Climbing the Political Ladder with Legal Status: Evidence from the Immigration Reform and Control Act

Andrea Bernini[*] Navid Sabet[†]

August 2025

Abstract

We study how immigrant legalization affects political representation and public service delivery, focusing on the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which granted legal status to nearly three million undocumented Hispanic migrants. Using geographic variation in IRCA exposure and newly digitized data on 12,000 Hispanic officials, we find legalization increased Hispanic representation in local government and facilitated upward mobility from school boards into municipal and county offices. These changes altered institutional behavior, shifting education spending toward capital investment and diversifying the racial composition of the teaching workforce. Immigration policy thus reshapes who governs and how public goods are allocated.

Keywords: Legalization, Political Representation, Political Mobility, Local Public Finance
JEL Classification: J15, H75, D72, I28, J61

[*]University of Oxford. andrea.bernini@economics.ox.ac.uk
[†]Goethe University in Frankfurt. sabet@econ.uni-frankfurt.de.

The bootlegged alien is by all odds the least desirable. Whatever else may be said of him: whether he be diseased or not, whether he holds views inimical to our institutions, he at best is a law violator from the outset.

– INS Annual Report, 1927, pp. 15-16, cited in Ngai (2003)

This view that the undocumented immigrant was the least desirable alien of all denotes a new imagining of the nation, which situated the principle of national sovereignty in the foreground. It made state territoriality — not labor needs, not family unification, not freedom from persecution, not assimilation — the engine of immigration policy.

– Ngai (2003)

1. Introduction

For most of U.S. history, immigration was largely open and the notion of (un)documented migration scarcely existed (Ngai, 2003, FitzGerald and Cook-Martín, 2014). Well into the early 20^{th} century, people moved into the US with minimal regulation, and the immigration system presumed eligibility rather than requiring authorization. This changed dramatically with the Immigration Act of 1924, which introduced strict national origin quotas and, for the first time, required prospective migrants to obtain visas.[1] By codifying exclusion as the default, the law created a new legal and political category: the undocumented migrant (Ngai, 2003). Over the course of the 20^{th} century, this status became a defining axis of social stratification, shaping not only migrants' access to legal residence but also their economic, social and physical well-being (Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark, 2002, Sommers, 2013, Sabety et al., 2023).

A growing body of research demonstrates the far-reaching consequences of undocumented migration. It confines individuals to low-wage, insecure employment, limits human capital accumulation, and undermines psychological well-being and physical development (Rivera-Batiz, 1999, Pope, 2016, Ornelas et al., 2020). These effects extend to children in mixed legal status families, who often internalize the fear and instability faced by undocumented parents, resulting in heightened risks of psychological distress, developmental setbacks, increased dropout rates, and long-term poverty (Sidhu and Song, 2019, Suárez-Orozco and Yoshikawa, 2013, Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez, 2015, Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2018).[2] Offering legal status, by contrast, has been shown to improve a wide range of social and economic outcomes, including educational attainment, earnings, social safety net participation, inter-generational health as well as reducing crime (Kuka et al., 2020, Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark, 2002, Cascio and Lewis, 2019, Cascio et al., 2024, Pinotti, 2017).

[1] Two important precursors are worth noting. First, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 imposed entry restrictions on migration, but, as its name suggests, it was targeted at economic migrants from a single country. Second, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 introduced numerical limits on immigration, but only as a temporary measure that was ultimately replaced and expanded by the 1924 Immigration Act.

[2] According to PEW research, as of 2022, undocumented migrants in the US reside in 6.3 million households that include more than 22 million people. They also estimate about 4.4 million US-born children under 18 living with at least one unauthorized parent. See https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/22/what-we-know-about-unauthorized-immigrants-living-in-the-us/ for details (Accessed 26 June 2025).

While the social and economic effects of legal status are increasingly well understood, its political consequences remain under-explored. Perhaps more than anywhere, political exclusion stemming from undocumented status is most visible at the level of local government. In the United States, nearly one third of public school students are Hispanic, yet only 3 percent of school board members are Hispanic, compared to 80 percent who are white.[3] At the same time, undocumented status disproportionately affects Hispanic communities: as of 2022, over 7 million of the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are from Central and South America, with the majority from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[4] The mismatch between who is served and who serves raises deeper questions about how legal exclusion shapes access to public office and the distribution of political voice.

In this paper, we study the long-run political and institutional effects of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), the most expansive immigrant legalization program in U.S. history. The IRCA granted permanent legal status (and eventually citizenship) to nearly three million undocumented immigrants, the vast majority of whom were Hispanic. Our analysis focuses on two core questions: How does legal status shape the entry, upward mobility, and tenure of Hispanic elected officials? And to what extent does increased Hispanic representation affect the behavior of local institutions?

We conceptualize the IRCA as a large-scale removal of a binding legal constraint that barred millions of immigrants from full political, economic and social participation. In the absence of legal status, undocumented immigrants face both formal and informal barriers to civic and political engagement, which spillover to households and communities of mixed legal status. Our analysis thus aims at estimating the full political return to legal status as measured by its effects on political representation, career mobility of elected officials, and institutional change.

From a theoretical perspective, the political effects of legalization are ambiguous. On the one hand, in removing entrenched barriers of inclusion for millions of migrants, it plausibly trigger wide-scale political mobilization within Hispanic communities. On the other hand, its effects may be muted or delayed if other informal barriers (e.g., socioeconomic disadvantage, institutional inertia, or discrimination) persist or because the relative size of the affected population is not large enough to affect political change. Alternatively, legalization could provoke backlash or counter-mobilization, diluting the representation of a historically underrepresented group.

We therefore consider four stylized hypotheses. First, legalization may have no measurable impact on Hispanic descriptive representation or political participation — for example, if formal status is insufficient to overcome deeper structural exclusion. Second, legalization may mechanically increase Hispanic descriptive representation by increasing the pool of Hispanic candidates but without altering career dynamics or institutional outcomes. Third, legalization may trigger broader political incorporation — reflected in higher retention, upward political mobility of Hispanic office-holders, and changes in public policy. Finally, legalization under

[3] These figures are taken from a 2018 survey by the National School Boards Association: https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/reports/K12_National_Survey.pdf. Accessed 12 June 2025.

[4] According to estimates by the Pew Research Center. See footnote 2 for source. We show later in the paper that undocumented status has disproportionately affected Hispanic migrants historically as well.

the IRCA might raise anti-Hispanic sentiment from the majority group. Our empirical strategy is designed to test between these possibilities by combining individual-level panel data with institutional and fiscal outcomes at the county level.

Our empirical strategy leverages geographic variation in IRCA exposure across U.S. counties, measured by the total number of IRCA applicants per 1,000 county residents in 1980. Because undocumented immigrants were already counted in the decennial Census and used for political apportionment prior to legalization (Sabet and Yuchtman, 2025, Sabet, 2025), this variation captures differences in legalization intensity independently from changes in key institutional features such as the number and size of local governments or underlying demographic conditions. This design therefore allows us to assess the consequences of legal inclusion on political representation and mobility, separately from shifts in government structure or population composition.

To identify the effect of legal status on political representation and mobility, we construct a new longitudinal dataset of over 12,000 Hispanic elected officials between 1984 and 1994, digitized from directories compiled by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO). These data allow us to track both entry into office and transitions across levels of government of individual officeholders. Importantly, by tracking individual officeholders over time, our baseline model employs person fixed effects, enabling us to identify the impact of legalization on political outcomes independently of broader demographic shifts, changes in the candidate pool, or individual time-invariant characteristics such as talent or ambition. We supplement our individual-level data with administrative and fiscal data from the U.S. Census and Census of Governments, full-count Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) tabulations on public employment, and an original dataset of school district ballot measures in California.

Our analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we estimate how the IRCA affected Hispanic political representation — examining the entry, career trajectories and tenure of individual officeholders as well as aggregate representation at the county level. Second, we study whether changes in representation led to policy changes, focusing on school districts — an important site of local governance with sizable budgets and independently elected boards.

We begin by documenting that the IRCA significantly increased upward political mobility among individual Hispanic officials. In high-exposure counties, Hispanic officeholders were more likely to move from entry-level positions such as school boards into more influential offices like city councils and county boards. These transitions followed a step-wise pattern and were not accompanied by increases in lateral or downward movement. We also find that mobile Hispanic officials in IRCA-exposed counties served longer in office, suggesting that legalization improved political viability, reduced attrition, or enhanced incumbency advantages. Importantly, these effects are not simply driven by mechanical increases in the pool of Hispanic officials winning office. We find that the IRCA made it harder, not easier, for Hispanic candidates to enter office — suggesting that legalization increased retention and mobility conditional on entry.

At the aggregate level, we show that IRCA exposure led to a significant increase in His-

panic representation in local government, especially on school boards. These effects are not driven by changes in population size or the structure of local government: Following Sabet and Yuchtman (2025), Sabet (2025), we confirm that the IRCA did not generate differential changes in population levels (in total or by race), patterns of county-to-county net migration, socio-demographic characteristics (including poverty rates, educational attainment, or occupational structure), or the number and size of school boards and municipal governing bodies. This is consistent with institutional features of the U.S. Census, which already include undocumented migrants in population counts. We therefore interpret the increase in Hispanic representation as reflecting broader political mobilization triggered by legalization, one that enabled not only newly legalized migrants but also entire households and communities of mixed legal status to participate more fully in civic and political life.

To further support this interpretation, we turn to individual-level data from the American National Election Survey (ANES). Linking IRCA exposure at the county level to survey respondents, we find that legalization significantly increased political participation. These effects appear across racial, age, gender, and educational subgroups — even though most IRCA recipients were not yet eligible to vote. Interestingly, we also find particularly strong effects among U.S.-born individuals with foreign-born parents. This suggests that legalization produced broader spillover effects: by reducing fear, stigma, and social isolation, it enabled civic engagement within mixed-status households.[5] We find no evidence that the IRCA sparked anti-Hispanic sentiment, further indicating that the increase in political activity was driven by expanded opportunity, not backlash.

Having established that the IRCA increased Hispanic descriptive representation, we next ask whether these shifts altered institutional behavior. In other words, did greater Hispanic representation merely diversify who held office, or did it substantively affect policy? We focus on school boards — where the effects on aggregate representation were most pronounced — and study two sets of outcomes: fiscal policy and the composition of the public education workforce.

Using detailed school district financial data (aggregated to the county), we find that boards with greater Hispanic representation in high-IRCA counties shift spending priorities away from current expenditures, in particular teacher salaries, and toward capital outlays such as school construction and infrastructure improvements. On the revenue side, we observe a decline in local tax contributions and a compensatory rise in state intergovernmental transfers. These shifts are not explained by declines in property values or demographic flight, suggesting they reflect strategic policy changes rather than external shocks. To explore the mechanisms behind these patterns, we analyze newly collected data on school district ballot measures in California from 1995 to 1999. Consistent with our budgetary findings, IRCA-exposed counties proposed more general obligation (GO) bonds — used to finance capital investments through long-term debt — while proposing fewer measures to increase local property taxes.

Finally, we examine the composition of the public school workforce using full-count EEO

[5] As demonstrated in qualitative work, undocumented status can constrain the civic engagement of entire households of mixed legal status, including U.S. citizens, by imposing fear, stigma, and social isolation (Castañeda, 2019, Sidhu and Song, 2019).

occupational tabulations for 1980 and 1990. We document that the IRCA had no effect on the overall number of teachers employed at the county level. Instead, it triggered significant shifts in the racial composition of the teaching workforce: counties with greater IRCA exposure saw increases in the share of Hispanic teachers, particularly Hispanic women, offset by corresponding declines in the share of white teachers. These patterns suggest that increased Hispanic representation on school boards may have influenced hiring patterns in ways that expanded access for Hispanic educators and brought the public school workforce into closer alignment with the communities they serve.

Our findings highlight three central mechanisms through which legalization reshapes local politics. First, it alters the incentives of Hispanic candidates to enter, remain, and advance in public office, facilitating upward mobility and longer political careers. Second, it expands political participation more broadly, activating spillover engagement within mixed-status households and communities that had previously been deterred from civic life. Third, it enhances institutional responsiveness, particularly in education, as newly included constituents influence public resource allocation and representation. Together, these mechanisms show how legal status can transform political careers, participation, and governance, even in the absence of immediate voting rights.

By examining the political and economic consequences of political inclusion, this paper contributes to a rich literature that documents the effects of voting rights on a range of economic, political, and social outcomes (Cascio and Washington, 2014, Fujiwara, 2015, Bernini et al., 2023, Bertocchi et al., 2020, Miller, 2008, Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000, Lizzeri and Persico, 2004). While enfranchisement changes the distribution of electoral power among legal residents, legalization expands the boundaries of formal membership in the polity. In this sense, legal status is a more foundational form of social inclusion that affects a persons right to work, reside legally, and access many public services as well as participate politically. Moreover, legalization generates both direct effects (on the recipients themselves) and indirect effects (on family and co-ethnic networks), in ways that differ from traditional enfranchisement shocks. We contribute to this literature by showing that legal status alone, even without formal voting rights, can significantly shape political processes, influencing political careers, representation, and institutional responsiveness.

This paper also contributes to two strands of literature on immigrant legalization. First, it builds on research examining the consequences of the 1986 IRCA — the most expansive legalization program in U.S. history. While most existing work on the IRCA has focused on labor market outcomes (Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark, 2002, Amuedo-Dorantes and Bansak, 2011, Pan, 2012), crime (Baker, 2015), human capital (Sabet, 2025), social safety net participation (Cascio and Lewis, 2019), inter-generational health (Cascio et al., 2024), and subsequent migration (Cascio and Lewis, 2025), few studies have investigated its political effects. Recent work has begun to show that the IRCA shaped federal redistricting (Sabet and Yuchtman, 2025). We contribute to this emerging literature by examining how permanent legal status affects political representation and local governance — focusing on the racial make-up of local governments, the upward mobility of Hispanic elected officials, the allocation of local public resources, and

the demographic composition of the public-sector workforce.

Second, our study complements research on the effects of temporary legal status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. These studies typically rely on survey-based proxies to identify undocumented individuals and examine impacts on educational attainment, labor market participation, and health (Pope, 2016, Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman, 2017, Kuka et al., 2020, Giuntella and Lonsky, 2020). A key distinction between these two legalization regimes lies in the incentives they create: while DACA confers limited, conditional protection, IRCA offered permanent and unconditional legal status — enabling long-term political engagement, stability, and investment in public life (Sabet, 2025). By leveraging administrative data on the universe of IRCA applicants, we provide new evidence on how *permanent* legal status affects not just individual political and economic outcomes, but also the structure and composition of local political institutions.

Finally, our paper also speaks to the literature on political selection by introducing new evidence on how legalization affects not just the representation, but also the political advancement of underrepresented groups. Existing work has documented the consequences of increased representation among women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004), Black officeholders (Bernini et al., 2023, 2024), and Hispanic representation on school boards (Fischer, 2023). We build on and extend this research by examining both the descriptive and mobility dimensions of Hispanic representation in response to immigrant legalization, and how that representation affects outcomes at the level of public schools and public school finances.

