

# ONE Latino Political Engagement

THE INTERSECTION OF POWER,  
IDENTITY(IES), AND PLACE

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

Frederick Douglass

Studies of political engagement rarely mention crossing borders.<sup>1</sup> Yet an examination of the experiences of immigrants in the United States highlights the many boundaries, both physical and psychological, that immigrants must cross before they become engaged politically. This is a different way of thinking about borders. It moves away from merely considering boundaries between nation-states and toward seeing the many barriers that exist within the U.S. polity itself. To recognize these boundaries, we need to look at what Vicki Ruiz calls “internal migration,” immigrants’ process of “creating, accommodating, resisting, and transforming the physical and psychological environs of their ‘new’ lives in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> Internal migration is an ongoing process of psychological, social, and cultural accommodation undertaken by immigrants and their children, and it must precede political engagement. This book focuses on the process of internal migration among Latino immigrants and their children and the way in which having to

cross multiple borders affects their relationship with the U.S. political system.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of border crossing has both geographic and psychological significance. In terms of geography, migrants clearly have chosen to cross a line dividing nation-states. After arriving in the United States, they encounter additional physical boundaries as they settle in places that provide differential access to transportation, jobs, services, and housing. These boundaries affect their everyday lives and chances for socioeconomic mobility.<sup>4</sup> In terms of psychological borders, immigrants leave their home countries with a certain understanding of self and nation, but this will evolve with time as they experience life in the United States.<sup>5</sup> I do not attempt to analyze migratory adjustments as a whole; instead, I focus on one aspect of immigrant accommodation: the political engagement of immigrants and their children. To do so, I compare the political attitudes and behavior of Latinos in two areas of Los Angeles County, California: East Los Angeles and Montebello.

Understanding the accommodation process is important because the migration story does not end with the immigrant generation. Like their parents, U.S.-born Latinos often remain geographically and socially separated from the Anglo majority.<sup>6</sup> Latino children quickly learn that they belong to a smaller, bounded circle within the larger circle of the United States. Thus, "racism and xenophobia shape both the meaning and social value attributed to [their] ethnic identities and to their lived experience of national belonging in contemporary U.S. society."<sup>7</sup> For Latinos, the adaptation process is complicated by the country's long history of discrimination against and exclusion of their community.<sup>8</sup> Because they are members of a marginal group in the United States, Latino immigrants and their children confront multiple boundaries that affect their socialization into the U.S. political system—boundaries that they are not always empowered to cross.<sup>9</sup>

This is not to suggest that Latino immigrants have no personal agency, defined as "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power."<sup>10</sup> They influence and are influenced by the larger social, economic, and political environment. An analysis of the immigrant experience must engage the tension between structure and agency.<sup>11</sup> Most polit-

ical studies assume near-absolute agency on the part of political actors, making participation a question of personal choice, rather than of legal or structural constraint. I instead use what Yen Espiritu calls “an agency-oriented theoretical perspective,” which considers how immigrants “are transformed by the experience of . . . migration and how they in turn transform and remake the social world around them.”<sup>12</sup> Individuals make personal choices. Their choices are constrained by the institutional environment, but their actions can alter that environment in some ways, which in turn affects the nature of their subsequent personal choices. For Latino political engagement in particular, what is key is the interaction between collective identity and structural position. Again, each influences and is constitutive of the other. For Latinos to perceive that they are full members of the U.S. political community and that they are empowered to act within that community, they must develop a positive attachment to their group and a belief that, however stigmatized it may be, that group is worthy of their political effort. This process entails shifts in Latinos’ internal and external boundaries. For both immigrants and their children, this process changes according to time, place, and circumstance. Major parts of the process are not completely under their control. The varied political outcomes of the process are the focus of this book.

#### LATINO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: IDENTITY MEETS SOCIAL CONTEXT

What exactly is meant here by the terms *Latino*, *group*, and *identity*? Many analysts are uncomfortable with the word *Latino* because it refers to an artificially constructed category that masks important cultural, social, economic, and political differences that exist among different groups of Latin American origin.<sup>13</sup> I use *Latino* to describe a particular social group in the United States, one composed of immigrants of Latin American origin and their descendants. My concept of *group* rests on Iris Young’s definition of a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from others by cultural forms, practices, special needs or capacities, structure of power, or privilege.”<sup>14</sup> According to Young, what makes a collection of

people into a group is “less some set of attributes its members share than the relation in which they stand to others.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, all members of the “Latino” group do not have to have the same interests or concerns but rather must be similarly situated within U.S. society. This structural aspect of identity is often overlooked, yet it affects strongly how Latinos interact with the political system on the individual level.

