Looking Back to See Ahead: Unanticipated Changes in Immigration from 1986 to the Present and Their Implications for American Politics Today

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Keywords
immigration, Immigration Reform and Control Act, state government, local government, undocumented, ethnic identity, transnationalism

Abstract
This article explores how issues of immigration—and particularly undocumented immigration—have evolved since the enactment of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and how they have changed US politics in significant and often unexpected ways. In particular, our review explores five themes: (a) the failure of comprehensive immigration reform over the past quarter century; (b) the shift in immigration policy making toward state and local governments; (c) the identification of ethno-racial minorities around immigration status and immigrants as racialized groups; (d) the political mobilization of undocumented immigrants; and (e) the emergence of transnational political ties between the United States and sending countries. The article concludes by assessing possible blind spots within the contemporary discussion of immigration and how we might fail to anticipate possible changes or trends in the making.
INTRODUCTION

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), enacted by Congress in 1986, was a grand bargain between the two major political parties. It was designed, on the one hand, to discourage future illegal immigration to the United States and, on the other, to create a remedy for long-term illegal residents. Its major provisions created new barriers to entry and long-term stay for new migrants entering the country illegally by increasing enforcement efforts at the borders and creating sanctions for employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers. Yet IRCA also provided a pathway to legalization and eventual citizenship for millions of undocumented aliens who had been continuously present in the United States since 1982 and instituted a new visa category for temporary agricultural workers.

IRCA, a compromise designed to be both punitive and ameliorative, was the first—and to date the only successful—attempt by Congress to comprehensively grapple with the issue of unauthorized migration. The passage of IRCA resulted in an immediate 50% increase in funding for border enforcement and the consequent hardening of especially the southern US border, which only prefigured the much larger increases in funding for enforcement that would take place after 1994. More than three million people applied for residency under the provisions of the law, of whom nearly 2.7 million received permanent legal status (Baker 2010). IRCA, however, did not solve the conundrum of long-term undocumented residents and in other ways raised new issues as well.

This article explores how issues around immigration—and particularly undocumented immigration—have continued to evolve since the passage of IRCA, and how immigration has changed US politics in significant and often unexpected ways. What, we ask, would surprise an informed observer in 1986 about US immigration politics today? We argue that there are five major themes that would puzzle and perplex an observer from a generation ago.

The first is the fact that the United States is stuck in pursuing comprehensive immigration reform. There have been no major revisions to US immigration policy during the past quarter century, and the outline of immigration policy—directed at both legal and illegal migrants—is much what it was in 1986. Second, with the stagnation of immigration policy at the federal level, immigration policy making has notably shifted toward state and local governments, and no observer in 1986 would have predicted this shift would have gone so far. Third, the hardening of the immigration debate in the United States has solidified the identification of ethno-racial minorities around immigration status and of immigrants as racialized groups, with consequent political effects. Whereas the experiences of racial minorities and immigrants were still seen as conceptually distinct in the 1980s, today the immigration debate itself has been racialized. Fourth, observers in 1986 would be surprised by the political mobilization of undocumented immigrants themselves, reflected in the large-scale protests in 2006 and the continuing activism among illegal immigrants around a proposed DREAM Act, which would allow those who arrived as children a pathway to legalization and citizenship. Political engagement of any kind requires significant coordination and resources for mobilization, which makes it so surprising that the single largest political mobilization in recent decades involved large numbers of undocumented migrants advocating for their rights. Finally, in 1986 the extent of transnational ties between recent immigrants in the United States and their countries of origin was just becoming apparent. These ties have played out in electoral politics in both sending and receiving countries, as well as in forms of social and political organization that straddle national borders.

We review the emerging literature in each of these five areas. We conclude by acknowledging that our contemporary discussion of immigration might also have its blind spots and fail to anticipate possible changes or trends in the making.
THE FAILURE OF COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

Almost immediately upon its enactment in 1986, it was clear that IRCA was insufficient to resolve the issue of undocumented immigration. Although it halved the estimated number of unauthorized immigrants then residing in the United States by granting them an avenue to legalization, it was unsuccessful at reducing the overall flow of undocumented migration. In addition, provisions that were designed to penalize employers who knowingly hired illegal workers and provisions that asked job applicants to prove legal residency proved largely unenforceable and were rife with fraud (Brownell 2005). As a result, both legal and undocumented migration to the United States continued largely unabated through the 1980s and 1990s.

Owing to the rapid increase in Hispanic and undocumented immigration since IRCA, with growth rates especially high in the Southeast, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions of the United States, immigration quickly evolved from a regional to a national issue (Massey 2008). Government officials representing states that previously had little experience with mass immigration, including those in the American South, now also entered the immigration fray. As immigrants became a national presence, there were heightened concerns about the supposed acquiescence to the presence of illegal immigrants and the feared negative impact of immigration on American culture, which contributed to the increasingly vociferous immigration debate. The issue drove a wedge into the Republican Party in particular, pitting business interests, who favored immigration to provide low-skilled labor, against nativists and populists, who feared that continued Hispanic immigration would undermine the country’s culture and society. The renewed political wrangling about immigration within and between political parties did not, however, lead to comprehensive immigration reform like that of IRCA. Instead, the federal government pursued stopgap administrative and legislative measures to try to address the ongoing problems of undocumented immigration.