2. Historical Background

2.1 The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act

The 1986 IRCA is the most expansive legalization program in U.S. history, and to date, the only federal legislation that has granted permanent legal status to the undocumented population. Signed into law by the Reagan administration, the IRCA introduced a three-part framework: sanctions on employers who knowingly hired unauthorized workers, increased funding for border enforcement, and, most notably, a broad amnesty program for undocumented migrants residing in the country before 1982 (Chishti and Kamasaki, 2014). A separate provision also legalized certain agricultural workers who had completed at least 90 days of seasonal farm work prior to May 1986 (Rytina, 2002).

Roughly 3 million people applied for legalization under the IRCA, and about 2.7 million (90 percent) were ultimately granted permanent residency, beginning in 1989. Hispanics accounted for roughly 86 percent of all applicants, making the IRCA primarily a shock to the legal and civic status of Hispanic communities.[6]

Although the IRCA provided a path to citizenship and voting rights, it was primarily a shock to legal status. This is made evident in Table A.1 which shows naturalization and legalization rates under the IRCA. As shown, the take up of legal status was immediate, beginning

[6]These figures are based on the Legalization Summary Tapes of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

as early as 1989. By 1991, nearly 90 percent of the immigrants who were granted legal status under the IRCA — some 2.5 million immigrants — received it; the approximate 200,000 remaining immigrants who received legal status under the IRCA did so, by and large, by 1994. Naturalization patterns, by contrast, look different. In total, just 33 percent of the IRCA migrants — or around 815,000 immigrants — went on to naturalize as U.S. citizens by 2000 and the majority of these happened in the mid to late 1990s. The lag between legalization and naturalization rates under the IRCA reflects the institutional feature of the IRCA that mandated a five year window between legal status and application for citizenship.[7] It also highlights the IRCA as primarily a shock to legal status rather than voting rights.

Importantly, the IRCA offered permanent and unconditional legal status, distinguishing it from later programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provide only temporary and conditional protections (Kuka et al., 2020). The difference in legal status under the two programs creates starkly different incentives: permanent and unconditional residency is more likely to encourage civic and political engagement, enabling long-run investments in public life and institutional participation in ways that temporary or conditional status does not.

2.2 Hispanic Political Representation

2.2.1 Historic Representation

By 2020, Hispanic Americans made up 19 percent of the U.S. population — up from just 5 percent in 1970 — making them the country's largest minority group.[8] Yet despite this sustained demographic growth, Hispanic political representation and participation remained disproportionately low, particularly in the decades preceding the 1986 IRCA. As shown in Table 1, only 36.3 percent of voting-age Hispanics were registered in the 1980 general election, and fewer than 30 percent voted — rates 20 to 30 percentage points below those of Black and white Americans, respectively.[9]

One of the most significant barriers to participation was lack of legal status. Undocumented immigrants were not only barred from voting but often excluded from broader forms of political behavior, including protesting, community organizing, or contacting elected officials (McCann and Jones-Correa, 2016). In 1980, the undocumented population in the U.S. was estimated at 2 million, 78 percent of whom were Hispanic (Table 1, Panel D). The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) identified undocumented status as the single greatest obstacle to Latino political empowerment in the 1980s and 1990s (NALEO, 1994).

This disjuncture — growing numbers amid persistent marginalization — has been de-

[7] In Online Appendix A, we also provide plausible reasons why there is such a lag between legalization and naturalization.

[8] See *PEW Research Center*, "A Brief Statistical Portrait of U.S. Hispanics" (2022): https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/06/14/a-brief-statistical-portrait-of-u-s-hispanics/. Accessed 27 June 2025.

[9] Table 1 presents race-specific data on the voting-age population (Panel A), registered voters (Panel B), and actual voters (Panel C).

scribed as the "paradox of presence" (DeSipio, 1996, Barreto, 2010). Panel E of Table 1 shows that, as of 1987, fewer than 1 percent of local officeholders were Hispanic, while nearly 90 percent were white. Even Black Americans, who also faced structural barriers, held more than twice as many local offices. Within this context, the passage of IRCA marked a potentially transformative moment: by offering a path to legal status — and eventually, citizenship — for nearly 3 million undocumented Hispanic immigrants, it sought to reduce institutional exclusion and release the civic potential of a politically underrepresented group.[10]

2.2.2 Historic Preferences over Representation

To understand how legalization might shape political representation and policy outcomes, we begin by assessing the baseline preferences and political orientations of Hispanic communities at the time of IRCA. For this, we turn to the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) — a survey of 2,817 Hispanic respondents conducted between July 1989 and March 1990, precisely as IRCA's legalization process was underway.

The LNPS offers valuable insight into the political behavior and policy priorities of the Hispanic population in the U.S. during this period. As shown in Figure B.1 of Appendix B, a large majority of respondents expressed that they were more likely to vote when a Hispanic candidate was on the ballot — especially in contests where the opponent was an Anglophone. This underscores a strong ethnic affinity in political behavior, often interpreted as evidence of shared identity-based representation preferences. Hispanic candidates were seen not merely as viable alternatives, but as motivational catalysts for political participation itself.

In terms of policy preferences, the survey reveals broad and consistent support for educational investment. Most respondents favored increased public funding for education generally, and showed particularly strong support for bilingual education — an area of relevance to immigrant communities and one often discussed in local school board debates. These views suggest a community-oriented policy agenda emphasizing access, equity, and cultural inclusion — areas where representation in school boards and local governance could translate into tangible institutional shifts.

Taken together, these findings imply that the expansion of legal status under IRCA was likely to facilitate both political participation and the pursuit of policy changes aligned with longstanding community preferences.

2.2.3 Legal Status and Hispanic Representation: Direct Effects

A growing body of individual narratives underscores the broader political opportunities unlocked by legalization. Across the country, formerly undocumented immigrants who later acquired citizenship have entered local politics — often beginning with school boards, then moving on to city councils, mayoral positions, or other regional offices. Many cite their undocumented experience as a formative influence on their decision to run for office.

[10] In President Reagan's words, IRCA would have improved the lives "of a class of individuals who now must hide in the shadows, without access to many of the benefits of a free and open society."

These stories illustrate the first mechanism we identify: legalization reshapes the incentives of Hispanic candidates to seek and retain higher office. By removing a binding constraint, legal status not only made candidacy formally possible but also encouraged greater political ambition, upward mobility, and sustained tenure.

For example, Nirva LaFortune, who arrived from Haiti as an undocumented child, became the first Haitian American elected official in Rhode Island, served on a local school board, and later launched a mayoral campaign focused on educational equity. When asked about her motivation to serve public office, she explained the following:

> I grew up here, graduated from the city's public schools, and am now raising my children here. I know what it means to not have access to certain things and the many barriers that exist for low-income families. I want to eliminate those barriers and create a more equitable city so that everyone can thrive.[11]

In Online Appendix C, we detail several other examples that illustrate the important role that *legal status* plays in directly increasing Hispanic political representation and upward political mobility.

2.2.4 Legal Status and Hispanic Representation: Spillover Effects

Although most IRCA beneficiaries could not vote until the mid-1990s, the law may have boosted political participation indirectly. Legalization lifted barriers not only for the recipients themselves, but also for their families and broader social networks — many of whom were already U.S. citizens. A large literature demonstrates how lack of legal status generates fear, stigma, and political disengagement not only among the undocumented but also among family members who are US citizens in mixed-status households (Gonzales, 2016, Castañeda, 2019, Suárez-Orozco and Yoshikawa, 2013). These dynamics can give rise to a phenomenon scholars term being "undocumented by association" (Castañeda, 2019). One U.S.-born respondent explained:

> Everybody is undocumented in my family, so that's all I really grew up knowing. Even though I am a U.S. citizen, I got used to those norms, so in a way it was like I was undocumented myself (Castañeda, 2019).

Survey data from the Legalized Population Survey indicate that 42 percent of IRCA recipients had at least one citizen family member prior to legalization, and 13 percent had additional citizen relatives beyond spouse and children.[12] These patterns imply that the IRCA expanded participation among a broader population already eligible to vote, particularly in mixed-status

[11] See *The Brown Daily Herald*, "Councilwoman Nirva LaFortune Runs for Mayor of Providence" (April 2022). Available at: https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2022/04/councilwoman-nirva-lafortune-runs-for-mayor-of-providence-on-platform-of-education-reform-affordable-housing. Accessed 30 June 2025.

[12] Figures derived from the first wave of the Legalized Population Survey (1989), conducted by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

households. As we show later in the paper, US born individuals in plausibly mixed-legal status households exhibit differential increases in political participation and engagement in counties with higher IRCA exposure — suggesting that legalization shaped not only the behavior of those directly affected, but also that of co-ethnic citizens embedded in their social and familial networks. This highlights another key mechanism of our work: the spillover effects of legal status in households and communities of mixed legal-status.

3. DATA

This section describes the primary variables used in the analysis, and their sources.

IRCA Applicants. Our main treatment variable is the number of IRCA applicants per 1,000 residents in a county, with county population measured using the 1980 Census. Application data come from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Legalization Summary Public Use Tape.[13] The INS suppresses county identifiers for applications filed in counties with fewer than 25 applicants or fewer than 100,000 residents. To address this, we follow the imputation strategy developed in Sabet and Yuchtman (2025), Sabet (2025), which estimates applicant counts in suppressed counties using demographic characteristics. Importantly, our core findings are qualitatively and quantitatively unaffected when excluding imputed counties from the analysis, suggesting that the results are not sensitive to this data limitation. Figure A.1, Panel A, maps the distribution of IRCA applicants across counties in 1980, providing visual context for the geographic variation underlying our identification strategy.

Hispanic Elected Officials. Data on Hispanic political representation come from the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), specifically its National Roster of Hispanic Elected Officials for the years 1984 to 1994. This panel covers over 12,000 Hispanic officials serving at the school district, municipal, county, state, and federal levels.[14] For each official, we observe the office title, level of government, gender, and office address, which we use to assign officials to counties.[15] These data allow us to construct measures of political mobility, including transitions across levels of government (e.g., from school board to city council), within-level transitions, and tenure in office. Figure 1 provides summary visualizations: Figure 1a shows the number of Hispanic officials by level of government, while Figure 1b illustrates their evolution over time. Figure A.1, Panel B, plots the number of counties with at least one Hispanic elected official in the NALEO dataset, illustrating the geographic diffusion of representation over time. Table D.1 presents summary statistics for the NALEO sample. During the pre-legalization period (1984–1988), 80% of Hispanic officials were male. The majority served on school boards (44%), followed by municipal (39%) and county-level

[13] By using administrative data on the universe of actual applicants, we overcome challenges of using proxies to measure legal status from the IRCA as documented in Cascio et al. (2024).

[14] Following a change in methodology, NALEO has tracked officials since 1996 through its National Directory of Latino Elected Officials. We focus on the 1984–1994 archive but expanding the analysis to include more recent data does not alter the main findings.

[15] For state and federal officials, addresses refer to district-level contact offices and are linked to counties accordingly.

(13%) offices. Officials served an average of 2.24 years across all offices, and 2.16 years within a single office. While upward mobility is rare, it is nonzero: 0.65% of all officials—and 0.50% of board officials specifically—advanced to a higher level of government.

Local Public Finance. To examine fiscal outcomes, we use data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Government Division Historical Finances of Individual Governments, available (for all counties) in five-year intervals. In this paper, because we observe the largest changes in representation at the school board level, we focus on financial data from 1987 and 1997 for school districts, aggregated to the county level. These records include detailed breakdowns of district revenues and expenditures, allowing us to track shifts in resource allocation over time.

Public School Teachers by Race. To assess changes in the composition of the teaching workforce, we use the 1980 and 1990 Census Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Special Tabulations. These files provide full counts of individuals by race, gender, and occupation at the county level.[16] We use them to track the racial and gender composition of public school teachers across counties, enabling us to examine whether IRCA-induced representation translated into changes in hiring patterns within public education.

County Controls and Outcomes. We compile a set of county-level controls from the 1980 U.S. Census and related intercensal datasets.[17] These include total population, racial and ethnic composition, age distribution, income, and poverty rates. We further incorporate data on local government structure from the U.S. Census Bureau's Historical Databases on Government Organization, which report counts of municipal, township, and school district governments at five-year. Using data from 1977 to 1997, we are able to verify that IRCA exposure is not systematically correlated with changes in the number or size of local government units. Finally, to assess compositional shifts in the political landscape, we use the Popularly Elected Officials database (1987 and 1992), which provides counts of elected officials by race and level of government. These data help confirm that changes in Hispanic representation are not mechanically driven by expansion in the number of elected positions.

4. IRCA AND THE POLITICAL MOBILITY OF OFFICIALS

4.1 Empirical Strategy

We begin by examining how the legalization of nearly three million undocumented migrants under the IRCA affected the political trajectories of Hispanic elected officials. Specifically, we identify the impact of the IRCA on the political mobility and tenure of Hispanic public officials.

[16] Prior to 1980, full count data from the census are only available in 1950.

[17] County-level covariates are drawn from the U.S. Counties Database (https://shorturl.at/pgL24) and intercensal population estimates (https://shorturl.at/D6Qws), accessed April 8, 2025.

In our main specification, we estimate the following individual-level regression:

$$y_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + \beta(IRCA_{c,1980} \times P_{89}) + \theta(X_{c,1980} \times P_{89}) + \lambda_i + \delta_c + \zeta_{st} + \epsilon_{c,t} \quad (1)$$

Here, $y_{i,t}$ denotes a measure of political mobility, entry or tenure for official i in year t (both outcomes are more precisely defined in the description of each respective analysis). The key regressor is an interaction between the total number of IRCA applicants in a county per 1980 population (standardized), $IRCA_{c,1980}$, and a post-treatment indicator, P_{89}, which equals one in years 1989 and onward — after legalization was conferred — and zero otherwise. We control for: i) individual fixed effects (λ_i) to absorb time-invariant characteristics across officials; ii) county fixed effects (δ_c) to account for fixed county-level differences; and iii) state-by-year fixed effects (ζ_{st}) to net out contemporaneous policy shocks at the state level. Additionally, we interact P_{89} with a rich vector of pre-treatment county characteristics, $X_{i,1980}$, including the size of the county's population, the foreign population, the school age population (between 5 and 19), the size of the population that is white, Black, and Hispanic, as well as the log of income and the size of the total population living in poverty and as well as child poverty. Standard errors, $\epsilon_{c,t}$, are clustered at the county level. Importantly, because we utilize individual panel data and exploit person fixed effects, β is able to capture the effect of legalization on our outcomes independently of such factors as political talent and ambition, broader demographic changes or shifts in the candidate pool.

4.2 Political Mobility

Table 2 presents the estimated effects of IRCA exposure on political mobility. We examine four levels of government: i) school boards; ii) municipality-level offices; iii) county-level offices; and, iv) state and federal positions. The outcome is an indicator that is one if an individual Hispanic official is listed as having served in more than one level of government.

Overall Mobility: Column (1) of Table 2 presents the baseline result. We find that the IRCA leads to a 0.8 percentage point increase in the likelihood of an individual official moving between tiers of government, which corresponds to a 50 percent increase relative to the pre-treatment mean. In Columns (2) and (3), we disaggregate our mobility measure into downward and upward mobility, respectively. As shown, the entire effect is driven by upward moves, with no measurable increase in downward transitions. These findings suggest that legalization expanded pathways to higher office without affecting downward mobility to lower-tier positions.