How group members identify themselves affects the ways in which they relate to larger collectivities, such as their racial group and the U.S. nation-state, in general. I define *identity* as an individual’s self-conceptualization that places the individual either within or in opposition to a social grouping. This definition accepts that “a group is constituted not only when all members share the same characteristics with one another, but also when the members stand in a particular relationship to nonmembers.”<sup>16</sup> This relational understanding of identity attempts to bridge the individual-level and contextual aspects of identity formation.<sup>17</sup> It acknowledges the cognitive aspects of identity while also situating identity processes in their social context in order to see people as “whole.” As Judith Howard explains, that means “recognizing that both our everyday lives and the larger cultures in which we operate shape our senses of who we are and what we could become.”<sup>18</sup>

For immigrants and their children, the sense of “who we are” and “what we could become” is profoundly influenced by the experiences of crossing, and not being able to cross, multiple borders. As a result, an analysis of the Latino experience in the United States must be situated at the intersection of power, collective identity(ies), and place. All affect where Latinos are positioned and where they end up positioning themselves vis-à-vis the larger political community. We must remember that this interaction between agency and structure does not occur in a value-neutral environment. Because accommodation occurs in a stigmatized context, and includes processes not always under Latinos’ control, “power” must be kept at the forefront of the analysis.<sup>19</sup>

The exercise of power is a key aspect of the experience of stigma. I emphasize the effects of stigma because stigma is somewhat different from discrimination. The latter infers a concrete negative experience or denial of some benefit (a standard often used by the courts to determine

the presence of discrimination). Stigma is imposed on individuals who "possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context."<sup>20</sup> Power is an important part of the equation, in that "stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and discrimination."<sup>21</sup> This less tangible aspect of racial hierarchy is very powerful, and it affects the life experiences and social interactions of all people of color in the United States. Studies have shown that members of stigmatized groups internalize societal stereotypes early in life, which negatively affects their future socioeconomic status and psychological health.<sup>22</sup> The process is also mutually reinforcing, in that when a stigmatized group accepts its lower status, its members are less likely to challenge the structural barriers they face.

Latinos' experiences of stigma, and the resulting perceptions of relative individual and group power, influence both the internal and external aspects of the adjustment process. Internally, feelings of stigma make it difficult for Latinos to feel positive about themselves and their larger group. Externally, their opportunities and choices are limited by a structural context that is often also the source of information regarding negative group attributions. Thus, analyses of marginal groups must consider how feelings of stigma affect attachment to their social group(s), as well as to the political system as a whole. To ignore this is to ignore an important part of the incorporation story.

Therefore, how a group member responds to feelings of stigma, along with the political resources and opportunities available in his or her political context, affects the group member's political engagement. Since publication of *The American Voter*, studies of political behavior have emphasized the role that resources play.<sup>23</sup> Socioeconomic status has been found to be especially important.<sup>24</sup> This is intuitively logical: Those with more income and education are more likely to have the time and cognitive ability to engage in politics. They are also more likely to be employed in occupations that provide them with civic skills.<sup>25</sup> For subordinate

groups in U.S. politics, other factors may fall under the rubric of political “resources”: the level of affective attachment individuals feel toward the larger social group, that is, psychological capital; and the politicization and political opportunities available in the group’s social context, that is, contextual capital. I find that the presence of these resources enhances group members’ feelings of agency and their political engagement, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

### *Mobilizing Identity(ies) as Psychological Capital*

For those who study political participation and social movements, a vexing question is why certain individuals are motivated to act while others are not. The key is not simply whether or not an individual was invited to get involved, but rather why the invitation was accepted. Although rational-actor theories, such as those developed by Mancur Olson, would lead us to expect collective action to be rare, in fact, people act collectively all the time.<sup>26</sup> Why? Social movement scholars argue that the existence of mobilizing identities, in addition to the availability of political resources, is key.<sup>27</sup> However, these scholars say little about where these kinds of mobilizing identities come from, why they exist for some group members and not others, or how to foster engagement by encouraging the creation of these kinds of identities.

This book examines the concept of a mobilizing identity and considers this kind of collective identification a form of “psychological capital”—social capital that exists within the individual psyche and gives a person the motivation to act on behalf of the collective. I define a mobilizing identity as an identity that includes a particular ideology *plus* a sense of personal agency. Ideology here is “a world view readily found in the population, including sets of ideas and values that cohere, that are used publicly to justify political stances, and that shape and are shaped by society.”<sup>28</sup> A mobilizing identity is different from an ideology in that it includes not only a particular outlook on the world but also a sense of having the ability to have an impact on that world.<sup>29</sup> Of course, it is likely that an individual’s feelings of agency are closely related to that world-view. For example, if an individual believes power is controlled by the

few at the expense of the many, it is unlikely that he or she will possess a mobilizing identity as I define it. But in this study I find that individuals with very similar worldviews had very different responses to those views. That difference, which I call personal agency, was the product of their affective attachment to their social group—their ability to have a positive collective identification with that group in a stigmatized social context—combined with a positive view of the group.

Using the term *collective identity*, singular, does not imply that individuals possess only one identity.<sup>30</sup> As intersection theorists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, have aptly pointed out, different identifications, such as race, class, and gender, combine to form one identity—what Howard describes as “the whole person.”<sup>31</sup> My understanding of collective identification does not require that individuals choose one group identification over another. Rather, I am focusing on the relational aspects of identity formation.<sup>32</sup> In other words, collective identity is less about how one sees oneself, that is, one’s personal identity, and more about the values and attributions one feels are attributed to his or her group(s) because of how the group(s) is seen by others. Thus, particular group identifications are the result of particular understandings of self and group in relation to other (hierarchically ordered) selves and groups.<sup>33</sup> A sense of group attachment and “place” within the social hierarchy in the United States affects how an individual understands political information and how he or she chooses to act on that information. My respondents’ strongest attachment was to a particular racial group, Latinos. In another context, gender or sexuality might have been more prominent. The importance of context to identification underscores the situational aspects of identity and the fact that race identity, as I show, is informed by experiences of gender and class as well. This discussion of collective identity should not be seen as reifying a particular understanding of community or as using a static definition. Rather, I conceptualize collective identity(ies) as shifting, situational, contextually driven understandings of self and place in particular historical moments.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of defining a positive collective identification as psychological capital, sociologists consider it a form of social capital. As such, it has been found to have important effects on immigrant adaptation, self-esteem, and