Administratively, immigration policy shifted increasingly to enforcement directed at undocumented immigrants. Funding for border enforcement increased exponentially from 1994 onward, particularly on the United States–Mexico border: fewer than 4,000 agents patrolled the US borders in 1994, but by 2009 that number had more than quadrupled to about 18,000 (Haddal 2010). Detentions and returns at the borders initially increased, peaking at 1.7 million in 2000, but have declined steadily since, reaching just over 340,000 in 2011, the lowest number of apprehensions at the border since 1972 (DHS 2012). As border detentions dropped, attention shifted to immigration enforcement in the country’s interior. Especially in its final years and after the immigration protests of 2006, the Bush administration executed high-profile workplace raids and neighborhood sweeps to round up unauthorized immigrants. A second, though less visible, focus of the Bush administration was to track down illegal fugitives who had ignored official orders to leave the United States. Arrests of illegal fugitives exploded from 1,900 in 2003, when the program was established, to over 40,000 in 2011 (ICE 2012a). Finally, the Bush administration widely used the controversial 287(g) program to authorize designated state and local police officials to perform federal enforcement functions. A total of 60 state and local law enforcement agencies signed up for the program under President Bush (Gomez 2012), and since 2006 almost 280,000 unauthorized immigrants have been identified for deportation through these agreements (ICE 2011a).

Internal enforcement mechanisms have endured, although under President Obama the focus has shifted to targeting employers with I-9 audits—so-called “silent raids,” which increased from 503 in fiscal year 2008 to 2,496 in fiscal year 2011—and the identification and removal of dangerous criminal aliens (ICE 2011b). Federal immigration officials continue to rely on state and local law enforcement officials to build their deportation capacity, but now under the auspices of the Secure Communities program rather than the 287(g) program, which the Obama administration began to shut down in early 2012. Under Secure Communities, participating jails submit
arrestees’ fingerprints to both criminal and immigration databases, allowing Immigration and
Customs Enforcement (ICE) access to information on individuals held in jails. Expected to be in
full force nationwide by 2013, the program was activated in 97% of all 3,181 state and local jails
as of August 22, 2012 (ICE 2012b). By mid-2012, nearly 19 million fingerprint submissions from
participating jails to ICE had resulted in more than a million database matches and the removal
of 212,315 foreign-born individuals, 75% of whom were identified as having criminal convictions
(ICE 2012c).

Legislatively, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconcil-
iation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, which significantly limited the eligibility of both undocumented
immigrants and legal permanent residents for welfare and other public benefit programs like Aid
to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, now Temporary Aid to Needy Families, TANF)
(Schmitt 1996). In 1996, Congress also passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant
Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), catalyzing a process of immigrant criminalization that some schol-
ars have dubbed “crimmigration” (e.g., Stumpf 2006). IIRIRA required the electronic tracking
of each individual arriving in and departing from the United States, making it easier to deport
those remaining in the country without authorization and criminalizing those who remained in or
returned to the United States following deportation proceedings. IIRIRA also precipitated a rapid
increase in deportations among legal immigrants by creating new conditions for removal that
affected even legal permanent residents with old felony convictions (Fragomen 1997, Langenfeld
1999, Morawetz 1999–2000). Finally, in 1998, Congress eliminated one of the few remaining
paths for undocumented immigrants to regularize their status by deleting Section 245(i) of the
Immigration and Nationality Act. Conservatives had attacked this provision as a “mini-amnesty”
program that since 1994 had allowed undocumented immigrants meeting certain qualifications to
legalize their status without leaving the United States if they paid a penalty.

It is striking that despite these administrative and legislative changes, which focused increas-
ingly on enforcing immigration laws against undocumented immigrants already residing in the
United States, the basic framework of the immigration regime is still organized around the prin-
ciples of country quotas, family reunification, and humanitarian relief for refugees. The United
States continues to admit over a million legal permanent residents every year—more than any
other country in the world. During the 1990s alone, over 14 million immigrants arrived in the
United States (Meissner et al. 2006), and another 13 million arrived between 2000 and 2010
(US Census Bureau 2010, table 2.1). As a result, by 2010, about 39 million of the approximately
311 million residents of the United States were foreign born. An estimated 11.2 million of these
foreign-born residents were undocumented, an indication that immigration law needed revisit-
ing (Passel & Cohn 2011). Yet recent attempts to overhaul the immigration system have failed.
President Bush proposed comprehensive reform of immigration policy in 2004. Congress took
up several comprehensive immigration reform bills in 2006 and 2007, but none of these bills
passed owing to insufficient bipartisan support and conservative opposition. Consequently, the
broad outline of American immigration policy, despite the greater emphasis on enforcement, is
largely unchanged since 1986. What explains the resiliency of US immigration policy, especially
in the face of growing public concerns about immigration and increasingly vociferous calls for
comprehensive immigration reform?

This question has received surprisingly little attention, but political scientists have noted that
US immigration policy has historically been resistant to change. There are three dominant expla-
nations for this. The first argues that US immigration policy reflects the institutional dynamics of
the actors involved. Andreas (2000), for example, sees spending on US border enforcement as a
way for legislators and border control officials to claim success at “controlling the border” while
making the case for additional funds to ensure continued success. Fitzgerald (1996) finds that each
aspect of immigration policy—border control, refugee policy, and immigrants’ access to government assistance programs—is decided on its own, through its own logic, responding to the specific actors involved. Neither Andreas nor Fitzgerald sees any larger overarching principles structuring immigration policy; rather, immigration policy is pursued piecemeal, with rather predictable ad hoc results.

The second argument is that immigration policy falls into a subset of public policy that is dominated by interest groups and that is deliberately insulated from public view, which allows considerable discretion on the part of the bureaucracies regulating immigration. Freeman (1995) argues that this backroom approach to immigration policy making characterizes many Western democracies and helps explain why immigration policy has continued to be more permissive than public opinion—which has grown more hostile to continued immigration—would predict. Other scholars have added that the issue of immigration in the United States is characterized by crosscutting cleavages that split both major party coalitions. Zolberg (1999), for instance, contends that the Democratic Party has both a restrictionist camp, historically drawn from organized labor, and a cosmopolitan camp, composed of immigrant rights organizations. He also finds that the Republican Party has been riven by disagreements between a pro-immigration business wing and a restrictionist nativist-populist wing. As a result of these internal party divides, immigration policy making has been relegated to interest groups and bureaucrats.

