

Watching and Learning from the Shadows:
Political Knowledge among DREAMer Latinos

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Abstract

The fate of undocumented youth recently overwhelmed political dialogue on immigration and its effect on those individuals remains largely unstudied. This paper extends the scope of political information analyses from potential voters to undocumented childhood arrivals. Quantitative observations come from in-depth qualitative interviews in Los Angeles County, California and the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. It finds important regional differences in the ability of immigration status to motivate cognitive engagement of politics. It questions the threat hypothesis, as highly politically knowledgeable DREAMers appear to reside in supportive environments. Such places help equip them with the ability to attribute blame and channel anger or enthusiasm. Findings suggest profound dissimilarities in the potential for political participation if and when DREAMer Latinos gain access to citizenship.

Introduction

Among the twelve million undocumented people that live in the United States, over 1.8 million are young adults that were brought to this country as children by their parents (Immigration Policy Resource Center 2012). Although the Obama administration recently recognized them as having arrived through no fault of their own, their plight is no stranger to academic circles and ethnic minority communities. Works such as *Underground Undergrads* by the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (2008) document the difficult situations many face. Individuals of different ethnicities typically arrive to the U.S. as young children, have received a K-12 education thanks to the court decision *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), and are for all intents and purposes Americans but without official recognition. This situation leaves them vulnerable to deportation, labor exploitation, traffic fines, limited access to higher education, and

the like. The result is a population of individuals who graduate high school, come of age, go through college, and enter adulthood as any other person. The difference in their case is that they do so in fear.

At the surface level this study attempts to understand the degree to which, if any, one's life in the shadows incentivizes collection of political information. Information about politics is critical in helping them learn about the implications of the laws they would inevitably break (such as driving without a license), whether threatening policy initiatives are emerging, and to keep track of ones that might help their situation. But being "politically informed" does not speak to whether that information is factually correct. Political information is most valuable when it becomes political knowledge because factual correctness provides accuracy. At the deeper level, this study is also concerned with underlying characteristics that have a hand in processing political information into knowledge. In addition to motivation, they include levels of exposure to the information and the cognitive ability to organize it internally. These characteristics explain one's cognitive complexity or expertise about politics - a concept better known as "political sophistication" (Luskin 1987).

Searching for political sophistication among individuals brought to this country as children advances the scope of political information analyses. It takes intuition from previous studies on citizen ability to wield expertise in the ballot box and applies it to those that have no access to it. Avenues of non-electoral participation open to them include political learning, discussion, organization, and other informal activities that have no citizenship requirements. Their involvement in political acts, just like other citizens, might be triggered by pull factors like campaigns or the effects of laws passed, and abundant information can help them become aware and interested in politics (Leal 2002). But unlike citizens, the immigration status of these

individuals causes them to perceive threat. Threat effectively motivates them to think about and socialize into politics differently; thus exploring the nature of their attention and retention of things political poses a useful case study in the incorporation of immigrants into American politics.

This case is useful because it also expands upon the motivational potential of identity. Policy initiatives like comprehensive immigration reform, the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, and Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) have made their identity a source of political motivation. Many respondents here, for example, adopted the personal identifier “DREAMer” and cited the slogan “undocumented and unafraid” when interviewers assured them their identity would remain anonymous. Activism is also at an all time high and support networks have sprung up nationwide around the cause of a pathway to citizenship. Their identification with this movement is important because its bearing on their attitudes and behavior can be greater than socio-economic (SES) indicators would suggest (Richardson 1999). In other words, their identity along these lines motivates their political engagement despite resource disadvantages and lack of access to citizenship.

The lives of these individuals are constantly influenced by actual and potential political developments. Their experience is set a part from that of average Americans because of their inability to participate in politics officially. It also differs from that of other undocumented residents that arrive at older ages since life in the United States is all they know. The research questions relating to undocumented Latinos brought to U.S. as children addressed here ask: what motivates their collection of political information? What is their level of political knowledge? Ultimately, does their measured sophistication explain how much they know about politics? In addition this paper discusses the implications answers to these questions have on their political

participation if and when they gain access to citizenship. Experiences are also liable to differ across states so this study compares sub-groups from California and Texas.

What follows is a multi-method analysis of observations that originate from in-depth qualitative interviews of undocumented Latinas and Latinos brought to the U.S. as children in Los Angeles County California and the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. I refer to them to as “DREAMers” for the sake of convenience. Data collection occurred in the period between the Obama Administration’s announcement of the DACA program in June and the opening of its application process in August 2012. This paper aims to answer the research questions posed as they are important since they carry the potential to shed light on patterns exist but have gone unmeasured until now.

Literature Review

Work on political cognitions goes back to Converse (1964) who finds a divide between political elites and the public. The latter, he finds, is woefully uninformed and lacks meaningful beliefs. His observations include that average individuals appear to mimic the views of their particular group, that contextual grasp and communication absorption is far from perfect, and that they sort themselves into narrow issue-publics. This and subsequent work raises the implication that levels of political sophistication or “cognitive complexity about politics” is low among the public (Luskin 1987, 7). For example, Zaller (1992) finds that those with greater cognitive engagement are more likely to be exposed to and comprehend political messages, as well as better able to resist arguments that are inconsistent with internal political predispositions.

Political sophistication is central to a knowledgeable citizenry that maintains developed, consistent, and accurate policy positions. Yet it also seems that ignorance is oftentimes rational

as average individuals largely avoid information costs associated with learning about politics (Converse 2006). In that sense the public largely depends on cognitive shortcuts dubbed “heuristics” that help in the “forming of judgments where [its] own easily accessed store of information is limited” (ibid, 306). Over reliance on them, especially among the chronically low informed, can invite manipulation by elite interests so that one acts against her best interests. Bartels (2008) shows that voter myopia and partisan biases in campaign spending are common and that Republicans whipped up mass support for the Bush Tax Cuts and repeal of the Estate Tax in the early 2000’s – policies with adverse effects on average Americans.