In Online Appendix Figure E.1, we run an event study and verify that Hispanic individuals in high-IRCA counties are not on following different trajectories prior to the IRCA. Using the latest approaches, we reject that the pre-period coefficients: i) follow a linear trend; and, ii) are jointly (or individually) distinguishable from zero.

Local Governing Boards: To sharpen our analysis, we focus on officials elected to local governing boards — school boards, city councils, and county boards — which collectively account for the majority of Hispanic elected officials in our sample (Figure 1). Additionally, these positions are critical levers of local governance, controlling budgets, educational policy, and public service delivery (Bernini et al., 2023). Local boards also serve as stepping stones for higher political office (Black, 1972, NALEO, 1994).[18]

Restricting the sample accordingly (Table 2, columns 4 – 6), we find that IRCA-induced effects are even stronger within the subset of officials serving on local governing boards. The coefficient on overall mobility increases by roughly 50 percent compared to the full sample, and upward mobility remains statistically significant and accounts for the entire mobility effect. By contrast, downward mobility remains null. This pattern reinforces the interpretation that legalization unlocked vertical political opportunities, particularly within entry-level offices. When comparing mobility across board-level offices (column 6) versus broader public offices (column 3), transitions appear more fluid within boards.[19] This is consistent with theories of political career ladders: local boards reduce entry barriers and provide governance experience, facilitating gradual movement to more influential positions (Black, 1972).

Upward Mobility Dynamics: We further explore the specific trajectories that underpin upward mobility using disaggregated transitions in Table 3. First, in column (1), we replicate our central result, showing a 1.2 percentage point increase in upward mobility when considering all board-to-board moves. We then disaggregate these transitions in columns (2) to (7) to better understand their dynamics. The most pronounced effect — both in magnitude and statistical significance — occurs in moves from school boards to city councils (column 2). A one standard deviation increase in IRCA exposure is associated with a 1 percentage point increase in this transition. This finding suggests that school boards serve as a launching platform for higher offices (NALEO, 1994). By contrast, our estimates in column (3) suggest that, while moving from school boards to county councils is possible, it is less common than the transition from school boards to municipal-level councils. This finding indicates that the career ladder from school boards to higher (local) offices takes place step-wise rather than through large leaps.

Transitions to state or federal office from any lower tier (columns 4, 6, and 7) are effectively zero, both by 1994 and in extended specifications through 2000 (Table F.5). This suggests that such moves are (exceedingly) rare within our dataset (indeed, the mean dependent variable as shown in Table 3 is zero). The transition from municipal to county offices (column 5) is positive but modest (0.2 percentage points) and only marginally significant. The municipal-to-state (column 6) and county-to-state (column 7) channels remain insignificant and small, reinforcing the notion that political mobility for underrepresented groups follows a step-wise

[18] In Table F.3, we also include Hispanic officials elected to local governing boards and any state or federal positions. In separate analysis, we check that state and federal positions are not driving our estimates.

[19] As shown in Table F.2, the coefficient is robust to considering a more parsimonious specification, which includes a smaller set of controls.

trajectory.[20]

These results suggest that movement through the political hierarchy occurs incrementally, from school board to city council and, subsequently, to county board, rather than through large leaps to higher office. By 1994, the school board-to-city council pathway emerges as the primary conduit of Hispanic upward mobility following legalization. This highlights the institutional importance of entry-level public offices as incubators of political advancement.

Robustness: We conduct a series of robustness checks in Online Appendix F to assess the strength of the relationship between legal status and the upward mobility of Hispanic elected officials across local governing boards.[21] These include: *i*) sequentially excluding from our sample politically mobile officials as well as counties by IRCA exposure; *ii*) omitting border states and counties covered by Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act; *iii*) dropping counties with imputed IRCA information; and, *iv*) extending the post-treatment window to the year 2000. We also test for robustness to alternative covariate controls (as well as no controls), non-linear functional forms, the exclusion of outlier counties based on population or IRCA share, and by redefining our measure of IRCA intensity to the total number of IRCA applications per 1980 *working age* population (i.e., between 15 and 64) as in Cascio and Lewis (2019). Across this broad array of specifications and sample restrictions, the estimated effect of the IRCA on political mobility remains stable, both in terms of magnitude and statistical precision.

4.3 Entry

As shown in Figure 1b, the number of Hispanic elected officials — especially school board members — increased steadily over time. This raises a concern that our findings on upward mobility might simply reflect a mechanical effect: with more individuals entering office, more may naturally move up. To assess this, we construct a balanced panel of Hispanic officials observed in the NALEO roster between 1984 and 1994 and estimate the individual-level model in equation 1. The dependent variable is a binary indicator equal to one if a Hispanic official appears in the roster in a given year and zero otherwise.

Figure 3 presents the results. We find that IRCA exposure is associated with a decline in the likelihood that a given Hispanic official holds office in a given year, even as upward mobility increases. This result holds across all local offices —– school boards, city councils, and county boards — and confirms that the increase in mobility is not driven by a mechanical expansion in the number of Hispanic officeholders. Instead, it reflects a shift in who advances once in office.

[20] These results do not rely on the sample period; extending the analysis to 2000, as shown in Table F.5, produces very similar results.

[21] Running these tests for overall mobility yields very similar results.

4.4 Tenure

We now focus on whether legal status affects the tenure of Hispanic officials — measured as the number of years an official appears in the NALEO roster. Figure G.1 reports the β coefficients from equation 1, capturing the relationship between IRCA and tenure between 1984 and 1994.

In aggregate, we find no increase in total time served post-1989 (row 1), with the average time spent as an official remaining around three years. Similarly, when examining tenure within a specific role (row 2), we find no significant effect, suggesting that officials do not remain in the same position longer after IRCA legalization, either across all offices or when focusing specifically on board and council positions (row 3).

When we split the sample by whether officials moved up the political ladder, however, a more nuanced picture emerges. Officials in IRCA-exposed counties who exhibited upward mobility serve longer in their boards or council positions (row 4). Specifically, we estimate a roughly 4-month increase in tenure — a 17 percent rise over the two year pre-treatment average time in office. In contrast, officials who remained in the same school board, city council, or county council position throughout 1984-1994 exhibit no change in tenure (row 5). These findings imply that legalization not only enabled upward movement but also increased staying power for those on that trajectory.

5. IRCA and County-Level Representation

5.1 Empirical Strategy

We next assess whether IRCA-induced legalization affected aggregate Hispanic political representation at the county level. To do so, we estimate an event study specification that traces the dynamic impact of IRCA exposure on the share of Hispanic elected officials over time:

$$y_{c,t} = \sum_{j=t, j\neq 1988} \beta_j (IRCA_{c,1980} \times D_j^t) + \theta(X_{c,1980} \times P_{89}) + \delta_c + \zeta_{st} + \epsilon_{c,t} \tag{2}$$

Here, $y_{i,t}$ denotes the number of Hispanic officials elected in county i and year t, normalized by the total number of elected officials in that county in 1987. The main regressor interacts the county's standardized IRCA applicant share in 1980 with a set of year indicators, D_j^t, omitting 1988, the year immediately preceding legalization, as the reference. The model includes county fixed effects (δ_c) and state-by-year fixed effects (ζ_{st}). Covariates $X_{c,1980}$ mirror those used in individual-level analysis and are interacted with a post-1989 indicator, P_{89}. We evaluate two outcomes using this framework: i) the number of Hispanic school board members; and, ii) the number of Hispanic officials serving on municipal and county governing boards. Each is scaled by the total number of elected officials at the corresponding level in 1987 to create a consistent baseline for comparison.

5.2 Event Study Results

Figure 2 presents the results. Panel A focuses on school boards. We find a clear, statistically significant post-IRCA increase in the share of Hispanic school board members in high-exposure counties. Importantly, we can reject that the pre-treatment coefficients follow a linear trend ($p-$value of 0.84) with a test of joint significance yielding a $p-$value of 0.91.

Panel B examines municipal and county boards. While the coefficients are smaller and less precisely estimated, two post-treatment years show statistically detectable increases in Hispanic representation. The estimated coefficients show no evidence of pre-trends (the $p-$values that test whether the pre-period coefficients (i.) are jointly significant or (ii.) follow a linear trend are 0.52 and 0.34, respectively). While the post-IRCA trajectory is modestly upward, the average post-treatment effect, captured by a difference-in-differences point estimate, is not statistically distinguishable from zero.

These results suggest that IRCA had the largest effects at the school board level — likely reflecting lower barriers to entry, smaller constituency sizes, and the proximity of school boards to the family and community networks most affected by legalization. In contrast, gains at higher levels of local government were more limited and appeared more gradually over time.

6. Mechanisms and Alternative Explanations

In this section, we explore potential mechanisms behind our main findings and empirically assess alternative explanations. Specifically, we rule out competing accounts based on structural changes in local government or demographic shifts and provide direct evidence that legalization increased political engagement among foreign-born migrants as well as native-born citizens with foreign-born parents (i.e., a proxy for citizen-children in mixed legal status households).

6.1 Ruling Out Changes in Governance Structure

One potential confound is that the observed rise in Hispanic representation may reflect changes in the structure of local government — such as an increase in the number of school boards or expansion in available seats — as a result of legalization rather than genuine gains in political access or competitiveness. If IRCA-exposed counties created new governing bodies or expanded existing ones, increases in representation might simply reflect a larger set of opportunities. We test this explanation using data from the U.S. Census Bureau on the number of local government units and elected officials, aggregated to the county level. We focus on school boards and municipal governments and report results in Online Appendix Table H.1.

Three key findings emerge. First, IRCA exposure is uncorrelated with the number of school boards or municipal governments in a county. Second, we find no evidence that IRCA-affected counties increased the number of elected positions on school boards after 1989. Third, and most strikingly, the number of municipal-level elected officials actually declined in counties

with higher IRCA exposure. This strengthens the interpretation that the observed gains in Hispanic representation reflect genuine political advancement, not a simple expansion of available offices.

Taken together, these results rule out structural expansion as a driver of our findings. Instead, they point to increased competitiveness and civic engagement among Hispanic candidates — likely facilitated by the removal of institutional and psychological barriers following legalization.

6.2 Ruling Out Demographic Change

A unique institutional feature of the U.S. is that undocumented immigrants are included in census population counts used for apportionment (Sabet and Yuchtman, 2025). As a result, the IRCA changed the legal composition of local populations without directly affecting the size or structure of those populations. In this respect, prior work has shown that IRCA exposure is not associated with changes in a wide range of county-level demographic or socioeconomic characteristics — including population size, racial composition, income, crime rates, age structure or federal transfers — as well as measures of both internal (county-to-county) and international migration (Sabet and Yuchtman, 2025, Sabet, 2025). We replicate and summarize (some of) these findings in Table 4. Specifically, we estimate the following model:

$$\Delta y_{c,1990-1980} = \alpha_0 + \beta IRCA_{c,1980} + \theta X_{c,1980} + \delta_s + \epsilon_{c,t} \tag{3}$$

Here, $\Delta y_{c,1990-1980}$ denotes the change in covariate y in county c between 1980 and 1990 (or between 1980 and 2000), and δ_s represents state fixed effects. Across both time windows (Panel A: 1980–1990; Panel B: 1980–2000), we find no relationship between IRCA exposure and county-to-county migration (columns 1 to 3), total population (column 4), racial composition (column 5), or socioeconomic indicators such as poverty, education, and occupational structure (columns 6 to 8).

Of course, These results do not imply that IRCA applicants were randomly distributed across space — pre-existing Hispanic settlement patterns and proximity to the Mexican border clearly shaped exposure. However, conditional on state fixed effects and baseline controls, these findings indicate that the IRCA did not lead to additional, differential changes in county characteristics over time. This finding is consistent with Cascio and Lewis (2025), who show that IRCA's family sponsorship provisions did not trigger large-scale or disproportionate chain migration. Together, these results reinforce our interpretation that observed political changes are not confounded by demographic shifts.

6.3 Political Engagement

We propose that the increase in Hispanic representation was driven by broader political activation within legalized communities. Legalization may have expanded political opportunity not only for the newly legalized themselves, but also for their families and social networks —

including U.S.-born citizens living in mixed-status households. By reducing fear, stigma, and civic exclusion, the IRCA likely enabled wider engagement with political institutions.

To test this, we use individual-level data from the American National Election Survey (ANES) and estimate a modified version of equation 2, interacting county IRCA exposure with a post-1989 indicator, P_{89}. We examine two outcomes: political participation and attitudes toward Hispanics. Results are presented in Figure 4.

The top panel of the figure shows effects on political participation, measured as the number of campaign-related activities reported by respondents. We find that IRCA exposure significantly increased participation, with effects holding across subgroups defined by race, age, gender, and education. Crucially, these effects arise despite the fact that most IRCA beneficiaries were not yet eligible to vote, underscoring the importance of indirect and spillover channels. We probe this mechanism further by examining heterogeneous effects by family background. The strongest effects emerge among native-born respondents with foreign-born parents, who report sharply higher levels of political participation in high-IRCA counties. Smaller, but still positive effects appear for native-born individuals in native-born households. For foreign-born respondents, participation also increases, though the estimates are noisier due to smaller sample sizes.

In the bottom panel, we examine public attitudes using the ANES "feeling thermometer" toward Hispanics. The outcome is coded as one if a respondent reports a score above 50 (on a 0-100 scale), indicating warm sentiment, and zero otherwise. We find no evidence that IRCA exposure increased anti-Hispanic sentiment; if anything, there is modest evidence of increased positive sentiment, particularly among native-born individuals with immigrant parents.

Together, the findings in Figure 4 are consistent with a broader spillover model of political inclusion: by reducing exclusion and precarity within mixed-status households, legalization significantly increased political participation — including among individuals in plausibly mixed-status households — without provoking backlash. In this way, the IRCA reshaped the demand side of politics by expanding the base of participation and amplifying the political voice of communities previously constrained by legal exclusion.

7. IRCA and School District Outcomes

Thus far, we have demonstrated that the IRCA significantly expanded Hispanic descriptive representation at the local level, particularly on school boards and subsequent upward political mobility. These representational shifts raise a central question: Did greater Hispanic representation merely diversify who held office, or did it affect how public institutions operated? Understanding the downstream consequences of political inclusion is key to assessing the broader impact of legalization on local governance.

We focus on school districts (aggregated to the county) as a central arena of institutional change. Persistent racial disparities in educational outcomes in the United States reflect not only inter-district inequalities — in part mitigated by state and federal redistribution (Card

and Payne, 2002, Papke, 2005) — but also stark intra-district disparities that remain largely unaddressed (Cascio et al., 2013, Lafortune et al., 2018). These internal gaps are shaped by the spending decisions of locally elected school boards (Fischer, 2023), which wield control over hiring, budgeting, and capital allocations. If newly elected Hispanic officials were responsive to historically under-represented communities with large undocumented populations, one might expect to see shifts in fiscal priorities and resource allocation strategies at this level of government.

To test this, we estimate the parameters shown in model 3, but use as our outcome the natural log of financial data differenced in the decade between 1997 and 1987.

7.1 Revenues and Expenditures

We begin by examining how increased Hispanic representation affected the financial management of school districts. Table 5 presents estimates for expenditures and revenues between 1987 and 1997.

