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Latina/o Postsecondary Education: Trends in Racial/Ethnic Education Gaps and the Role of Citizenship in Access to Higher Education

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ABSTRACT Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps persist in the United States despite substantial increases in Latina/o educational attainment since the late 1950s. The Latina/o population has grown rapidly in recent decades and currently comprises more than 20% of the U.S. population; however, barriers to citizenship have grown in tandem and have limited access to higher education. Using data from the U.S. Census (1950–2010) and the American Community Survey (2015–2017), we examine trends in Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college completion gaps and factors that may explain them. We find that college enrollment differences explain the majority of the bachelor's degree gaps. We then decompose enrollment gaps by differences in enrollment by citizenship and find that if the Latina/o population had the same citizenship rate as the White and Black populations, the Black–Latina/o enrollment gaps would effectively disappear and the White–Latina/o enrollment gaps would be reduced by up to 75%. Our findings indicate that the Latina/o population's relatively low college completion rates are partially explained by restricted access to citizenship. The high proportion of Latina/o noncitizens has also masked the considerable educational progress Latina/o citizens have made in recent decades.

KEYWORDS Higher education • Race/ethnicity • Immigration • Citizenship • Education gaps

Introduction

Education continues to be a major source of social and economic stratification in the United States, and as inequality has increased over the last several decades, so has the importance of higher education (Autor et al. 2020; Baum et al. 2013; Goldin and Katz 2009; Hout 2012). Despite substantial increases in Latina/o[1] educational attainment since the late 1950s, Latina/o individuals continue to have lower bachelor's degree rates than Black and White men and women (Hirschman 2016;

[1] For clarity in the remainder of this article, we use "Latina/o" to refer to the broader Latina/o population and "Latina" or "Latino" to address each gender (Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020).

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Ma et al. 2020; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2015). The Latina/o population has grown rapidly in recent decades and currently comprises approximately 20% of the U.S. population (authors' calculation). Given the many benefits associated with a college degree, it is critical to understand why such a large proportion of the population lags behind their peers (Baum 2014; Brand and Xie 2010; Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2013).

A wide-ranging body of literature has looked at factors that influence college completion, from family and neighborhood poverty to first-generation college student status (Alvarado 2016; Engle and Tinto 2008; Fletcher and Tienda 2010). Factors particularly salient for the Latina/o population are low high school graduation rates, lack of academic preparation among high school graduates, and limited local college choices—all of which decrease the likelihood that Latina/os will finish a bachelor's degree (Alon et al. 2010; Desmond and López Turley 2009; Gándara and Mordechay 2017). Recent research has also identified lower college enrollment among noncitizen Latina/o youth relative to citizens as an additional explanation for the uniquely low educational attainment of the Latina/o population (Hirschman 2016; Patler 2018).

However, much is still not known about trends in Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps, such as when they arose and how persistent they have been. It is also difficult to discern why Latina/o educational attainment is lower relative to that of other racial/ethnic groups, such as the Black population, who share a similar set of disadvantages, as well as other types of historical and current disadvantages that do not negatively impact the Latina/o community in the same way (O'Connell 2012; Wilson 2008). Moreover, the proximate drivers of these education gaps remain unknown, as well as how they have varied over time as Latina/os have experienced different structural constraints and opportunities that might shape college enrollment and completion, including access to citizenship.

This study addresses these unknowns by using U.S. Census data from 1950–2010 and American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2015–2017. With census data that has been optimally adjusted to capture the full Latina/o population prior to 1980, we first examine trends in the racial/ethnic gap between Latina/os and their Black and White peers to see how inequalities have developed and varied over time (Gratton and Gutmann 2000). Second, we reveal the relative importance of differences in college enrollment versus differences in college completion among individuals who enroll to explain Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gap trends. Finally, we examine how citizenship differences explain these college enrollment gaps. We examine Latinas and Latinos separately because, historically, they have had different migration patterns, as well as different cultural and familial expectations placed on them (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Garip 2012; Ovink 2014). We exclude Asian and other racial/ethnic groups from the analysis, because they also have had very different immigration histories than Latina/o individuals.

With these analyses, we draw attention to the importance of *access to college*, defined here as enrollment in college (a common measure of access among education scholars), for explaining racial/ethnic bachelor's degree gaps (Bailey and Dynarski 2011; Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). While an individual may be qualified to access a college education, many students in the United States face a complex and often competing set of background characteristics, motivations, and expectations that can reduce their likelihood of enrolling (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). Further, we focus

on citizenship as one explanation for White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o enrollment differences observed in this study, because in addition to the traditional barriers to college entry identified by education scholars, more Latina/os than White and Black men and women must contend with issues regarding citizenship. The negative consequences of being a noncitizen and the associated benefits of citizenship have been studied in several contexts (Abrego 2006; Cebulko 2014; Ku and Matani 2001; Young et al. 2018). Differences in outcomes between citizens and noncitizens are especially salient in the Latina/o community, because it has become more difficult in recent years to gain citizenship (González-Barrera 2017). Citizenship provides security and stability that allow for future planning (Cebulko 2014). It also conveys social advantages that have social and legal implications for membership inclusion/exclusion and access to such resources as social services and federal financial aid (Bean et al. 2015). Indeed, Patler (2018) labeled these benefits the "citizenship advantage" in her recent study of high school completion and college enrollment among California young adults. It is, therefore, likely that citizenship differences explain a significant proportion of Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o education gaps, and that these differences have become more important over time.

We organize our Results into three parts. The first section examines trends in Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps among the U.S population aged 25–29, separately among men and women. We find that these gaps were quite small or nonexistent in 1950, grew substantially until peaking in 2010, and then began to narrow as of 2017. This narrowing was because of more rapid growth in Latina/o college completion compared with that among Black and White men and women.

In the second Results section, we draw on McDaniel et al.'s (2011) study of White and Black gender gaps in educational attainment to examine how differences in college enrollment versus college completion given enrollment explain Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps. We find that differences in enrollment rates explain the majority of these gaps, with some variation over time. We also find that Latina/os and Black men and women consistently have very similar (and low) college completion given enrollment rates.

Finally, in the third section, we draw on Patler's (2018) work on the citizenship advantage and Hsin and Ortega's (2018) study of Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and educational outcomes to study college completion trends by Latina/o citizenship rates. We first examine trends in Latina/o college enrollment and completion given enrollment by citizenship status. We find that while citizenship appears to have become more important for college enrollment among Latina/os, college completion given enrollment is nearly the same for both citizens and noncitizens. We then decompose Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college enrollment gaps by enrollment differences among citizens and noncitizens and differences in citizenship rates. White–Latina/o differences in citizens' college enrollment rates explain the majority of observed enrollment gaps in early decades, but these differences decline substantially over time, while citizenship rate differences increasingly explain the majority of enrollment gaps since 1990. Citizenship differences explain nearly all Black–Latina/o enrollment gaps in every decade and, in some years, overexplain gaps. This overexplanation means that given the same citizenship rates, Latina/o individuals would have higher college enrollment rates than their Black peers.

We conclude that restrictive citizenship policies have played a significant limiting role in Latina/o entry into postsecondary education. We also find that the large proportion of Latina/o noncitizens in the United States during certain decades masked the substantial educational progress that Latina/o citizens have made. Drawing attention to enrollment is important for researchers looking at where inequalities are magnified and where policymakers can intervene. Drawing attention to citizenship also helps us think about the unique structural constraints different groups face.