The current state of Latino political sophistication is much more concerning. Pantoja (2005) finds that Blacks, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans are more alike than different since their political knowledge typically ranks much lower than whites. He casts doubt on their ability to “effectively pursue political interests, make informed political choices, and create a government more responsive to their needs” (34). Pantoja along with Abrajano and Alvarez (2010) take note of underlying structural disadvantages such as minority overrepresentation in underfunded schools that reinforces low educational attainment, a small likelihood in landing occupations that promote attention to politics, and language barriers. Overall their work suggests that Latinos face structural hurdles in becoming incorporated into the American political system.

These conclusions do not necessarily mean that Latinos process political information differently. Their cognitive engagement functions just as it would for the rest of the American polity as policy issues play an important role in shaping voting preferences among politically sophisticated Latinos. On the flip side, cognitive shortcuts such as political symbolism and long-standing partisan preferences matter most to uninformed Latinos (Nicholson et al. 2006). The issue is that cognitive engagement of politics is generally low but lower among minorities. The

task at hand is to identify how cognitive engagement of politics might increase while individuals are setback by structural disadvantages.

So can individuals increase in political sophistication? Luskin (1990) articulates that the model depends one's motive, opportunity, and ability to process political information. Out of the three, Luskin finds that "sophistication depends, above all, on motivation" (1990, 351). Motivation can vary from person to person, across political contexts, and even aid in overcoming opportunity and ability related deficiencies. McCann and Lawson's (2006) analysis of Brazil, Russia, and Mexico during tenuous political periods in the 1990's confirms that levels of civic competence rely heavily on SES, but also observe the knowledge gap virtually disappears as lower class individuals became motivated to pay close attention to presidential campaigns. They find that these citizens achieved the same levels of political sophistication as those of higher classes in these transitional democracies. In essence, individuals appear capable of meeting demands put on them by their political environment in spite of resource disadvantages.

Political psychology literature operationalizes the effects of such political uncertainty by analyzing anxiety. Marcus et al.'s (2000) theory of affective intelligence argues that individuals that undergo anxiety during political campaigns are likely to become more interested, will pay close attention to news coverage, and are more likely to care about the outcome of a given election. Anxiety, they say, prompts individuals to "scan the environment for novelty and intrusion of threat" (10). Others point to political engagement as anxiety seems to merely prepare the body to act by boosting attention and disrupting rehearsed patterns of behavior. Individuals can also experience anxiety but will engage in avoidance behavior if they lack self-control or are unable to attribute blame. Political engagement is ultimately boosted when anger and enthusiasm

interact with personal resources (Valentino et al. 2011). It may be the case then that anxiety promotes attention to politics but does not promote political engagement on its own.

Latino politics literature presents another stream, which suggests that threat is effective in motivating both political interest and engagement. Pantoja and Segura (2003) find that a political climate of anti-immigrant nativism boosted political sophistication and naturalization rates among undocumented Latinos in California. The culprit was the 1994 voter approved Proposition 187 known as the “Save Our State Initiative,” which established a state-run citizenship screening system and banned undocumented immigrants from publicly funded health care, education, and other social services. Anxiety was certainly present but the added measure of threat prompted citizen and non-citizen Latinos alike in East Los Angeles to internalize stigma that the campaign placed on their identity (Garcia-Bedolla 2005). Subsequent conservative-Republican campaigns in 1990’s California ratcheted up anti-immigrant rhetoric to anti-Latino tones in the name of establishing English only instruction in public schools (Proposition 209 in 1996) and ending state sponsored affirmative action (Proposition 227 in 1998). This rhetoric was effective in reversing increasing rates of Republican partisan identification among Latinos and pushing them toward the state’s Democratic party (Bowler et al. 2006). The situation appeared so bad that some moderate whites turned to the Democrats as well. Those that naturalized during this period sought enfranchisement as an act of political expression and were more likely to feel strongly about political issues (Pantoja et al. 2001).

Pantoja et al. (2001) and Pantoja and Segura (2003) benefit from a natural experiment. Pantoja et al. notice that naturalized Latinos in Florida or Texas did not replicate patterns among those in California because those states were not undergoing similar anti-immigrant movements.

Pantoja and Segura similarly compare levels of political knowledge between naturalized Latinos in California and Texas to arrive at similar results. They miss that differences in the political culture of these states makes for unequal comparisons. Elazar (1972) explains that state governments employ different policies for similar problems because cultural tendencies vary from region to region. Texas state politics are traditional because of a long history of one-party rule, low voter turnout, social and economic conservatism. Its opposition big government, support for private business, reliance on the marketplace, and individual responsibility also upholds individualism. California politics uphold a similar focus on individualism but, quite paradoxically, also demonstrate a moralistic tendency, which maintains that government's role is that of an agent of the public interest and the purpose of bureaucracy is to advance the public good. Political competition is higher in California so policy outputs vary on ideological extremes unlike Texas.

Comparing outputs and outcomes of state immigration policies from the 1990's to 2010's reveals unequal policy environments. State government in 1990's California served the negative imperative of conservative forces while the tables are now turned in the 2010's. It now allows some undocumented immigrants in-state tuition and state financial aid for higher education, driver licenses, the right to practice law in the state, and protections that limit state law enforcement cooperation with federal immigration officials. In Texas, a nativist upsurge was restrained by Governor George W. Bush's control of the Republican Party in the 1990's. The political strategy, later articulated by Karl Rove, was to show compassionate conservatism and prime Latinos to support the GOP in the 2000 Presidential election. The only form of positive engagement to come out of the Texas state capitol, however, was permission for immigrants to

pay in-state college tuition in 2001. Subsequently Texas has undergone a proliferation of highway immigration checkpoints that limit the movements of state's undocumented population. On one hand California immigrants have experienced periods of both negative and positive engagement, while those in Texas have gone from a sort of positive neglect to negative treatment due to increased enforcement. These policy environments are unequal because they have imposed different degrees of burden on their immigrant populations, causing different starting points for their political engagement.