academic success. In their study of the adaptation of second-generation Vietnamese youth in New Orleans, Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston found that “strong positive immigrant cultural orientations can serve as a form of social capital that promotes value conformity and constructive forms of behavior, which provide otherwise disadvantaged children with an adaptive advantage.”<sup>35</sup> They argue that this kind of psychological capital is more important than human capital for the successful adaptation of younger-generation immigrants.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Rubén Rumbaut observed that how immigrant youth “think and feel about themselves is critically affected by the parents’ modes of ethnic socialization and by the strength of the attachment that the child feels to the parents and the parents’ national origins.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, María Eugenia Matute-Bianchi found that Mexican American youth with strong ethnic identification are more likely to be successful in school.<sup>38</sup> These studies suggest that when immigrants feel positive attachments to their group, despite any negative attributions they may perceive, it helps them to adapt better in the United States.

This is also true in this study. The Latinos with whom I spoke tended to situate their discussion of political issues in the context of their feelings about being Latino. Their identities as members of a Latino community, however defined, framed their understanding of political events. Their interpretation of those political events, or their ideology, was similar across the sample. However, the degree to which they felt empowered to act on that worldview varied. All respondents felt that negative government policies targeted Latinos. All but three saw themselves as part of a stigmatized group. Those whose answers indicated a positive affective group attachment and a positive view of their group also believed they had the ability to act on behalf of their group. This sense of agency is related to group attachment and group self-image, and it is what makes an identity mobilizing. That identity, or psychological capital, serves as an important individual resource. Ideology provides only a particular interpretation of the world. The degree to which the respondents were able to see their group in a positive light is what gave them the sense that they could act. The issue is not simply racial identification but also the content of that identification and the resulting psychological resources it provides the individual, and by extension, his or her social group.



Put simply, for individuals to choose to act, they must feel that they are a part of something and that that “something” is worthy of political effort. That feeling of attachment and group worthiness is what motivates them to act on behalf of the collective. This affects their engagement in the full range of political activities, from protest to community politics to voting in presidential elections. It affects their propensity to participate as well as the nature and content of that participation. In the American political context, race enters the picture here. In racial terms, the American political community has long been defined as white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.<sup>39</sup> Only recently have other racial groups been allowed to participate formally in the system. It is reasonable to expect that members of nonwhite racial groups may have difficulty identifying with, or feeling a part of, a system that historically has not included people who look like them.<sup>40</sup> This also may explain why white racial identification may not have a significant impact on whites’ participation. It is less about whether whites have a racial identification than that their identification is in congruence with the larger political system. There is no conflict, or contradiction, between whites’ racial identification and their larger political attachments.

For members of marginalized groups, there is a contradiction. The respondents in this study consistently defined “politics” as being separate and distant from them. Therefore, their ability to feel part of the U.S. political system is more complicated, and potentially contradictory, than it is for whites. The experience of stigma acts as an important boundary between how they see themselves and how they see the larger political community. In this context, how members see their marginalized social group and the feelings of worthiness they attach to it is what gives them a sense of efficacy and the motivation to act politically. This is where we see the mobilizing potential of collective identity(ies). Whereas almost all respondents said they felt their social group was being attacked during the 1990s, those who felt the need, obligation, and ability to act on behalf of their group were those who felt an affective attachment to it. As a result, when their group was threatened, they felt it was worthy of their protection. More important, they felt enough personal agency to believe that their actions *could* protect it. Therein lies the major difference among

the respondents: A sense of personal agency is critical. It is the key to political engagement, and it increases as affective attachment to the social group increases.

This idea of affective group attachment is similar to but not the same as what Michael Dawson calls "linked fate." Dawson sees linked fate as the extent to which the individual sees his or her fate (social, economic, or political) as related to the fate of the larger group.<sup>41</sup> Feelings of linked fate have been found to influence African American political behavior.<sup>42</sup> However, it is possible to feel that one's fate is closely tied to that of the group, yet feel very negative about the group itself or pessimistic about one's ability to effect change on behalf of the group.<sup>43</sup> In this case, feelings of group consciousness without a sense that the group is worthy could move group members toward less participation, rather than more. Individuals' affective group attachment may say more about their sense of personal efficacy, and how efficacy relates to group membership, than feelings of group consciousness alone. The findings from this study suggest scholars need to look more deeply at the nature of racial identification and how it varies within and among racial groups, as well as how group consciousness, group attachment, and perceptions of stigma affect levels of political efficacy and activity within racial groups.<sup>44</sup>

To that end, it is important to locate the source of affective group attachment. Among the respondents, family, school, and community were especially crucial. Political socialization studies have found that the family strongly influences the development of political attitudes, and I find similar effects in this sample.<sup>45</sup> The degree to which parents discussed their family and cultural history with their children seemed most important. Respondents who knew their families' migration histories were much more likely to express positive feelings about their racial background. Of course, this might reflect better general communication with the parents, which translates into higher self-esteem. However, for those who actually engaged in political activity, historical information and a sense of cultural pride were more important motivators than was self-esteem. In any case, for members of marginalized groups, self-esteem and group identity are interrelated, so it is likely that high self-esteem affects group identity and vice versa, blurring the distinction between the two.

