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# **Chicago Mexican Hometown Associations and the Confederation of Mexican Federations: Experiences of Binational Civic Participation**

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## **Chicago Mexican Hometown Associations and the Confederation of Mexican Federations: Experiences of Binational Civic Participation**

The Chicago Confederation of Mexican Federations (CONFEMEX)<sup>1</sup>—representing a citywide growing base of politically connected and organized Mexican immigrant hometown associations and federations—is currently in the midst of garnering Mexico-US binational political influence. This passionate coalition embodies Mexican immigrant leaders who possess decades of experience in creating philanthropic development projects and exerting political influence in their hometowns of Mexico. More recently, however, this coalition of hometown club leaders has galvanized their broad membership base, routed throughout local Chicago and Midwest communities, to form broader binational coalitions that voices integral political concerns newly recognized on both sides of the border. Most notably, Chicago hometown associations and their broader coalitions' leadership role in launching the extraordinary 2006 mass marches for domestic immigrant rights points to a dramatic shift in their agendas to include US-based concerns along with Mexico-based issues. Their growing binational activism serves as a glowing illustration for how groups of Chicago Mexican immigrants—often considered marginalized and legally vulnerable—can create tangible opportunities to voice vital political concerns in *both* Mexico and the United States.

Overall, I argue that it is the increasingly unequal relationship between Mexico and the US that positions Chicago hometown clubs and coalitions to have new forms of unique binational political influence. This is to say, as Mexico's diplomatic influence weakens within US politics, Mexico becomes more dependent on emigrants residing in the US, particularly those in organized clubs and federations, to influence the US's current immigration debate. At the same time, Chicago clubs and their coalitions have strategically worked to take advantage of these new political opportunities. To construct this argument, I will start by providing background on hometown clubs development in Chicago and their mainly Mexico-oriented focus throughout the 1990s. I will then turn to common misconceptions about hometown clubs that have prevented research from moving beyond one-sided Mexico-only accounts to acknowledge the organizations' evolving Mexico *and* US-focused activities. Afterward, I will explore the external and internal factors that have influenced CONFEMEX's transition towards Mexico-US cross-border influences. I will then highlight the extraordinary expansion of CONFEMEX into binational civic action. The paper will conclude with considerations for potential challenges in maintaining binational priorities into the future.

This paper provides preliminary findings from my ongoing dissertation research on Chicago hometown clubs and their broader coalitions. This includes one and a half years of participant observation with CONFEMEX (from January 2006 to the present). Field activities include taking notes at monthly CONFEMEX meetings, volunteering at numerous transnational and immigrant-focused events, and participating in public demonstrations and hometown-association festivals. The project is now moving to in-depth interviews with Chicago Federation leaders, Mexican consular and local US government officials who interact directly with Chicago clubs and their broader coalitions. The study also plans to incorporate a review of archival data to explore

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<sup>1</sup> CONFEMEX is an umbrella organization representing the nine Mexican state federations in the Greater Chicago area. Those federations, in turn, are comprised of 179 hometown associations.

federation and coalition developments along with exploring the organizations' strategic responses to changes in the broader political landscape. One should take note that this account is based on preliminary findings of my dissertation research. Ideas will continue to develop and new insights will emerge as I conduct future archival research and semi-structured interviews.

*I. Chicago Hometown Club Development During the 1990s: Mexico-Focused Agendas*

Mexican immigrant hometown clubs have been largely characterized as organizations primarily focused on Mexican-oriented concerns, what researchers commonly refer to as “transnational organizations.”<sup>2</sup> This conception largely stems from the fact that hometown clubs often initiate with Mexico-focused priorities. Such clubs are made up of self-organized immigrants from the same hometown of Mexico whose efforts seek to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage and celebrate their Mexican identity. Such clubs can serve as crucial resources for members who encounter a xenophobic environment in the US and for those who wish to pass their cultural values and traditions onto their children.

Numerous clubs have also pooled together donations to provide collective remittance-funded infrastructure projects in their hometowns of Mexico. Such financial assistance goes towards civic, religious and public works projects to improve the welfare of their communities back home. Hometown associations perform a number of fundraisers in attempts to raise money (e.g., soccer clubs, dances, beauty pageants, raffles, picnics, rodeos, membership dues, and private donations) for a number of various public works projects (e.g., renovation of roads, bridges, parks, churches, schools, health care clinics, sport facilities, childcare centers, and homes for the elderly). Hometown associations have also been known to donate ambulances, medical goods, and school supplies and to provide education grants to needy members of their hometown communities.<sup>34</sup> Hometown associations not only serve to develop the infrastructure of their sending communities, but such projects also serve to promote a sense of community that transcends international borders and strengthens network ties between those residing in the US and those living in the mother country.<sup>5</sup> Over time, hometown clubs began to