Background

Latina/o Early Education and College Preparation

Three interrelated forces are frequently cited to explain the low college education rates of Latina/os relative to those of other racial/ethnic groups: socioeconomic background, academic preparation, and cultural expectations (frequently moderated by gender) (Fraga et al. 2010; Fry 2002; Hirschman 2016; Saenz et al. 2007). Latina/o children are more likely than their White and Black peers to grow up in low-income households, have parents who have less than a high school diploma, seasonally migrate with parents who work in agriculture, and live in mixed citizenship status families (Bean et. al. 2015; Rodriguez 2016; Salis-Reyes and Nora 2012; Warren 1996). They are also more likely than White children to live in low-income neighborhoods with low-resourced schools (Hussar et al. 2020).

These early disparities follow Latina/o children throughout elementary school and into high school and result in lower academic preparation than that attained by White and Black students (Arbona and Nora 2007; Fry 2002; Kanno and Varghese 2010). Historically, Latina/os have had lower high school completion rates than their White and Black peers, limiting their college eligibility (Donato et al. 1991; Hirschman 2016). In 2000, 87% of the Black population and 94% of the White population aged 25–29 had a high school diploma, compared with 63% of Latina/os—although there are striking nativity differences, with 56% of foreign-born Latina/os holding diplomas versus 80% of U.S.-born Latina/os (Driscoll et al. 2001).

Examining high school students in the Pacific Northwest, Hirschman (2016) found that college pathways vary not only among Latina/o high school students but also by generation: foreign-born Latina/os reported lower levels of college aspirations and expectations than native-born (second-generation) Latina/os. A recent report also found that foreign-born Latina/os enter the United States with some of the lowest years of schooling compared with other foreign-born groups (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2015). Despite differences across generations, in general, educational expectations remain high for both parents and students and are not substantively different from those of White and Black families (Patler 2018; Schneider et al. 2006).

Beyond academic disadvantages and immigration, cultural expectations—mediated by gender—have been theorized to predict college outcomes. *Familismo* is often used by scholars to describe the strong feelings of family loyalty and responsibility among Latina/os, and it is also closely tied to traditional gender roles and expectations (Desmond and López Turley 2009; Sabogal et al. 1987). For Latinos, *familismo* may

mean that while parents are supportive of their sons' pursuits of higher education, young Latinos feel a great deal of pressure to provide financial support for the family early in adulthood (Saenz and Ponjuan 2009). In contrast, *familismo* might push Latinas into college because of expectations that they be both educationally and financially successful to help support the family later in life (Ovink 2014). Finally, during certain time periods, young men migrated to the United States in greater numbers than women (Garip 2012; Gordon 2005; Parrado and Flippen 2005); these young men tended to immigrate for employment, not education (Fry 2005; Garip 2012).

Given the previous literature, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Latina/os will consistently have lower bachelor's degree rates than Black and White men and women, but White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps will be consistently larger than Black–Latina/o degree gaps throughout the study period.

Hypothesis 1b: While Latina/os will share similar bachelor's degree trends, on average, Latinas will have higher bachelor's degree rates than Latinos.

College Enrollment and Completion Once Enrolled

While Latina/os struggle with disadvantages in early education and college preparation, a variety of other factors also contribute to lower college enrollment and completion. They wrestle with the usual challenges facing disadvantaged college students, because they are more likely than their more advantaged peers to be first-generation college students, come from low-income families, and attend low-resourced colleges (Nora and Crisp 2009). Latina/o students also express strong preferences to live at home during college, and their homes are generally closer to two-year colleges—which have low transfer and completion rates—than to four-year colleges (Brint and Karabel 1989; Desmond and López Turley 2009; Hogan and Perrucci 2020; Murphy and Murphy 2018). In addition, Latina/os are more likely than the average college student to be employed while in school and to work more hours, which are associated with an increased risk of dropping out (Nuñez 2009).[2]

However, they share many of these disadvantages with other disadvantaged groups, notably Black women and men, who perform better in terms of college enrollment. This might appear perplexing but Black students graduate from high school at higher rates and take more college preparatory classes than Latina/os, leaving more Black students better qualified for college (Perna 2000). In addition, the early establishment of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and the longtime focus on education to combat racism has likely contributed to Black men and women's relatively high rates of college enrollment (Bennett and Xie 2003; U.S. Department of Education 1991). Indeed, various studies have shown that Black men and women are even more likely to attend college than Whites, net of socioeconomic characteristics (Alexander et al. 1987; Bennett and Xie 2003; Rivkin 1995).

[2] In addition, Latina/o individuals are more likely than their White peers to delay college enrollment, which has also been shown to reduce college persistence (Bozick and DeLuca 2005; Horn and Maw 1995; Nora and Crisp 2009; Snyder et al. 2006).

However, it is not clear why Black students would perform better in college once enrolled than Latina/o students. Black college students are also likely to come from low-income families and be first-generation students (Nora and Crisp 2009). Although Latina/o students are more likely to enroll in community colleges, Black students are more likely to enroll in for-profit colleges (Cottom 2017). These institutions are much more expensive than community colleges yet have similar graduation rates (Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment 2018). Finally, the Black community has historical and current disadvantages that Latina/os do not, such as slavery, Jim Crow, and continuing anti-Black racism (Boutte and Bryan 2021; O'Connell 2012).

On the basis of this literature, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2a: Enrollment differences will explain a larger proportion of the Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps than differences in college completion given enrollment.

Hypothesis 2b: Enrollment differences will explain a larger proportion of Black–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps than White–Latina/o college degree gaps.

The Burden of Noncitizenship

Latina/os are the largest immigrant population in the United States,[3] and the history of Latina/o U.S. immigration—as well as recent immigration patterns—has been documented in detail.[4] Latina/os have the lowest naturalization rates among all immigrant subpopulations (Budiman 2020), and this has likely had a negative impact on their college enrollment. It has also become increasingly difficult to gain citizenship and, therefore, citizenship has likely become an increasingly important explanation for college enrollment differences between Latina/os, Blacks, and Whites (Bloemraad 2006; González-Barrera 2017; Hainmueller et al. 2018; Massey et al. 2015; Patler 2018).

Although aspirations for college do not vary by citizenship, high school dropout rates and college enrollment do (Greenman and Hall 2013; Patler 2018). Because noncitizen youth are vulnerable to deportation, they are more likely than citizens to feel the precariousness and insecurity of their position, and it appears to affect their academic preparation and success in college (Abrego 2006). Additionally, noncitizenship status can be disruptive to life course transitions from childhood to adulthood by requiring noncitizens to navigate hostile and anti-immigrant contexts (Garcia 2019; Gonzales 2011).

Citizens are eligible for federal financial aid and in-state tuition at public universities and do not have to fear deportation (Oliverez et al. 2006).[5] The importance of citizenship is reflected in the mixed results of the DACA. Since DACA's passage in 2013, undocumented young adults who were brought to the United States as children

[3] While recent estimates show that, among newer arrivals, Asian immigrants outnumber Latina/o immigrants, Latina/os remain the largest foreign-born population in the United States.

[4] For a comprehensive history of Latina/o immigration streams to the United States, the effects of immigration policies, and the changing characteristics of immigrants entering the United States, see Garip (2012), Massey et al. (2015), Massey and Pren (2012), and Patler (2018).