With regard to school, students who had taken Chicano Studies or Multicultural History courses were much more likely to report having a positive attachment to their social group, whether or not they discussed their cultural history at home.<sup>46</sup> On the community level, the East Los Angeles respondents in particular mentioned that cultural events, such as the 16th of September parade and celebrations marking Mexico's Independence Day, instilled in them a positive sense of community.<sup>47</sup> The importance of this kind of historical information makes sense in a stigmatized context. The respondents were very aware of the negative images associated with their group, and historical and cultural knowledge may serve as an important counternarrative to that prevailing view.<sup>48</sup> A positive view of the group fosters feelings of agency because, to feel empowered to act, a person must have an alternative vision of how things could be. A counternarrative may be unnecessary for nonstigmatized groups because they automatically perceive that the system is meant to serve their interests. For stigmatized groups, the larger social context is crucial to fostering a positive sense of group identity and group worthiness. Among the East Los Angeles respondents, a favorable social context—family, school, community—fostered the development of mobilizing identities.

Collective identity can have negative consequences as well. A lack of this kind of psychological capital may depress engagement. Zhou and Bankston found that the least adaptationally successful Vietnamese youth were "overadapted," in that they viewed themselves neither as Vietnamese nor as Americans and simply drifted between the two identities.<sup>49</sup> A similar but not identical process was apparent among the Montebello respondents in this study. Zhou and Bankston were looking at socioeconomic adaptation. In this study, the Montebello respondents and their families were middle class and thus socioeconomically well adapted. However, that socioeconomic success did not translate into high levels of political efficacy, as the political behavior literature would lead us to expect.<sup>50</sup> The Montebello respondents also maintained a high level of racial identification. Like the Vietnamese youth, they felt they were not "American" because, for them, being "American" meant being "white," and all but one did not define themselves as white.<sup>51</sup> Yet they also lacked

a strong positive sense of what it meant to be “Latino.” As a result, they lacked psychological capital and possessed a *demobilizing* identity, one that depressed their feelings of efficacy and political engagement.

This understanding of the importance of collective identity again highlights the interaction between individual agency and larger structure. Individuals cannot shape how others see their social group (and, by extension, themselves).<sup>52</sup> Members of groups that are constructed around ascriptive characteristics have little choice regarding their inclusion in those definitions.<sup>53</sup> So, if social psychologists are correct in positing that individuals want to have a positive collective identity, members of devalued groups need to find a way to resolve this conflict in order to maintain self-esteem in the face of negative attributions. Regarding politics, a positive group attachment and feelings of group worthiness provide members of marginalized groups with stronger feelings of personal agency. That psychological capital helps them to become more engaged with the larger polity. Political efficacy, then, is not just a product of the individual psyche but of the structural context in which the individual is situated and of the individual’s ability to garner the psychological resources needed to overcome the negative images attributed to his or her racial group.

### *Opportunity Structures: The Role of Contextual Capital*

Psychological capital refers to group members’ feelings of personal agency. Contextual capital—social capital that arises from the area of settlement and the larger social context—relates to structural constraints. Both interact and affect the process of political engagement. Contextual capital matters for two main reasons: an immigrant’s place of settlement affects (1) access to institutional and organizational resources and (2) the development and nature of immigrant social networks. Thus, levels of contextual capital affect Latinos’ attitudes toward politics, opportunities for political mobilization, and actual political activity.

Unlike the prominent scholar Robert Putnam, who focuses on social capital at the community level and defines it as the degree of associational involvement and participatory behavior in a community, I believe the *type* of organization matters, particularly whether it is ethnically based.<sup>54</sup> To measure social capital, Putnam looks at, among other things,

memberships in voluntary associations, newspaper readership, and expressions of trust in authorities. However, his analysis does not differentiate sufficiently among organizations. For him, membership in a union is the functional equivalent of membership in a bowling league.<sup>55</sup> Yet social capital studies of marginal communities have found that not all organizational activity has the same impact. Certain types of organizations, particularly neighborhood associations, have been found to have a greater positive effect on participants' sense of community and civic engagement than other types.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, an experimental study of the effects of mobilization on Asian American electoral turnout found that get-out-the-vote contact was more effective in areas with a larger presence of Asian American social, political, and cultural institutions, such as ethnic newspapers, social service organizations, and Asian-centered political organizations.<sup>57</sup> Although Putnam is correct in arguing that people's social and political context affects their response to political stimuli, it seems that for marginal groups, specific types of institutional activity and membership are of greater significance. In this study, I also found that ethnic organizing, even if not explicitly political, influences social capital levels within marginal groups and seems to have a beneficial long-term effect on feelings of efficacy.