Two implications emerge from Pantoja et al. and Pantoja and Segura's oversight. The first is that threat is a necessary but not sufficient explanation of increased consumption of political information, observed levels of political knowledge, changes in partisan identification, and naturalization rates among Latino immigrants. I argue that the contemporary positive tone of immigrant politics evident in California fulfills Luskin's motivational criteria for individuals to become politically sophisticated. Second, comparably lower rates of political knowledge and participation among Texan immigrants cannot be solely explained by a lack of a threatening political environment. Should Texas DREAMers remain comparably low in 2012 given increases in threat, it might be the case that support mechanisms are undeveloped.

Nationally, Leal (2002) finds that Latino non-citizens maintain measurable levels of political interest and involvement. Non-citizens, contrary to common expectations, are civic minded as they "invest their time in communities in which some are not even legally allowed to live" (370). SES measures for education and income as well as time in the U.S. and love for the U.S. fail to predict their participation in informal politics. Their participation is boosted, his evidence shows, as they become more interested in politics, informed about politics, better able

to perceive differences between major parties, feel stronger about their ethnic identity, are generally younger, and plan to naturalize.

This paper takes a step back to shed light on first three of those findings among DREAMers. It pins down their motivation to become interested, the process by which they become informed as well as knowledgeable, and the overall state of their cognitive political engagement, which allows them to perceive differences between the major parties. It finds that important differences on these fronts that are attributable to region of residence. The emergence of these findings calls into question the viability of the threat hypothesis. It appears as though the difference lies in the nature of political environments that equip DREAMers with the ability to attribute blame and channel anger or enthusiasm while others encourage alienation and avoidance behavior. Overall findings point to the conclusion that political information is being gathered and processed unevenly among DREAMers. It concludes that those disparities might lead to gaps in political participation if and when they gain access to citizenship.

Theoretical Overview

First, we know that perceptions of threat can be effective in prompting Latino immigrants to become engaged with politics. As a matter of observation, threat seems to be a stronger catalyst than anxiety alone. Literature cited above shows that perceptions of threat appear effective in not only increasing interest in politics but also leading some to perform political acts. Is this the case for DREAMers as well? Answering that question requires establishing a causal connection between immigration status and political engagement. I employ a combination of summary statistics and words from respondents themselves because causation cannot be demonstrated solely by statistical methods. The objective of this section is to explore the effect of immigration status on three forms of engagement: 1. Interest in politics, an attribute that costs

respondents little to report but is indicative of an underlying motive - the linchpin to political sophistication; 2. Discussion of politics, an act that involves vocalizing concerns with friends, family, and networks of like minded others, which often results in reinforced and polarized political attitudes (Binder et al. 2009); and 3. Student organization activity, an act that involves elevating discussion to a level of purpose and commitment to mobilize others. Each of these forms of political engagement requires more commitment and exposure from a DREAMer than the last. I posit that the impetus behind these acts is a DREAMer's concern for immigration and their immigration status.

Threat Hypothesis: As concerns for immigration increases, DREAMers report higher political interest, discussion, and student organization activity.

Second, we know that Pantoja et al. and Pantoja and Segura have made use of what seemed to be natural experiments. They found that naturalized Latino immigrants outside California underperformed when compared counterparts in the state. Their explanation is that the motivational effect of threat accounts for the differences. Now, nearly two decades later, the treatment of immigrants in Texas has declined while having dramatically improved in California. The California legislature now positively engages immigrants and nativist threat has subsided. In Texas, positive neglect of the Governor Bush years gave way to increased border patrols, highway checkpoints, and proposals of Arizona like anti-immigrant bills in the state capitol. Given the increased negativity the threat hypothesis suggests heightened cognitive and political engagement should be evident among the state's immigrant residents. I argue that although that might be the case, California DREAMers will still outperform their Texas counterparts because positive policy engagement has made their "DREAMer" identity a rallying point. The environment it would seem equips California DREAMers with the ability to attribute blame and channel anger or enthusiasm to engage politics. I posit that DREAMers in California and Texas

will exhibit differences in political interest and political knowledge that are consistent with Pantoja et al. and Pantoja and Segura but for the reasons outlined above.

Regions Hypothesis: Concern for immigration, political interest, discussion, student organization activity, and political knowledge are higher among DREAMers in Southern California than counterparts in South Texas.

Third, we know that political information, political knowledge, and political sophistication are related. Luskin (2002) explains that political information measures the quantity of information held while omitting an explanation of its internal organization. Political knowledge assesses the accuracy of that information in terms of factual correctness, but also omits the same internal organization. The measurement political sophistication is an improvement upon political information since it roughly represents both the quantity and organization of one's stored political cognition. Its importance is in "conditioning of the relationship between values and policy candidate preference, which can be expected to be tighter among the more sophisticated" (220). In this summation political sophisticates should also gain the accuracy that we see in political knowledge. In the interest of ease of use, however, Luskin admits that political sophistication can be thought of as roughly the same variable as political information and political knowledge due to close correlations. For the practitioner political knowledge is readily observed with factual based quiz questions based on knowledge of the rules of the game, people and players, and the substance of politics (Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996).

In this case, one might judge the process by which DREAMers are incentivized, exposed to, and internally capable of organizing political information by using these facets to explain their political knowledge. In this paper I test Luskin's assertion. Can measures of political sophistication, which explain content and organization, explain political knowledge, the measure of content and accuracy? I posit that these linkages exist for DREAMers but are conditional upon

the regions hypothesis. That is one's region of residence, in addition to relevant variables, will highly predict observed political knowledge.