[5] Many states offer in-state tuition to immigrants who are not citizens, but this is a recent development. California was the first state to pass this into law in 2001 (Mendoza and Shaikh 2019).

(referred to as the 1.5 generation) have benefited from the relief of deportation and improved work opportunities, as well as access to higher education; however, DACA does not provide citizenship. Hsin and Ortega (2018) found that DACA immigrants were more likely to seek out employment than enroll in college—largely explained by the financial needs of their families. Programs like DACA may, in theory, increase access to higher education for Latina/o youth, but it appears that what they really need is improved access to citizenship.

Citizenship status has likely become more important for college enrollment in recent decades. From a compositional perspective, citizenship has become more important over time because of the large influx of Latina/o immigrants at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first (González-Barrera 2017). A large proportion of these immigrants never naturalized; therefore, the proportion of the Latina/o noncitizen population grew (see Figure 5). Moreover, on average, Latina/o noncitizens have lower educational attainment in comparison to citizens (González-Barrera 2017; Ramirez and Medina 2010).

From this literature, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3a: Latina/o citizens will have higher bachelor's degree rates than noncitizens.

Hypothesis 3b: Over time, as the proportion of noncitizens grows, noncitizen enrollment differences will explain a higher proportion of racial/ethnic enrollment gaps than enrollment differences among citizens.

Data and Measures

Data

We use U.S. decennial census data from 1950 to 2010, in conjunction with pooled ACS data from 2015 to 2017 (Ruggles et al. 2019). The ACS is a nationally representative survey conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau between decennial census years. We use these data to analyze historical trends in Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps. These data also allow us to assess the role of citizenship and age at migration in education gaps. Although the average age of college completion continues to increase, we limit our sample to individuals aged 25–29 because they continue to represent the ages by which the majority complete college (Ma et al. 2020). However, Latina/os overall are at higher risk of the types of disadvantages that delay college attainment (e.g., being first generation, being poor, and having immigrant parents). Therefore, online appendix Figure A1 examines college completion rates for 28- to 32-year-olds. We do not find substantial differences between this older age-group and the 25–29 age-group used here.

Identifying the Latina/o Population

"Hispanic" is often used interchangeably with "Latina/o," but the term formally refers to native speakers of Spanish or those who have Spanish-speaking ancestry.

This definition is commonly referred to as the *Spanish Rule* and was used by census officials to develop the Hispanic category during the 1970s (Gratton and Gutmann 2000). In contrast, the term "Latina/o" formally refers to anyone of Latin American origin or ancestry, which includes the Hispanic population, as well as those from such non-Spanish-speaking countries as Brazil. While the term Hispanic continues to be a dominant one used by researchers and organizations, such as the U.S. Census, we use the term Latina/o to account for all individuals having ancestry in any of the Latin American countries, including natural-born citizens, naturalized citizens, and noncitizens. We classify everyone in our sample born in Mexico, Central America, Cuba, or South America as Latina/o. Our sample includes Latina/os born in the United States, as well as those born abroad.

Citizenship is a key variable of interest in this study. Although Latina/os represent the largest immigrant population in the United States, not all Latina/os in the United States are themselves immigrants and many are citizens. A large number are born to immigrant parents or are multigenerational, thus making them native-born citizens. In addition, many immigrants become naturalized citizens after entering the country, although this has become increasingly difficult over the last two decades (Bloemraad 2006). To examine citizenship, we construct a simple binary category: citizen and noncitizen. We define citizens as any individual born in the United States or abroad to native parents, or who became a naturalized citizen after entering the country.[6] We define noncitizens as those who were not born in the United States and did not naturalize, although they may have legal permanent residency. Because of data limitations, we are unable to separately examine those with legal status and those without. In addition, the 1960 decennial census did not ask about citizenship status. Therefore, in the third section of the Results, we exclude all respondents from 1960 from the analysis.

Researchers have expressed concern about the potential undercount of the Latina/o population prior to 1980 due to inconsistent measurement (Duncan and Trejo 2018; Jimenez 2018; Massey 2018; Mora 2014). Prior to the 1980s, estimating the U.S. Latina/o population was difficult because the census did not include a question or category specifically aimed at distinguishing Latina/o people (Gratton and Gutmann 2000; Mora 2014). While this is still a concern, IPUMS created an approach, which they call the "Hispanic origin rule," to harmonize inconsistencies and optimally capture the full Latina/o population (Gratton and Gutmann 2000; Ruggles et al. 2019). For census years 1950–1970, IPUMS assigned Hispanic origin according to eight rules.[7] We use this Hispanic origin variable to create our race/ethnicity category and draw comparisons between non-Latina/o Black, non-Latina/o White, and Latina/o

[6] There are differences in the educational attainment of natural-born and naturalized citizens. They are not large, however, and the proportion of naturalized citizens is quite small: approximately 7% of the Latina/o population are naturalized citizens, compared with 19% noncitizens and 76% natural-born citizens. For these reasons, we combined natural-born and naturalized citizens into one group (citizens).

[7] The Hispanic Rule is used to delineate persons in the census as Hispanic from 1950 to 1970 (Gratton and Gutmann 2000). IPUMS classified individuals as Hispanic if they met one of eight rules (Ruggles et al. 2019). If a person could be assigned to more than one rule, they were assigned to the lowest (most robust) possible. The lowest rule applied to Hispanics is 1, which indicates that they were born in Latin America or Spain or were born in states that were still considered Mexican territory before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in July of 1848. Rule 8 assigns individuals as Hispanic if that person is a relative of a householder

(including White and Black) men and women prior to 1980. However, despite changes in census measurement strategies, Latina/os remain one of the most undercounted populations (Alsan and Yang 2018; O'Hare 2015, 2019).

Previous research has shown that the noncitizen Latina/o population (as well as those who live in mixed-status households) in the United States are less likely than Latina/o citizens to complete the decennial census, because they do not trust government authorities and they fear deportation (Duany 1992; Van Hook and Bean 1998). Latina/o noncitizens are also more likely to be unstably housed and migrate for agricultural work, making this population more difficult to enumerate (Bean et al. 2015; O'Hare 2019). This undercount of noncitizens may bias any results that examine citizenship in our analysis. We are not able to address this problem, but we note that any differences due to citizenship in our findings are likely conservative and downwardly biased. Nonrespondents to the U.S. Census are more likely to be noncitizens, and noncitizens on average experience higher rates of poverty and have lower educational attainment than citizens (Government Accountability Office 2003). For example, the average Latina/o agricultural worker has an eighth-grade education, and a high proportion of agricultural workers are noncitizens (Hernandez and Gabbard 2019). Consequently, the gap in educational attainment between Latina/o citizens and noncitizens is likely larger than we present in this study.

College Enrollment and College Completion

Our main outcomes of interest are college enrollment and bachelor's degree completion among individuals who enroll. The decennial census has not consistently measured education in the same way during the time under observation. From 1950 to 1980, college education was reported as years of college, and degree status was not assigned. To limit possible measurement errors due to this change, we follow a procedure suggested by Jaeger (1997) and used in several studies (Autor et al. 2008; Schwartz and Mare 2005), which classifies (1) anyone who reported less than one year of college or more as having enrolled in college and (2) those with four years of college or more as having a bachelor's degree or higher. From 1990 to 2017, we measure college attainment as any degree completed at or above a bachelor's degree,[8] including a master's, professional, or doctoral degree. We do not differentiate between various types of bachelor's degrees (e.g., Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science).[9] We limit our college completion given enrollment variable to only those who enrolled in college. We code those who completed a bachelor's degree or higher

classified Hispanic using rule 6 or 7. Hispanic origin has been asked in all census forms starting in 1980 (Mora 2014).

