This insightful book addresses the civic development of immigrant youth as their numbers grow steadily in schools across the nation. Callahan and Muller provide an important additional perspective on the general concerns about low voter turnout rates among young adults. While education is important for the civic development of young adults generally (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996), the authors argue that social science education is important for the civic development of immigrant youth specifically. “Social science” is used in the book to denote a wide range of social science coursework (e.g. history, geography, economics, civics, government, psychology, etc.) or a collection of what others might call social studies. The authors claim that social science education is especially important for the civic development of immigrant youth because these courses offer immigrant youths opportunities to engage with a political system that their parents are unfamiliar with. Noting that the act of voting provides citizens a unique way to provide input on changing the system, the authors highlight the importance of political participation for immigrant youth alongside other civic actions such as volunteerism and community building. Through rigorous analyses of data from two longitudinal studies, along with
analysis of qualitative interview data, the authors assert that formal and informal schooling processes in high school can significantly impact the political development of children of immigrants.

The book has seven chapters. The first two serve as the background for navigating the rest. The first chapter provides a foundation for the motivations behind this work. By exploring trends in youth political participation in recent history, along with recent demographic changes, the authors show that the civic development of immigrant youth can have valuable impact on future political decisions. In Chapter Two, the authors lay the groundwork for the impact that schools can have on adolescent development, especially for children of immigrants. Because immigrants often lack knowledge or understanding about the U.S. political system, there is often a role-reversal between immigrants and their children when it comes to political socialization. In this way, not only can schools provide important socialization for immigrant youth, but what they learn in school could potentially impact the socialization of their parents as well.

Chapters Three to Six work together as a group, each serving as an individual study that together address the line of inquiry laid out by the first two chapters. Each of these chapters draws on data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002; the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement Study; and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The studies in these chapters also draw on qualitative interview data from the authors’ New Citizens in a New Century project. The authors compare the social position of children of immigrants as compared to children of native-born parents in Chapter Three. Callahan and Muller explore the role that language choice and language acquisition have on students’ adolescent identities. While language plays a large role in determining immigrant youths’ identities, the authors suggest that children of immigrants and children of non-immigrants share similar social experiences in high school. This could mean that there is something in the social fabric of high school that impacts the civic development of adolescents generally. The authors could have chosen to ground this theory within the Positive Youth Development framework (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). Had they done so, they would have been able to hypothesize how these adolescent experiences may
contribute to the development of immigrant youth, especially as they enter into young adulthood.

In Chapter Four, the authors explore the academic opportunities and achievements of children of immigrants in terms of courses taken and students’ grades in these courses. The most striking finding in this chapter is the role that language acquisition, and the stratification that accompanies it, plays in determining students’ access to curriculum. Since English proficiency is the most salient evidence of assimilation for immigrant students, schools often create systems that “track” students into various language acquisition programs, with labels such as English Language Learner (ELL) and English as a Second Language (ESL). The authors note that these tracks often have unintended consequences of limiting students’ exposure and access to social science and college preparatory coursework. This particular finding illuminates questions surrounding language acquisition and literacy that will continue to permeate all aspects of education, as the number of immigrant youth in schools rises.

Chapter Five continues the line of inquiry around access to social science coursework by exploring the variations in experiences and achievements in social science classes between children of immigrants and their non-immigrant counterparts. The authors determined that children of immigrants typically have less access to social science electives than their non-immigrant counterparts, since schools often only prepare immigrant students to complete bare minimum graduation requirements. This means that immigrant youth often complete fewer credits in social sciences and have fewer opportunities to acquire civic skills such as critical thinking, taking on multiple perspectives, and evaluation of evidence. This uneven access to coursework supports Kahne and Sporte’s (2008) findings about the impact of uneven access to civic learning opportunities.