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<sup>2</sup> Hometown associations have been characterized in research as transnational organizations in which immigrants' energies concentrate on sustaining social and political membership ties with their country of origin (Goldring, 1998, 2002; Rivera-Salgado, 2002, R.C. Smith, 1998, 2006; Portes, Escobar, and Radford, 2007). This characterization, however, has inhibited researchers from capturing the ways in which hometown associations are evolving to incorporate both Mexico-US binational agendas (for exceptions see Rivera-Salgado, Bada, and Escala-Rabadan, 2005; Fox, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Alarcon, Rafael (2002). “The Development of Hometown Associations in the United States and the Use of Social Remittances in Mexico.” Departamento de Estudios Sociales El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Working Paper.

<sup>4</sup> Rivera-Salgado, Gaspar (2002). “Cross-Border Grassroots Organizations and the Indigenous Migrant Experience.” In *Cross-Border Dialogues: US-Mexico Social Movement Networking*, ed. David Brooks and Jonathon Fox. Center for US-Mexico Studies: University of California, San Diego.

<sup>5</sup> Zabin, Carol, and Luis Escala-Rabadan (1998). “Mexican Hometown Associations and Mexican Immigrant Political Empowerment in Los Angeles.” California Nonprofit Research Program, Working Paper.

play an important role in local politics back in Mexico. There are numerous examples of clubs influencing local Mexican elections to the extent that some club leaders even return to Mexico to hold public office.<sup>6</sup>

The Mexico-focus of hometown clubs is further encouraged by the proactive outreach of the Mexican government. While various Mexican government outreach attempts at municipal and state levels began earlier, in the 1990s the Mexican national government began its outreach to hometown clubs through consulate-based programs. Continuing today, the Institute for Mexicans Abroad (*El Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior*), including the Secretary for Foreign Relations and Social Development (*Las Secretarías Relaciones Exteriores y de Desarrollo Social*), administered through US-based Mexican consulates, aim to capitalize on hometown clubs growing political and financial influence. For example, these programs coordinate the 3x1 match initiatives; every dollar hometown associations send back to their local communities for development projects is matched with one dollar given by the municipal, state, and federal governments of Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Mexican government outreach throughout the 1990s also encouraged the growth of hometown clubs throughout metropolitan Chicago along with the unity of hometown clubs into broader state-level federations.

The Mexican government presents an obvious financial and political interest in sustaining close ties to hometown associations. The government has financed cultural events to celebrate Mexican national holidays, regional sports competitions and yearly community celebrations: “These ‘cultural’ events are in fact politically motivated, relying on migrants’ loyalty to their communities of origin to gain support for Mexican government policies, both nationally and in relation to the United States.”<sup>8</sup> Recognizing how emigrants can influence political elections back in Mexico, the Mexican Foreign Ministry, starting in 1998 and continuing today, has organized US tours for Mexican governors to visit hometown associations and state-level federations throughout the US.

While Mexican hometown associations were first founded as early as the 1950s, they have experienced tremendous growth in the past decade. Chicago and the Midwest (Illinois, Wisconsin and northern Indiana), in particular, have experienced a vast growth of hometown associations since the 1990s. In 2006 there were 295 hometown associations registered with the Chicago Mexican Consulate (179 of which would eventually be organized into CONFEMEX).<sup>9</sup> Overall, there are an estimated 600 hometown associations and federations registered with Mexican consulates in thirty US cities.<sup>10</sup> The highest concentration of hometown associations are in California and

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, Robert C (1998). “Transnational Localities: Community, Technology and the Politics of Membership within the context of Mexico and US Migration.” In *Transnationalism From Below*, eds. Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo. Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick and London.

<sup>7</sup> Alarcon, Rafael (2002). “The Development of Hometown Associations in the United States and the Use of Social Remittances in Mexico.” Departamento de Estudios Sociales El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Working Paper.

<sup>8</sup> Rivera-Salgado, Gaspar (2002). “Cross-Border Grassroots Organizations and the Indigenous Migrant Experience.” In *Cross-Border Dialogues: US-Mexico Social Movement Networking*, ed. David Brooks and Jonathon Fox. Center for US-Mexico Studies: University of California, San Diego. Quote p.264.

<sup>9</sup> Chicago Mexican Consulate Materials, June 8, 2006. However, it must be noted that there are likely many more clubs in Chicago who, for various reasons, chose not to register with the consulate.

