Status and Region



Note: When calculating predicted values, controls were set to their means.

Conclusions

- The grouping of Latino immigrants based on naturalization and documentation status is significantly associated with perceived quality of life. These effects, however, depend to an appreciable extent on temporal and geographical contexts.
- Theoretically, these studies underscore the dynamic nature of socially-constructed identifications.
- On a more practical level, efforts on the part of some government officials and NGOs to change the tone of discussions regarding immigration could have a significant effect on the subjective well-being of the foreign-born, regardless of the outcome of current proposals to reform federal immigration policies.