We find no evidence that overall spending (total district expenditures) levels changed in this ten-year window (column 1). However, the composition of spending shifted significantly. In 1987, 92.8% of school district budgets were allocated to current expenditures, with only 7.2% devoted to capital investments. Counties with greater IRCA exposure experienced a 0.6 percentage point increase in capital outlays (column 4), matched by a 0.6 percentage point reduction in current expenditures (column 2). The decline in current spending was driven largely by cuts to teacher salaries (column 3) — the largest expenditure category, accounting for approximately 60% of all school district budgets in 1987. On the capital expenditure side, the gains were concentrated in infrastructure projects, particularly new school construction and facility upgrades. Given the low baseline share of spending earmarked to construction-related projects (4.3%), a 0.6 percentage point increase represents a substantial relative change (column 5). These findings suggest a strategic shift in fiscal priorities: school boards in IRCA-affected counties reallocated resources away from recurrent costs like salaries and toward long-term physical investments.

Turning to the revenue side, we find a parallel re-balancing. While total revenues did not significantly change (column 6), local tax revenues declined by 0.4 percentage points, and reliance on state intergovernmental transfers increased by 0.3 percentage points (albeit not statistically significant).[22] Together, these patterns indicate that Hispanic-led school boards became slightly less reliant on local property taxes, turning instead to state funding while simultaneously reallocating spending priorities away from wages and toward capital infrastructure.

In Online Appendix Figure E.2, we examine district expenditure in a time-varying manner. As shown, the pre-treatment coefficient on the share of spending allocated to current expenditures is indistinguishable from zero ($p-$value: 0.22). In the post-treatment period, however, school districts in counties with greater IRCA exposure show a noticeable decline in the share of current expenditures — by 0.3 percentage points in 1992 ($p-$value: 0.11) and 0.6 percentage

[22] In 1987, local taxes comprised 33.2% of district revenues, compared to 55.0% from state sources.

points in 1997 ($p-$value: 0.00) — relative to the 1987 baseline. These results point to a reallocation of fiscal priorities coinciding with increased Hispanic representation on school boards.

7.2 Interpreting the Shift Away from Local Taxation

A natural question emerges: how can this shift away from local tax revenue be reconciled with increased infrastructure investment? Two explanations are plausible.

The first is a mechanical one: changes in the local property tax base — for example, "white flight" or declining home values — could have led to a shrinking revenue pool without any deliberate policy changes. The second is political: newly elected Hispanic officials in school boards may have strategically shifted fiscal policy away from regressive local (property) taxation in response to the needs of lower-income, immigrant-heavy constituencies, while still pursuing capital investment salient to the local electorate through alternative — debt-driven — channels. We consider the validity of these competing explanations in turn.

Demographic Flight: First, we examine demographic and housing data. Results, shown in Online Appendix Figure I.1, indicate no evidence of significant white flight in IRCA-exposed counties during the relevant period, nor do we find systematic declines in local property values. These null results suggest that the decline in local tax revenues is not mechanically driven by changes in the tax base, but rather reflects shifts in fiscal strategy by local school boards.

Policy Change: Second, we investigate whether local politicians changed the types of revenue-generating mechanisms they pursued. Using newly collected data on school district ballot measures in California (1995-1999), we categorize measures into five types: i) general obligation (GO) bonds; ii) property tax increases (e.g., parcel taxes); iii) ordinance changes; iv) recall measures; and, v) other items. For each type, we construct both extensive (any proposals) and intensive (number of proposals) measures.[23]

Table 6 shows that a one-standard-deviation increase in IRCA exposure is associated with a 7.5% rise in GO bond proposals — long-term debt instruments used to finance school construction and capital upgrades without raising immediate taxes. This shift aligns with broader trends in Table 5, suggesting that newly empowered Hispanic officials favored spreading tax burdens over time.[24] In contrast, property tax-related measures declined by 11.4% in high-

[23] We restrict the sample to this period to capture the medium-run consequences of IRCA while avoiding contamination from the 2000 passage of Proposition 39, which lowered the voter threshold for approving school bonds from two-thirds to 55%, and thereby significantly altered the political economy of school finance (Alvord and Rauscher, 2021). Proposition 39, passed in November 2000, lowered the super-majority requirement for passing school bond measures, resulting in a surge of successful bond approvals statewide. By stopping in 1999, we avoid conflating changes driven by IRCA with institutional reforms that dramatically increased the ease of bond financing.

[24] For example, a 1995 ballot in Amador County Unified School District asked voters to approve $30 million in bonds for school construction and facility upgrades (Amador County, July 11th, 1995): "Shall Amador County Unified School District incur a bonded indebtedness of $30,000,000 with an interest rate not to exceed the statutory limit, to raise money for the following purposes (which purposes are hereby united and shall be voted upon as one single proposition), as follows: (a) permanent repairs, alterations and additions to existing facilities; (b) the construction of purchasing of buildings; (c) the permanent improvement of grounds; and (d) the acquisition of real property?" (CEDA, 2025).

IRCA counties. These taxes fund ongoing expenses like teacher salaries but disproportionately burden low-income households. The drop reinforces the view that Hispanic-led boards avoided regressive taxation and deprioritized current expenditures.[25] We find no significant effects for ordinance, recall, or advisory measures — e.g., district boundary changes, board member removals, or votes on bilingual education — indicating that fiscal, not procedural, change was most salient.

Of course, because these data are limited to the post-IRCA period, the evidence is necessarily suggestive. Still, the size and policy importance of California — over half of all IRCA applicants reside in the state and, as of 1990, it led the country with the largest number of school districts (1,155) — make this analysis nevertheless informative as to how legalization may have shaped local fiscal decision-making. Overall, these results suggest that the decline in local tax reliance was not driven by demographic flight or eroding property values, but rather by strategic fiscal choices. The patterns point to how legalization and institutional inclusion can shape local revenue strategies and reflect responsiveness to the needs of historically underrepresented communities.

7.3 Teacher Workforce Composition

Given the reduction in current spending, and in particular on wages and salaries, we next examine whether IRCA-induced changes in school board composition affected the size and demographic profile of public school teachers. Using full-count data from the 1980 and 1990 Census Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) tabulations, we estimate long-difference models of teacher employment by race and gender.[26]

Table 7 summarizes the results. We find no significant change in the total number of teachers (column 1), indicating stable staffing levels. However, columns (2)–(10) reveal large shifts in composition. A one-standard-deviation increase in IRCA exposure increases the Hispanic share of teachers by 0.67 percentage points — equivalent to a nearly 40% increase from the 1980 baseline of 1.7%. This rise is offset primarily by a decline in white teachers (–0.62 points), with a smaller increase in Black teachers. The effect is concentrated among women: the Hispanic female teacher share rises by nearly 1 percentage point, while the white female teacher share falls by a comparable amount. No statistically significant changes are observed among male teachers.

These shifts suggest that changes in school board leadership may have influenced recruit-

[25] For example, the $90 per parcel tax proposed by the New Jerusalem School District (San Joaquin County, July 11th, 1995) funds general operations like teacher salaries and instructional aides: "Shall the New Jerusalem Elementary School District, for the benefit of its students, be authorized to impose a qualified special tax to be used for the maintenance, reinstatement and development of quality programs and services to include: (a) Employment of Classroom Teachers (b) Employment of Instructional Aides at the rate of $90 per year for three (3) years on each parcel of land, developed or undeveloped, within the District, excluding property exempted by law, and shall the appropriations limit of the District be raised for three (3) years by the amount received from the tax?" (CEDA, 2025).

[26] Unlike standard Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS), the EEO Tabulations are derived from the full decennial census, offering a complete picture of the occupational distribution by race, sex, and geography. They are particularly valuable in capturing changes among smaller groups, such as Hispanic teachers at the county level, where sample-based estimates would be noisy and imprecise.

ment and hiring practices, whether by expanding access for Hispanic educators, prioritizing diversity, or reacting to new budget constraints. One interpretation is that reduced salary budgets led to attrition among more senior (and often white) teachers, while newly hired Hispanic teachers filled those roles at lower pay. Alternatively, the presence of Hispanic board members may have reduced barriers to entry for Hispanic job seekers, improving match quality in local labor markets.[27]

8. Conclusions

The legalization of nearly three million undocumented immigrants under the 1986 IRCA represents one of the most consequential expansions of legal status in U.S. history. While prior research has explored the labor market and social integration effects of legalization, less is known about its downstream political consequences, particularly how legalization alters the institutions through which democratic governance occurs. Understanding whether, and how, access to legal status reshapes local political power and public institutions is critical for evaluating the broader democratic implications of immigration policy.

We show that legalization led to a durable increase in Hispanic political representation, particularly in entry-level positions such as school boards. It enabled greater upward mobility and longer tenures among Hispanic elected officials, especially those who moved from school boards to city councils. These effects were not driven by demographic changes or institutional expansion, but by increased political viability among historically excluded communities. Importantly, the political changes we observe were not confined to office-holding alone. School districts in high-IRCA counties altered their fiscal strategies, reallocated spending priorities, and diversified the composition of the teaching workforce.

Our findings highlight three mechanisms behind these shifts. First, legalization changed the incentives of Hispanic candidates to seek and retain higher office. Second, it expanded political participation through spillover engagement in mixed-status households and communities. Third, it enhanced institutional responsiveness, as newly included constituents shaped fiscal choices and hiring practices. Together, these mechanisms demonstrate how legal status can transform political careers, participation, and governance — even in the absence of immediate voting rights. As contemporary debates over legalization, enfranchisement, and inclusion continue to shape immigration policy in the United States and abroad, our results suggest that expanding legal status is not only a question of rights, but also of political power — and that who governs may ultimately change what is governed, and for whom.

[27] In Table J.1, we confirm that no parallel changes occurred in the racial composition of college professors — consistent with school boards having no jurisdiction over higher education. This helps isolate the effect to settings where boards have direct policy influence. Reassuringly, Panel B of Table J.1 confirms that our findings for teachers remain robust even when restricting the sample to counties with non-zero counts of professors, underscoring that the observed shifts are localized to primary and secondary education settings, where board influence is most direct.

REFERENCES

Acemoglu, D. and J. A. Robinson (2000). Why Did The West Extend The Franchise? Democracy, Inequality, and Growth in Historical Perspective. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115(4), 1167–1199.

Alvord, D. and E. Rauscher (2021). Minority Support: School District Demographics and Support for Funding Election Measures. *Urban Affairs Review* 57(3), 643–674.

Amuedo-Dorantes, C. and F. Antman (2017). Schooling and Labor Market Effects of Temporary Authorization: Evidence from DACA. *Journal of Population Economics* 30, 339–373.

Amuedo-Dorantes, C., E. Arenas-Arroyo, and A. Sevilla (2018). Immigration Enforcement and Economic Resources of Children with Likely Unauthorized Parents. *Journal of Public Economics* 158, 63–78.

Amuedo-Dorantes, C. and C. Bansak (2011). The Impact of Amnesty on Labor Market Outcomes: A Panel Study Using the Legalized Population Survey. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 50(3), 443–471.

Amuedo-Dorantes, C. and M. J. Lopez (2015). Falling Through the Cracks? Grade Retention and School Dropout Among Children of Likely Unauthorized Immigrants. *The American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings* 105(5), 598–603.

Baker, S. R. (2015). Effects of Immigrant Legalization on Crime. *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings* 105(5), 210–213.

Barreto, M. A. (2010). *Ethnic Cues: The Role of Shared Ethnicity in Latino Political Participation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Bernini, A., G. Facchini, M. Tabellini, and C. Testa (2024). Sixty Years of the Voting Rights Act: Progress and Pitfalls. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 40(3), 486–497.

Bernini, A., G. Facchini, M. Tabellini, and C. Testa (2025). Black Empowerment and White Mobilization: The Effects of the Voting Rights Act. *Journal of Political Economy*, Forthcoming.

Bernini, A., G. Facchini, and C. Testa (2023). Race, Representation and Local Governments in the US South: The Effect of the Voting Rights Act. *Journal of Political Economy* 131(4), 994–1056.

Bertocchi, G., A. Dimico, F. Lancia, and A. Russo (2020). Youth Enfranchisement, Political Responsiveness, and Education Expenditure: Evidence from the US. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 12(3), 76–106.

Black, G. S. (1972). A Theory of Political Ambition: Career Choices and the Role of Structural Incentives. *American Political Science Review* 66(1), 144–159.

Card, D. and A. A. Payne (2002). School Finance Reform, the Distribution of School Spending, and the Distribution of Student Test Scores. *Journal of Public Economics* 83(1), 49–82.

Cascio, E., N. Gordon, and S. Reber (2013). Local Responses to Federal Grants: Evidence from the Introduction of Title I in the South. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 5(3), 126–159.

Cascio, E. and E. Lewis (2019, April). Distributing the Green (Cards): Permanent Residency and Personal Income Taxes After the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. *Journal of Public Economics* 172, 135–150.

Cascio, E. and E. Lewis (2025). Opening the Door: Immigrant Legalization and Family Reunification in the United States. *Journal of Labor Economics*, Forthcoming.

Cascio, E. U., P. Cornell, and E. G. Lewis (2024). The Intergenerational Effects of Permanent Legal Status. *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper.

Cascio, E. U., E. G. Lewis, and C. Zhang (2024). How Good are Proxies for Legal Status? Evidence from the Legalization of Two Million Mexicans. *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper.

Cascio, E. U. and E. Washington (2014). Valuing the Vote: The Redistribution of Voting Rights and State Funds Following the Voting Rights Act of 1965. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(1), 379–433.

Castañeda, H. (2019). *Borders of Belonging: Struggle and Solidarity in Mixed-status Immigrant Families*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

CEDA (2025). *California Elections Data Archive*. Sacramento, CA: California State University, Institute for Social Research.

Chattopadhyay, R. and E. Duflo (2004). Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India. *Econometrica* 72(5), 1409–1443.

Chishti, M. and C. Kamasaki (2014). IRCA in Retrospect: Guideposts for Immigration Reform. *Migration Policy Institute*, Issue Brief.

DeSipio, L. (1996). *Counting on the Latino Vote: Latinos as a New Electorate*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

Fischer, B. (2023). No Spending Without Representation: School Boards and the Racial Gap in Education Finance. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 15(2), 198–235.

FitzGerald, D. S. and D. Cook-Martín (2014). *Culling the Masses: The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fujiwara, T. (2015). Voting Technology, Political Responsiveness, and Infant Health: Evidence from Brazil. *Econometrica* 83(2), 423–464.

Giuntella, O. and J. Lonsky (2020). The Effects of DACA on Health Insurance, Access to Care, and Health Outcomes. *Journal of Health Economics* 72, 102320.

Gonzales, R. G. (2016). *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* (1 ed.). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Jasso, G. and M. R. Rosenzweig (1986). Family Reunification and the Immigration Multiplier: US Immigration Law, Origin-country Conditions, and the Reproduction of Immigrants. *Demography* 23(3), 291–311.

Kossoudji, S. A. and D. A. Cobb-Clark (2002). Coming Out of the Shadows: Learning About Legal Status and Wages from the Legalized Population. *Journal of Labor Economics* 20(3), 598–628.

Kuka, E., N. Shenhav, and K. Shih (2020). Do Human Capital Decisions Respond to the Returns to Education? Evidence from DACA. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 12(1), 293–324.

Lafortune, J., J. Rothstein, and D. Schanzenbach (2018). School Finance Reform and the Distribution of Student Achievement. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 10(2), 1–26.