<sup>10</sup> Bada, Xochtil (2003). “Culbes de oriundos en los Estados Unidos.” Publicado por el Programa de las Americas, del Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC). Available at: [www.americapolicy.org](http://www.americapolicy.org).

Chicago and some research suggests that close to half of existing hometown associations were created after 1995.<sup>11</sup>

Such organizational growth is not surprising, as during the 1990s alone the Chicago Mexican immigrant population swelled by more than 115 percent with the arrival of an estimated 291,000 people. By the end of that decade, one out of every ten Chicago residents was of Mexican origin. In fact, Chicago, with more than 500,000 Mexican immigrants, has the second largest Mexican population after Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup> Such increases in hometown clubs reflect the burgeoning Mexican immigration particularly to Chicago during the decade, the savvy organizational capacity of local immigrant actors, and proactive Mexican government outreach.

Over the years, Chicago hometown clubs and federations have emerged as key players in Mexico's economic development strategies, further encouraging the Mexican focus of their activities. From 2002 to 2006 the number of club-funded economic development projects back in Mexico expanded from 942 to 1,587. Even more impressive, hometown associations' financial donations within the same time period mushroomed from \$34.4 million to \$136.6 million.<sup>13</sup>

While Mexican government officials were instrumental in setting up many hometown associations and continue to play an important supporting role, certain state federations as well as CONFEMEX have recently pursued greater autonomy from the Mexican government. Furthermore, in more recent years the Chicago immigrant organizational scene has advanced into broader, vibrant and successful coalitions within and beyond the sphere of Mexican governmental influence.

Such advances in Chicago hometown clubs and federation activity, however, have been largely undermined in current research. By only focusing on hometown clubs interaction with Mexico, as emphasized by dominant transnational research paradigms, current scholarship ignores how such clubs and coalitions have evolved to interact with both Mexico and US-based concerns. Largely ignored in current research is how Chicago clubs and their members' daily lives are also shaped by the US politics at both local and national levels. Indeed, more recently US immigration policies, especially as they have become increasingly hostile towards immigrants, have influenced Chicago clubs and coalitions' agendas and strategies. My research, therefore, views Chicago hometown associations as living organizations that change according to both external demands and internal issues that occur in *both* the US and Mexico.

## II. *Chicago Clubs in Transition: Broader Mexico and US Influences*

Beyond Mexico and US's separate influences on such organizations, Chicago clubs and coalitions' actions and priorities are also shaped by the political and economic relationship between Mexico and the US. While Mexico and the US have had a long-standing asymmetrical economic and political relationship, globalization factors and the

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<sup>11</sup> Orozco, Manuel, and Michelle Lapointe (2004). "Mexican Hometown Associations and Development Opportunities." *Journal of International Affairs* 57(2): 31-49.

<sup>12</sup> Paral, Rob. (2006). "Latinos of the New Chicago." In *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis*, Edited by John Koval, Larry Bennett, Michael Bennett Fassil Demissie, Roberta Garner, and Kijoong Kim. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

<sup>13</sup> Chicago Mexican Consulate materials, 2006.

1994 North American Free Trade Agreement have only enhanced this unequal partnership.<sup>14</sup> Since the trade agreement, Mexico's economy has become increasingly polarized, further instigating the growth in out-migration to the US. In response to such population loss to the US, Mexico has become increasingly reliant on remittances.<sup>15</sup> Within this scenario, organized immigrant clubs and federations—representing organized financial and political capital—become key resources of the Mexican government's emigrant outreach initiatives. As the Mexican government's priorities manifest into what Delgado-Wise and Guarnizo (2007) have coined as a “remittances-based development model,” organized clubs and federations transpire into essential components of Mexico's economic development strategies.<sup>16</sup>

As Mexico grows ever more financially dependent on its diaspora, targeting specifically those organized into clubs and federations, the government becomes inclined to support US government policies that help secure the political and economic integration of its Mexican diaspora.<sup>17</sup> As one of many examples, former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) illustrated such support for US immigrant integration in a speech to emigrants at the National Council of La Raza annual meeting in Chicago on July 23, 1997: “I am convinced that Mexico's success will benefit Hispanics in the United States too, and I know for sure that the stronger you get in economic and political terms here in the US, the better Mexico's image will be.”<sup>18</sup> While it might seem counter-intuitive at first glance, the Mexican government actually *favours* Mexican emigrants' strengthened economic and political position in the US for two specific reasons: 1) it secures the continuation of remittances back to Mexico and 2) organized emigrants, especially those in clubs and federations, have the *potential* to campaign for Mexico's interests within US political circles

More recently, US political events have illustrated that although Mexico and the US are growing more interdependent economically, Mexico remains the persistently weaker actor in this unequal regional partnership. By 2000 the US Census declared Latinos, comprised largely of Mexican immigrants, to be the largest minority in the United States. Not only did the Mexican population increase in Chicago, but the nation as a whole experienced a rapid increase of immigration throughout the 1990s. The census highlighted the increase in the foreign born population to 31.1 million; 11.2

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, Peter H (1996). Talons of the Eagle. Dynamics of US-Latin American Relations. New York: Oxford University Press.