Formal political institutions—such as local, state, and national governmental bodies, party organizations, electoral rules—also form an important part of the social context by facilitating or impeding political activity.<sup>58</sup> East Los Angeles and Montebello have fairly comparable institutional structures that are typical for California: nonpartisan local office holding, a strong county government, and a weak party system.<sup>59</sup> The main difference is that Montebello has a local municipal government, whereas most of East Los Angeles is unincorporated, which puts it under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.<sup>60</sup> This institutional environment affects the political mobilization of individuals, particularly by political parties. In addition, the resources available to institutions in different areas varies, which affects opportunities for engagement and mobilization. Thus, place of residence is important because it affects the levels of ethnically based organizational activity and formal institutional resources that are available.

The final contextual variable is the racial makeup and politicization of

a person's social networks. Sociologists have long explored how individuals are incorporated into social networks and the effects those networks have on socioeconomic opportunity.<sup>61</sup> Sociologists see social networks as a source of benefit to individuals because they create feelings of "bounded solidarity" among network members. This bounded solidarity encourages actors to act altruistically on behalf of their group, sect, or community.<sup>62</sup> The motivation is especially powerful because it is located in the larger societal context and enforced by local community norms. However, unlike many sociologists, because local context shapes the opportunities individuals will have to develop different kinds of networks, I view these networks as a contextual variable. Here again, the individual and the context are interacting in important ways, but the distinction between them can be unclear. For the study of marginal communities, an emphasis on the contextual aspect of networks shows the degree to which a person can and cannot control his or her social circle. Structural constraints determine the availability of those networks and the resources they may offer.

One of the greatest of these constraints is the degree to which a person's social networks include people of other races. People's social networks tend to be remarkably homogeneous in terms of race, particularly for blacks and whites.<sup>63</sup> A survey in Detroit found that 73 percent of whites reported having no black friends, and 57 percent of blacks said they had no white friends.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, a national probability sample found that only 8 percent of adults reported having a person of another race with whom they "discuss important matters."<sup>65</sup> Although in part this may be the result of individual choice, it also is likely a product of the high levels of residential segregation in the United States, combined with the effects of social stigma. In her study of Mexican Americans in Santa Paula, California, Martha Menchaca found that Anglos and Latinos engaged in what she calls "social apartness," resulting in two distinct ethnic communities that interact only rarely.<sup>66</sup> This separation was voluntary only on the part of Anglos; the Mexican Americans had little choice regarding the degree to which they were "allowed" to interact with whites. Interracial contact is embedded in a stigmatized context.<sup>67</sup> The racial composition of the larger context and the levels of stigma

attached to each group strongly affect who will be included in a given person's social networks.

The racial homogeneity of social networks is important because the levels of politicization within them strongly influence voting attitudes and behavior. David Knoke found that "structural relations are critical to shaping Americans' political behaviors. Being embedded in a strongly partisan political environment and talking about political matters with others are significant factors in national electoral participation."<sup>68</sup> Ronald Lake and Robert Huckfeldt also found that the existence of political discussion and information sharing within social networks has significant positive effects on political activity and engagement.<sup>69</sup> Among Latinos specifically, Melissa Marschall posited that "the real key to understanding political participation lies in the social and institutional context that shapes political engagement."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Natasha Hritzuk and David Park concluded that "social structural variables"—voting rates among the respondent's social networks, organizational affiliations, frequency of religious service attendance, and mobilization—have important effects on participation and that the politicization of the respondent's social networks has the strongest contextual effect.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, it is difficult to know if politically interested individuals seek out social networks that engage in political discussion, or if they become more interested in politics because of the political discussion to which they are exposed in their networks. At the very least, the social networks literature shows that Americans have fairly homogeneous social networks, both at home and in the workplace, and the degree to which networks are politicized affects members' political engagement and activity. Thus, a member of a racial group that is not politically engaged is less likely to have access to social networks that foster political activity, regardless of his or her personal propensities. This is especially problematic for an immigrant group in which many members are noncitizens or have limited experience with the U.S. political system, as is the case for Latinos. Hritzuk and Park contend that "different means are required to draw Latinos into the political process since, due to their predominantly immigrant status, they tend to be less integrated into American society than are blacks."<sup>72</sup>

However, social networks are important for another reason: they are spaces where group historical memory and collective experience are shared. Latinos in Los Angeles have experienced second-class citizenship since 1848, when the city became part of the United States. They have faced labor-market discrimination, political exclusion, and social and geographic segregation.<sup>73</sup> Families of the third-plus-generation respondents in this study were integrated into U.S. society when segregation and discrimination were at their height, and that experience has affected the socialization of subsequent generations.<sup>74</sup> Because the communities where second- and third-plus-generation respondents live are highly segregated, when new Latino immigrants settle there, most of their interpersonal interactions are with Latinos whose families experienced historical exclusion and discrimination.<sup>75</sup> Thus, immigrant Latinos' social networks are largely composed of other Latinos, immigrant and native born. The native born socialize the immigrants, using historical memory to educate them regarding their place in U.S. society. Though *de jure* discrimination no longer exists, its residual effects remain within Latino communities and social networks, and this affects the integration of new immigrants.<sup>76</sup>

To understand Latino political attitudes and engagement, we must examine the effects of Latino psychological and contextual capital. As Zhou and Bankston point out, "The effect of ethnicity depends on the microsocial structure on which ethnicity is based, as well as on the macrosocial structures of the larger society. . . . [A]n explanation of differential patterns of adaptation must take into account the normative qualities of immigrant families and the patterns of social relations surrounding those families."<sup>77</sup> Again, individuals are affecting structure and structure is affecting individuals. The interaction between these two spheres is what gives Latinos their sense of place in the political system and influences their ability to engage with it.

