The whole point of social science in high school [for immigrant children] really . . . is to get these kids to citizenship. What do they really need to know? And so the focus is on democracy and how every vote counts. That’s why we set it up that way, to be more involved in their local governments.

—Mr. Schroeder, world history teacher, San Diego

The simple act of voting gives voice to the needs and desires of a population and is a critical aspect of political participation and civic engagement. Voting offers a measure of citizens’ perceived agency in society. As a citizenry grows and changes, the political processes associated with its governance are expected to respond in kind. In the American democracy, this relationship requires an educated populace—a citizenry able to recognize and define not only the individual’s obligations to the greater society but also the government’s obligations to the citizen and to the society at large. American public schools have evolved to address this critical need; through social science instruction, schools educate youth for citizenship and prepare them for political participation. In this book, we unpack the role of social science instruction in the political coming of age of American youth, focusing on the children of immigrants in particular.

Historically, U.S. public schools have been tasked with the preparation of youth for citizenship and participation in the democratic process (Cremin 1951; Goodlad 1984; Marshall 1950). Schools’ role in the political preparation of American youth is relevant in the context of our current political discourse across several levels. First, social science instruction is designed to develop a democratic citizenry—that is, a citizenry that shapes its own governance. Second, the civic side of schooling may be particularly salient for children of immigrants who are coming of age in a political system in which their parents are novices as well. Third, the political preparation of children of immigrants increases in importance as the population itself grows, both in the present and into the future. And finally, schools now play these roles in...
the political preparation of students in an era of unprecedented school accountability. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education 2001) and the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program initiated in 2009, the ever-increasing pressure on educators and schools to focus on the content areas being tested often leads them to deemphasize the social science curriculum in the process.

The importance of the children of immigrants population to the future of our democracy will only increase in the coming decades, as the population is expected to grow at an unprecedented rate. This book reflects on the relationship between social science instruction and political participation among this expanding population. This relationship may prove particularly sensitive to the well-documented academic and social stratification in U.S. high schools, but here we tease social science instruction apart from the larger scope of overall academic preparation and training. Today, as schools struggle to meet federally imposed accountability measures that indirectly curtail access to social science instruction, the relationship of social science instruction to the civic and political development of children of immigrants may be especially important.

Schools and Citizenship

As our nation faces a heated debate over immigration and immigrant rights, we focus on one critical component of the schools’ role in the development of civic engagement—electoral engagement (Keeter, Andolina, and Jenkins 2002)—and on the ways in which schools shape the political participation of young people as they gain the right to vote. In order for our democracy to survive, much less thrive, high schools must prepare students to be active citizens as well as provide them with the skills that they will need for the workforce. Citizenship development requires a sense of commitment, beyond self-interest, to a larger community (Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss 2002). The civic education received by American youth shapes the future of our democracy, and among children of immigrants civic education may in fact hold even greater sway. Children of immigrants encounter the social science curriculum with a perspective distinct from those of their peers and their parents. The work presented here attempts to better understand the strengths and characteristics of the perspectives of all youth, and of children of immigrants in particular.

Social Science Instruction: Pedagogy, Content, Course-Taking, and Outputs

The early twentieth century was marked by rapid industrialization and the rise of the urban center as an immigrant receiving ground. During this pe-
Historically, the role of the school in transforming children of immigrants into American citizens grew in importance (Tyack 1974). A century later, U.S. schools remain the primary source of civic preparation, even during recent eras of accountability focused on math and reading. It is not only through direct social science instruction about civic life and democracy but also through language instruction and academic preparation that youth prepare to engage in adult civic society. As schools prepare this next generation of citizens for higher education and jobs, they develop the connections to social institutions—first to school and then to work—that they will carry into their adult lives. Adolescent students receive this academic and social preparation at a critical point in the life course, the transition into young adulthood. The high school is thus well positioned to shape that crucial transition, which defines an individual’s contribution not only to the labor force but also to our democracy.