Massey, Douglas S., Jorge Durand and Nolan J. Malone (2002). Beyond smoke and mirrors : Mexican immigration in an era of economic integration. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>15</sup> Remittances are Mexico's second largest source of income after oil.

Wise, Raul Delgado (2006). “Migration and Imperialism: The Mexican Workforce in the Context of NAFTA.” Translated by Mariana Ortega Brena. Latin American Perspectives 33(2): 33-45.

<sup>16</sup> (Delgado)-Wise, Raul and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo (2007). “Migration and Development: Lessons from the Mexican Experience.” Migration Policy Institute. Available at: [www.migrationinformation.org](http://www.migrationinformation.org)

<sup>17</sup> Guarnizo, Luis Eduardo. (2001). “On the Political Participation of Transnational Migrants: Old Practices and New Trends.” In *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation*, Eds Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>18</sup> Gutierrez, Carlos Gonzales (1999). “Fostering Identities: Mexico's Relations with Its Diaspora.” The Journal of American History, 86(2): 545-567.

million more than 1990 estimates.<sup>19</sup> Of the foreign born population, Mexican immigrants represent the vast majority—30 percent—translating to an estimated 10 million persons.<sup>20</sup>

Due in large part to this dramatic demographic shift, political leaders in the US and Mexico, in the interest of gaining votes and political popularity, prioritized immigration reform as a key political objective. Most notably, Mexico and US presidential leaders Vicente Fox and George W. Bush appeared to have similar interests in establishing immigration reform talks during 2001. Promises of immigration reform, however, were quickly eclipsed by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The following years of US policy would be consumed with heightened national security, measures to tighten borders, and a politically constructed view of immigrants as potential terrorist threats.

Despite the fact that commerce between Mexico and the US was steadily growing and increasing the countries' ever enlarging economic interdependency, immigration talks between Fox and Bush were no longer a political priority by 2002. Beyond the US's political preoccupation with Middle East concerns, the relationship between Fox and Bush deteriorated when Mexico neglected to support the US war in Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, Mexico's political leaders would lose diplomatic influence in immigration reform debates. At the same time, however, Mexican federation leaders in Chicago were acquiring increased organizational maturity and strength. The federations' vigor coincided with a growing need for Chicago immigrant organizations to battle the increased immigrant hostility that proliferated post-9/11 in the US. Both the external political factors and internal organizational growth of this period speak to the study's main argument: it is this increasingly unequal relationship between Mexico and the US that positions Chicago hometown clubs and coalitions to have new forms of unique binational political influence. As Mexico's diplomatic authority lessens within US politics, Mexico becomes more reliant on emigrants, particularly organized clubs and federations, to persuade the US's current immigration debate. In the midst of this changing political scene, the Chicago clubs and coalitions themselves have expanded their organizational focus and activities to seize opportunities for binational influence. Due to Mexico's growing dependence on its diaspora, as Chicago clubs grow to gain power in US political circles, they will not lose their political influence in Mexico, but instead widen their realm of political influence in *both* the US and Mexico. Such rising binational priorities of Chicago clubs and coalitions will be highlighted in the following section.

### *III. Chicago Clubs Evolving: Emerging Binational Civic Participation*

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<sup>19</sup> Zolberg, Aristide R. (2006). *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Aleinkoff, T. Alexander (2005). "No Illusions: Paradigm Shifting on Mexican Migration to the United States in the Post-9/11 World," Working paper for the Mexico Institute for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Available at: [www.wilsoncenter.org](http://www.wilsoncenter.org)

<sup>21</sup> Zolberg, Aristide R. (2006). *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Such external political factors would set the stage for a shift in Chicago clubs and federations' focus to include US domestic concerns. Clubs and federations that were customarily Mexican-oriented were motivated to respond to the US's harsh anti-immigrant sentiment. These organizations, not customarily focused on contentious US activism, would transform into "vehicles of mobilization" for domestic immigrant rights.<sup>22</sup> This would lead to their importance as community actors in the US while at the same time maintaining ties to Mexican society. By 2002 federation leaders began discussions on how to coalesce into a national coalition. On February 23, 2003 the Confederation of Mexican Federations in Chicago, CONFEMEX, was established. CONFEMEX, from the time of its inception, promotes a clear binational Mexico-US agenda.