This is quite different from the approach political scientists usually employ to study the roles of identity and context in political behavior. Although scholars of history, literature, psychology, and sociology have focused on questions of identity when examining Latino behavior, for the most part, political scientists have not.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps this is because mainstream studies of political participation generally have not emphasized



how identity affects political behavior.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, studies of African American political participation have placed great emphasis on how identity affects African American political activity.<sup>80</sup> Scholars of Latino political participation still debate the role that identity plays in that process. Some, like Louis DeSipio, argue that because ethnic identification has not been found to have a statistically significant effect on Latino political behavior, ethnicity "rarely proves the most salient factor in political decision-making," and thus there is no "routine ethnic impact on individual political behavior."<sup>81</sup> Others, like Carol Hardy-Fanta, see changes in personal identity as fundamental to how Latinos choose to incorporate themselves into politics.<sup>82</sup> Most analysts fall somewhere in between, seeing identity as having an impact on political activity but not necessarily as central to Latino political behavior.<sup>83</sup>

Part of the problem may be how political scientists measure identity and the effects of context. Identity is usually measured as a dummy variable showing whether or not the respondent identified with a particular racial group. However, my findings from Montebello and East Los Angeles indicate that not all collective identities have an equal capacity to mobilize. Thus, that variable could be measuring very different kinds of identities simultaneously. Measures of social context generally are not included in surveys, except in questions about membership in organizations and whether a respondent has been contacted by a political campaign. Putnam's work reveals the importance of the relationship between social capital and political behavior and the need to develop better ways to measure the effects of contextual factors, particularly those of social networks.<sup>84</sup> Individual political behavior must be examined in the context of the "whole" person, that is, in a manner that considers both psychological and contextual factors.

These factors are especially important for marginal groups, and the failure of previous studies to include them may help to explain why the findings on Latino political behavior vary so widely. For example, in 1980, Ray Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone found that Latinos vote at almost the same rate as Anglos.<sup>85</sup> However, in 1989, María Antonia Calvo and Rosenstone found that Latinos voted at significantly lower rates.<sup>86</sup> Studies using the 1991 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) found

that Latinos vote at lower levels than Anglos but that some Latinos participate in nonelectoral politics at higher rates.<sup>87</sup> Using the Citizen Participation Study, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady, and Norman Nie found that Latinos participate in both electoral and nonelectoral activities at significantly lower rates.<sup>88</sup> All these studies use very different sampling techniques and methodologies to identify "Latino" respondents, measure identity in a variety of ways, and incorporate measurements of the effects of stigma and social context to varying degrees.<sup>89</sup> Those differences may partly explain the variation in their findings. Incorporating better measures of Latino identity and context into future studies should provide scholars with a more complete picture of Latino incorporation patterns.

#### THE STUDY

In November 1994, Proposition 187, which called for denying education, health care, and social services to undocumented immigrants and their children, was approved by more than 60 percent of California voters. The campaign surrounding Proposition 187 garnered national media coverage and fomented the largest mass protests the California Latino community had seen since the 1960s.<sup>90</sup> Schools were the location for much of this political activity. In mid-October 1994, junior high and high school students in Orange, Los Angeles, and Ventura Counties began walking out of school en masse.<sup>91</sup> According to the *Los Angeles Times*, more than ten thousand students walked out in protest during October and November. Students also organized and participated in rallies, teach-ins, and petition-signing drives. They walked precincts and worked phone banks until election day.<sup>92</sup> Most of these students were Latino.

Many observers believed that this high level of activity would have long-term effects on the political engagement of these youths. Dennis McLellan of the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "It is hard to recall another issue in recent years that has galvanized so many high school students throughout California, most making their first foray into political activism."<sup>93</sup> Jon Markman, also of the *Los Angeles Times*, called this activity a "real-life civics

lesson," and James Trent, a professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, said the students "won't be the same anymore."<sup>94</sup>

As a graduate student watching events unfold from afar, I also believed that the Proposition 187 campaign marked an important historical moment in Latino politics in the United States, one that needed to be documented and analyzed. How would participation in this kind of political activity affect the development of Latino political attitudes and activity? Would youth involved in these actions be more politically engaged later in life? Would feelings of identity and efficacy change as a result? This study is meant to shed light on these questions. I began my investigation with what is known about political behavior. Studies of political participation using both Anglo and Latino samples have consistently found that socioeconomic status is the best predictor of political behavior.<sup>95</sup> Thus, it was reasonable to assume that class issues would affect Latino behavior in the post-Proposition 187 context as well.