Cognitive Engagement Hypothesis: As the political sophistication measures of motivation, opportunity, and cognitive ability increase, DREAMers become more politically knowledgeable with the caveat that one's region is highly explanatory.

Data

Measures for analysis come from a survey instrument incorporated into a qualitative study on the conditions of undocumented Latinos eligible for the DREAM Act and DACA (Chavez, Lavariega Monforti, and Michelson 2014). I personally collected twenty-five interviews in the greater Los Angeles County area as Research Assistant for Dr. Melissa Michelson of Menlo College. A second research assistant from the University of Texas Pan-American collected observations in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Both areas are homes to prominent Latino immigrant enclaves and we reached members using snowball sampling.

Altogether the dataset contains fifty respondents. Twenty-five are from Los Angeles County (LA) and represent areas like East and West L.A., the Valley, and Azusa. Fourteen of them are male and eleven are female. Their mean age is 23.68 years and have been in the U.S. an average of 17.56 years. The Rio Grande Valley (RGV) group represents the areas of Edinburg, McAllen, and Brownsville. Among them there are seventeen females and eight males, their mean age is 23.32 years, and they have spent an average of 14.4 years in the U.S. Taken together, respondents are twenty-eight females, twenty-two men, their mean age is 23.5, and average time in the U.S. is 15.98 years.

Additionally, all but three respondents from the LA group are undocumented. The reason they remain in the analysis is because the three received their residency status less than a year before interviews took place. Given the recency of their granted legal status, I assume memories

are still fresh and patterns consistent to the rest that remain undocumented. Upon probing the three for confirmation, one summed it best in saying “my memories as an undocumented student are still very vivid. I learned to drive a year ago and I freak out when I see the cops, but then I’m like, ‘oh wait, I have a license.’”

Acquiring relevant data for such a project is no easy feat. Complications include locating relevant individuals, having interviewers gain respondent trust, and maintaining a calm and supportive environment. At stake is getting a respondent to admit her undocumented status and getting her to open up long enough to discuss immigration experiences. In addition this project also requires a uniquely constructed survey instrument to achieve content validity. Noteworthy here is also the small amount of observations to analyze. Since locating and gaining the trust of these individuals was a challenge, qualitative fieldwork was a necessity.

Conceptualizations and Measurements

Measures for the concepts of interest came about careful attention to content validity. The survey questions that led to their construction are available in Appendix B. The first measures are demographic and their formulation is straightforward. Interviewers recorded respondent *age*, gender, and derived *Time in the U.S.* by calculating the difference between respondent *age* and responses to the question “how old were you when you came to the U.S.?” Respondent *education* is a composite variable with the following categories: No High School Diploma, High School Diploma, Currently in Community College or Completed Some College, Currently in Four-Year University or Achieved University Degree, Currently Graduate Student or Completed Some Graduate Education, and Completed Graduate Degree. The survey also contained measures for one’s *parents’ education*, whose purpose is to inform about the general level of a

respondent's socioeconomic status and the climate of expectations in their family. This variable is composite, albeit far simpler, and combines the highest level of education completed by one's mother and/or father.

Politically related measures begin with the strength of one's *Latino identity*, whether they would like to *vote* one day, and proceed to measure one's political sophistication. The instrument measures one's general *political interest*, how often they engaged in political *discussion* with others, and rates of participation in *student organization activity* to assess the presence of a motivational incentive at each level of political engagement. The survey instrument then provided each of these measures with its own follow up question to assess 1. whether immigration motivated interest in politics (*immigration motivation*); 2. the degree to which political discussions consisted of immigration content (*immigration content*); and 3. the degree of immigration's role in participation in student organizations (*immigration related*). These measures are a unique feature of these data that facilitate the assessment of causality. The survey instrument also measures one's *exposure* to political information in form of number of days of the week one watches, reads, or listens to news of political current events (excluding news of entertainment or sports).

The measurement of one's *cognitive ability* to process political information is worthy of special attention. When analyzing Latino Political Sophistication, Pantoja et al (2005) and Pantoja and Segura (2003) use education as a proxy for this same ability, except they do so incorrently. Luskin et al. (1995) note that education and ability are not the same variable because ability directly implicates intelligence whereas education is just catch all measure for schooling. The implication is that regressing education to political knowledge will obscure the effects other variables. As Luskin (1990) puts it, *education* can take "credit for other variables' work. Students

must pick up some political information in school, but apparently do not wind up knowing much more, other things being equal, the longer they spend there.” Therefore I will exclude *education* from regression analysis in favor of Luskin’s motivation-opportunity-ability strategy for political sophistication. The measure *ability* that I use consists of post-interview interviewer assessments of respondent cognitive ability to receive and assess political information. Interviewer ratings are no doubt rough cuts that can be subjective but are known to effectively capture attributes that behave closely like intelligence (ibid).

Political Knowledge is a variable generated with the use of responses to politically factual questions. Delli-Carpini and Keeter’s (1996) criteria was useful for developing a battery of questions that derive overall general knowledge of politics. Criteria include knowledge of the rules of the game, substance of politics, and people and players. Luskin and Bullock’s (2011) intuition in discouraging “Don’t Know” responses and employing open-ended response sections for each question to avoid guessing - a method that they find is particularly effective in uncovering true knowledge - was useful. I followed their work in coding responses that were correct as such and classified those that were partially correct as incorrect altogether. Such an approach, though considered to set a high bar by some, is preferred here since complete bits of knowledge of politics provide the most relevance in engaging politics accurately.

Findings

Table 1 in Appendix A contains the means of variables *age, male, education, parents’ education, Latino identity, desire to vote, years in the U.S., exposure to political information, and cognitive ability*. The first column reports the means of respondents from Los Angeles County, the second for those from the Rio Grande Valley, and the third an aggregate average for

respondents altogether. Regional means underwent two-tailed means tests to assess the likelihood of observing a test statistic as extreme as the one that is actually observed if the null hypothesis is true. In this case, the null hypothesis is that there are no statistically significant differences in the observed demographic measures.