Critics have argued that the dominant pedagogical model in the social sciences, transmission, focuses on the recitation of facts rather than on the development of critical thinking skills (Thornton 1994). Nevertheless, the social science classroom is often held up as a rich context for the development of critical thinking and inquiry through its focus on the development of civic society (Newstreet 2008; ten Dam and Volman 2004). Given its focus on the development and growth of human communities and on patterns of social dominance and renewal, the social science classroom lends itself to the development of students’ ability to question a premise, construct an argument, predict its outcome, and debate its merits.

Social science instruction is shaped not only through teachers’ pedagogical practices but also through the content of the curriculum. The curricular content of the social science classroom offers the opportunity for students to develop political and civic arguments firsthand, although the social science curriculum has traditionally focused more narrowly on the development of linear history and the impact of geography. So deep is this tradition, in fact, that schools and teachers, as Stephen Thornton (1994) points out, are relatively unwilling to adopt seemingly controversial curriculum in the social sciences. Done well, the study of governments and governance can lead to questioning of the existing political hierarchy. Consciously or not, as Diane Ravitch (2010) has argued, educators may feel pressure from politicians and policymakers not to instill in students the desire to question authority.

Content is determined in part by course sequencing, and the sequence and structure of social science course-taking have remained largely unchanged over the past century: civics or world cultures is generally taught in ninth grade, world and U.S. history in tenth and eleventh grade, and government in twelfth grade (Ross 1997). Richard Niemi and Julia Smith (2001) find that more specialized classes—such as international relations, economics, sociology, or psychology—tend to be offered to students in the later years of
high school, generally after they have fulfilled the base graduation requirements. Such patterns suggest that enrollment in social science coursework above and beyond high school graduation requirements may distinguish the students preparing for college from those focused solely on high school graduation.

The quality of social science instruction can be measured by outputs as diverse as grades, credit accumulation, and—further removed—political participation. Each measure gauges one or more aspects of youths’ civic development. To successfully prepare the next wave of citizens, educators in U.S. high schools must simultaneously develop students’ desire to become involved in the community and desire to participate in the political process, both elements of civic engagement and citizenship (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). This can be done through engaging social science pedagogy, content, and course offerings. Ultimately, successful social science programs will produce engaged citizens, but along the way more proximate measures of effective instruction, such as grades and course-taking, can be used to gauge the quality of those programs.

**Defining the Content of the Social Science Curriculum: A History in Conflict**

Ideally, the teaching of history and social science is a nonpartisan affair that allows educators to focus on developing students’ ability to critique social movements, policies, and revolutions, recognize the positions of the actors, and understand the short- and long-term impacts of these actors and events on society as a whole. In reality, however, ample evidence points to the content of the social science curriculum being shaped by the political maneuvering of policymakers rather than by educators. Ravitch (2010), for example, details the vicious political attacks levied by Lynne V. Cheney against the national social studies standards and the federal government’s response—under both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush—distancing itself from the very concept of national standards. Ravitch argues that states were motivated by this federal social studies standards debacle to produce relatively weak state-level social studies standards that make little specific mention of history or civic development. In Texas (where both authors reside), the state social studies standards were recently revised to increase the number of references to religion and capitalism and to delete any references to Thomas Jefferson, a proponent of the separation of church and state. Critics argue that the new standards have produced a laundry list to memorize and leave little room for the development of critical thinking skills. The dilution of state social studies standards nationwide serves only to weaken the civic function of school during an era of accountability that is increasingly focused on basic math and literacy skills.

With the onset of the accountability era, especially the federal No Child
Left Behind (NCLB) mandate passed in 2001, educators have been pressured to focus increasing amounts of time on the tested content areas (Jennings and Renter 2006). Initial reports warned of a decrease in, if not elimination of, classes in physical education, music, and art (Grey 2009; National Education Association 2004; Vincent 2004–2005) as schools implemented three-hour instructional blocks dedicated to the development of isolated reading and math skills. Soon researchers began to document the deemphasis of social science and science in elementary grade classrooms nationwide (Bailey, Shaw, and Hollifield 2006; VanFossen 2005), even as middle and high school teachers were faced with increasing numbers of students who had little preparation in these areas. The year 2007 saw the inclusion of science in the NCLB standards, but social science has yet to be similarly integrated. In fact, some social science educators have argued that increased attention from NCLB would not necessarily benefit their programs (Burroughs, Groce, and Webeck 2005); both district- and state-level accountability systems, they point out, exert sufficient pressure to include social science. The era of accountability has not left social science untouched; indeed, it remains a direct threat to the quality and quantity of social science instruction that students experience in U.S. high schools.