Lizzeri, A. and N. Persico (2004). Why Did the Elites Extend the Suffrage? Democracy and the Scope of Government, with an Application to Britain's "Age of Reform". *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119(2), 707–765.

McCann, J. A. and M. Jones-Correa (2016). In the Public but Not the Electorate: The "Civic Status Gap" in the United States. *Journal of the Social Sciences* 2(3), 1–19.

Miller, G. (2008). Women's Suffrage, Political Responsiveness, and Child Survival in American History. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123(3), 1287–1327.

NALEO (1994). *National Roster of Hispanic Elected Officials (1994)*. National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), Education Fund.

Ngai, M. M. (2003). The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien: Immigration Restriction and Deportation Policy in the United States, 1921–1965. *Law and History Review* 21(1), 69–108.

Ornelas, I. J., T. J. Yamanis, and R. A. Ruiz (2020). The Health of Undocumented Latinx Immigrants: What We Know and Future Directions. *Annual Review of Public Health* 41, 289.

Pan, Y. (2012). The Impact of Legal Status on Immigrants' Earnings and Human Capital: Evidence from the IRCA 1986. *Journal of Labor Research* 33(2), 119–142.

Papke, L. (2005). The Effects of Spending on Test Pass Rates: Evidence from Michigan. *Journal of Public Economics* 89(5), 821–839.

Pinotti, P. (2017). Clicking on Heaven's Door: The Effect of Immigrant Legalization on Crime. *American Economic Review* 107(1), 138–68.

Pope, N. G. (2016). The Effects of Dacamentation: The Impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals on Unauthorized Immigrants. *Journal of Public Economics* 143, 98–114.

Portes, A. and J. W. Curtis (1987). Changing Flags: Naturalization and its Determinants Among Mexican Immigrants. *International Migration Review* 21(2), 352–371.

Rivera-Batiz, F. L. (1999). Undocumented Workers in the Labor Market: An Analysis of the Earnings of Legal and Illegal Mexican Immigrants in the United States. *Journal of Population Economics* 12(1), 91–116.

Rytina, N. (2002). IRCA Legalization Effects: Lawful Permanent Residence and Naturalization Through 2001. *Office of Policy and Planning, INS*, Technical Report.

Sabet, N. (2025). Out of the Shadows and Into the Classroom: Immigrant Legalization, Hispanic Schooling and Hispanic Representation on School Boards. *CESIfo*, Working Paper.

Sabet, N. and N. Yuchtman (2025). Identifying Partisan Gerrymandering and its Consequences: Evidence From the 1990 US Census Redistricting. *Journal of Political Economy: Microeconomics*, Forthcoming.

Sabety, A., J. Gruber, J. Y. Bae, and R. Sood (2023). Reducing Frictions in Health Care Access: The ActionHealthNYC Experiment for Undocumented Immigrants. *American Economic Review: Insights* 5(3), 327–346.

Sidhu, S. S. and S. J. Song (2019). Growing Up with an Undocumented Parent in America: Psychosocial Adversity in Domestically Residing Immigrant Children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 58(10), 933–935.

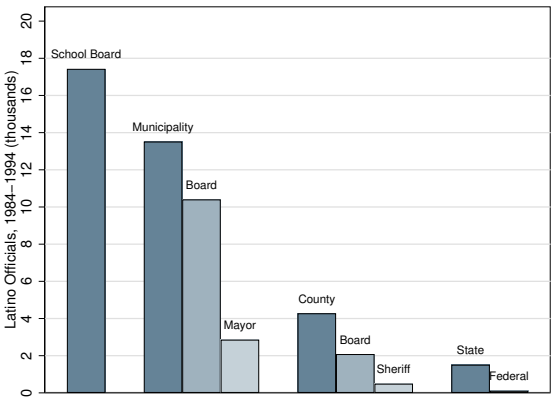
Sommers, B. D. (2013). Stuck Between Health and Immigration Reform—Care for Undocumented Immigrants. *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Suárez-Orozco, C. and H. Yoshikawa (2013). Undocumented Status: Implications for Child Development, Policy, and Ethical Research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 2013(141), 61–78.

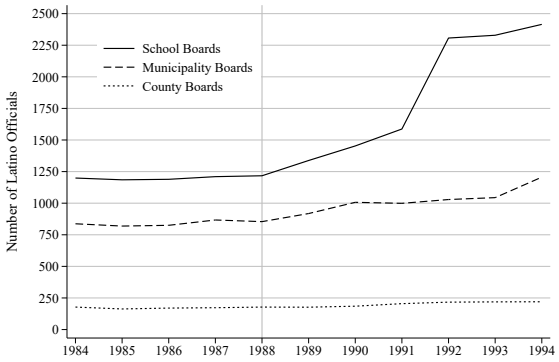
Warren, R. and J. S. Passel (1987). A Count of the Uncountable: Estimates of Undocumented Aliens Counted in the 1980 United States Census. *Demography* 24(3), 375–393.

FIGURE 1: Latino officials, 1984-1994

(A) Number of officials

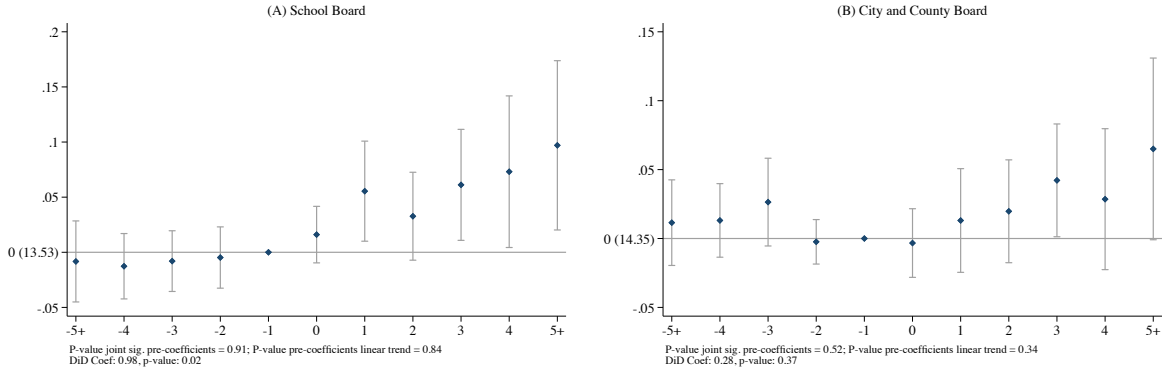


(B) Evolution over time



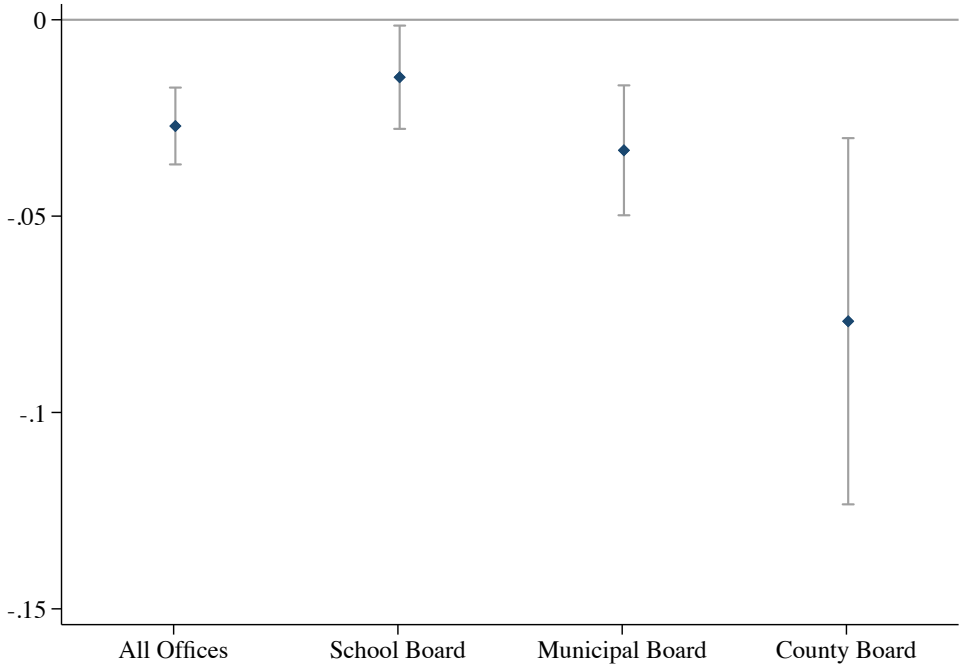
Notes: Figure (A) presents the total number of Hispanic officials from 1984 to 1994, categorized by government level and office. In Figure A, official is counted in each year they appear and again if they change office. Figure B plots the total number of Hispanic officials across school district, municipal, and county governing boards over time.

FIGURE 2: County-level Hispanic Representation



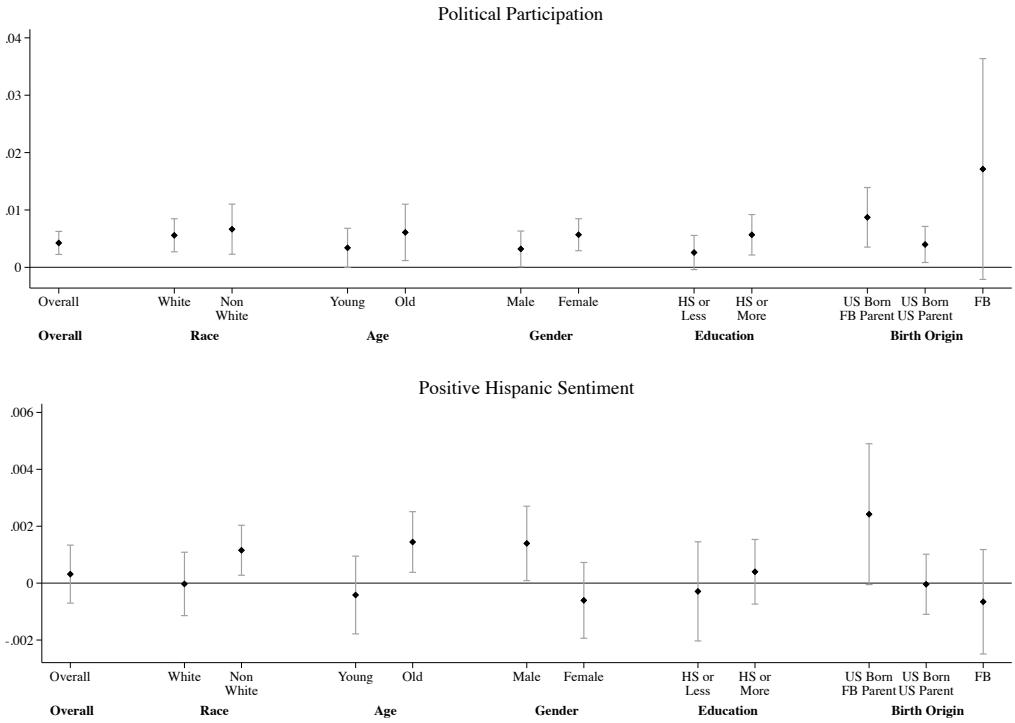
Notes: The figures plot the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrant's at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and year dummies. The outcome in panel (A) is the total number of Hispanic school board officials elected to office per total number of school board officials measured in 1987. In panel (B), the outcome is the total number of Hispanic city and county board officials per total number of city and board officials measured in 1987. The regressions also include the interaction between 1980 county controls and time-dummies. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty as well as county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent.

FIGURE 3: Likelihood of Winning Office



Notes: The figures plot the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrant's at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and P_{89}, which is one for time periods before 1988 and one for years on or after 1989. The outcome is an indicator that is one if a Hispanic official appears in the NAELO roster in a given year (for any office or by particular office, as noted) and zero otherwise. The regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and P_{89}. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty as well as individual fixed effects, county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent.

FIGURE 4: Individual Political Engagement and Attitudes toward Hispanics



Notes: The figures plot the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrants at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and P_{89}, which is one for time periods before 1988 and one for years on or after 1989. The outcome in the top panel is a count of the number of times a respondent reports participating in political campaign activities; in the bottom panel, it is an indicator that is one if a person feels warmly towards Hispanics and zero otherwise. The regressions also include the interaction between 1980 county controls and P_{89}. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty as well as county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent.

TABLE 1: 1980 Voting and Population by Race

Total	White	Black	Hispanic
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Over 18 population (thousands)			
157,085	137,676	16,423	8,210
Panel B: Registered Voting Population (thousands)			
105,035 (66.9%)	94,112 (68.4%)	9,849 (59.9%)	2,984 (36.3%)
Panel C: Voters (thousands)			
93,066 (59.2%)	83,855 (60.9%)	8,287 (50.5%)	2,453 (29.9%)
Panel D: Undocumented Population (thousands)			
2,057	—	—	1,608
Panel E: Local Elected Officials (1987)			
97.47 —	88.2 (90.0%)	1.83 (1.8%)	0.82 (0.8%)

Notes: Information from Panels A, B and C are taken from the U.S. Census Bureau Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1980, specifically Table 2. Panel D is taken from Table 2 of Warren and Passel (1987) and data from Panel E is taken from the 1987 U.S. Census Bureau Popularly Elected Officials. Panel B and C percentages refer to share of total population in Panel A.