Failure to reject such a null hypothesis on many accounts is telling of noteworthy similarities among respondents from Los Angeles County and the Rio Grande Valley. The aggregate mean age is 23.5 years and both genders are roughly represented. Respectively, respondent *education* ranks at 3.92 and 3.32 for LA and RGV. Though a tad higher for respondents from LA, there is no statistically significant difference among the two as the aggregate mean is 3.62. This observation explains that DREAMers here have attained or are working toward a baccalaureate degree. Educational achievement among them is impressive if we consider the comparably lower level of their parents' education, which similar across both groups (1.66) at a rate between completing Elementary/Middle School and some High School.

Table 1 also demonstrates observations for additional variables that are important to understanding DREAMers. The first is their degree of *Latino identity*, which is roughly similar across subgroups and is interesting because, despite being foreign born, these individuals report strong levels of pan-ethnic attachment. This observation is the first sign that their immigration status engenders perceptions of threat. In spite of notoriously low levels of feelings of pan-ethnicity among Latinos at-large, Latino immigrants will align themselves with the larger community because of safety in numbers (Schmidt et al. 2000). Second, DREAMer *desire to vote* one day approaches near unanimity and speaks to their enthusiasm about wanting to become a part of the political process. Third, the mean number of *Years in the US* for respondents from RGV is 14.4, whereas it is 17.56 for those from LA. The difference between the two is 3.16 years

and is statistically significant. Though a seemingly short span, three years can mean that those in LA might have a head start in learning the rules and substance of their political environment.

The last two variables in Table 1 pertain to political sophistication. Respectively they measure *Exposure* to political information and a respondent's *Cognitive ability* to organize it internally. Exposure, though larger for LA respondents, is not significantly different. Its aggregate mean is 3.92 days of a week or 56 percent. This finding explains that these DREAMers are in the habit of listening to, reading, or watching news of political current events (excluding sports or entertainment news) quite often and are generally politically informed. Evidence also shows that *Cognitive ability* is no different with an aggregate mean that is on the higher end between neutral and somewhat agree to a respondent's mental capability to receive, assess, and respond to political information. An interesting note is that this measure, which is based on interviewer assessment, behaved relatively well across contexts and does not appear to be overly generous in its assessment of mainly college educated respondents.

Table 2 in Appendix A demonstrates observed levels of *Interest* and *Discussion* of politics as well as *Student organization participation*. Each of these measures is immediately followed by a question that assesses whether and/or to what degree immigration and immigration status is a motivating factor. Interviewers only asked these follow-up questions if a respondent stated any positive degree of interest, discussion, or student organization activity. The intention of these follow-up questions is to establish causality and is a unique feature of these data.

"How interested would you say you are in American politics?" is the question behind respondent *Interest*. These data show a statistically significant difference of .36 between respondents from LA and RGV. Responses by LA more likely to be closer to "quite interested" whereas RGV is "somewhat interested." Both sets also report that immigration and their

immigration status motivates their interest at near unanimous rates (measure is dichotomous and mean scores approach 1). Though there is no discernible difference among both groups at this level, it is clear that one's concern for immigration and their immigration status is compelling those in LA report higher levels of political interest than their RGV counterparts.

Accounting for the observed difference is not easy but is aided with words of respondents. One LA DREAMer explains her concern for national politics. Her motivation to pay attention and become familiar with politics and the policy process is so to understand progress made by the DREAM Act.

"[I am interested] because of my status, I need to understand how the system works... not in a superficial level but in a deep level. I need to know how congress works and how congress votes. I need to know how a filibuster works because if I don't then I won't understand why the Federal DREAM Act did not pass. By understanding politics I can understand the situation that I am in and I can also understand how I can best help myself and how I can best help my community."

Another mentioned that she was not interested in politics as a teenager but became active after she graduated high school and the consequences of her status set in. Her concern is with the unfair treatment she and others like her have experienced.

"Just being undocumented, you have to be on top of your game to know what laws are affecting you. And if there's any other group that needs your help, you know what it is like being looked down upon and you will be able to help others."

Both respondents communicate a strategy of defense when explaining why they are interested in politics. Interestingly, their responses not only inform that they are sensitive to threat but also communicate a sense of efficacy in maneuvering legal constraints and helping others. These Latinas seemed to cope with their status through empowerment, a dimensions unobserved by this study but one that is clearly missing with counterparts outside of their political environment. RGV respondents seemed to be similarly concerned with the threatening nature of their status but appeared disengaged and comparably disinterested. On whether concern for immigration and

immigration status motivated his interest in politics, an RGV DREAMer said:

"I guess that's the only reason that I look at the noticias (news)."

Both quantitative and qualitative bits of evidence lend support political interest aspect to the threat hypothesis. They also foreshadow sub-group dissimilarities put forth in the regions hypothesis, as LA respondents seem to base their political behavior on perceptions additional to threat.

Table 2 additionally shows that the propensity to discuss politics is not equally distributed among these DREAMers. Observed means account for days of the week they discuss news of political current events with others. LA respondents report to discuss politics on average 1.96 days of the week more than their RGV counterparts. Similarly striking is the degree to which discussions consisted of immigration, immigration policy, or their immigration status. LA respondents were more likely to report "A Good Deal" while RGV "Some." As discussed before, discussion of politics is a form of political engagement that requires more effort because seeking out like minded others could be a precondition. Benefits include developments of social networks and more consistent political positions. To this end, RGV respondents appear to be doing it significantly less. Upon closer inquiry, an RGV DREAMer's response gives the impression of little support from her surrounding environment.

Interviewer: "to what extent do your conversations consist of matter involving immigration, immigration policy, or your immigration status?"