Immigrant Youth, Schools, and Civic Society

Immigrant and language minority youth make up a growing proportion of the American young adult population (Passel and Cohn 2008). For the purposes of our work, we use the terms “immigrant youth” and “children of immigrants” to refer to this rapidly growing population of youth born abroad or in the United States who have at least one foreign-born parent. We consider adolescents born abroad to one or two foreign-born parents to be “first-generation” and those born in the United States to one or two foreign-born parents to be “second-generation.” Thus, all remaining youth born in the United States to two native-born parents are “third-plus-generation.” At times we distinguish students by generational status, but for the most part we follow in the footsteps of scholars such as Grace Kao and Marta Tienda (1995), who consider having foreign-born parents in the home to be the defining feature of immigrant students’ interactions with the school system. As a result, our analyses primarily consider first- and second-generation youth together as they experience and interact with the U.S. school system, developing their civic voice.

How immigrant young adults choose to participate in the political and civic life of the country is likely to have an impact on the civic face of the nation in the future. Language policy in American education focuses on the academic preparation of language minority youth learning English, especially on their academic achievement at grade level. Language policy and planning theorists have long called for greater attention to the civic and political devel-
opment of immigrant communities through schools and schooling (Hornberger 2006; McGroarty 2002). Pointing to the growing language minority population of immigrants and the tendency of this population to be underrepresented in the polls, they stress the civic role of schooling in the discourse surrounding the education of children of immigrants. We take this school of thought one step further and delve into the civic purposes of the high school social science preparation of our youth.

The core mission of this book is to understand the relationship between adolescents’ high school experiences and their political participation as young adults, paying particular attention to children of immigrants. In exploring how schools contribute to civic society through the political development and civic engagement of youth, we recognize that civic engagement is not limited to political engagement (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995) and can pertain more broadly to the interaction of the individual with the larger community and community institutions in the form of volunteering, fund-raising, spending time in religious endeavors, and so on.

Contemporary public schools and their districts offer diverse academic opportunities to students. Schools and districts vary in size (both the number of students served and the number of schools within a local educational agency), student body composition (proportion minority, immigrant, free and reduced lunch, and so on), and funding and available resources and services, as well as in many other features that may have an impact on the quality of the education that students receive. It is important to remember that not only do schools vary in quality and caliber, but also that children of immigrants tend to be clustered in relatively poor, urban, high-minority schools. Our analyses take school context into account whenever possible, recognizing its unique role in shaping students’ educational experiences and outcomes.

Beyond their composition, resources, and services, American high schools today are more diverse in their course offerings and social organization than these broad indicators reflect (Frank et al. 2008). However, our communities and schools, including the schools attended by the children of immigrants, are also more socioeconomically stratified than ever before. We are well aware that, in contrast to previous eras, educational attainment is vital to economic success and security in today’s world, and we bring that awareness to bear on our analysis of the schools attended by the children of immigrants.

**Considering the Function of Schools: The Political Outcomes of Immigrant Youth**

After the American common school emerged in the midnineteenth century as a means by which to prepare and educate the citizenry for participation in a democratic society, public schooling expanded greatly in response to the
influx of immigrants from Europe at the start of the twentieth century (Tyack 1974). The common school’s emergence brought with it a tension between academically preparing youth to fill jobs and develop skills, on the one hand, and training them in civic engagement and political participation, on the other. Ideally, an effective school produces individuals who are academically and politically well prepared; however, educational policies and political pressures in our own era of accountability may shift the balance in our schools—away from their civic goals and toward greater focus on academic goals. We argue that the civic goals of schools are relevant to all students and that they are particularly critical for children of immigrants, whose parents may be relatively less familiar with the U.S. political system.

