



Residential Segregation and Election Participation of Immigrants in Australia

KEYWORDS

Immigration; political adaptation; visible minorities; geography; political participation

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Debates about immigrant adaptation in host societies are frequent in Western democracies. While adaptation discourse tends to focus on economic and social policies, Bilodeau's research addresses a relatively neglected component of the process: geography. His analysis shows that the way immigrants are dispersed within a country can influence how immigrants participate in host country politics. In doing so, this project draws attention to the potential political benefits of residential segregation for host societies and immigrant communities.

Using survey and census information from Australia, Bilodeau demonstrates that residential segregation *increases* the political activity of newcomers. Immigrants who live among other immigrants are more likely to discuss political choices, work for parties or candidates, and attend political meetings than immigrants who live secluded from immigrants. Moreover, immigrants from ethnic enclaves are also more likely to feel their opinions matter

and are taken seriously by politicians. Geography also influences political preferences. Immigrants residing in high concentration immigrant areas tend to be most unified in terms of political decision making: immigrants who live together vote together.

HEADLINES

Benefits of residential segregation

Immigrants living in high density immigrant areas participate more in host society politics, feel more political efficacious, and speak with a more unified voice than immigrants who live with few immigrants

Uneven influence

Political benefits of living in ethnic enclaves apply primarily to immigrants from visible minority backgrounds

Understanding the Gap

Ethnic enclaves promote political engagement through community networks, shared identity, and mobilization by ethnic candidates

A key caveat to the argument is that residential segregation does not affect the political adaptation of all immigrants in the same way. Bilodeau finds that it is most beneficial for members of visible ethnic minorities.

How do we explain the results? Though no firm answers are advocated, Bilodeau provides evidence to discount some possibilities. He speculates, in conclusion, that community mobilization, the presence of ethnic candidates, and group consciousness are the most likely reasons why residential segregation promotes immigrant political adaptation.

HOW WE DID IT?

Survey data used to track political participation are from Australian National Election Studies (ANES), 1998, 2001, and 2004. Population data are from the Australian Census, 1996 and 2001. Australian federal constituencies are classified as follows: small (0-15%), sizeable (15-30%), or substantial (30-50%) based on percentages of foreign-born population therein. To assess differences across immigrant groups the author relies on a measure of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries (NESC). Descriptive statistics and regression analyses are used to assess a series of hypotheses.

FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

This project speaks to the thriving and often contentious public conversation about how immigrants' successfully adapt to their host country. For policymakers, Bilodeau's research

calls attention to the basic political benefits that immigrant settlement policies might achieve. If fostering participation in host society politics is a desirable end goal, it would appear that policies aiming to support residential segregation merit consideration. Immigrants who settle in ethnic enclaves do not detach themselves from their new country's politics, they embrace it.

“Residential segregation thus does not correspond to the image of ghettos or pockets of political alienation and apathy”

Political adaptation is but one piece of a much broader discussion relating to immigrant adaptation. More debate and research will be needed to determine how the political benefits discussed here might relate with more salient social and economic outcomes that have been linked to residential segregation.

LEARN MORE

Bilodeau, Antoine. 2009. “Residential Segregation and the Electoral Participation of Immigrants in Australia.” *International Migration Review* 43(1): 134-159.

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/122222877/abstract>



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