RGV respondent: "Not at all, I don't bring it up because I don't even want to test the waters."

Table 2 also shows the inclination for these DREAMers to be involved in student organizations, clubs, or other campus-based extra-curricular activities. Student organization activity is important because it is one of the few types of activities that can be organized by and for DREAMers. They can provide these individuals with leadership experience and more opportunities to develop consistent political positions. Such organization also requires the most

effort, time, and exposure from these individuals. The measure for student organization activity gauges overall participation (immigration related and unrelated) to note DREAMer experience with organized groups on campus, which can aid in access to social networks and earning political efficacy essential to political participation later in life.

Again observations clearly demonstrate that student activity is not evenly distributed. The remarkable finding here is the mean difference in student activity that involves immigration issues. Observations from Table 2 note that RGV respondents were an entire unit less likely to report that their extra-curricular activities dealt with immigration in any way. A consistent observation in RGV is that immigration status mainly came up when a student group needed to travel north into Central Texas. Students often stayed behind because highway immigration checkpoints put them in real danger of discovery and deportation. A student reports that her organization dealt with immigration status

“‘some’ because sometimes we needed to go to San Antonio and they were like ‘you cannot go [because you are undocumented].’”

Immigration was more germane to LA respondents as affiliation with local student organizations was part of a larger network spanning a large area of college campuses. These individuals were able to move freely unencumbered by immigration check points.

Noteworthy as well is that immigration as motivation for student activity demonstrates the largest observed mean difference between sub-groups. The first, immigration as motivation for political interest, shows that there is no statistically significant difference between groups. The second, immigration as motivation for political discussion, records a relevant difference that is smaller than that which is observed for its ability to motivate student activity. In essence, these observations demonstrate the effect of concern for immigration or one’s immigration status increases in variability as political engagement goes from interest, to discussion, to student

activity. For LA respondents, effectiveness remains consistent as political engagement becomes more costly and it wanes in influence for those from the RGV; thus both threat and regions hypotheses are supported.

Table 3 in Appendix A contains observations to six separate measures that assess the political knowledge of these respondents. Selection criteria are put forth by Delli-Carpini and Keeter (1996): the first two measure respondent knowledge of the rule of the game; the second, knowledge of the substance of politics; and the third, knowledge of political people and players. Scores that appear in the columns are mean averages of respondents that scored correct answers unless labeled otherwise. Upon analyzing the row “Mean Count Correct” what is clear is that LA respondents are more politically knowledgeable than their RGV counterparts by a rate of 1.88 political facts. Percentage wise, the varied success rate is 61.33% for LA while just 30% for RGV. This difference is 31.33%, is statistically significant, and is consistent with findings by Pantoja et al. and Pantoja and Segura.

Close inspection of Table 3 reveals where key differences lay. The largest inter-question difference is for the section on knowledge of the rules of the game concerning the federal branch of government that makes laws (76% vs. 20% correct). The second largest difference pertains to knowledge of the substance of politics as only 24 percent in RGV (versus 60 in LA) knew that Supreme Court partially repealed of Arizona’s SB1070. In each of these sections, meaningful differences lay only with the second question. When analyzing the section on knowledge of people and players, the disparity is consistent as both measures yield a statistically significant difference of .28. The questions relate to correctly identifying John Boehner as Speaker of the House of Representatives (32% vs. 4%) and John McCain’s political party (100% vs. 72%).

These data provide a valuable first glimpse into nature of dissimilar political knowledge

levels among these groups. RGV respondents appeared partially disadvantaged in their knowledge of the rules of the game and substance of politics, but are most behind on trivial knowledge of political people and players. Their difference conveys a general lack of attentiveness to political current events that would otherwise compel them to internalize facts for future use. Though LA DREAMers come nowhere near complete knowledge at 100 percent, their 61.6 percent success rate is a good showing that suggests that the store of information they possess and might bring to bare on situations is larger and more accurate. What remains to be seen is whether political knowledge, the measure of content and accuracy is dependent upon political sophistication, the measure of content and internal organization ability.

In light of evidence presented in Table 3, what predicts DREAMer political knowledge? Table 4 in Appendix A presents a linear regression with the Political Knowledge of DREAMers as a dependent variable. I employ this particular method over maximum likelihood estimation based techniques such as negative binomial regression both because of the small number in n-cases and the dependent variable's seven possible categories, which allow it to behave as an interval variable. The adjusted r-squared of .716 suggests the posited model does a commendable job at minimizing squared sum of errors.

The first bit of evidence that stands out is the size and significance of the effect that residing in the Los Angeles area produces. Controlling for the effects of political sophistication measures interest, exposure, ability, and others important characteristics, an LA respondent is on average more politically knowledgeable than her RGV counterparts by a rate of 1.46 political facts. This finding confirms both Pantoja et al. and Pantoja and Segura's observation of disparate cognitive engagement. It does so, however, outside of the political context they posit to be driving perceptions of threat that incentivizes this behavior.

Results for the sophistication measures interest in politics, exposure to political news, and cognitive ability are instructive. The inclusion of LA residence as mentioned above also has the effect of holding regional differences at the center of Tables 2 and 3 constant for subsequent coefficients. First, regression results show that interest in politics is not statistically significant. All things equal, Luskin's model posits that motivation (or political interest in this case) should be the most important among political sophistication measures but here it is not. Approval of the threat hypothesis holds that political interest is largely based on perceptions of threat because of immigration status. The measure on its own, however, fails to stand up to statistical inquiry and what is left is a large and positive effect for LA residence, where the political environment makes the identity of these individuals salient.

At the same time, other facets of political sophistication perform comparably better. Evidence that DREAMers appear more likely to increase their store of political facts as consumption of news of political current events increases in daily increments emerges. Also, a one-unit increase in their cognitive ability to internally organize political information according, as regression results show, yields a .500 increase in correct political facts. What is apparent with these patterns is that DREAMer political knowledge (the measure of political content and accuracy) is dependent upon the presence of the sophistication measures exposure to political news and cognitive ability (content and organization). Yet the motivational impact appears to reside squarely in the region one resides in.