Over the past century, schools have served as a social and educational nexus in the community where children of immigrants come for socialization into the American mainstream (Olsen 1997). The dramatic increase in the number of children of immigrants among the student population over the past decade has brought new urgency to the role of schools in preparing students for the democratic process. Today, with the immigrant dispersion into new destinations in the rural and suburban Midwest and Southeast, many schools must address the academic, linguistic, and educational needs of children of immigrants for the first time, in preparation not only for higher education and work but for citizenship.

Although we have a relatively thorough understanding of the academic achievement of children of immigrants, particularly in traditional receiving areas, we know much less about their experiences in school or the effects of school on other aspects of their lives. Thus, not only must immigrant-receiving schools address the formal education of children of immigrants, as measured by their math, science, and social science course-taking, but these schools must recognize that they are the social fabric into which young new immigrants are integrated. And with the rapid changes in immigrant demographics, it is more important than ever before to develop our understanding of the experiences in school of children of immigrants and the impact of those experiences on their futures and on the future of our nation. For instance, what are the implications of the transformation of the immigrant population in U.S. schools for higher education and for the labor force? What is the impact of this transformation on the social integration of children of immigrants into the adolescent community? The school experiences of children of immigrants include formal and informal processes, relationships, and connections that provide important clues about their political development and future civic engagement, and our study explores political participation as an end product of these school experiences during the formative years of adolescence.

Although we certainly acknowledge that individual attributes and family background play important roles in shaping the political participation of
young adults, we focus primarily on schools as the primary site of the institutional and social integration of immigrant youth and as an aspect of their lives that can be altered to affect change. Education policy consumes a sizable share of public domestic spending and represents our largest public investment in children and their socialization. As such, the political socialization that takes place in schools is a core mission of the educational system in which we have so heavily invested, and one that may be especially valuable for children of immigrants.

Central Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis is that high school provides an excellent arena for understanding a school’s contribution to the political development of children of immigrants. For the majority of adolescent students, high school provides valuable learning opportunities. It has a rich social environment in which young people’s identities develop, behavioral norms are conveyed, and information about opportunity and responsibility is shared among students of different backgrounds and social origins. All of these functions foster a connection to the school and are important factors in adolescents’ socio-emotional development. The high school also provides formal opportunities to learn, through coursework and other academic activities. These learning opportunities and the stratification that is characteristic of the high school curriculum not only lead to differential postsecondary attainment and labor force opportunities but also affect the social science instruction that takes place.

As many others have argued, we also hypothesize that each aspect of school and schooling—the academic, the civic, and the social—promotes political engagement in early adulthood. Academic preparation and stratification shape students’ postsecondary entry into higher education and the labor market. Not only does the high school civics curriculum provide exposure to the political fabric of American democracy, but the coursework promotes political engagement, we argue, both directly through knowledge-building about the political system, identity development, and development of a sense of civic responsibility and indirectly through the effect of high school on educational attainment and labor market success. Integration into the social fabric of societal institutions beyond the family and the community often first occurs through school experiences. School activities like volunteering and extracurricular participation build social relationships and a sense of connection to the school. In combination, these three forms of integration—academic, civic, and social—encourage youth to vote in early adulthood.

Although we expect that many aspects of the high school experience, from course-taking and grades to volunteering and extracurricular involvement, would shape the political participation of children of both native-born and foreign-born parents, we hypothesize that children in immigrant families are
positioned to benefit even more from these aspects of high school, for at least three reasons. First, children of immigrants typically achieve relatively high levels of academic success and engagement compared to native-born students of similar social, economic, and racial-ethnic backgrounds. This relative academic advantage may increase the saliency of what they learn in school, both social and academic. Second, because children of immigrants are less likely to have parents who are familiar with or engaged in the U.S. political system, their school experiences have a potentially greater impact on their political engagement. Third, children of immigrants, as inhabitants of two cultures, have experience in bridging two worlds and understanding multiple perspectives; this experience resonates with the central tenets of the high school social science curriculum and foreshadows an awareness of political issues and responsibility.