The third explanation offered for the resiliency of US immigration policy since 1986 is that policy change only occurs when a paradigmatic shift in institutional factors precedes it. Tichenor (2002) draws on this institutional approach to solve a series of puzzles in US immigration policy. Why did US policy toward European immigration remain laissez-faire throughout much of the nineteenth century, even though significant opposition to immigration had been building up for many years? What explains the timing of the success of immigration restrictionists in the early twentieth century? And how did policy tilt toward the liberalization of immigration after 1965? Tichenor argues that paradigm shifts in immigration policy are strongly linked to changes in four areas: coalitions for and against immigration, the institutional context in which they operate, the role of experts, and the role of international politics. He argues that in the nineteenth century, US policy remained laissez-faire because there was a powerful coalition composed of business interests and political parties in favor of immigration, because parties in particular were too beholden to immigrant voters to respond to popular demands to curtail immigration, and because experts—policy makers, intellectuals, and activists—were divided on the consequences of immigration. With the advent of World War I, though, the volatile international situation created significant pressures to restrict immigration. In addition, Progressive Era reformers had reshaped the dynamic of political parties, organized labor had joined the anti-immigrant coalition, and the intellectual debate was dominated by those drawing on the “scientific” study of race to argue against additional immigration. Congress thus adopted the national-origin quotas in the 1920s that remained in place for the next four decades. The post-1965 consensus on immigration, which persists even today, was shaped by post–World War II international liberal norms and the movement of labor unions to support immigration liberalization, joining business and immigration advocates pushing for a more open immigration policy (Gimpel & Edwards 1999, Wong 2006).

Through the early 1990s, partisan cleavages (Zolberg 1999) and political coalitions and other factors (e.g., Tichenor 2002) were relatively constant, and so neither party saw great advantage in making immigration a partisan issue or priority. However, this changed as a result of an increase in both partisanship in American politics and partisan polarization around policy issues, including immigration. In the mid-2000s, there were still Republican senators supporting comprehensive immigration reform; by 2010 there were none. The increasingly strident tone in the immigration debate, especially after the 2001 terrorist attacks, has meant that immigration policy is no
longer overlooked, as Freeman (1995) described—and left to be decided by interest groups and bureaucrats. What might unsettle the increasingly hard partisan lines taken in the congressional discussions of immigration, and particularly undocumented migration, is the gradual incorporation of post-1965 immigrants and their children into American electoral politics, joining other actors to once again shift the balance toward a more open immigration policy. Signs of this were apparent in the immediate aftermath of President Obama’s reelection in the fall of 2012, won with the much-noted support of a large majority of Latino voters.

Shifts and continuities in US immigration policy are still relatively undertheorized. How, for instance, does immigration policy fit with other kinds of policy decision making? Is immigration policy somewhat exceptional, as Zolberg’s analysis might suggest, or part of a larger set of policy arenas with similar mechanisms, as Freeman might argue? We are only now beginning to gain an understanding of how immigration policy fits into the larger constellation of policy making, or, as we detail in the next section, how federal immigration policy works in conjunction—or not—with policy made at the state and local levels.

THE SHIFT OF IMMIGRATION POLICY TO STATES AND LOCALITIES

Since the enactment of IRCA in 1986, there has been a pronounced shift toward state and local immigration policy activism. The historical record shows that state governments have acted on immigration issues throughout US history (Skerry 1995, Filindra 2009), but political scientists often refer to data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) to illustrate just how dramatically state involvement has increased in the past decade. In 2005, legislatures in 25 states considered approximately 300 immigration-related bills and resolutions and enacted 39 of them. In 2007, when the failure of federal immigration reform became apparent, state legislative activity increased fivefold: a total of 1,562 bills and resolutions were introduced, and 290 passed in 46 states. State legislators have sustained their immigration policy activism, and in 2011 they introduced 1,607 immigration-related bills and resolutions and passed 306 of them in 42 states and Puerto Rico (NCSL 2012).

Attention to immigration issues has also spiked in municipalities, although here data across time are harder to come by. According to Ramakrishnan & Wong (2010), close to 180 cities, towns, and counties across the country had considered immigration-related proposals and enacted nearly 120 ordinances by the end of 2007. These state and local laws tackle immigration issues across a broad range of policy areas, but many concentrate on immigrants’ eligibility for state-issued identification documents (such as driver’s and professional licenses), employment, education, and other public benefits, or they address the relationship between local law enforcement agencies and federal immigration authorities. Some of these laws seek to integrate immigrants by granting them local voting rights, municipal ID cards, in-state college tuition, and local sanctuary from federal immigration laws. The prevailing tendency in both political rhetoric and proposed legislation, however, is to exclude immigrants, especially the undocumented, from employment and housing opportunities as well as a wide range of government benefits (Varsanyi 2010).