Chapter Six presents the authors’ study of the relationship between schooling of immigrant youth and their political participation in young adulthood. While parents’ level of education continues to predict the likelihood that children of native-born parents will register to vote and actually vote, the authors suggest the same is not true for children of immigrant parents. Instead, the

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1 See Hess & Torney, 1968; Verba, Schlozman, & Burns, 2003 for detailed studies on the predictive relationship of parents’ level of education on the child’s political efficacy.
number of social science credits completed is the best predictor of the likelihood that children of immigrant parents will register to vote and actually vote. This means that schools could potentially impact immigrant youth’s political participation more than the political socialization that occurs at home.

In the closing chapter of the book, Callahan and Muller make a strong argument for supporting social science coursework in schools. In particular, they emphasize the importance of social science coursework as a vehicle for the civic development of children of immigrants. The authors argue that access to and performance in social science coursework can influence immigrant youth’s decision to vote and bolster their political participation in the future. At the same time, the authors question the impact that English-language proficiency tests and rankings have on denying immigrant youth access to social science coursework. In the end, the authors argue that curtailing social science programs in high schools could mean curtailing the political engagement of the next generation of voters, especially since schools are seeing an influx of immigrant youth.

While the importance of social science coursework for civic development has been well documented already (e.g. Torney-Purta, 2002; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008), Callahan and Muller’s book provides a unique perspective on the influence that schooling, and social science coursework in particular, can have on immigrant youth as the future electorate. Of interest is the notion that while the amount of social science coursework and achievement in these courses can impact the likelihood that immigrant youth will vote, they do not necessarily influence how the students will vote. Even though this finding may calm the anxieties of parents who do not want schools to indoctrinate their children in certain beliefs\(^2\), it highlights important questions about the role that social sciences play in teaching about partisanship as an integral part of teaching civic responsibility\(^3\).

As a caveat, I am not fully convinced of the theory behind the stratification of achievement in high school and its predictive powers on voting, as discussed at the beginning of Chapter Four. The predictive power of the stratification of achievement in high school could very well

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\(^2\) See Stolzenberg (1993) for an example.

\(^3\) See Hess and McAvoy’s (2014) forthcoming book for further discussion on the issue.
mirror socioeconomic disparities that already exist. Since the influence of socioeconomic disparity on myriad outcomes (e.g. political knowledge, political participation, college graduation, etc.) is well established, the stratification of achievement in high school may fall more in line with socioeconomic differences than students’ immigrant status. However, one can argue that these predictors mediate each other. As the authors point out, these relationships are complicated ones and often difficult to parse out; however, the influence of social science coursework on the civic development of immigrant youth is palpable.

The United States is experiencing a shift in demographics that is creating an electorate more diverse than ever before. Callahan and Muller suggest, as immigrants continue to enter the country, the civic development of their children rests largely in the hands of schools. If this book is evidence of the influence that social science courses can have on shaping future citizens, it serves as a reminder for a need to invest in social science coursework. While the policy agenda of high-stakes testing in certain subjects can take attention away from social science curriculum in schools, Callahan and Muller wisely point out that “deemphasizing these programs at the local level in response to federal and state accountability requirements could result over the long term in the diminished civic and political involvement of a generation of citizens” (p. 123).

Overall, Coming of Political Age is an accessible book that provides well-drawn conclusions from the authors’ thorough analyses of a broad range of data. I hope that the authors will continue to study the civic development of immigrant youth by looking more specifically at the type of learning opportunities these youth have access to in their coursework. I can imagine civic educators and educators in general being attracted to this book. Even though the authors specifically address issues of civic development, the book raises important issues about changing demographics that have implications for all educators of immigrant youth. Especially true is the discussion on language acquisition and the role that students’ language fluency may have in shaping the goals and aims of education as the immigrant youth population increases in schools. For the field of civic education, this book will provide fodder for civic scholars, educators,
policy makers, and individuals who are committed to building a strong democracy for the future.

References


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Jane Lo is a doctoral candidate in Social Studies Education at the University of Washington’s College of Education where her research focuses on the political engagement of youth, civic identity development, and political education. She is currently studying the ways in which classroom practices in a high school U.S. Government course can influence students’ political interest and their commitments to political participation in the future.