The varied success rate of demographic provide further context. The two demographic variables that emerge with statistical significance are parent's education and being male. Taken separately, all things equal, DREAMers with more educated parents will know more about politics. A gender gap in DREAMer political knowledge also emerges as males start off with a .9

advantage over their female peers. What is more, the measures for length of time in the U.S. and Latino identity are not significant here. Time in the U.S. provided statistical differences in Table 1's breakdown of demographic characteristics by regional residence but fails here. The inclusion of LA residence in this regression appears to have subsumed the effect of years in the US and Latino identity could have on the collection of political knowledge. The influence of these variables might come later, as Leal suggests, in concert with political interest as one becomes engaged in informal political acts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to understand the degree to which one's life in the shadows incentivizes the collection of political information. I have uncovered that the DREAMers interviewed report that concern for immigration motivates their interest in politics and that they maintain modest levels of exposure to political information. Results diverge, however, as self-reported levels of interest in politics, discussion of politics, and student organization activity are broken down by region of residence. The ability of one's concern for immigration to influence discussion of politics and student organization also diverges along the same line. These results happen despite demographic characteristics are largely similar across both groups, supporting the claim that perceived threat is a necessary but not sufficient explanation for Latino non-citizen to engage politics.

At the deeper level, this paper is also concerned with underlying characteristics that have a hand in processing political information. Specifically, it employs measures that political scientists use to explain citizen ability to wield political expertise at the ballot box to those that have no access to it. I explore cognitive political engagement in detail because it drives non-citizen participation (Leal 2002). First, I measure political knowledge and find that DREAMers

differ along the regional residence line; whereas those from LA successfully answered sixty percent of facts, others from RGV only correctly identified thirty. Since political knowledge and political sophistication can be thought of as the same variable due to close correlation (Luskin 2002), one might stop here and conclude that DREAMer political sophistication is collectively modest but unevenly distributed between sub-groups.

This paper intends to advance understanding in how DREAMers process raw political information into valuable political knowledge. It accomplishes that by using the political sophistication measures political interest, exposure to news, and cognitive ability to explain observed levels of knowledge. In doing so it takes advantage of sophistication's conceptualization as the measure for one's content and organization and knowledge as one of content and accuracy (Luskin). Regression analysis yielded statistically significant effects for measures exposure to news and cognitive ability but not political interest. The dynamics for political interest were potentially explained away by the inclusion of a DREAMers region of residence. Namely, being from LA produced the highest coefficient of the regression analysis.

These results are instructive because they explain that DREAMer political cognitive engagement is highly dependent upon one's environment. Pantoja et al. and Pantoja and Segura argue this much but their reason is that the threatening climate in 1990's California promoted increases in the sophistication of immigrants. The emergence of a similar result in contemporary times raises the implication that these scholars missed differences in state political culture that make for uneven comparisons.

The explanation for differences observed here is a contextual one. Recent California political history contains examples of both positive and negative sentiment communicated

through public policy directed at immigrants. Their engagement by the state's political forces seems to have engendered the politicization of Latino immigrant communities. The similar time span in Texas political history is nowhere near as contentious and political activation of immigrants does not appear to have kept pace.

Moving beyond the threat narrative, the upside of positive politics in California encourages DREAMer participation at the cognitive level and spills onto the political acts of political discussion and political organization. The networks that have sprung up in universities and communities encourage such activity and their supportiveness seems to have downgraded concerns for immigration from perceived threat to mere anxiety. In essence, such an environment is akin to a soup that contains the right set of ingredients, which equips these individuals with the ability to attribute blame and channel enthusiasm or anger in a sophisticated manner. DREAMers in essence become "undocumented and unafraid."

A leading concern for these findings is their generalizability outside of these contexts. Could they apply to DREAMers nationwide? My account proceeds as unbiased as possible in advancing the conditions relating to their cognitive political engagement. Analysis of these two very different political environments shows the best and worst case scenarios. It ultimately holds that residence is not everything but it matters a great deal. Simultaneously, DREAMer political sophistication in Texas might also improve upon comparing residents of Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, or Dallas to Los Angeles since they contain large ethnic enclaves that engage in urban politics. I would still contend, however, that observed levels of knowledge for those in Los Angeles would be hard to beat given differences in state political culture.

Alternative explanations to the value of political knowledge are also worth addressing.

Community members might argue that DREAMers only need to be sophisticated in navigating the politics within their community to avoid the consequences of their immigration status. The benefit of this criticism is that it is easily launched and it is hard to measure. What if, however, knowledge about politics is not useful currency in some immigrant communities? A response would be that Delli Carpini and Keeter explain that their criteria are neutral and cast a wide enough net that assesses one's likely level of exposure to this and other non-neutral and non-exclusively factual information.

The main implication of these findings is that the potential for DREAMer political engagement is not evenly distributed. This conclusion is a contribution to Leal's study on the political participation of Latino non-citizens. Data show that concern for immigration indeed motivates political interest but its effect begins to vary as political activity gets more demanding in commitment and exposure of oneself. This analysis finds that respondents exhibit statistically significant differences in self reported political interest, discussion of politics, and student organization activity by region of residence.

In explaining their political knowledge, further analysis found varied success for the political sophistication model. Exposure to news and cognitive ability matter a great deal, political interest does not, and the leading predictor is Los Angeles residence. Individuals in that environment appear better equipped to, for example, perceive differences political parties. This conclusion does not mean to say that DREAMers from the Rio Grande Valley lack the same ability. On the contrary, regression analysis shows that they too maintain the requisite exposure to politics and cognitive ability to process political information. Their issue seems to be lack of motivation to become cognitively engaged. I advance a contextual explanation that posits state political culture as the principal reason; thus rendering the threat hypothesis as necessary but not

sufficient in explaining the political engagement of these non-citizens.