The recent uptick in state and local immigration policies has attracted scholarly attention because it points to deepening political conflict in a federal system where immigration policy has traditionally been understood as a federal prerogative (Aleinikoff et al. 2008). Whereas legal scholars have explored the normative desirability of subnational immigration policies (what they refer to as “immigration federalism”) and the constitutional and legal conflicts they have set in motion (e.g., Spiro 1997; Wishnie 2001, 2004; Olivas 2007; Huntington 2008; Rodríguez 2008), political scientists have analyzed the content of state immigration policies to determine whether they conflict or cooperate with federal laws and whether they innovate in areas of traditional state
responsibility or merely emulate federal immigration objectives. Contrary to theories of federalism that depict states as laboratories of policy innovation (e.g., Skerry 1995), Newton & Adams (2009) and Newton (2012) find that most state immigration policies replicate federal laws and utilize methods and pursue goals similar to those of national immigration policies. Although some states, including Alabama, Arizona, and Georgia, have been testing the limits of permissible state action, state–national relations in the immigration domain tend to be characterized by cooperation rather than conflict.

Political scientists have also focused on explaining why and where state and local immigration policy activism has surged in recent years. Most invoke a federalist frame of reference and suggest that subnational immigration policies are a response to Washington inaction and the deadlock in federal immigration reform efforts since 2006 (e.g., Krane 2007, Varsanyi 2010). Beyond that, political scientists seeking to explain variation in state and local immigration policy activism have questioned demography-based explanations, popular in the media and among legal scholars, which portray subnational immigration policies as reactions to the economic stress and wage depression, language and cultural threats, and overcrowding caused by growing Hispanic immigration and unauthorized immigration in particular. In a comparative study of municipal immigration policies, Ramakrishnan & Wong (2010) find that political factors—especially the Republican partisanship of local residents—matter more than demographic or economic factors in explaining why municipalities propose and pass anti-immigrant policies targeting undocumented immigrants. Along similar lines, Ramakrishnan & Gulasekaram (2013) advance a “polarized change model” that emphasizes opportunistic behaviors by political parties and issue entrepreneurs to explain the passage of subnational immigration policies. Hopkins (2010) marries demographic with political explanations and contends that when national anti-immigrant rhetoric is politicized into feelings of threat at the local level, rapid demographic changes like those that have taken place in new immigrant destinations in the South increase the probability that anti-immigrant measures are enacted.

Given the recency of scholarship on state and local immigration policies, there are many opportunities for additional research. There is an obvious need, for example, for additional large-N comparative studies across states and municipalities in the vein of Newton (2012) and Ramakrishnan & Wong (2010) to expand our theoretical thinking about the relative effects of political, demographic, and economic factors on subnational immigration policy activism. Do these factors play out differently in central cities versus suburbs, in states and cities with long versus short migration histories, in border versus interior states? We also need additional in-depth case studies—like those conducted by de Graauw (2012), Varsanyi (2008), and Frasure & Jones-Correa (2010)—to learn about specific struggles to shape subnational legislation affecting immigrants. How does immigrants’ electoral participation affect local political dynamics on immigration issues? How and to what effect are unions, faith-based institutions, foreign consulates, and pro- and anti-immigrant rights organizations inserting themselves into the political debates about state and local immigration policies?

Additionally, although most research has focused on anti-immigrant state and local policies, we also need to better understand when, where, why, and to what end pro-immigrant legislation is considered and enacted at the state and local levels, especially in the current context of increased federal immigration enforcement. Finally, most studies to date have focused on statutory content and political dynamics leading up to the passage of state and local immigration policies, but political scientists should not overlook the administrative or judicial realms. Like Jones-Correa (2008) and Lewis & Ramakrishnan (2007), they should ask what factors drive state and local agencies and bureaucrats to develop anti- and pro-immigrant policies and practices, either with or without consent of legislative officials, and how administrative practices in turn affect state and local legislative dynamics on immigration issues. Also, how have court decisions on state and local
immigration policies affected subsequent subnational policy initiatives and rhetoric? The 2012 US Supreme Court decision on Arizona’s restrictive immigration policy S.B. 1070 provides one window into interaction between courts and subnational governmental actors.

**RACIALIZATION AND IMMIGRATION**

When IRCA was enacted in 1986, the idea was that the enforcement side of the act would be counterbalanced by the provisions facilitating integration and eventual citizenship. In this, IRCA simply followed what has been the assumption, historically, in the United States: that immigrants eventually become Americans. In this assimilation narrative, individuals become socialized into society as members and citizens (Gordon 1964, Alba & Nee 2003), with an American national identity layering over, and perhaps eventually replacing, ethnic attachments. There might be some variation in this narrative, with some immigrants having a range of choice in their “ethnic options” (Waters 1990) while others experience greater constraints (Waters 1999), but the expectation is that over time, descendants of immigrants largely cease to identify themselves by their ethnic origins entirely (Ono 2002, Alba & Islam 2009).

However, a view of racialized assimilation, which sees immigrants becoming categorized and self-categorized in racial terms, is increasingly posited as an alternative to the assimilation narrative. This process of racialization is not new: earlier European immigrants, for instance, maneuvered to be identified as “white” to avoid negative stereotyping and discrimination (Lieberson 1981, Ignatiev 1996, Jacobson 1999, Roediger 2005), while other immigrants, such as Asians arriving in the nineteenth century, were fitted into new racialized categories (Ancheta 2006). Similarly, new immigrants arriving in the United States today also find themselves either pushed into becoming “white” or assigned to racial or ethnic minorities (Nobles 2000). What is new is the argument that racialization is now the normal process of immigrant integration.

Social scientists give different explanations for this racialization process. One approach focuses on how differences in human capital and a less favorable economic environment lead to differential pathways in assimilation, with some groups becoming upwardly mobile while others are trapped by downward assimilation (Gans 1992, Portes & Zhou 1993, Portes & Rumbaut 2001). Telles & Ortiz (2008), for instance, in their multigenerational study of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio, find little evidence of socioeconomic mobility across generations. The absence of socioeconomic mobility, they argue, is an indicator of the racialization of Mexican Americans and their subsequent acceptance of a racialized identity.