TABLE 2: Mobility of Latino Officials Across Levels of Government

Dep. Variable:	Mobility Across Levels of Government					
	Any Latino Official			In Governing Boards		
	Any	Down	Up	Any	Down	Up
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
$IRCA_{1980} \times P_{1989}$	0.008**	–0.000	0.008**	0.011***	–0.001	0.012***
	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.015	0.007	0.008	0.020	0.014	0.006
Adj. R-Square	0.46	0.47	0.45	0.67	0.83	0.42
Clusters	472	472	472	418	418	418
Officials	9135	9135	9135	6929	6929	6929
N	39836	39836	39836	28294	28294	28294

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (1). The dependent variable is the mobility of all Latino officials (columns 1-4) and all Latino officials elected in local governing boards (columns 5-7). All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE 3: Upward Mobility of Latino Officials in Governing Boards

Dep. Variable:	Upward Mobility						
From:	Any	School Boards			City		County
To:	Any	City	County	Higher	County	Higher	Higher
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
$IRCA_{1980} \times P_{1989}$	0.012***	0.009**	0.004	0.000	0.002*	–0.001	0.007
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.007)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.006	0.006	0.002	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.008
Adj. R-Square	0.42	0.33	0.47	0.50	0.38	0.08	0.67
Clusters	418	295	295	295	315	315	129
Officials	6929	3901	3901	3901	2352	2352	433
N	28294	16071	16071	16071	10175	10175	1813

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (1). The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE 4: Demographic Changes

Dep. Variable:	Demographic Changes							
	Migration			Population		Characteristics		
	In-	Out-	Net	Total	Hisp.	No Educ.	Poverty	Low-Skill
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Panel A: 1990-1980								
$IRCA_{1980}$	157.958	–180.967	346.183	–625.025	136.495	0.202	0.192	–0.201
	(265.419)	(169.543)	(226.596)	(750.323)	(348.330)	(0.130)	(0.174)	(0.484)
Mean Dep. Variable	12978.40	12952.77	29.76	71605.44	4471.83	2.72	8.08	98.62
Adj. R-Square	0.90	0.97	0.71	0.75	0.95	0.13	–0.02	–0.03
N	3129	3128	3128	3132	3132	292	292	292
Panel B: 2000-1980								
$IRCA_{1980}$	–29.789	–156.351	133.229	–9.176	1320.199	0.113	0.271	–0.898
	(267.831)	(169.299)	(224.482)	(1353.343)	(810.644)	(0.171)	(0.174)	(0.728)
Mean Dep. Variable	12978.40	12952.77	29.76	71605.44	4471.83	2.77	7.61	97.58
Adj. R-Square	0.90	0.97	0.72	0.69	0.91	0.11	0.01	0.04
N	3129	3128	3128	3132	3132	251	251	251

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (3). The dependent variable is the 1990-1980 change (Panel A) and 2000-1980 change (Panel B) in in-migration (column 1), out-migration (column 2), net migration (column 3), total population (column 4), Hispanic population (column 5), share of Hispanics with no education, standardized by the Hispanic population above 25 years of age (columns 6), share of Hispanics living below 50% of the poverty threshold, standardized by the Hispanic population (column 7), and share of Hispanics working in a low-skill occupation, standardized by the Hispanic population in the labor force (column 8). All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include county fixed effects and state fixed effects. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE 5: Public Finances of School Districts

Dep. Variable:	Public Finances of School Districts									
	Expenditure					Revenue				
	Total	Current		Capital		Total	Own Sources		IG Transfers	
		Total	Wages	Total	Construction		Total	Taxes	Total	State
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
$IRCA_{1980}$	0.003	–0.645***	–0.514***	0.645***	0.610***	–0.004	–0.296	–0.409**	0.296	0.274
	(0.004)	(0.205)	(0.177)	(0.205)	(0.212)	(0.004)	(0.185)	(0.178)	(0.185)	(0.207)
Mean Dep. Variable	2.044	92.835	60.064	7.165	4.305	2.057	40.351	33.162	59.649	54.998
Adj. R-Square	0.35	0.09	0.26	0.09	0.12	0.46	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.63
Clusters	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702
N	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702	2702

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (3). The dependent variable is the change (1997-1987) in the logarithm of the item of public finance considered (per capita, real). All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include county fixed effects and state fixed effects. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE 6: Ballot Measures

Dep. Variable:	Ballot Measures									
	General Obligation Bonds		Property Taxes		Ordinance		Recall		Other	
	0/1	Number	0/1	Number	0/1	Number	0/1	Number	0/1	Number
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
$IRCA_{1980}$	0.022**	0.631*	–0.025**	–0.128*	–0.005	0.041	0.006	0.046	0.010	0.013
	(0.009)	(0.373)	(0.011)	(0.069)	(0.016)	(0.057)	(0.015)	(0.076)	(0.012)	(0.019)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.845	8.448	0.293	1.121	0.414	0.966	0.224	0.810	0.103	0.190
Adj. R-Square	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.01	–0.02	–0.01	–0.02	–0.01	–0.00	–0.01
N	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (3). The dependent variable is either an indicator variable equal to one if the county holds a school district election with a given ballot type (1995-1999), or the number of ballots of a given type (1995-1999). All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980. All regressions include county fixed effects. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE 7: Teachers by race and gender

Dep. Variable:	Change in Teachers, 1980-1990									
	Number	Share								
	Total	Hispanic			White			Black		
		Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
$IRCA_{1980}$	–3.601	0.665***	0.186	0.936***	–0.754***	–0.143	–1.058***	0.101	–0.038	0.151*
	(12.449)	(0.211)	(0.315)	(0.255)	(0.247)	(0.346)	(0.286)	(0.068)	(0.089)	(0.082)
Mean Dep. Variable	1193.349	1.685	1.703	1.664	90.332	90.994	90.069	6.917	6.273	7.155
Adj. R-Square	0.80	0.11	–0.00	0.13	0.07	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.00	0.03
Clusters	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115
N	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115	3115

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (3). The dependent variable is the change (1990-1980) in the number (column 1) or share (columns 2-10) of teachers, by race and gender. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include county fixed effects and state fixed effects. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

ONLINE APPENDIX FOR PAPER: ***Legal Status and Political Power***

A. IRCA Information

A.1 Legalization and Naturalization Rates

Table A.1 shows the number of IRCA applicants who legalized (i.e., received permanent legal residency) and who naturalized (i.e., obtained citizenship and voting rights) under the IRCA over time, both in absolute terms and relative to the total number of legalized and naturalized immigrants in the country. As shown, the take up of legal status was immediate, beginning as early as 1989. By 1991, nearly 90 percent of the immigrants who were granted legal status under the IRCA — some 2.5 million immigrants — received it; the less than 200,000 remaining immigrants who received legal status under the IRCA did so, by and large, by 1994. Naturalization patterns, by contrast, look different. In total, just 33 percent of the IRCA migrants — or around 815,000 immigrants — went on to naturalize as US citizens by 2000 and the majority of these happened in the mid to late 1990s. The lag between legalization and naturalization rates under the IRCA reflects the institutional feature of the IRCA that mandated a five year window between legal status and application for citizenship.

There are (at least) two factors that might explain the lag in naturalization as well as the overall low rate of naturalization as a result of the IRCA. First, administrative backlogs associated with the IRCA became more pronounced as of 1996 which led to fluctuations and delays in naturalization (Rytina, 2002). Second, Portes and Curtis (1987), Jasso and Rosenzweig (1986) show that newly documented migrants prioritize legalization over naturalization because legal status already provides key economic and legal protections, such as the ability to work, live in the U.S. indefinitely, and access public benefits. They demonstrate that this is especially the case when considering the time and financial costs associated with naturalization.

TABLE A.1: Legalizations and Naturalizations in the United States, Total and under the IRCA

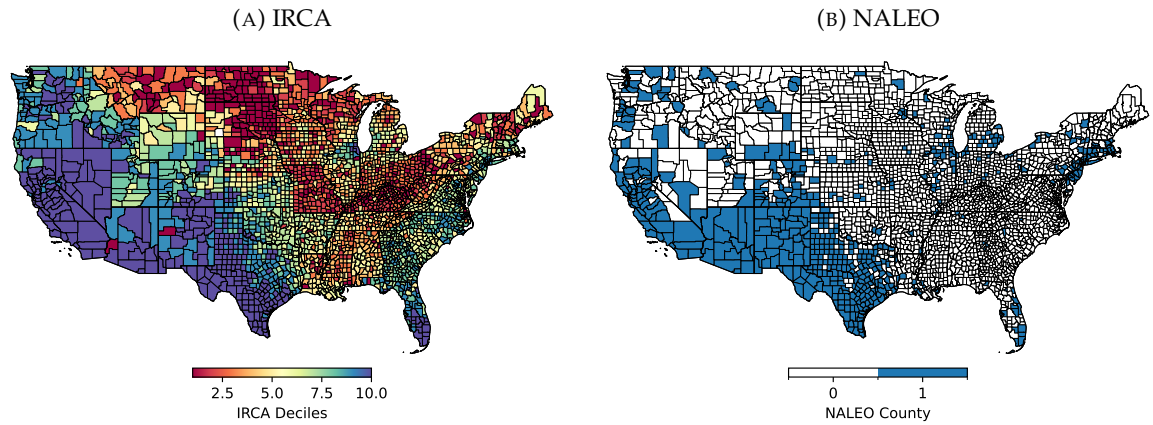
	Total Legal Residents	IRCA Legal Residents		Total Naturalizations	IRCA Naturalizations	
Year	(Number)	(Number)	(% of Total)	(Number)	(Number)	(% of Total)
1989	1,090,956	478,883	44	–	–	–
1990	1,543,812	880,940	57	270,101	133	0
1991	1,837,207	1,134,509	62	308,058	115	0
1992	972,557	165,089	17	240,252	218	0
1993	905,111	16,702	2	314,681	881	0
1994	791,218	4,083	1	434,107	11,048	3
1995	723,641	2,898	0	488,088	65,490	13
1996	916,521	3,037	0	1,044,689	227,905	22
1997	781,892	1,300	0	598,225	136,084	23
1998	653,207	820	0	463,060	85,647	18
1999	644,788	6	0	839,944	151,829	18
2000	841,001	271	0	888,788	135,385	15
Total	11,701,911	2,688,538	23	5,889,990	814,735	14

Notes: This table presents statistics on the number of legalized migrants in the entire US as well as those legalized under the IRCA. It also shows total naturalizations in the US and those as a result of the IRCA. The statistics are taken from Tables 2 and 3 from Rytina (2002).

A.2 Geographic Distribution

In Figure A.1, we map the distribution of IRCA applicants across counties in 1980 (panel A) as well as counties with Hispanic officials as recorded in the NALEO Roster between 1984 and 1994 (panel b).

FIGURE A.1: IRCA and NALEO



B. Survey Evidence: Latino National Political Survey

To examine the relationship between legalization and political preferences among Hispanic communities, we analyze data from the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) — a nationally representative survey of 2,817 Hispanic respondents conducted from July 1989 to March 1990, coinciding with the rollout of IRCA's legalization program.

Figure B.1 summarizes the responses to four key questions — two concerning political behavior and two concerning policy preferences:

Political Behavior

- "I am more likely to vote in an election if a Hispanic candidate is running" (1 = yes, 0 = no)
- "In the most recent election with a Hispanic candidate running against an Anglophone rival, I voted for the Hispanic candidate" (1 = yes, 0 = no)

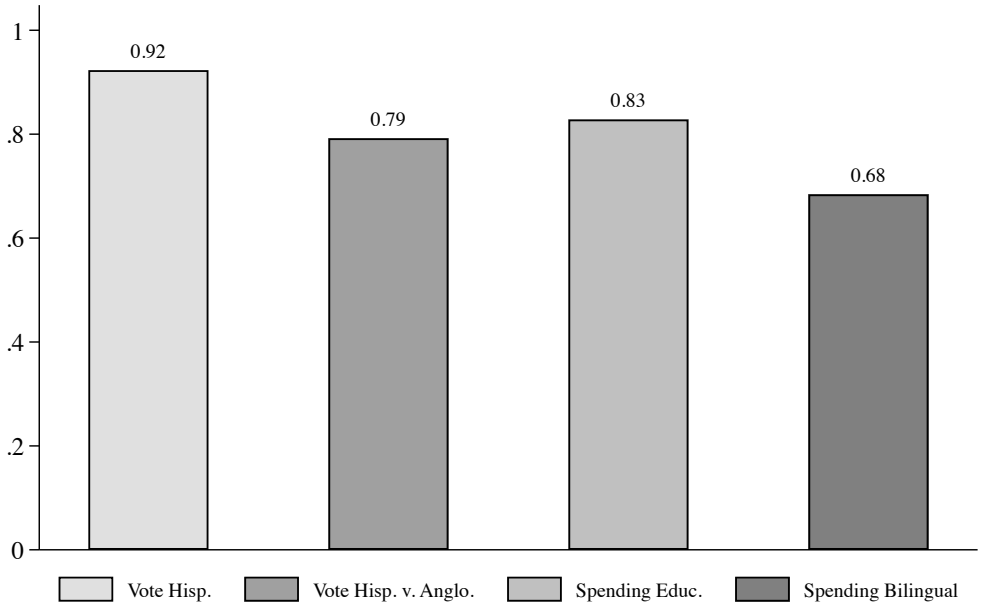
Policy Preferences

- "I would like to see more spending on public education" (1 = yes, 0 = no)
- "I would like an increase in tax revenue to fund bilingual language education" (1 = yes, 0 = no)

The responses exhibit clear patterns. First, identity-based voting appears widespread: a majority reported increased likelihood of voting when a Hispanic candidate is present, and most reported supporting the Hispanic candidate in recent contests against Anglophone opponents. This provides suggestive evidence that coethnic representation was not only symbolically important but also behaviorally motivating. Second, respondents expressed strong preferences for redistributive and inclusive educational policy. A large majority supported increases in general education spending, with particularly strong support for bilingual education funding — likely reflecting both practical needs and a broader cultural agenda.

These findings reinforce the view that Hispanic communities at the time of IRCA were well-positioned for both descriptive representation and substantive policy engagement. The preference for bilingual education, for instance, is directly connected to the observed institutional changes we document in the main text — particularly the shift in fiscal priorities and the diversification of the teaching workforce. Similarly, the widespread support for coethnic candidates aligns with the observed increases in Hispanic representation and political mobility at the local level. By revealing widespread support for coethnic candidates and redistributive policy in education, the LNPS data help explain why legalization had such pronounced downstream effects on local governance. Legalization activated not just formal eligibility for office or voting, but a latent set of preferences for both who should govern and what policies should be prioritized.

FIGURE B.1: Hispanic Political and Policy Preferences



Notes: The figure plots the share of Hispanic respondents in the LNPS in agreement with a given statement. The statements are (in order): 1) I am more likely to vote in an election if a Hispanic candidate is running; 2) In the most recent election with a Hispanic candidate running against an Anglophone rival, I voted for the Hispanic candidate; 3) I would like to see more spending on public education; and 4) I would like an increase in tax revenue to fund bilingual language education. The responses are elicited from a sample of 2,817 Hispanic indivdiuals in the United States between July 1989 and March 1990.

C. Anecdotal Evidence of Political Participation Following Legalization

In this appendix, we present qualitative examples of the entry, upward mobility, and tenure of Hispanic elected officials among formerly undocumented immigrants. These narratives, while anecdotal, underscore the mechanisms documented in the quantitative analysis: political entry through school boards, progressive advancement to higher local office, and sustained tenure.

Ylenia Aguilar: School Board to Water Governance. After living undocumented in the U.S. for several years, Ylenia Aguilar gained citizenship in 2014. Just two years later, she ran for and was elected to the Osborn School District governing board in Arizona. She served as board president and won reelection, demonstrating both political entry and tenure. In 2022, Aguilar was elected to the Central Arizona Water Conservation District board—a significant regional body managing a 336-mile canal that delivers Colorado River water across the state.

"As a former undocumented person living in various cities throughout the U.S. and Mexico," Aguilar reflected, "I see this role as something I've been preparing for my entire life." She added, "I want to ensure that we oversee the delivery of the 336 miles of water to cities, municipalities, agriculture, and tribes... [and] that we are sharing the information about what this role is in all the languages spoken."[28]

Nirva LaFortune: From Undocumented Immigrant to Mayoral Candidate. Born in Haiti, Nirva LaFortune arrived in the U.S. as an undocumented child. In 2017, she was elected to the Providence City Council in Rhode Island—the first Haitian American to hold elected office in the state. She later launched a mayoral campaign on a platform focused on education reform, including ending state control of the school system, expanding after-school programs, and increasing diversity in the teaching workforce.