[8] For accuracy, we compared our bachelor's degree measure with annual reports from both the National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau and found that our share of the population with a bachelor's degree is within one percentage point of all reports across every year in this study (Hussar et al. 2020; Ryan and Bauman 2016).

[9] For brevity, we use BA to indicate all bachelor's degrees in accordance with other scholars' labeling schemes (Bailey and Dynarski 2011).

as 1 and those who enrolled in college but did not complete a bachelor's degree as 0. We use this measure in our decomposition of Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o education gaps, where we identify differences in college enrollment and completion given college enrollment.

Analysis

Analytic Approach

We begin our analysis by examining trends in the Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o gaps in college attainment over a 70-year period. Next, we explain the proximate drivers of these gaps by decomposing them into racial/ethnic differences in college enrollment versus racial/ethnic differences in college completion given enrollment. Finally, we explain the role of citizenship in Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college enrollment gaps by decomposing them by racial/ethnic differences in citizens and noncitizens' enrollment and the proportion of the population who are citizens and noncitizens. We are unable to distinguish between education completed inside or outside of the United States prior to immigrating. To account for this problem, we add a sensitivity analysis and repeat our decomposition analysis while limiting our sample to those who immigrated before age 14.

Decomposition Analysis

Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o College Completion Gaps

In the second section of Results, to examine the Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college completion gaps for the full population in each time period from 1950 to 2017, we decompose the total Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps by differences in college enrollment versus college completion given enrollment. Decomposition-based studies allow scholars to simulate counterfactual scenarios to explain subgroup inequalities (Kitagawa 1955). We measure racial/ethnic gaps in absolute values in proportions.[10] The values in our decomposition are based on sample means estimated from U.S. Census data. Note that

[10] We measure racial/ethnic gaps in absolute values in proportions for a few reasons. These measures are internally consistent with the other figures in the article and are easier for readers to interpret than relative measures, such as odds ratios. In addition, for this type of decomposition, it is preferable to use absolute gaps. While relative measures are important, one problem with relying on them is that during the early years of this study, the gaps between Latinos and White and Black men are small because college completion was rare, regardless of race/ethnicity. For example, in 1950, 4.2% of White men and 1.1% of Latinos completed college. The absolute gap is 3.1 percentage points, but the risk ratio indicates that White men are nearly four times more likely than Latinos to complete college, which is accurate. However, in 2000, the absolute gap was 23 percentage points between these groups, but the risk ratio indicates that White men were only 3.5 times as likely to complete college. If we used relative gaps, education differences between White men and Latinos in 1950 and 2000 would appear to be relatively similar, but we know that they have changed significantly, and the differences were much larger in 2000 than in 1950.

these values do not reflect unobserved counterfactuals estimated from regressions. Decomposition methods are noncausal and descriptive in nature. Our goal is to describe the association of citizenship differences with racial/ethnic educational inequality.

The total White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o gaps in bachelor's degree rates are decomposed into the sum of the two components: college enrollment differences and college completion given enrollment differences. We write the decomposition as follows:

BA Completion Gaps Enrollment Completion Given Enrollment

$$(BA_{rg} - BA_{Lg}) = (BA_{Lg} \mid E_{Lg}) \times (E_{rg} - E_{Lg}) + (E_{rg}) \times (BA_{rg} \mid E_{rg} - BA_{Lg} \mid E_{Lg}),$$

where *BA* denotes bachelor's degree, *r* denotes Black or White, *L* denotes Latina/o, and *g* denotes male or female. If White or Black men and women have an educational advantage over Latina/os, the gaps will be positive, and if Latina/os have the advantage, then the gaps will be negative.

To estimate the role of college enrollment in these gaps as opposed to the role of college completion given enrollment, we calculate the amount of the bachelor's degree gap that can be explained by White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o differences in college enrollment in each period:

$$\text{BA completion gaps explained by enrollment differences} = (BA_{Lg} \mid E_{Lg}) \times (E_{rg} - E_{Lg}),$$

where $BA_{Lg} \mid E_{Lg}$ is the proportion of Latina/os who graduate from college conditional on their enrollment in college and *E* is the proportion of the subpopulation who enroll in college.

To estimate the role of college completion given enrollment in the racial/ethnic gaps observed, we calculate the amount of the bachelor's degree gap that can be explained by White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o differences in college completion given college enrollment, in each time:

$$\text{BA gaps explained by college completion differences} = (E_{rg}) \times (BA_{rg} \mid E_{rg} - BA_{Lg} \mid E_{Lg}),$$

where E_{rg} is the proportion of Black and White men and women who enroll in college and $BA_{rg} \mid E_{rg}$ is the proportion of the subpopulation who graduate from college given that they enrolled in college.

Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o College Enrollment Gaps

In the third section of Results, we estimate the proportion of the Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college enrollment gaps that can be explained by differences in enrollment by citizenship status and composition. We write the decomposition as follows:

Enrollment Gap Noncitizen Enrollment Citizen Enrollment

$$(E_{rg} - E_{Lg}) = (NC_{Lg}) \times (E_{rg} \mid NC_{rg} - E_{Lg} \mid NC_{Lg}) + (C_{Lg}) \times (E_{rg} \mid C_{rg} - E_{Lg} \mid C_{Lg}),$$

where E denotes college enrollment, r denotes Black or White, L denotes Latina/o, and g denotes male or female.

To estimate the role of noncitizen enrollment differences and the composition of noncitizens, we calculate the amount of the enrollment gap that can be explained by White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o differences in college enrollment among noncitizens in each period:

$$\text{Enrollment gaps explained by differences in noncitizens' enrollment and composition} = (NC_{Lg}) \times (E_{rg} \mid NC_{rg} - E_{Lg} \mid NC_{Lg}),$$

where NC_{Lg} denotes the noncitizen rates of Latina/os and g is the enrollment rate of noncitizens. When noncitizen rates are high or racial/ethnic noncitizen enrollment gaps are large, differences in enrollment among noncitizens will explain more of the racial/ethnic enrollment gaps.

To estimate the role of citizens' enrollment differences and the composition of citizens, we calculate the amount of the enrollment gap that can be explained by White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o differences in college enrollment among citizens in each period:

$$\text{Enrollment gaps explained by differences in citizens' enrollment and composition} = (C_{Lg}) \times (E_{rg} \mid C_{rg} - E_{Lg} \mid C_{Lg}),$$

where C_{Lg} denotes the citizenship rates of Latina/os and $E_{rg} \mid NC_{rg}$ is the enrollment rate of citizens. When citizenship rates are high and/or racial/ethnic citizen enrollment gaps are large, differences in enrollment among citizens will explain more of the racial/ethnic enrollment gaps.

Results

Trends in Racial/Ethnic Educational Attainment and Gaps

Figure 1 shows trends in bachelor's degree completion by race/ethnicity and gender.[11] Although women in all three racial/ethnic categories had nearly the same college attainment rates in 1950, White women rapidly diverged from Black women and Latinas over time, and Black women's educational attainment increased at a higher rate than Latinas'. White and Black women made their principal increases early (between 1950 and 1980), while Latinas made their largest gains more recently, from 2000 to 2017.