Other scholars have emphasized that discriminatory anti-immigrant sentiment shapes immigrants’ ethnic options, leading to a hardening of a racialized group identification (Kim 1999, Itzigsohn & Dore-Cabral 2000, Golash-Boza 2006, Masuoka 2006, Golash-Boza & Darity 2008, Frank et al. 2010, Massey & Sánchez 2010, Rico 2010, Sanchez & Masuoka 2010, Yarbrough 2010), with some immigrants having the flexibility to opt out of their ethnic labeling and identify as either simply “American” or “white” (Ono 2002, Alba & Islam 2009, Vasquez 2010). Researchers have also pointed out the possibility that rather than simply being a story of immigrants encountering racial categories and being fitted into them, immigration itself reshapes ethno-racial options (Lee & Bean 2004). For example, in a study of immigrant Mexicans and native-born Mexican Americans in California and Kansas, Jiménez (2008) sees immigration as replenishing and reinforcing native-born Hispanics’ ethnic and immigrant identities. Junn (2007) argues that immigration policies have had a different effect for immigrants from Asia, shifting the racial tropes used to describe and type them.

In any case, there is mounting evidence that many immigrants arriving in the United States increasingly are seen, and see themselves, in racial terms. Post-IRCA immigration policy, with
its growing emphasis on enforcement targeting undocumented residents in the United States, undoubtedly helped reinforce the conflation of native-born and immigrant identities (Jiménez 2009). Residents of Latin American origin, for example, are likely to see pan-ethnic labels like Hispanic or Latino as markers of racialized identities rather than simply as ethnic identifiers. Hitlin et al. (2007) find that a significant portion of self-reported Hispanics treat identity as a race, most often by choosing “other” when asked for their racial classification on the US Census, opting out of both black and white racial categories. Similarly, Fraga et al. (2012) present survey evidence indicating that a majority of Latin American–origin respondents think of Latino or Hispanic as a racial category. Asian immigrants also struggle to place themselves among ill-fitting racial categories, being assigned, or choosing, pan-ethnic labels as well as national-origin identifiers (Junn & Masuoka 2008a). These labels for both Hispanic and Asian immigrants, initially developed and legitimized by the state, have diffused in daily and institutional practice (Kim 1999, Macías 2004, Junn 2007, Jiménez 2010) and are now internalized by immigrants themselves (Jones-Correa & Leal 1997, Lien 2001). Other research has found that Latinos, despite intragroup differences, may share a sense of linked fate, possibly due to increased anti-immigrant sentiment that indiscriminately targets all Latinos, regardless of legal status or country of birth (Stokes 2003; Sanchez 2006; Sanchez & Masuoka 2010; Schildkraut 2005, 2011). Similar findings are emerging for Asian immigrants as well (Junn & Masuoka 2008a,b).

These identity choices have political consequences. Engagement in politics reflects the process of identity formation: individuals identify with a group, develop a group consciousness, and then with this group consciousness mobilize and engage in politics. This is not an automatic process; mobilization does not come about simply because individuals are objectively members of a group, whether it is a religious denomination, a racial category, or a national-origin group. For a group identity to serve as a politically mobilizing force, two preconditions must be met: individuals have to recognize themselves as members of the group and also be conscious of the political value of acting as a group (Miller et al. 1981; Shingles 1981; García 1982; Conover 1984, 1988; Dawson 1994; Omi & Winant 1995; Cole et al. 1998). These are by no means obvious outcomes, and their presence or absence presumably explains why many groups are not politically engaged as groups per se, and why many individuals who might objectively be seen as members of politicized groups might not be politically engaged themselves.

Political science research indicates that as individuals opt for racialized group identities, these become the avenue for their mobilization into politics (Schildkraut 2005, Stokes-Brown 2009, Jackson 2011). For example, Masuoka’s (2008) findings suggest that Latinos who hold racialized identities are more likely to become politically engaged than Latinos who do not. Similarly, Valdez (2011) sees Latino group consciousness significantly and positively correlated with political participation, and Stokes-Brown (2006) finds that racialized group identity shapes both participation and vote choice (see also Sanchez 2006, Manzano & Sanchez 2010). There are similar findings for Asian immigrants (Junn & Masuoka 2008b). The context immigrants arrive into can shape both identity choices (see above) and political mobilization (Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001, Pedraza 2010). Researchers have found, for instance, that ballot initiatives in California and other states targeting immigrants had the effect of mobilizing newly naturalized voters (Johnson et al. 1999, Pantoja et al. 2001, Jones-Correa 2002, Barreto et al. 2005a,b).

Although there is a sense that immigrants’ racialized identities may better explain their mobilization in American politics than a straightforward narrative of immigrant assimilation, many questions remain. What exactly determines immigrants’ identity choices? Why do individuals, even those who belong to the same national-origin group, opt for different racial categories (Alba & Islam 2009)? We know that these choices are shaped by the context of reception that immigrants encounter, with greater discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment reinforcing the
racialization of identity, but under what conditions does this take place? Does this process play out at the individual or at the group level? What difference do these racialized identity choices make in the longer run for the political incorporation of immigrants and their offspring?

**THE MOBILIZATION OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS**

Observers from 1986 would be surprised to learn of the extent to which undocumented immigrants and their allies have mobilized in the political process in recent years. In the spring of 2006, an estimated 3.5 to 5.1 million people participated in peaceful rallies in more than 160 cities nationwide to protest the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (Bada et al. 2006). Also known as H.R. 4437, this federal comprehensive immigration reform bill was widely viewed as draconian, in large part because it sought to make illegal presence in the United States a criminal rather than civil offense. Protests took place in large traditional gateway cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, but also newer immigrant destinations of different sizes, including Atlanta, Charlotte, and Omaha (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008, Benjamin-Alvarado et al. 2009). People of all ages marched in support of immigrant rights, including up to a million children and teenagers (Bloemraad & Trost 2008). Many of these youth subsequently became leaders in the DREAM Act movement to pressure Congress to enact legislation that would allow those who arrived as undocumented children a pathway to citizenship (Gonzales 2008). Protesters also included people of different ethnic backgrounds, although a diverse group of Latinos constituted the majority (Barreto et al. 2009).