With that in mind, I compared students from two Latino-majority areas in Los Angeles that were involved in the protests against Proposition 187 but that varied in terms of class. I focused on East Los Angeles, a working-class Latino area, and Montebello, one of the few middle-class, Latino-majority cities in the United States.<sup>96</sup> Montebello residents are more likely to speak English and less likely to be foreign born than are the residents of East Los Angeles. Because geographic and psychological boundaries can significantly influence the political socialization process for immigrants and their families, a comparison of Montebello and East Los Angeles allows us to see how two very different environments affect Latino political attitudes and activity.<sup>97</sup>

I conducted one hundred in-depth, semistructured interviews during summer 1996 and winter 1996–1997.<sup>98</sup> Because much of the organizing against Proposition 187 occurred in schools, I concentrated on four schools, Garfield High School and Garfield Adult School in East Los Angeles and Montebello High School and Montebello Adult School in Montebello.<sup>99</sup> Half of my respondents were high school seniors at the time of the interviews, which meant that they had been sophomores during the walkouts protesting Proposition 187. That experience gave them the opportunity to be politically engaged in a way that was rare for their age group. The rest

of my respondents were adult school students in both areas, almost all of whom had been living in California during the Proposition 187 campaign.<sup>100</sup> They too had experienced the heightened political activity during the summer and fall of 1994.

The sample respondents were as diverse as the Latino community itself. Most (83 percent) were of Mexican origin, but individuals of mixed Mexican/other Latin American origin were also represented. The respondents were between sixteen and sixty-eight years of age; two-thirds were first or second generation, and the remaining respondents were third-generation or more. Forty-nine were female, and fifty-one were male. Some respondents had been in the United States for more than twenty years; others had arrived less than a year before. Most of the respondents were full-time students. Those who were employed had occupations ranging from tattoo artist to executive assistant. (For a complete list of the interview respondents, with their generational and citizenship status, see Appendix A.)

The interviews were voluntary, and depending on the preference of the respondent, they were conducted in English, Spanish, or both (for the interview questions, see Appendix B). They averaged one and a half hours in length, but some went on for as long as six hours, and all were audiotaped. In transcribing the interviews, my goal was to be faithful to the respondents' words, including any grammatical errors.<sup>101</sup> I used the interview transcripts to create a database, sorted the responses by area, gender, and generation, and employed content analysis to find recurring themes. I organized the book's chapters based on the main findings of that analysis.<sup>102</sup>

With qualitative work, generalizability is always a question. This methodological approach makes "a basic assumption . . . that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience."<sup>103</sup> I used what Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin call "grounded theory," meaning "theory . . . derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process."<sup>104</sup> With such a method, the researcher does not begin with a preconceived notion but rather "allows the theory to emerge from the data" so as to offer insight and enhance understanding of the phenomenon in question.<sup>105</sup>

Yet some may question the validity of those insights. Because this study was conducted in the aftermath of an important historical moment in California politics, one could argue against its applicability to other contexts. There are at least three reasons why I believe my findings provide insights into the wider Latino political incorporation process. First, the Proposition 187 campaign brought to the foreground anti-immigrant tendencies that have always been present in California and U.S. politics.<sup>106</sup> Second, the findings on the political detachment of English monolingual third-plus-generation respondents are consistent with quantitative studies of Latinos, particularly the LNPS.<sup>107</sup> Finally, the findings on the increased Latino mobilization that occurred after Proposition 187 coincide with other qualitative and quantitative studies of Latino political participation in California during the mid- to late 1990s.<sup>108</sup> In this book, through Latinos' own voices, I show how members of marginalized groups engage in the complex process of negotiating their relationship with the U.S. political system and the role of collective identity and social context in that process.

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book examines how the overall political and social context in California during the 1990s affected Latino political attitudes, activity, and identity. The 1990s were a difficult period for Californians, especially Latino Californians. Economic recession, natural disasters, riots, and several ballot initiatives perceived to be directed at limiting the opportunities for Latinos in the state made this period historically important. These events echoed the negative experiences that Latinos have faced throughout California history, but during the 1990s, expressions of power were much more overt than previously. Because Latinos were being described openly in the media as "undesirables" and "outsiders," they were better able to see how power was operating in relation to themselves and their communities.<sup>109</sup> Thus, unlike in most periods, political issues and the state of the Latino community were in the forefront of their minds.

Chapter 2 describes the racialized environment that characterized

California politics during the 1990s and shows how that environment was a reflection of Latinos' historical experiences in California. The chapter begins with a look at the economic and political factors that drove the Proposition 187 campaign and connects that proposition to two other anti-Latino initiatives on the California ballot during the 1990s: Proposition 209 to end affirmative action in the state and Proposition 227 to end bilingual education. The analysis then turns to an overview of how Latinos have been incorporated into Los Angeles politics and society since annexation. That discussion is followed by brief political histories of Latinos in East Los Angeles and Montebello. These histories serve as the foundation for subsequent political mobilization.

Chapter 3 describes the relations between immigrant and native-born Latinos in a stigmatized context. Perceptions of stigma had important negative effects on the respondents' social identities and feelings of group worthiness. Consistent with the findings of other studies on the effects of stigma, these Latino respondents were very aware of how other groups negatively stereotype their group. Though they had little contact with Anglos, they perceived that these stereotypes affect all aspects of their lives, from shopping in a non-Latino neighborhood to finding a job. I find that, in response, many of the U.S.-born Latinos are selectively dissociating themselves from immigrant Latinos.<sup>110</sup> They are often hostile to immigrants and refuse to speak Spanish in an attempt to force them to assimilate more rapidly. They hope that if immigrants assimilate more quickly, it will weaken negative stereotypes. New Latino immigrants, in turn, get the message that group cohesion is limited and that speaking Spanish only is an impediment to social and economic mobility.<sup>111</sup> This has a number of negative effects: it lowers the self-esteem of new immigrants, decreases language maintenance in the second generation, and diminishes group cohesion and feelings of shared collectivity, which has implications for policy proposals that target immigrants.