[11] Changes in college attainment for women and men in each racial/ethnic category from 1950–1980, 1980–2000, and 2000–2017 can be seen in greater detail in Table A1 in the online appendix.

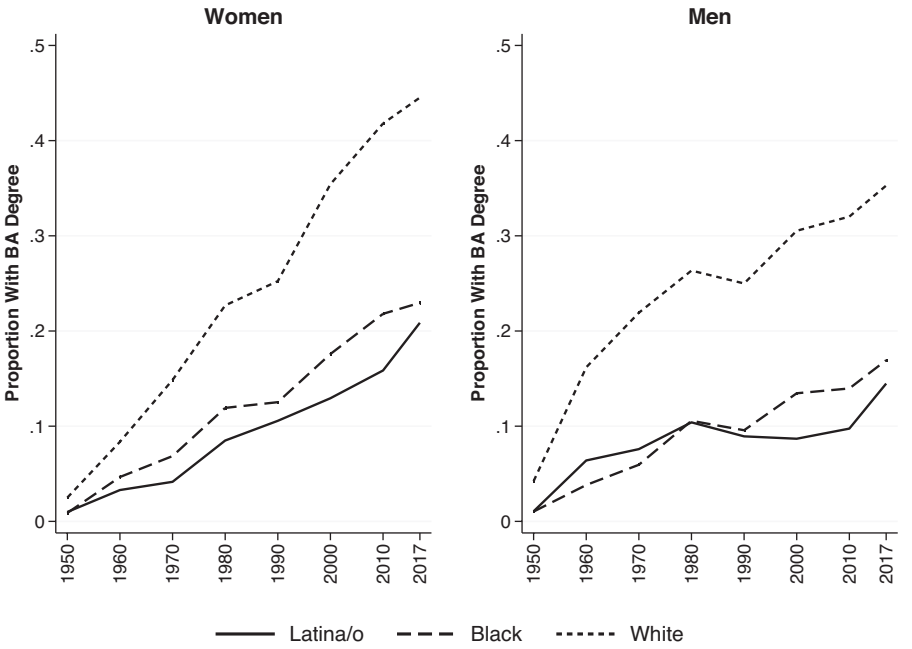

Fig. 1 Trends in the proportion of 25- to 29-year-olds with a bachelor's degree, by race/ethnicity and gender. *Sources:* 1950–2010 IPUMS and 2015–2017 ACS.

Women in all racial/ethnic groups increased their college attainment more than men in the same racial/ethnic group. As we saw with women, men's racial/ethnic gaps were small in 1950 and then rapidly grew over the study period. Men in all three groups increased their college attainment the most from 1950 to 1980. Latinos are the only group to experience declines in college attainment from 1980 to 2000. However, like Latinas, Latinos increased their college education at a faster rate than White or Black men from 2000 to 2017.

Figure 2 reorganizes the information in Figure 1 to highlight the trends in the Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps from 1950 to 2017. The magnitude of the gap in educational attainment between Black women and Latinas has never been very large, but Black women have consistently held an advantage in educational attainment over Latinas since 1960 (left panel). The White–Latina gaps are very different. While White women and Latinas had similar educational attainment in 1950, White women rapidly outpaced Latinas, despite Latinas' consistent attainment increases in every decade after 1950. The recent narrowing of gaps from 2010 to 2017 is due to Latinas' more rapid increase in bachelor's degree attainment than that among Black and White women.

The college completion gap trends between Black men and Latinos vary from the other racial/ethnic gaps in the earlier decades (1950–1990), when Black men and Latinos either earned college degrees at the same rate or Latinos earned degrees at higher rates than Black men; however, after 1990, Black men earned college degrees at higher rates than Latinos (Figure 2, right panel). White men have consistently had

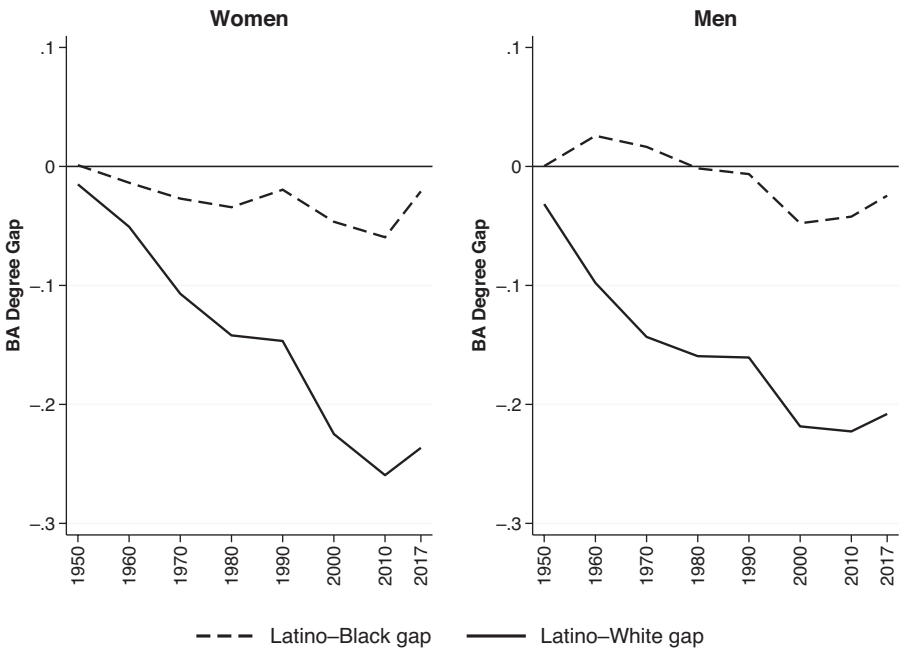

Fig. 2 Trends in Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps

higher degree rates than Latinos, although the gaps grew substantially over time. As with women, White–Latino and Black–Latino bachelor's degree gaps narrowed in 2017. White–Latina/o education gaps grew more rapidly than Black–Latina/o degree gaps and are still quite large (greater than 20 percentage points for both men and women).

Differences in Enrollment and Completion as an Explanation for College Completion Gaps

Previous research has demonstrated how differences in college enrollment and college completion given enrollment help explain differences in bachelor's degree rates between White and Black men and women (McDaniel et al. 2011). Here, we examine how these differences explain White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o college attainment gaps.