As we observe in chapter 1, the growth of the population of school-age children of immigrants, coupled with the low levels of youth political participation, underscores the need to better understand how schools prepare children of immigrants for their citizenship responsibilities. This book approaches this challenge by investigating our hypotheses, taking a multi-pronged approach: we conduct rigorous analysis of quantitative data with two recent large samples of adolescents in high schools who were followed as they transitioned into adulthood, and we use qualitative interviews with teachers and students to flesh out our understanding of the possible mechanisms through which schools shape the political behavior of children of immigrants. Before providing an overview of the organization of the book, we briefly describe our data.

Introduction to the Data

The quantitative component of our study utilized data from two nationally representative longitudinal surveys of students in high school: the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS2002–2006) and the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement Study (AHAA) and its partner study, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Each of these databases contains school-based samples of adolescents and tracks them into early adulthood. Each database has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to addressing our research questions; taken together, they provide a more comprehensive and nuanced portrait of how adolescents’ high school experiences shape their political participation in early adulthood. These data sets contain rich information on students’ academic and social experiences in high school and on the high schools they attend. In particular, they provide detailed information about variables relevant to our research questions, such as student and parental nativity, students’ social science preparation, and students’ political participation (voting, voter registration, and identification
with a political party), allowing us to analyze in depth the relationship between formal and informal schooling processes in adolescence and political participation in young adulthood among children of immigrants.

Information about the nativity of the parents and the student respondents is central to our research agenda and therefore deserves mention here. Although each of the two large and nationally representative databases has both strengths and limitations, we relied on the Add Health/AHAA more heavily for several reasons. Only Add Health asks respondents their citizenship status in early adulthood. Furthermore, although both data sets include reports from parents about their nativity, Add Health has more complete data because many parents did not respond to the ELS questionnaire and so the missing parents in that survey were disproportionately likely to be immigrant parents. On the other hand, ELS offers much richer data on students’ academic achievement, both prior to entry into high school and along other dimensions. Notably, ELS administered reading and mathematics achievement tests, which are important components of achievement and provide important controls for understanding high school outcomes. Taken together, analyses of both databases, especially when the findings are consistent and suggest similar conclusions, assure us of the robustness of our findings. When possible, we have conducted parallel sensitivity analyses with both data sets and present findings that are robust, though we rarely show these supplemental analyses.

As mentioned earlier, we grouped together children of immigrants born in the United States and those born abroad. Because our central goal is to understand voting behavior, some analyses include only children of immigrants who are citizens, thus excluding first-generation immigrants who are not yet eligible to vote. Although we used only Add Health/AHAA, we did test similar models using ELS (where we probably included respondents who were ineligible to vote) and found similar results. More generally, our data analysis included testing for differences between first- and second-generation children of immigrants. Although there are some well-documented differences between these groups, particularly in their relationships with their parents and in some indicators of academic achievement (Harker 2001; Kalogrides 2009), we present these two groups of children of immigrants together for continuity, mentioning only notable differences between first- and second-generation students. Finally, we tested whether our conclusions about voting behavior varied by generational status—they did not. This result is not surprising because the group of first-generation citizens is already a select group.

In addition, we supplemented our quantitative analyses with interview-based data—collected through our New Citizens in a New Century research project—which offer a qualitative exploration of the perceptions of teachers and children of immigrants of the high school social science classroom and curriculum. This qualitative component of our study drew on interviews.
from two distinct groups of participants: nationally board-certified high school social science teachers and Latino, immigrant young adults in five key immigrant-receiving communities: New York, San Diego, Texas, Florida, and Chicago. While each region provided an ample population of Latino children of immigrants in the schools, each also offered a unique contextual perspective: that of the Cuban refugee in Florida, the historically Polish in Chicago, the Mexican in California and Texas, and the Dominican and Central American in New York. Although not central to the focus of our inquiry, these different student and teacher perspectives, as the careful reader will note, reflect the diversity of immigrant experiences and perspectives across these target communities.

Our target population of peer-recognized, board-certified teachers in these high-Latino, high-immigrant communities taught college preparatory social science courses, and the young adults took their social science courses with many of these same teachers. By carefully selecting our sample, engaging in data analysis during data collection, and using these processes to inform and shape further data collection (Charmaz 2006), we hope to shed light on the interactions between teachers and students in college preparatory social science courses, as perceived by both the teachers and the Latino young adults themselves.