Chapter 4 examines electoral participation. Women in the sample were the most likely to participate in voting. In general, the respondents from both areas said they felt that Latinos were under attack. However, responses varied according to the respondents' levels of psychological and contextual capital, particularly their affective attachment to their social

group, their feelings of group worthiness, and the levels of politicization that existed within their social networks. The positive group identity among Latinos in East Los Angeles motivates them to become more involved in electoral politics. Conversely, the Montebello respondents' lack of an affective group attachment has the opposite effect, making them feel more pessimistic about politics in general. These differences in racial identification result in different responses to the same political environment.

Unfortunately, the presence of Latino elected officials does not seem to be having an effect on these responses. At the time of the study, both areas had Latino representatives at the national, state, and local levels.<sup>112</sup> Yet the respondents, like many Americans, knew little about their representatives, and they were largely unaware that their representatives were Latino. This may be due to an absence of political discussions and access to political information within those Latinos' social networks. At the very least, it shows that descriptive representation cannot have a positive effect on Latino political attitudes if the constituents are not aware their representatives are Latino. This suggests that the effect of the presence of Latino representatives may also vary by context and merits future research.<sup>113</sup>

Chapter 5 looks at nonelectoral participation in both areas. Again, women were much more likely than men to participate in marches and protests. In terms of community work in general, respondents of both genders from East Los Angeles were much more positive than were those from Montebello about their ability to solve their area's problems. Hardy-Fanta argues that political consciousness begins at the point at which an individual understands that individual problems are a collective issue and thus need to be resolved on a collective level.<sup>114</sup> It seems that the presence of mobilizing identities among the East Los Angeles respondents, regardless of gender, motivate them to act on behalf of their neighborhoods. The long organizational history in the area also seems to be facilitating this process. In contrast, because they lack this psychological and contextual capital, the Montebello respondents have very low feelings of efficacy regarding nonelectoral participation and think that problems should be left to government. At the same time, they do not trust the government to solve problems, leaving them pessimistic about Latinos' ability to find effective collective solutions to problems.

## CONCLUSION

My findings are important for a number of reasons. First, they highlight how the interaction between identity and context can affect political attitudes and behaviors. As Jimmy Sanders points out, social capital is “useful in explicating how ethnic-based forms of social organization and collective action are embedded in interpersonal networks and how these forms of organization and action generate and distribute resources.”<sup>115</sup> However, the key is to grasp the role of interaction in this process. Social context can construct identity, but identity can also transform the social context.<sup>116</sup> Both aspects are continually influencing and transforming the other. It is important, therefore, to focus on the relational aspects of these processes and how they affect individuals’ relationships with their social group and the political system in general.<sup>117</sup>

Second, my findings show the important roles of power and stigma in shaping how members of subordinate groups understand their political “place” in the United States. That sense of place is affected by the interaction of psychological and contextual capital. As a result, group identification, feelings of efficacy, and political motivation can vary significantly among racial-group members and across contexts. This means that the issues or movements that mobilize particular Latinos will vary depending on where they live and the extent to which those things appeal to their group identity(ies). However, my findings also raise a cautionary note: The absence of affective group attachment and politicized social networks can have the opposite effect, depressing mobilization. Thus, effective mobilization strategies must be politically meaningful from the standpoint of a person’s group identity, and they must be context-specific. Our current Latino political leadership could use this important information to make more meaningful connections with their constituents and to mobilize Latinos more effectively.

Finally, my findings suggest that low participation rates among Latinos are not due simply to issues of culture and poverty. Some scholars have argued that Latino political disinterest is the result of inherent cultural traits.<sup>118</sup> Peter Skerry calls it the Mexican tendency to *aguantar*, that is, the willingness to tolerate negative experiences without combat-



ing them. Likewise, scholars who argue that socioeconomic status is the key factor driving Latinos' low participation rates assume that those rates will not change significantly until Latino incomes and educational levels increase. Both positions presuppose that a change in Latino participation patterns cannot be expected in the short term and that even long-term change would require a fundamental structural shift. This study suggests that this may not be the case.

Many Latinos are aware of policy issues and politics, but some do not feel that they, or their group, will benefit from being involved in the formal political process. This highlights the importance of identity and social context to political participation among stigmatized groups. In the case of East Los Angeles Latinos, affective attachment to their social group and feelings of group worth serve as sources of psychological capital, counterbalancing their sense of group stigma to motivate area residents to act politically. The result of this process is exemplified by the creation and success of the Mothers of East Los Angeles, a group of Latino housewives who successfully organized against the construction of a prison and a toxic incinerator in their area.<sup>119</sup> If that kind of collective orientation could be fostered in other Latino areas, either through mobilization or organizational efforts, it would promote increased participation by serving as a counterbalance to residential segregation and low socioeconomic status. This study shows that examining the nature and effects of the interaction between identity and context can help us to better understand the political integration of subordinate groups in the United States. That examination may also help us to find alternative methods for fostering their civic engagement and political empowerment.