Figure 3 shows trends in college enrollment (top row) and college completion given enrollment (bottom row) for men and women in all three racial/ethnic groups. White men and women have consistently enrolled in and completed college at higher rates than both Latina/os and Black men and women (except for White women's college completion rates in 1950). White–Latina/o enrollment gaps were small in 1950, but grew precipitously over time. Black women also experienced higher growth rates in enrollment than Latinas after the 1950s, albeit to a smaller degree. Latinos enrolled at higher rates than Black men from 1950 to 1970, but from 1980 onward, Black men enrolled in college at higher rates than Latinos. Black–Latina/o enrollment gaps have

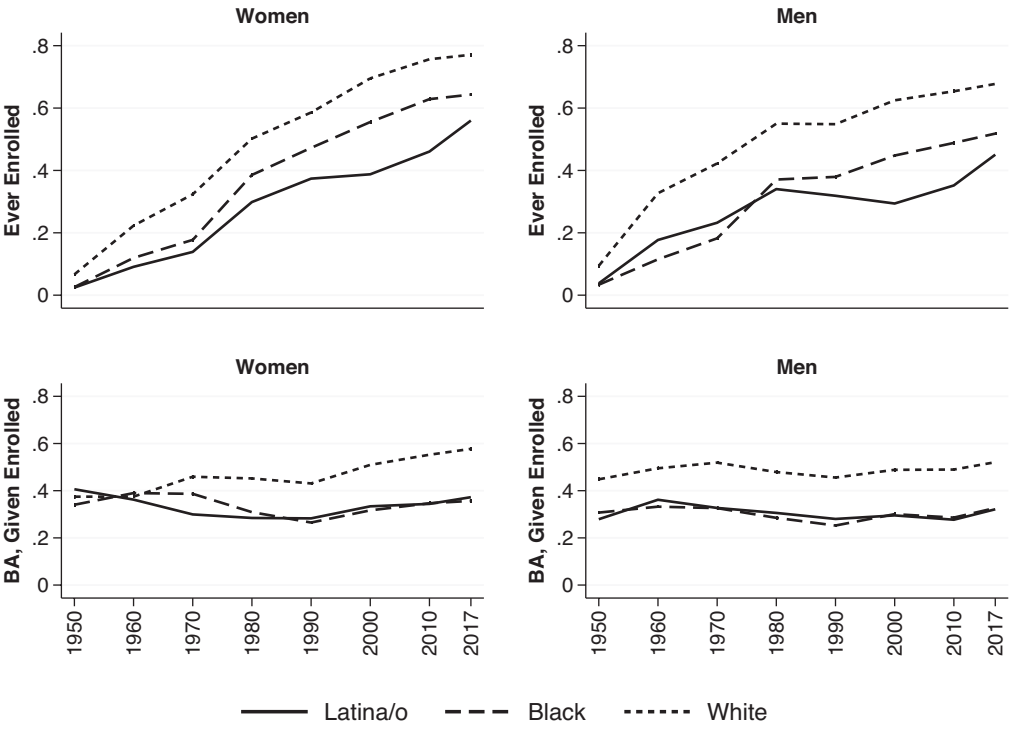

Fig. 3 Trends in college enrollment and college degree completion given enrollment, by race/ethnicity and gender

consistently been much smaller than the White–Latina/o gaps, although all enrollment gaps declined slightly in 2017.

College completion conditional on enrollment trends is very different from enrollment trends. While enrollment increased substantially—if unequally—for all groups since 1950, completion rates have remained mostly flat for all racial-ethnic groups, with one notable exception: White women are the only group to experience large gains in college completion conditional on enrollment. White men have consistently completed college at much higher rates than both Latinos and Black men, and White women have maintained a substantial college completion advantage over Latinas and Black women since 1970. It is not surprising that White students complete college at much higher rates than both Latina/o and Black students given the disadvantages that both groups face relative to White students.

Based on the trends in Figure 3, it appears that college enrollment differences explain more of the White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o education gaps. Figure 4 decomposes these two components (enrollment and completion given enrollment) to identify the magnitude of each more precisely. Enrollment differences explain the entirety of the Black–Latina/o college completion gaps and, in some years, overexplain the gaps (Figure 4, left panels). This means that in some years, if Latina/os had enrolled in college at the same rates as Black men and women, they would have had higher college degree rates than Black men and women. The only year when

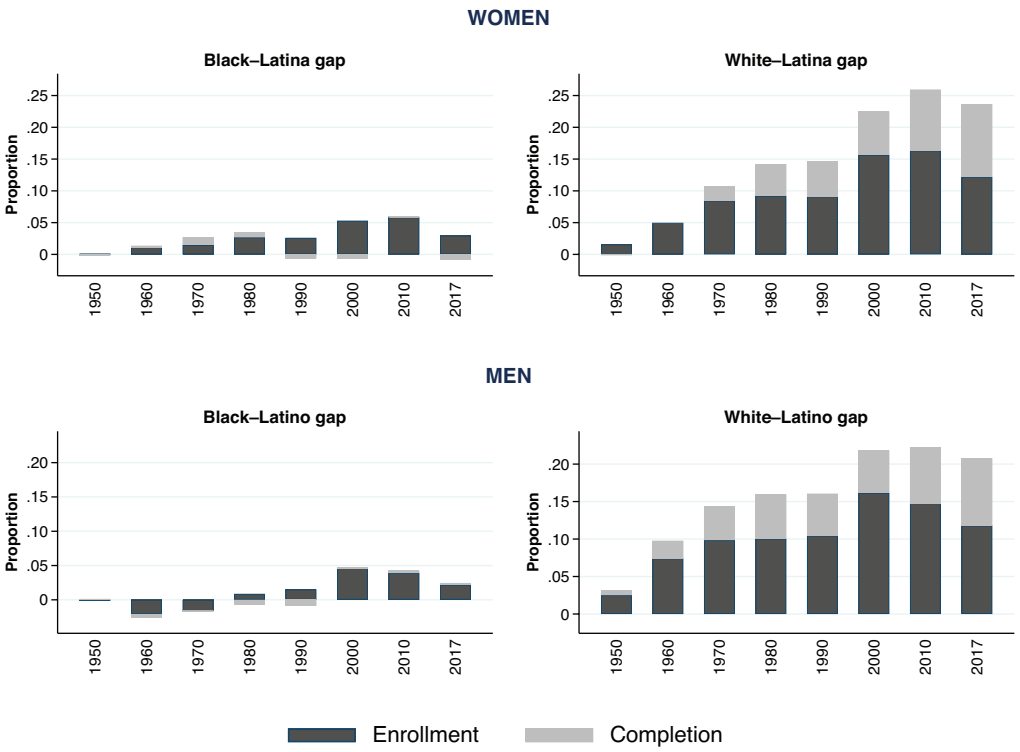

Fig. 4 Decomposition of Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o bachelor's degree gaps, by differences in college enrollment and completion given enrollment.

completion differences explained any of the Black–Latina/o education gap is 1970. This finding suggests that Black men and women may have some advantages in college access, but both groups experience challenges that lower their likelihood of finishing college relative to their White peers.

White–Latina/o education gaps, in contrast, reflect both enrollment differences and completion differences given enrollment (Figure 4, right panels). Although enrollment differences explain most of the college completion gaps between Latina/os and White students in almost every year examined, they do not explain the entirety, except for women in 1950 and 1960. Moreover, the proportion of the college completion gap explained by enrollment decreased between 1950 and 2010. The only year when conditional completion explained more of the White–Latina gap than college enrollment is 2017.