"Providence is really important to me," LaFortune stated. "I grew up here, graduated from the city's public schools, and am now raising my children here. I know what it means to not have access to certain things and the many barriers that exist for low-income families. I want to eliminate those barriers and create a more equitable city so that everyone can thrive."[29]

Rocío Treminio-López: From Undocumented Immigrant to Mayor. Originally from El Salvador, Rocío Treminio-López migrated to the U.S. alone at age 14 during the country's civil war. After settling in Maryland, she entered politics in 2013 as a city councilmember. She was subsequently elected mayor, reelected to a second term, and is now considering a run for county council. Her political motivation stemmed from the lack of Hispanic representation,

[28] See *The Copper Courier*, "Ylenia Aguilar is Having a Phenomenal Decade" (January 2023). Available at: https://coppercourier.com/2023/01/20/ylenia-aguilar-central-arizona-water-conservation-board

[29] See *The Brown Daily Herald*, "Councilwoman Nirva LaFortune Runs for Mayor of Providence" (April 2022). Available at: https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2022/04/councilwoman-nirva-lafortune-runs-for-mayor-of-providence-on-platform-of-education-reform-affordable-housing. Accessed 30 June 2025.

and during her tenure, she spearheaded reforms allowing non-citizens to vote in municipal elections.

"Did you ever imagine, as an undocumented immigrant, that you would become mayor of a U.S. town?" a reporter asked. "Not at all," she replied. "Truly, I could never have imagined the fate or the luck that awaited me in the U.S." She added, "I believe it was one of the biggest achievements in recent years. . . involving everyone, even if they're not citizens, in the electoral process."[30]

These cases reflect the broader mechanisms identified in our empirical findings: undocumented immigrants who gain legal status not only participate in local politics, but often pursue extended and upwardly mobile political careers. Their advancement underscores how legal status can reshape who governs—and by extension, how governance is practiced in immigrant communities.

[30] See *Univision*, "De indocumentada a ser la alcaldesa de un pueblo en Maryland" (2023). Available at: https://www.univision.com/shows/primer-impacto/de-indocumentada-a-ser-la-alcaldesa-de-un-pueblo-en-maryland-la-historia-de-rocio-treminio-lopez-video

D. Summary Statistics of Data in Sample

In this Online Appendix, we present summary statistics of the main variables in our analysis. These are shown in Table D.1 below.

TABLE D.1: Summary statistics

Panel A: Hispanic Officials						
	1984-1988			1989-1994		
	Mean	St Dev	Obs	Mean	St Dev	Obs
Male (%)	80.789	39.4	13685	71.802	45.0	23161
School Board (%)	43.844	49.6	13685	49.346	50.0	23161
Municipal (%)	38.531	48.7	13685	35.594	47.9	23161
County (%)	12.802	33.4	13685	10.911	31.2	23161
State and Federal (%)	4.823	21.4	13685	4.149	19.9	23161
Avg. Years Elected	2.241	1.3	13685	3.686	2.6	23161
Avg. Years in Same Office	2.158	1.2	13685	3.437	2.5	23161
Upward Mobility (%)	0.650	8.0	13685	1.114	10.5	23161
Upward Board Mobility (%)	0.495	7.0	11724	1.050	10.2	19816
Panel B: Sample Characteristics						
	Count					
Number of Officials	10898					
Number of Counties	518					

E. Differential Pre-Trends

E.1 Hispanic Officials

In this Online Appendix, we investigate whether Hispanic officials who experienced upward political mobility after IRCA were already on distinct trajectories prior to its implementation. To do so, we estimate an event study specification in which the key explanatory variable is a county's IRCA exposure interacted with year fixed effects. The outcome variable, also considered in column 3 of Table 2, is an indicator that is one if an individual Hispanic official is listed as having served in a higher level of government and zero otherwise.

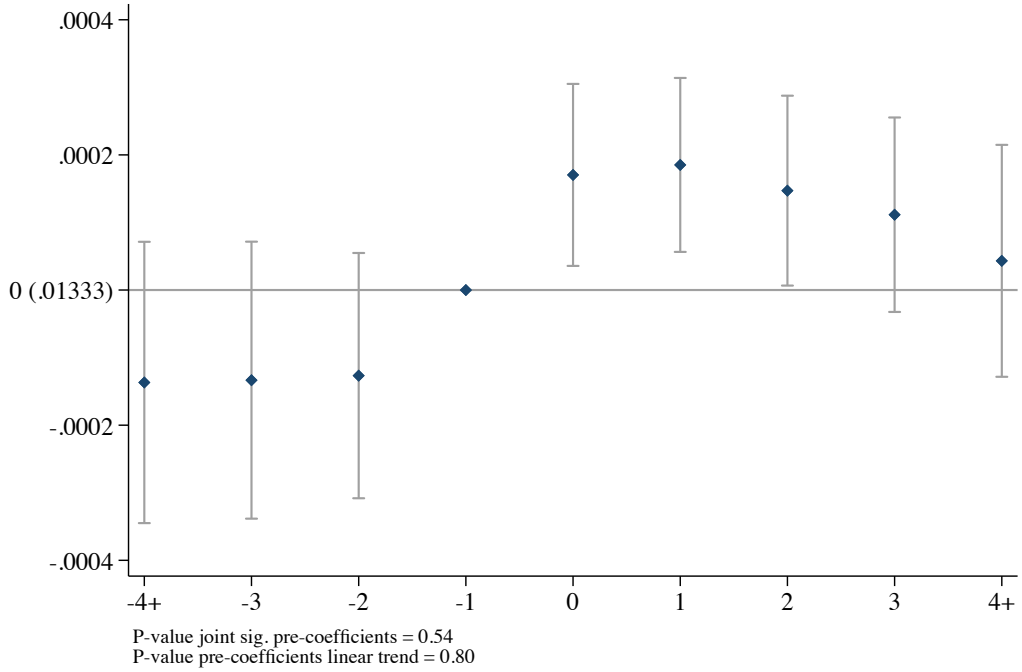
The results, presented in Figure E.1, show that the pre-treatment coefficients are not statistically distinguishable from zero — neither individually nor jointly — suggesting no pre-existing differential trends. Following IRCA, however, we observe a large and immediate increase in upward mobility among Hispanic officials, which gradually attenuates over time. This pattern is consistent with a model of political advancement that occurs incrementally, as officials climb the ladder through successive steps rather than through sudden leaps.

E.2 Revenues and Expenditures

We next analyze the temporal dynamics of how Hispanic representation affected the fiscal behavior of school districts. Figure E.2 displays time-varying estimates of the share of district expenditures allocated to current spending (as opposed to capital investment).

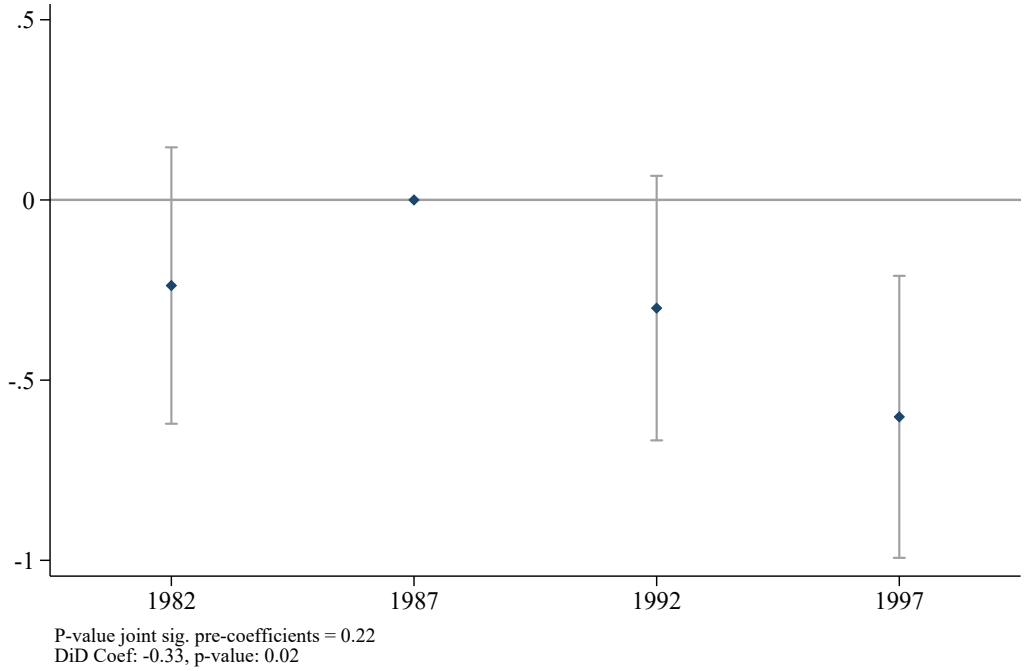
The pre-treatment coefficient is statistically indistinct from zero ($p-$value: 0.22), suggesting no differential trends before IRCA. In the post-treatment period, however, school districts in counties with greater IRCA exposure show a noticeable decline in current expenditures — by 0.3 percentage points in 1992 (p-value: 0.11) and 0.6 percentage points in 1997 — relative to the 1987 baseline. These results point to a reallocation of fiscal priorities coinciding with increased Hispanic representation on school boards. Specifically, they suggest a strategic shift away from recurrent expenditures, such as salaries, and toward long-term capital investments, emerging shortly after IRCA-induced increases in Hispanic electoral participation.

FIGURE E.1: Time-Varying Effect of IRCA on Mobility



Notes: This figure plots the coefficient on the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrants at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and year dummies. The outcome is an indicator that is one if an individual Hispanic official is listed as having served in a higher level of government and zero otherwise. The regressions also include the interaction between 1980 county controls and P_{89}. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty as well as individual fixed effects, county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent. The analysis includes the year 1984 but, because no officials in 1984 experience mobility, the outcome in this particular year has almost no variation and is therefore not reported in the figure.

FIGURE E.2: Time-Varying Effect of IRCA on Current Expenditures



Notes: This figure plots the coefficient on the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrants at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and year dummies. The outcome is the share of total district expenditure that is allocated to current expenditures. The regressions also include the interaction between 1980 county controls and P_{89}. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty as well as individual fixed effects, county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent.

F. Robustness Checks

We conduct a series of robustness checks to assess the sensitivity of our main findings — specifically the relationship between IRCA exposure and the upward mobility of Hispanic elected officials. Across a broad array of robustness checks — including alternative samples, covariate sets, temporal windows, and functional forms — we find that the positive effect of IRCA exposure on the upward mobility of Hispanic elected officials remains consistent and statistically significant. These findings reinforce the credibility of our identification strategy and underscore the stability of the core result.

F.1 Sample Selection and Mobility

We first examine whether our results are driven by a small number of highly mobile individuals or disproportionately influential counties. In Figure F.1, Panel A sequentially excludes counties that elected at least one Hispanic official between 1984 and 1994 to any local board (school district, municipality, or county) or to state or federal office. Panel B sequentially excludes individual Hispanic officials who exhibited upward mobility during this period. In both cases, the estimated effect of IRCA exposure remains stable, closely tracking the main coefficient reported in column (1) of Table 3, suggesting that neither specific counties nor highly mobile individuals drive the results.

We further explore geographic sensitivity in Table F.1. Columns (2) to (5) sequentially exclude California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico — the four border states with the highest density of IRCA applicants and Hispanic elected officials.[31] Despite smaller samples (particularly when excluding California or Texas), the estimated coefficient on IRCA exposure remains stable across these specifications. In column (6) of Table F.1, we exclude all counties covered by the special provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) as of 1980. While the 1965 VRA (and its subsequent amendments) has been shown to expand minority political participation (Bernini et al., 2023, 2024, 2025), its coverage may confound the effects of IRCA. Removing these counties reduces the number of Hispanic officials by more than half, yet the IRCA effect remains positive and statistically significant.

F.2 Covariate Controls

We next assess the role of county-level controls in driving our results. Table F.2 presents a stepwise inclusion of covariates interacted with the post-1989 indicator, P_{89}. Column (1) estimates the model with no controls. Column (2) adds the racial composition of the county in 1980 (white, Black, Hispanic shares). Column (3) adds population size, school-age population, and foreign-born share. Column (4) includes all six demographic variables. Column (5) adds income, poverty, and child poverty measures. Column (6) reports the full baseline specification from Table 3. Across all specifications, the coefficient on IRCA exposure remains stable

[31] See the maps of Figure A.1.

and statistically significant, suggesting that observed effects are not an artifact of the chosen controls.

F.3 Alternative Specifications and Sample Definitions

We next test whether our results are sensitive to modeling assumptions. In column (2) of Table F.3, we limit the sample to counties for which IRCA applicant counts are directly observed (i.e., not imputed). This reduces the sample size by nearly half, but the estimated coefficient remains unchanged. In column (3), we redefine our measure of IRCA intensity to the total number of IRCA applications per 1980 working age population (i.e., between 15 and 64) as in Cascio and Lewis (2019). In column (4), we exclude officials who transitioned from county boards to state or federal office. Given the limited representation of Hispanic officials at higher levels, we show that the main result is not driven by this small group. Column (5) extends the post-treatment window to 2000 to capture longer-run effects. Although NALEO's methodology changed in 1996 and data for 1995 are unavailable, expanding the analysis window does not alter the core result. If anything, the effect of IRCA on upward mobility slightly strengthens to 1.3 percentage points.

F.4 Outliers and Nonlinearities

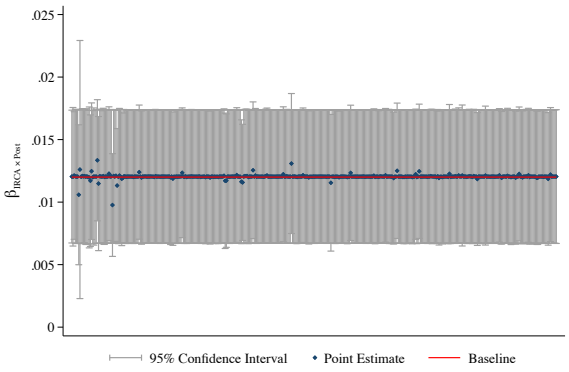
We examine sensitivity to outliers and functional form in Table F.4. Columns (2) and (3) exclude counties with Hispanic population shares in the 1st/99th and 25th/75th percentiles, respectively. Columns (4) and (5) repeat this exclusion for counties with extreme IRCA applicant shares. Across all samples, the IRCA effect remains robust. Columns (6) and (7) include quadratic terms for the Hispanic population share and IRCA exposure, respectively, to test for nonlinear effects. The linear term remains significant, and the quadratic terms are small and insignificant, indicating that the relationship is approximately linear within the observed range.

F.5 Extending the Sample to 2000

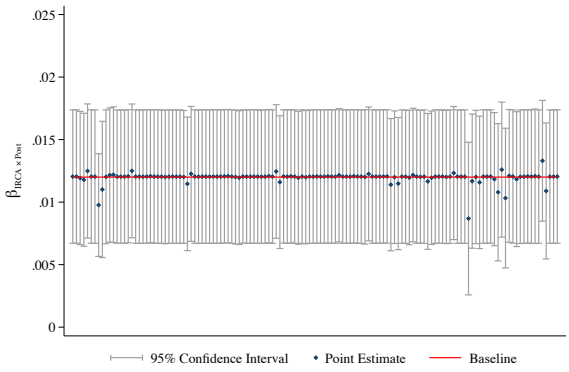
In this Online Appendix we utilize information from the NALEO Rosters until the year 2000 so as to give more time for mobility and representational effects to take place. We report the results in Table F.5 which mirror those from Table 2 but run to the year 2000 instead of 1994. As shown, extending the sample does not meaningfully alter our results.