The 2006 immigrant rights protests, which disappeared as quickly as they had spread, were the largest mass mobilizations the country had seen since the Vietnam War. In Los Angeles alone, an estimated 650,000 demonstrators took to the streets on May 1, 2006, and another 400,000 turned out in Chicago (Bada & Fox in Bloemraad et al. 2011, p. 8). In comparison, 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. give his “I Have a Dream” speech, and between 250,000 and 320,000 people participated in the antiwar protest in Washington, DC in 1969 (Cicchetti et al. 1971, Euchner 2010). The 2006 immigrant rights demonstrations were also unprecedented because of who the marchers were. Latinos do have a legacy of collective action to protest injustices and anti-immigrant sentiment—consider, for example, the Chicano movement and the United Farm Workers Union movement of the 1960s, the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, and protests following California’s adoption of Prop. 187, a 1994 initiative to deny undocumented immigrants social services—but never before had so many immigrants, and especially undocumented immigrants, come out for the right to be included in the United States.

The 2006 immigration protests have posed a challenge to political scientists because existing theories cannot readily account for the timing, size, and demobilization of the protests or the nature of the demonstrators. The political behavior literature, which underscores the importance of socioeconomic skills and resources (e.g., income, education, occupation, age, etc.) to explain individuals’ decisions to participate in civic and political affairs, cannot explain why so many immigrants participated in the 2006 protests. Even though participating in the protests did not require US citizenship or legal status, many immigrants had low levels of human capital that usually correlate with low levels of civic and political participation (Gonzales 2008, Pantoja et al. 2008, Zepeda-Millán 2011). In addition, from a cost-benefit calculus, engaging in the 2006 protests did not make sense for undocumented immigrants owing to the risk of deportation (Bloemraad et al. 2011).

In contrast to the political behavior literature’s emphasis on individual resources, various other scholars highlight the importance of group-based resources to explain the massive turnout at the 2006 immigration protests. Bloemraad & Trost (2008), for example, point out that many families
participated in the demonstrations, setting in motion a pattern of cross-generational resource accumulation. Immigrant parents and their children pooled and shared different information sources (i.e., ethnic, mainstream, and social media) and networks (i.e., churches, workplaces, schools, and youth groups) that in effect allowed them to overcome the barriers of weak individual resources. Others (e.g., Barreto et al. 2009, Pallares & Flores-González 2011) argue that the increased racialization of the immigration debate and the damaging effects of current enforcement strategies, especially on mixed-status households, have fostered a sense of solidarity among a diverse group of Latinos that served as a powerful motivational resource, moving individuals to participate in the immigration protests even if their individual resource levels would not predict that. Analyzing the 2006 protest participation of especially undocumented immigrants has thus allowed scholars to make important new contributions to the political behavior literature.

Political scientists have also found it challenging to use the social movement literature to explain the 2006 immigration protests. Social movement scholars emphasize the importance of a hospitable political opportunity structure—composed of a supportive electoral base, influential allies at the elite level, and supporting civil society organizations—to explain successful mass mobilizations (e.g., McCarthy & Zald 1977, McAdam 1982, Meyer 2007). Social movement theory can help explain why immigration protests occurred in large gateway cities with a rich infrastructure of immigrant civic organizations and a long history of immigration. Along these lines, Cordero-Guzmán et al. (2008) argue that the large turnout at the immigration protests in New York and Chicago were orchestrated by immigrant nonprofit organizations, labor unions, churches, and ethnic media outlets that organized public education campaigns, advocacy initiatives, and community mobilization efforts, often with the active involvement of Latino immigrants. Yet the social movement literature cannot adequately explain the protests that took place in many other cities, including the new immigrant destinations in the South where immigrant civil society is less developed and anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric and policy positions are common (Benjamin-Alvarado et al. 2009).

To make sense of the protests that occurred in cities with inhospitable or closed opportunity structures, scholars have paid more attention to threat as a mobilizing force. Barreto et al. (2009), Benjamin-Alvarado et al. (2009), and Zepeda-Millán (2011) all argue that H.R. 4437, along with the subsequent xenophobic rhetoric and discrimination against immigrants and their native-born coethnics, constituted a powerful external threat that activated multiple Latino constituencies to participate in the marches. Others (e.g., Baker-Cristales 2009, Benjamin-Alvarado et al. 2009, Ramírez 2011) have also emphasized the role of the Spanish-language print and broadcast media, which has national reach, as a valuable resource that compensated for the absence of local civic organizations as agents of protest mobilization. Analyses of why the 2006 immigration protests occurred in unlikely places have thus also added new insights to the social movement literature.

Even though this scholarship has given us a better understanding of the 2006 immigration protests, many research questions remain, especially related to the protests’ consequences. Why, for example, has there been so little mass mobilization for immigrant rights since 2006? Also, what has been the impact of the 2006 protests on conventional politics in ensuing years? Are legal immigrants who participated in the 2006 immigration protests more likely to naturalize and vote, as happened in the aftermath of the anti–Proposition 187 protests in California (Pantoja et al. 2001, Ramakrishnan 2005)? Will the solidarity that the protests fostered among Latinos carry through and give rise to a more energized and more powerful Latino voting bloc or the cultivation of a new Latino social movement? Although most scholarship to date has treated undocumented immigrants as a monolithic group, they are in fact diverse; for example, different age groups may behave distinctively (Abrego 2011). Given the large numbers of undocumented youth who participated in the 2006 immigration protests, how have the protests affected the political
consciousness and political socialization of different age groups of undocumented immigrants? Will President Obama’s decision in 2012 to defer action against certain undocumented youth widen or narrow the participation gap between undocumented youth and adults, between legal and undocumented immigrants?

THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS

As noted above, IRCA was premised on the idea that undocumented immigrants could become citizens and good Americans, a premise that fit well with common narratives of assimilation (Gordon 1964). Empirical research indicates that immigrants do integrate into American society across time and across generations (Alba & Nee 2003). However, the idea that assimilation necessarily requires immigrants to cut off connections to their countries of origin was challenged by the rise, beginning in the 1990s, of transnational perspectives on immigration.

Transnationalism refers to the persistent ties that immigrants and their descendants have with their countries of origin. These ties can be social, such as maintaining contact with and providing support to family; economic, such as continuing to own land and businesses in one’s native country; or political, such as following or participating in the politics and civic affairs of one’s country of origin. Researchers have characterized transnationalism as attachments that stretch across national borders, making up a social world that is located simultaneously in two different places but remains distinct from both (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991, Basch et al. 1994, Guarnizo 1997, Smith & Guarnizo 1998, Levitt & Schiller 2004). More recent scholarship emphasizes that migrants’ social spaces are embedded in more than one society (Waters & Jiménez 2005; Smith 2006; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, p. 131; Morawska 2007).

Scholars have debated whether transnational networks spanning national borders are really anything new, or whether globalization and technology allow social connectedness in a way not possible before (Smith 2003a, Vertovec 2004). Historians and others have pointed out that much of what we consider to be specific to transnationalism today has taken place before, in other waves of immigration, on a similar scale (Foner 1997, 2000, 2001; Gabaccia 2000; Smith 2003a; Morawska 2004; Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004). But the key point is that transnationalism provides a different lens for us to examine immigrants’ social and political lives, dislodging the dominant paradigm of straight-line immigrant assimilation that largely disregards and dismisses home-country ties.

This “re-siting” of the study of immigration has had four significant impacts on political science research. First, it has motivated a line of research focused on the involvement of sending states in the affairs of their nationals abroad and on states’ attempts to influence expatriates for their own ends, whether by monitoring emigrants, activating their national loyalties, delivering services, or providing incentives to emigrants (such as dual nationality) to keep them engaged and sending remittances back to their country of origin, preferably in ways that meet state objectives (Guarnizo 1998, González Gutiérrez 1999, Goldring 2002, Levitt & de la Dehesa 2003, Østergaard-Nielsen 2003, Smith 2003b, Choate 2007).

Second, there has been increased attention to immigrant transnational organizations, particularly voluntary groups such as hometown associations. These associations bring together immigrants from the same town or region to, among other things, pursue philanthropic projects back in their hometowns (Itzigsohn 2000, Guarnizo 2001). There has been considerable interest in Latin American hometown associations’ participation in the financing of local development projects in immigrants’ countries of origin (Orozco 2000, Alarcón 2002, Smith 2006, Orozco & Rouse 2007, Flores-Macias 2012). Researchers are beginning to take note of the role of hometown associations in the United States and their role in mobilizing and integrating immigrants in the receiving society (Zabin & Escala Rabadan 1998, Rivera-Salgado 1999, Rivera-Salgado et al. 2005, Somerville et al. 2008, Ramakrishnan & Viramontes 2010).
Third, the transnational lens has meant renewed attention to immigrants’ activism in home-country politics, including expatriate voting, taking part in sending-country electoral campaigns, and running for office in their country of origin (Graham 1997, Guarnizo et al. 2003). One argument is that immigration gives expatriates the freedom to organize as well as new skills, ideas, and allies. When combined with greater wealth, these factors often add to migrants’ capacity to influence the places from which they came (Adamson 2004). There has been considerable interest in the expansion of dual nationality among sending countries and its implications for (and possible conflicts with) citizenship in the United States (Jones-Correa 1998, 2001; Escobar 2004, 2006, 2007). Likewise, there has been an explosion of research in the involvement of Mexican expatriates, particularly those residing in the United States, in elections back in Mexico (Marcelli & Cornelius 2005, Smith 2008, McCann et al. 2009, Lafleur & Chelius 2011).

Fourth, researchers have turned their attention to the political behaviors of transnational migrants in their countries of reception. There is disagreement about whether transnational political engagement decreases participation in the United States or whether these politics are complementary. However, research suggests only a relatively small minority exercise political leverage back home (DeSipio et al. 2003, Guarnizo et al. 2003, Waldinger 2008). In this vein, Fraga et al. (2012) find that less than 10% of first-generation Latin American immigrants are engaged in any form of home country politics. An even smaller percentage of immigrants donate funds or vote from abroad, although these activities persist even with more time spent in the United States. Additionally, researchers have found that engagement in transnational politics more often complements or reinforces, rather than detracts from, political participation in the United States (DeSipio 2000, Barreto & Muñoz 2003, de la Garza & Hazan 2003, DeSipio et al. 2003, Pantoja 2005, Segura 2007).