In summary, college enrollment differences explain the majority of the Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college attainment gaps. What explains these White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o enrollment differences? We hypothesized that citizenship differences provide a key explanation. Throughout the study period, more than 95% of Black and White men and women were citizens (Table A2, online appendix), while a very large proportion of the Latina/o population were immigrants and noncitizens

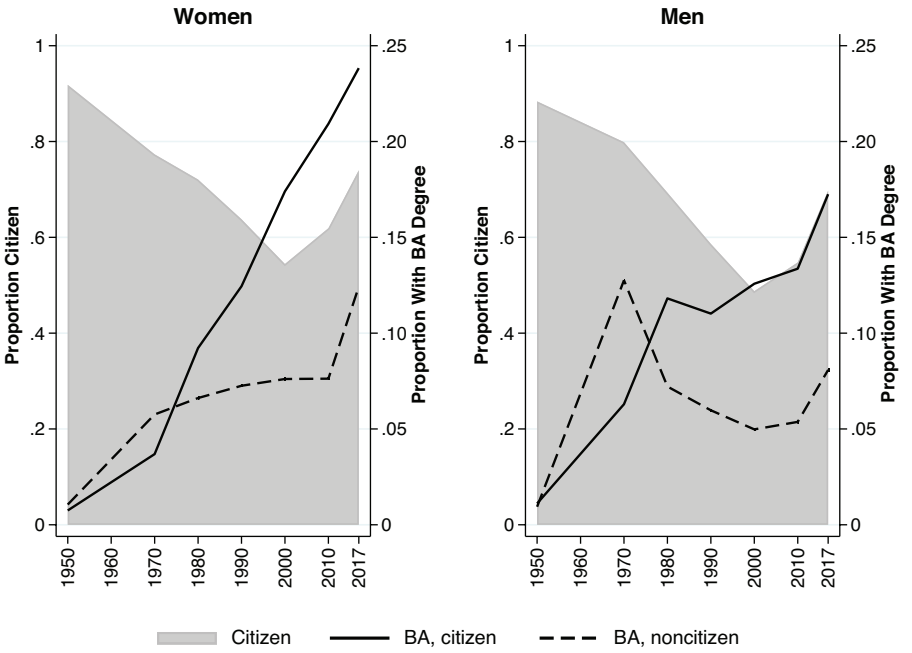

Fig. 5 Trends in Latina/o citizenship and bachelor's degree rates, by citizenship and gender

(ranging from 48% to 89% across the study period). In the next section, we examine these citizenship differences to evaluate their relationship to Latina/o college enrollment.

Differences in Citizenship Rates as an Explanation for Differences in College Enrollment

Figure 5 shows the proportion of Latina/o citizens (left *y*-axis), as well as the proportion of Latina/o individuals with a bachelor's degree (right *y*-axis), by citizenship status. Although Latina/o citizens have represented the majority of the U.S. Latina/o population in most decades, citizenship rates were at their highest in 1950. From 1960 to 2000, Latina/o citizenship rates declined, reaching a low of 53% and 48%, respectively. Except for 1970, Latinas have consistently had higher citizenship rates than Latinos.

From 1950 to 1970, Latina/o noncitizens had higher college attainment rates than citizens; however, after 1980, citizens overtook noncitizens, and the education gap between them swiftly grew. These differences are important, especially in the context of declining citizenship rates. As it became more challenging for Latina/o immigrants to gain citizenship, it also became more difficult for noncitizens to gain access to college. Because the noncitizen population was so large and growing, the educational progress that Latina/o citizens were making during this time was obscured.

Figure 6 shows trends in college enrollment (top row) and college completion given enrollment (bottom row) for Latina/o citizens and noncitizens. Overall, in early

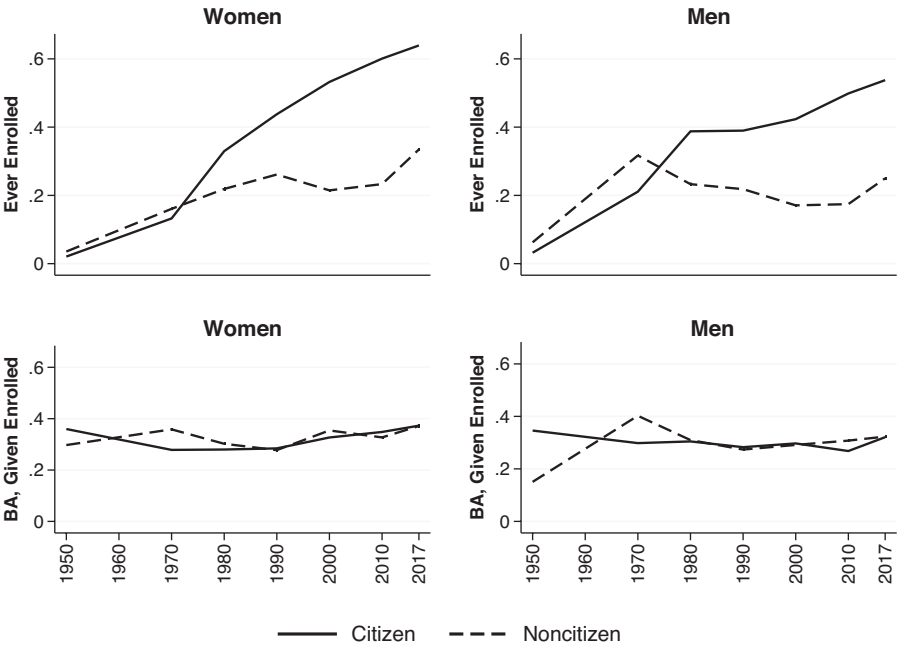

Fig. 6 Trends in Latina/o college enrollment and college degree completion given enrollment, by citizenship and gender

decades, both groups had similar and low college enrollment rates; however, over time, Latina/o citizens increasingly enrolled in college at higher rates than noncitizens. For Latina noncitizens, college enrollment slowly increased while Latino noncitizens experienced declines in college enrollment until 2017. This suggests that the importance of citizenship for college enrollment grew over time.

We observe a very different pattern for college completion given enrollment trends. Despite some variation, Latina/o citizens and noncitizens have had roughly similar college completion rates given enrollment rates. Citizenship appears to provide better access to college, but does not increase Latina/o citizens' likelihood of graduating. These findings are similar to Black–Latina/o enrollment and completion given enrollment gaps observed in Figure 3. It appears that Black and Latina/o students—regardless of race/ethnicity or citizenship—are disadvantaged in very similar ways once enrolled in college, and this lowers their likelihood of completing college relative to White students.

Figure 7 displays the proportion of the White–Latina/o and Black–Latina/o college enrollment gaps that can be explained by differences in the enrollment rates of citizens and noncitizens, and the composition of each group. Differences in noncitizen enrollment explained a small proportion of the White–Latina/o enrollment gaps from 1950 to 1970, but grew significantly over time. Since 1990, the proportion of the enrollment gaps explained by noncitizen enrollment differences has remained relatively stable at approximately 70%.

Turning to the Black–Latina/o college enrollment, differences in noncitizen enrollment explain nearly all of the Black–Latina enrollment gaps in every year. If