FIGURE F.1: Robustness to Outliers: Counties and Mobile Officers

(A) Excluding Counties



(B) Excluding Mobile Officers



Notes: This figure plots the coefficient on the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrants at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and P_{89}, which is an indicator that is 1 for periods on or after 1989 and zero otherwise. The outcome in both figures is the same as in column (1) of Table 3, an indicator that is one if an individual Hispanic official experienced upward mobility across local governing boards. In both figures, counties and officers are sorted by IRCA share. Panel (a) excludes counties, one by one, that elected a Hispanic official at any period in the sample, while Panel (b) excludes individual mobile officers, one by one.

TABLE F.1: Robustness: Sample Selection

Dep. Variable:	Upward Mobility in Boards					
	Baseline	Excluding States				Excl. VRA
		CA	TX	AZ	NM	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
$IRCA_{1980} \times P_{1989}$	0.012***	0.013***	0.011***	0.010***	0.013***	0.008***
	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.006	0.006	0.007	0.005	0.005	0.007
Adj. R-Square	0.42	0.45	0.40	0.44	0.38	0.46
Clusters	418	376	247	404	387	222
Officials	6929	5855	4140	6418	5982	3403
N	28294	23670	16262	26298	24121	13302

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (1). The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE F.2: Robustness: Controls

Dep. Variable:	Upward Mobility in Boards					
	No Controls	Population			Income	Baseline
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
$IRCA_{1980} \times P_{1989}$	0.006**	0.009***	0.007***	0.009***	0.008***	0.012***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Pop. by Race		✓		✓		✓
Pop. and Foreign-born			✓	✓		✓
Income and Poverty					✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	0.005	0.005	0.006	0.006	0.005	0.006
Adj. R-Square	0.41	0.41	0.41	0.42	0.41	0.42
Clusters	421	421	418	418	421	418
Officials	7033	7033	6929	6929	7033	6929
N	28703	28703	28294	28294	28703	28294

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation 1. The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE F.3: Robustness: Alternative Specification

Dep. Variable:	Upward Mobility in Boards						
	Baseline	IRCA		Mobility		Gender	
		Not Imputed	Working Age Pop.	Local Govts	Until 2000	Female	Male
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
$IRCA_{1980}$ X $Post_{1989}$	0.012***	0.011**	0.012***	0.011***	0.013***	–0.002	0.014***
	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.007)	(0.002)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.006	0.005	0.006	0.006	0.006	0.002	0.006
Adj. R-Square	0.42	0.38	0.42	0.40	0.48	0.26	0.46
Clusters	418	155	418	418	447	229	383
Officials	6929	3952	6929	6929	9541	1766	5131
N	28294	15680	28294	28294	40697	6538	21516

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (1). The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE F.4: Robustness: Outliers and Non-linearity

Dep. Variable:	Upward Mobility in Boards						
	Baseline	Excluding Extreme Values				Non-linearity	
		Hisp. Share		IRCA		Hisp.^{2}	IRCA^2
		1st-99th	25th-75th	1st-99th	25th-75th		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
IRCA$_{1980}$ × P$_{1989}$	0.012***	0.012***	0.011***	0.009**	0.017*	0.009***	0.012**
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.009)	(0.003)	(0.006)
Hispanic Share$_{1980}$ × P$_{1989}$						0.039	
						(0.056)	
Hispanic Share$_{1980}^2$ × P$_{1989}$						–0.014	
						(0.054)	
IRCA$_{1980}^2$ × P$_{1989}$							–0.000
							(0.001)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.006	0.006	0.005	0.005	0.007	0.006	0.006
Adj. R-Square	0.42	0.41	0.42	0.42	0.43	0.42	0.42
Clusters	418	369	135	392	128	418	418
Officials	6929	6795	3241	6796	3590	6929	6929
N	28294	27722	14129	27753	14029	28294	28294

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (1). The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

TABLE F.5: Upward Mobility of Latino Officials in Governing Boards until 2000

Dep. Variable:	Upward Mobility						
From:	Any	School Boards			City		County
To:	Any	City	County	Higher	County	Higher	Higher
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
IRCA$_{1980}$ × P$_{1989}$	0.013***	0.010***	0.005	0.000	0.003**	–0.001	0.005
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.008)
Mean Dep. Variable	0.006	0.006	0.002	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.008
Adj. R-Square	0.48	0.37	0.50	0.53	0.47	0.36	0.69
Clusters	447	299	299	299	340	340	142
Officials	9541	5422	5422	5422	3181	3181	543
N	40697	22970	22970	22970	15115	15115	2556

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (1). The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include individual-level fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

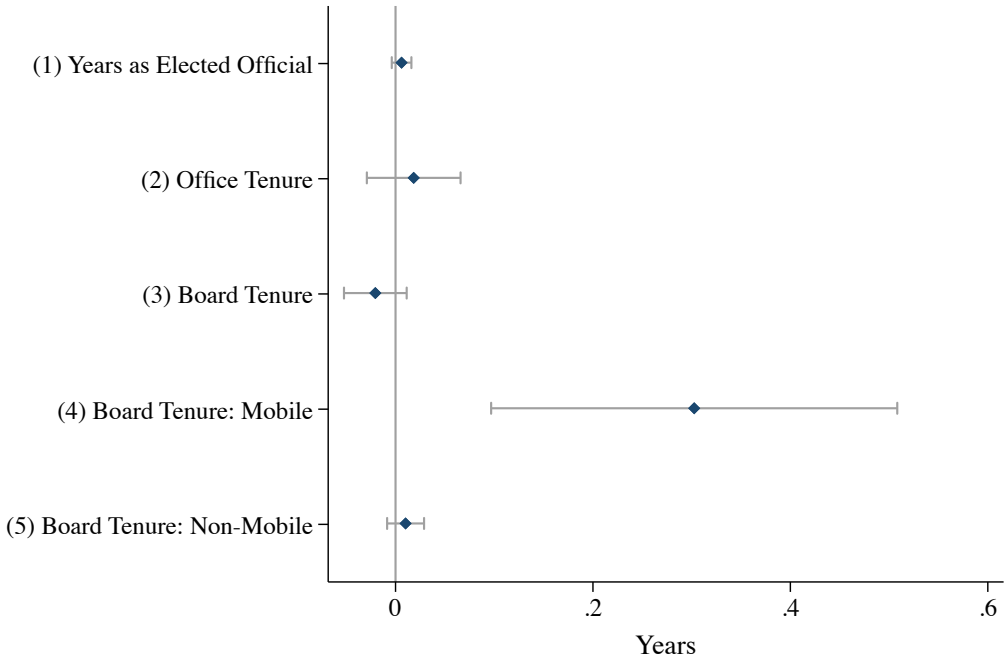
G. IRCA and Tenure of Hispanic Officials

We now focus on whether legal status affects the tenure of Hispanic officials — measured as the number of years an official appears in the NALEO roster. Figure G.1 reports the β coefficients from equation 1, capturing the relationship between IRCA and tenure between 1984 and 1994.

In aggregate, we find no increase in total time served post-1989 (row 1), with the average time spent as an official remaining around three years. Similarly, when examining tenure within a specific role (row 2), we find no significant effect, suggesting that officials do not remain in the same position longer after IRCA legalization, either across all offices or when focusing specifically on board and council positions (row 3).

When we split the sample by whether officials moved up the political ladder, however, a more nuanced picture emerges. Officials in IRCA-exposed counties who exhibited upward mobility serve longer in their boards or council positions (row 4). Specifically, we estimate a roughly 4-month increase in tenure — a 17 percent rise over the two year pre-treatment average time in office. In contrast, officials who remained in the same school board, city council, or county council position throughout 1984-1994 exhibit no change in tenure (row 5). These findings imply that legalization not only enabled upward movement but also increased staying power for those on that trajectory.

FIGURE G.1: Tenure



Notes: The figures plot the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrants at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and P_{89}, which is one for time periods before 1988 and one for years on or after 1989. The outcome is the total number of years a Hispanic official served in office, in total (row 1), in a specific role (row 2), as a member of a local governing board (row 3) and as a member of a local governing board for politically mobile (row 4) and non-mobile (row 5) officials. The regressions also include the interaction between 1980 county controls and P_{89}. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty, as well as individual fixed effects, county fixed effects, and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent.

H. Ruling Out Changes in Governance Structure

A potential confound is that our results might reflect shifts in the underlying structure of local government — such as expansions in the number of elected bodies or available seats — rather than genuine increases in Hispanic political competitiveness. For instance, if IRCA-exposed counties created more school boards or expanded existing boards, any observed increase in representation could be mechanical. We test this alternative explanation in Online Appendix Table H.1, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau on the number of local government units and elected officials, aggregated to the county level. We focus on school boards and municipal governments. As shown, the IRCA is not related to the number of municipal governments or school boards operating in a county, nor is it related to the number of school board seats available post-legalization. Interestingly, there is a decline in the number of municipally-elected officials in high-IRCA counties, making our findings on Hispanic political upward mobility all the more interesting.

TABLE H.1: Robustness: Size of Local Governments

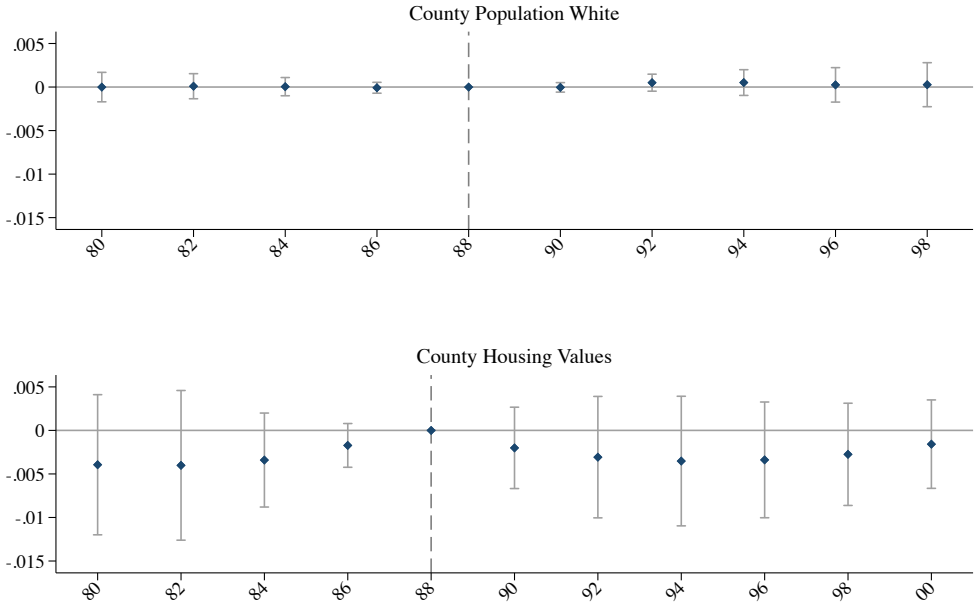
Dep. Variable:	Government Units				Elected Officials			
	Municipal		School Boards		Municipal		School Boards	
		$\Delta_{1997-87}$		$\Delta_{1997-87}$		$\Delta_{1992-87}$		$\Delta_{1992-87}$
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
$IRCA_{1980} \times 1977$	0.011		0.012		0.123		–0.046	
	(0.019)		(0.019)		(0.156)		(0.098)	
$IRCA_{1980} \times 1982$	0.007		0.012					
	(0.010)		(0.016)					
$IRCA_{1980} \times 1987$	–		–		–		–	
$IRCA_{1980} \times 1992$	–0.011		–0.023		–0.400***		–0.135	
	(0.012)		(0.017)		(0.118)		(0.087)	
$IRCA_{1980} \times 1992$	0.001		–0.039					
	(0.011)		(0.024)					
$IRCA_{1980} \times P_{1989}$		0.004		–0.033		–0.284***		–0.109
		(0.011)		(0.025)		(0.096)		(0.087)
Mean Dep. Variable	6.199	6.253	4.861	4.793	43.571	44.209	28.005	27.922
Adj. R-Square	1.00	1.00	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	1.00
Clusters	3060	3060	3060	3060	3060	3060	3060	3060
N	15293	6120	15293	6120	9173	6120	9173	6120

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (3). The dependent variable is the upward mobility of all Latino officials elected in local governing boards. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980 and its interaction with an indicator that is zero for years before 1988 and one for years after 1989 (included). Regressions include the interaction between 1980 county controls and the post-1989 indicator. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects, as well as all lower order terms of the included interactions. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

I. WHITE FLIGHT

In Figure I.1, we analyze white flight — specifically, changes in a county's white population and corresponding house prices — in response to the IRCA. As shown, we do not find evidence of significant white flight in IRCA-exposed counties during the relevant period, nor do we find systematic declines in local property values. These null results suggest that the decline in local tax revenues is not mechanically driven by changes in the tax base, but rather reflects shifts in fiscal strategy by local school boards.

FIGURE I.1: IRCA and White Flight



Notes: The figures plot the interaction between the standardized number of IRCA migrants at the county level per 1,000 1980 county inhabitants and year dummies. The outcome in the top panel is the share of county population that is white; in the bottom panel, it is average house prices at the county level. Both outcomes have been standardized to ease interpretation. The regressions also include the interaction between 1980 county controls and P_{89}. Controls are: foreign born population, school-aged population (between 5 and 19), white population, black population, Hispanic population, income, poverty and child poverty as well as county fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level and confidence intervals are drawn at 95 percent.

J. College and University Professors

In Table J.1, we confirm that no parallel changes occurred in the racial composition of college professors — consistent with school boards having no jurisdiction over higher education. This helps isolate the effect to settings where boards have direct policy influence. Reassuringly, Panel B of Table J.1 confirms that our findings for teachers remain robust even when restricting the sample to counties with non-zero counts of professors, underscoring that the observed shifts are localized to primary and secondary education settings, where board influence is most direct.

TABLE J.1: Professors and Specialized Instructors by race and gender

Dep. Variable:	Change in the Share of Teachers, 1980-1990								
	Hispanic			White			Black		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Panel A: Professors or Specialized Instructors									
$IRCA_{1980}$	0.185	0.250	–0.123	–0.473	–0.330	–0.674	0.237	–0.092	0.689
	(0.277)	(0.446)	(0.412)	(0.292)	(0.448)	(0.477)	(0.223)	(0.121)	(0.511)
Mean Dep. Variable	1.584	1.345	1.893	92.294	92.978	91.355	4.071	3.369	4.962
Adj. R-Square	0.02	0.00	–0.00	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.00	–0.02	–0.01
Clusters	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603
N	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603
Panel B: Teachers									
$IRCA_{1980}$	0.428***	0.332	0.467***	–0.383*	–0.205	–0.486***	0.027	–0.017	0.048
	(0.166)	(0.226)	(0.170)	(0.204)	(0.297)	(0.174)	(0.064)	(0.087)	(0.069)
Mean Dep. Variable	1.611	1.585	1.624	90.104	90.761	89.797	7.161	6.581	7.413
Adj. R-Square	0.22	0.04	0.25	0.13	0.04	0.12	0.08	0.02	0.07
Clusters	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603
N	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603	1603

Notes: The table estimates the model in equation (3). The dependent variable is the change (1990-1980) in the share of teachers, by race and gender. All regressions include the standardized number of IRCA immigrants per 1,000 county inhabitants measured in 1980. Controls are: Population; Foreign population; School-aged population (between 5 and 19); White population; Black population; Hispanic population; Income; Poverty; Child poverty. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the county. All regressions include county fixed effects and state fixed effects. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.