A transnational approach to immigrants and politics suggests we cannot study immigration from the perspective of the receiving country alone. Transnationalism implies paying attention to how new social spaces bridge sending and receiving societies, and how these spaces in turn shape political activity. What is less clear is how these transnational social spaces might vary across individuals, life-cycle stages, national-origin groups, or contexts of reception. The evidence suggests, for instance, that home country ties play out differently for different national-origin groups. Political transnationalism, such as donating to country-of-origin campaigns or voting in country-of-origin elections, is thought to be weaker among Colombians than among Dominican immigrants in the United States (Guarnizo et al. 2003, DeSipio & Pantoja 2004). Immigrants from countries with greater proximity to the United States, which tend to have close historical ties to the United States, are also thought to be more likely to take part in the transnational circuit of travel, remittances, and return (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004). But we still do not have a good theoretical accounting of when and why transnationalism varies across individuals or across countries of origin. Likewise, evidence shows that transnational ties diminish across time and generations (DeSipio 2000, Jones-Correa 2003, Kasinitz et al. 2003), but aside from some intriguing suggestions that transnational engagement might vary over the life course (Levitt 2003) or as immigrants change their immigration status, we have little in the way of a theoretical framework to predict who might retain transnational ties and why.

LOOKING TO THE UNEXPECTED IN THE FUTURE?

The outlines of IRCA continue to inform immigration policy and the immigration debate today. The act’s emphasis on a dual track of enforcement and integration is at the heart of many discussions around any anticipated immigration reform in the near future. What is striking, however, is how much IRCA shaped the parameters of our discussion of immigration policy and how little observers...
at the time anticipated the changes—some of them shaped by IRCA itself—that have engaged social scientists over the past quarter century.

What can we glean from this? This article has explored five areas of immigration policy and politics that have developed in unanticipated ways since the passage of IRCA in 1986. Two of these have an institutional focus: the absence of any successful comprehensive immigration reform and the shift of immigration policy to states and localities. One unintended consequence of IRCA was that in its aftermath further federal efforts at comprehensive immigration reform stalled. As a result, immigration policy has shifted to the state and local levels, as has the focus of immigration policy research. Explaining the persistence of the policy stalemate at the federal level has gotten relatively short shrift, and instead researchers have renewed attention to questions of federalism and the consequences of increased state and local involvement in immigration issues for the rights and protections of citizens, legal permanent residents, and unauthorized immigrants. The three other areas covered in this review comprise aspects of political behavior: the racialization of immigrants and its effect on their political engagement, the political mobilization of the undocumented, and the extension of immigrant politics across national borders. Research on these three topics follows the introduction of immigrants as new actors in the political system and the resulting expansion of the expression of politics in both electoral and nonelectoral arenas.

What observers from 1986 might have failed to anticipate are the ways in which significant institutional changes can block further institutional change or shift institutional change to other sites for politics, as IRCA did by transferring the locus of immigration policy from the national to the subnational level. In addition, the policy changes brought about by IRCA—the legalization and eventual naturalization of 2.7 million unauthorized residents, the hardening of the borders, and the consequent increase in the numbers of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States—both introduced new political actors and highlighted new forms of political claims making. Immigrants entering the political system as new actors have occasioned shifts in political behavior—with, for example, participation in the 2006 protests and transnational civic and political activities—that in turn have shaped institutional responses at the federal, state, and local levels. In other words, immigration policy and immigrant political behaviors are interrelated, and significant shifts in one area can entail unintended or unexpected consequences in others.

Social scientists tend to be “presentists,” who discount the past as being different from the present and who assume the present will continue indefinitely into the future. The experience of IRCA indicates that the past shapes the present, yet that it is impossible to predict the contingent events of the future. Having seen how much can change in unexpected ways, we should not assume the current immigration context will remain the same in the future. Acknowledging that change is often both unexpected and unpredictable, what might we be taking for granted today?

The United States has had an unprecedented run of immigration. More immigrants entered the United States from 1965 to 2010 than during any other period in US history. The assumption often made is that this immigration will continue—in its general size and shape—indefinitely into the future. But if there is anything to be gleaned from the history of immigration, it is that patterns of immigration are unlikely to remain static. There is some indication already that illegal immigration from Mexico, the largest source of undocumented immigrants to the United States, may be tapering off. Since 2008 there has been a sharp drop in apprehensions at the border, the result of a combination of increased border policing, a slowing US economy, and diminished population pressures and increased opportunities in Mexico. Recent US Census analyses have indicated, moreover, that the United States is now receiving more immigrants from Asia than from Latin America. Perhaps as a result Asia will become the locus for American concerns about immigration in the future.

It is likely that the political context of arrival in the United States will undergo changes as well, responding to domestic politics or international events. Domestically, there has been a bipartisan
consensus on the desirability of continued immigration, even as public opinion on immigration has been consistently ambivalent. But there is nothing to guarantee that this period of acceptance will continue. Indeed, since the destruction of the World Trade Center in September of 2001, there have been some indications that this acceptance has diminished, with a resurgence of an emphasis on “American” identity and calls for reduced immigration. The international context can also change. World War I, for example, served to demobilize the highly organized German-American community in the United States, and war dynamics facilitated congressional action to curtail immigration and impose national quotas. World War II placed Americans of Japanese, German, and Italian backgrounds under suspicion, resulting in the internment of large numbers of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans on the west coast (Sterne 2001). These experiences, Waldinger (2007) writes, had long-term effects on the political participation of these groups, just as World War II had opposite, mobilizing effects for many of the immigrants (and their children) who actually served in the US military. Similarly, the events of 9/11 have complicated any mobilization on the part of Muslim immigrants as well as many immigrants from the Middle East or South Asia. If these earlier episodes serve as a guide, the post-9/11 climate may have similar long-term effects on Muslim-American politics, although we do not yet have a good grasp of what these might be (Baker et al. 2009, Canker 2011). The experience of IRCA, in other words, reminds us that although political scientists look for patterns and seek to explain variation in these patterns, politics itself is full of contingencies.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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