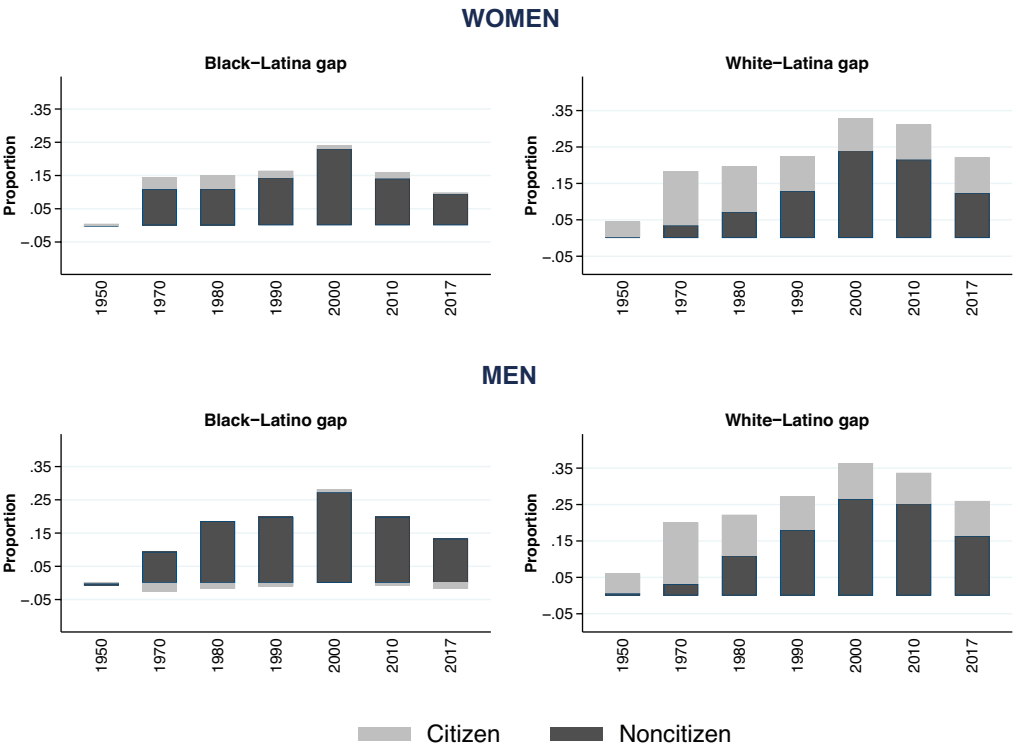

Fig. 7 Decomposition of racial/ethnic college enrollment gaps, by citizenship differences. The 1960 decennial census did not ask about citizenship status, therefore we exclude all respondents from 1960 from the analysis.

Latinas had the same citizenship rates as Black women, Latinas would have had the same enrollment rates as Black women. The pattern is very similar for Black men and Latinos, except that during some decades, noncitizen enrollment overexplains Black–Latino enrollment gaps. Latinos would have had the same enrollment or higher enrollment rates than Black men.

Overall, we find that as Latina/o citizenship declined, the proportion of racial/ethnic enrollment gaps that could be explained by the enrollment differences of noncitizens increased substantively, and the proportion of racial/ethnic enrollment gaps that could be explained by the enrollment differences of citizens declined. Latina/o noncitizens have very low college enrollment rates and, over time, they became a large proportion of the Latina/o population. Although enrollment differences among citizens declined during this time, the racial/ethnic gaps in citizenship rates meant that the enrollment progress of Latina/o citizens was obscured. In the online appendix, we conduct a sensitivity analysis to account for differences that may arise from age at migration. Those who immigrated at younger ages may be more likely than those who immigrate in young adulthood to enroll in college regardless of citizenship status (Beck et al. 2012; Gonzalez 2003). Although there are differences in magnitude, the results support our previous findings and conclusion that access to citizenship is instrumental in Latina/o access to higher education

Discussion

Across the study period, college completion grew in social and economic importance. Individuals with a bachelor's degree earn higher wages, have longer life expectancy, and have increased intergenerational mobility than those who do not (Hout 2012). Yet, at the same time, educational inequality grew between Latina/os and Black and White men and women. Previous scholarship provides some insight into these gaps, such as the higher childhood poverty rate and the lower high school graduation rates of Latina/o families (Kanno and Varghese 2010; Nora and Crisp 2009). We add to this literature by demonstrating that differences in enrollment explain the majority of racial/ethnic bachelor's degree gaps and that differences in citizenship rates explain gaps in enrollment.

We extend previous scholarship with four main contributions. First, we show how Black–Latina/o and White–Latina/o college completion gaps developed over a 70-year period, from relative parity in 1950 to large gaps later. Racial/ethnic gaps in bachelor's degree attainment can occur at two points: inequalities in college enrollment and inequalities in college completion given enrollment. This leads to our second finding that differences in college enrollment explain the majority of the White–Latina/o education gaps in nearly every decade, although differences in college completion given enrollment have grown over time. Differences in enrollment explain nearly all Black–Latina/o college education gaps, and in some decades, college enrollment differences overexplain these gaps. Therefore, if college enrollment rates were equal between Black men and women and Latina/os, the latter would have higher bachelor's degree rates than their Black peers.

Third, we show that Latina/o citizens increasingly enrolled in college at much higher rates than Latina/o noncitizens after 1980, but that there is little or no substantive difference between citizens and noncitizens for college completion conditional on enrollment. These findings support Patler's (2018) work on the "citizenship advantage" for the transition to college, although this advantage does not appear to apply to college completion once enrolled.

Finally, we find that citizenship rates explain or overexplain Black–Latina/o college enrollment differences. We also find that the importance of citizenship differences increased over time. This is due to Latina/o citizens having higher rates of college enrollment than Black citizens and the enormous differences in citizenship rates between Latina/o and Black populations. The trends are similar for the White–Latina/o enrollment gaps, but smaller in magnitude. Through these results, we show that citizenship is an important factor for explaining educational inequalities in the United States. Our findings offer a potential explanation for the mixed effects of DACA for educational attainment found by Hsin and Ortega (2018). It does not appear to be sufficient to legally allow noncitizens to enroll in college. Instead, these students need a path to citizenship before they can enroll.

As with most scholarly work, there are limitations to our study. It is notoriously difficult to obtain an accurate count of the Latina/o population because of the precarious position of undocumented immigrants. The lack of a standardized measure of Latina/os in the early years of this study period compounds this problem. However, these data collection challenges likely bias our results downward, meaning that if all Latina/os in the United States were accurately enumerated, the White–Latina/o

and Black–Latina/o differences in educational attainment would be even larger and citizenship differences would explain even more of the educational gaps than we report. In addition, we do not address immigrant selectivity or changes in selectivity—that is, the different reasons or characteristics of individuals that motivate immigrants to leave their home country—over time. Indeed, contexts of exit—such as education, distance from the United States, and political repression—are powerful indicators of which segment of a country's population migrates (Feliciano 2005, 2018). Some individuals immigrate to the United States to attend college, while others come after they have completed their postsecondary education, in search of better employment opportunities. Both factors have effects on our findings that we are unable to identify in this study.

Future work should further examine how citizenship shapes other educational inequalities in the United States. Latina/os are not a monolithic group, and there is likely a great deal of variation in both citizenship rates and educational attainment between Latina/o subgroups. Education scholars could separate out the different regions from which Latina/os immigrate, as well as the different regions in which they settle in the United States, and examine how these differences interact with access to citizenship and predict educational attainment. In addition, future research that can incorporate family socioeconomic status could disentangle the relationship between socioeconomic status, citizenship, and education. Although the future of DACA is uncertain, we still have a great deal to learn about the relationship between DACA (or similar types of programs) and educational attainment.

Finally, although Latina/o and Asian populations have very different immigration histories, comparative research on the association between citizenship and educational attainment is lacking. Studies in this area would yield important insights for two of the largest immigrant groups in the United States on how some immigration policies hyperselect immigrants and how policy differences have affected the educational achievement of these two racial/ethnic groups.

Our findings suggest that examining the educational attainment of the total Latina/o population—without accounting for the large differences in citizenship rates between Latina/o and the White and Black populations—obscures the overall higher attainment of Latina/o citizens relative to noncitizens, as well as the progress that Latina/o citizens have made in recent decades. Our results also indicate that continued attention and additional resources are necessary to help disadvantaged students graduate after they have entered college. ■

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