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Appendix A

Table 1: DREAMer Characteristics

	Los Angeles County	Rio Grande Valley	<i>Aggregate</i>
Years of Age	23.68	23.32	23.50
Male	.56	.32	.44
Education	3.92	3.93	3.62
Parental Education	1.66	1.66	1.66
Latino Identity	4.36	4.2	4.28
Desire to Vote	.88	.96	.92
Years in US	17.56**	14.40**	15.98
Exposure	4.28	3.56	3.92
Cognitive Ability	3.88	3.76	3.82
Observations	25	25	50

1. *Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2: DREAMer Political Engagement and Immigration as Motivation

	Los Angeles County	Rio Grande Valley	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Statistical Significance</i>
Interest in Politics	1.60	1.24	.36	.046
Immigration Motivation	.76	.84	-.08	.489
Discussion of Politics	4.4	2.44	1.96	.000
Immigration Content	2.36	1.64	.72	.007
Student Activity	2.36	1.48	.88	.005
Immigration Related	2.08	1.08	1.00	.002
Observations	25	25	-	-

2.

Table 3: DREAMer Political Knowledge by Mean Correct Rate

	Los Angeles County	Rio Grande Valley	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Statistical Significance</i>
Majority Party in U.S. House	.56	.32	.24	.091
Federal Branch that Makes Laws	.76	.20	.56	.000
Health Care Law "Obamacare"	4.4	.28	.16	.247
SB1070 Supreme Court Rulling	.60	.24	.36	.009
John Boehner's Office	.32	.04	.28	.009
John McCain's Party	1.00	.72	.28	.004
Mean Correct	3.68	1.80	1.88	.000
Percent Correct	61.33	30	31.33	.000
Observations	25	25	-	-

3.

Table 4: DREAMer Political Knowledge, OLS Results

<i>Political Knowledge</i>	Coef.	S. E.
Los Angeles County	1.468***	(0.311)
Interest in Politics	0.057	(0.291)
Exposure	0.271***	(0.087)
Cognitive Ability	0.500***	(0.138)
Parental Education	0.531***	(0.190)
Male	0.909***	(0.320)
Years in US	-0.025	(0.035)
Latino Identity	-0.009	(0.203)
Constant	-1.886**	(0.878)
Observations	50	
Adjusted R ²	0.716	

4. *Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix B

5. Survey Questions

- a. [1] Los Angeles Area [2] Rio Grande Valley
- b. What is your age? _____
- c. Interviewer record gender: [1] Male [0] Female
- d. Do you have a high school diploma? [1] Yes [0] No
 - i. If yes, are you currently enrolled in college/university? [1] Yes [0] No
 - ii. If yes, at what level? [0] NA [1] Community College [2] 4-Year University [3] Graduate
 - iii. If not, what is the highest level of education completed? [0] NA, No High School [1] High School [2] Some College [3]University Degree [4]Some Graduate School [5] Graduate Degree

- e. What is the level of education attained by your Mother? [0] NA, Don't Know, No Education [1] Elementary/Middle School [2] High School [3] College [4] Graduate
- f. What is the level of education attained by your Father? [0] NA, Don't Know, No Education [1] Elementary/Middle School [2] High School [3] College [4] Graduate
- g. Are you a US Citizen, permanent resident, or other? [1] US Citizen [2] Permanent resident [3] Undocumented [4] Other
- h. How old were you when you came to the U.S.? _____
- i. How interested would you say you are in American politics? [0] Not Interested [1] Somewhat Interested [2] Quite Interested
 - i. If interested, what motivates your interest? Probe - does it involve your legal status? [1] Yes, it does [0] No, it does not
- j. Would you like to be able to vote one day? [1] Yes [0] No
- k. As a student, to what extent did you participate in student organizations, clubs, or other campus-based extra-curricular activities? [0] Not at all [1] Some [2] A Good Deal [3] A Great Deal
 - i. If so, to what extent did somehow involve your status as an undocumented student? [0] Not at all [1] Some [2] A Good Deal [3] A Great Deal
- l. How would you rate your sense of Latino identity? [5] Very strong [4] Strong [3] Moderate [2] Weak [1] Very weak
- m. How many days of the week do you listen, read, or watch news of political current events? [0] [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
- n. How many days of the week do you discuss news of political current events with others? [0] [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]
 - i. If so, to what extent do your conversations consist of matter involving immigration, immigration policy, or your immigration status? [0] Not at all [1] Some [2] A Good Deal [3] A Great Deal
- o. What is the party with most members in the U.S. House of Representatives? [1] Republican [0] Wrong Answer, Don't Know
- p. Which branch of federal government has the power to make laws? [1] Congress/Legislative [0] Wrong Answers, Don't Know
- q. What does the new health care law, dubbed as "Obamacare" do? [1] No Preexisting condition, No Coverage caps, Healthcare exchange, Mandate, Health care reform, Subsidy for Low Income, Expanded coverage for dependents in

college up to 24, etc. Generally shows knowledge of statute at center of controversy [0] Wrong Answer, Don't Know

- r. What was Supreme Court's ruling on Arizona's SB1070 Anti-Immigration law? [1] Mostly repealed, "show me your papers condition" remains [0] Wrong Answer, Don't Know
- s. Who is John Boehner? [1] Speaker of the House of Representatives [0] Wrong Answer, Don't Know
- t. What is John McCain's Party? [1] Republican [0] Wrong Answer, Don't Know

Post Interview Assessment:

- u. The respondent seems mentally capable of receiving, assessing, and responding to political information." [5] Strongly Agree [4] Somewhat Agree [3] Neutral [2] Somewhat Disagree [1] Strongly Disagree