These interviews were designed to complement our quantitative analysis by exploring—from both the teacher and student perspective—how the experiences of children of immigrants in the high school social science classroom shape their future political participation. For those readers interested in the sources and analytic methods utilized in this book, we describe our data, analytic samples, and research methodology in the appendix.

Overview of the Book

In chapter 1, we describe the demographic backdrop and political motivation for our study. We begin by presenting an overview of immigrants and immigration in the past decade, with a focus on the growing population of children of immigrants and the schools they attend. Then we explore trends in youth political participation across the past twenty years to explain our interest in outcomes focused on political participation.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical foundation for our focus on schools as an important force in the political socialization and education of children of immigrants. We argue that the high school in particular is a valuable venue for inquiry because it serves adolescents as they are developing their independent identities and preparing for their transition to adulthood. In contrast to most research on children of immigrants, this study focuses on what schools do. Chapter 2 describes the rationale for this perspective.

In chapter 3, we explore immigrant adolescents’ social positions with re-
pect to their peers, family, and teachers, with a focus on the high school experience. Specifically, we describe how adolescent children of immigrants compare with their third-plus-generation peers on several dimensions of social integration and connection to their school that contribute to youths’ sense of belonging in school: language preferences, extracurricular involvement, and social relationships. Our discussion of these connections sets the foundation for our exploration in chapter 4 of academic preparation and achievement among children of immigrants through an examination of their course-taking patterns and course grades. We explore these patterns not only by immigrant status but also by race and ethnicity, in order to address the racial and social stratification replicated in our school systems. Together, these two chapters provide insight into how adolescent children of immigrants are integrated into the institution of school and thus help us understand how formal and informal aspects of schooling influence their political participation in young adulthood.

In chapter 5, we narrow our focus to examine variation in social science preparation by generational status. As we have noted, social science coursework, because of its subject matter and promotion of civic values, is the formal component of schooling that we consider most relevant to adolescents’ political development, and especially the political development of immigrant adolescents. Chapter 5 introduces this argument by investigating whether children of immigrants and children of native-born parents have similar social science experiences in high school. To answer this question, we analyzed differences by generational status in social science grades and in the number of social science credits taken in high school, while taking individual and school-level characteristics into account. Although we observed no differences in social science achievement, we found that children of immigrants take fewer social science courses in high school than do children of native-born parents. However, these differences are largely explained by differences in background characteristics, such as parental education.

In chapter 6, we investigate the relationship between formal and informal schooling processes in adolescence and political participation in young adulthood. We first examine whether the children of immigrants were more or less likely than children of native-born parents to register to vote and then to vote in the 2000 presidential election; we also analyze the likelihood that they would identify with any political party. Following these analyses, we investigate whether the associations between individual and school variables and political participation differ between children of immigrants and children of native-born parents.

Although children of immigrants and children of native-born parents look no different in terms of the likelihood of their registering and voting, we discovered that the factors associated with this likelihood are indeed very different; that is, the factors associated with the political participation of children
of native-born parents are not necessarily the same as those that predict the political participation of children of immigrants. For children of native-born parents, background characteristics, such as parental education, as well as informal aspects of schooling, such as volunteering, are highly associated with political participation. For children of immigrants, however, parental education demonstrates no such predictive power for the likelihood of their registering and voting. Instead, social science coursework is the aspect of schooling most highly associated with the future political participation of children of immigrants in young adulthood. Similarly, we found that social science course-taking predicts whether students identify with a political party in early adulthood (although their coursework has nothing to do with which party they identify with). In contrast to the factors associated with registering and voting, however, course-taking predicts affiliation with a party for children of immigrants and native-born parents alike.

In chapter 7, we summarize our results and conclude with a discussion of the policy implications of our findings. High schools clearly play a role in shaping the civic development of young adults, and importantly, they appear to matter more in the civic development of children of immigrants. High school social science coursework in particular is central to the political participation of children of immigrants. Considering that children of immigrants make up an increasingly large segment of our nation’s electorate, understanding the factors that shape their political participation is critical to our nation’s civic vitality. Our findings point to one way in which schools might improve voter turnout among this growing population—by expanding access to social science curriculum in general and to advanced social science courses in particular.