With Mexican immigration flows continuing to the US and George W. Bush seeking reelection in 2004, immigration reform resurfaced as a political priority. Now that Chicago club and federation leaders were organized into CONFEMEX, their unified voice enhanced their preparation to respond to Bush's attempt at immigration reform. In fact, CONFEMEX expanded its political influence in joining another coalition of immigrant activists in 2004, the National Alliance of Latino and Caribbean Communities, NALACC.<sup>23</sup> NALACC aims to insure that first generation Latino immigrant community activists would be represented in the current political landscape.

As immigration issues gained prominence within the US national agenda and immigrant leaders formed political alliances, the Mexican federal government passed key legislation that enabled its diaspora to maintain binational membership and political privileges. Back in 1997 Mexicans were granted dual citizenship rights. This enabled the Mexican diaspora to seek citizenship in the US without relinquishing their citizenship rights back in Mexico. Political privileges were extended by July of 2006 when emigrants were granted absentee voting privileges in Mexican federal elections. Chicago CONFEMEX leaders were fundamental to sustaining Mexican political loyalty as they helped their membership base register to vote.

Around that time in May of 2005, key US senators presented an immigration bill that largely resonated with Bush's desires for immigration reform in 2004. The bipartisan Kennedy-McCain bill included a path to citizenship, guestworker program and increased border security. Although this was not in line with what immigrant activists were seeking, the bill did not elicit much community opposition.

By December of 2005, federal legislative proposals took a dramatic turn in their anti-immigrant agenda when the Republican-dominated US House of Representatives passed resolution 4437, promoted by long-time anti-immigrant Representative James

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<sup>22</sup> McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. (2001). *Dynamics of Contention*. New York: University Press.

<sup>23</sup> "The National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC) is a network of approximately 75 community-based organizations led by Latin American and Caribbean immigrants. NALACC member organizations are working to improve quality of life in their communities, both in the United States and in countries of origin. NALACC seeks to build transnational leadership capacity and increase immigrant civic participation, so that immigrants can advocate effectively for public policies that address the root causes of migration, as well as addressing the challenges faced by immigrants in the United States. To date, this latter work has focused on efforts to reform US immigration policies to make them more humane and effective" ([www.nalacc.org](http://www.nalacc.org)).

Sensenbrenner. This bill proposed harsh consequences for undocumented immigration as it would forbid new temporary guest worker programs and a path towards legal residency or citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Additionally, the bill would make undocumented immigration a felony offense, as well as assisting, supporting, guiding, or provoking a person to either illegally enter or stay in the US.<sup>24</sup>

On March 10, 2006 a loose coalition of various Latino immigrants of Chicago was the first in the country to respond to such aggressive measures with a massive, but peaceful march towards the city's downtown. Estimates vary between 200,000 to more than 500,000 protestors. This historic rally sparked numerous protests throughout the country. Surprisingly, established national organizations and labor unions were not central to the initial uprising. In Chicago, CONFEMEX along with other local Latino immigrant organizations and local churches spearheaded the planning behind the marches.<sup>25</sup> Casa Michoacán, the headquarters for the Michoacán Federation and home to many CONFEMEX meetings, served as the central planning center for the marches. While never associated before with contentious activism, CONFEMEX leaders proudly referred to Casa Michoacán as "*Casa Del Pueblo* (The House of the People)," illustrating their pride in connecting with the broader immigrant community for this battle and in expanding their political outreach.

Building off the momentum of the first march, CONFEMEX joined with labor unions and larger immigrant coalitions to begin working diligently to strategize for their next demonstration. On May 1<sup>st</sup> of 2006, immigrants in various cities throughout the country simultaneously poured into the streets to protest their opposition to HR4437. Conservative estimates report that in Chicago alone there were more than 400,000 protestors.<sup>26</sup> In fact, there were more than one million marchers in huge synchronized rallies throughout the country.<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. *CONFEMEX Today: Achieving Mexico-US Binational Civic Participation*

Since the 2006 marches and moving into 2007, CONFEMEX's dynamic leadership has strategically used such broader political events to amplify and widen their political reach in both Mexico and the US. Chicago federation leaders continue their Mexican-focused activities—some even gaining political credence in Mexico for their impact in the US. A case in point, the Michoacán Federation gained absentee voting rights at the state level and also hosted the first ever multi-national immigrant summit held in Morelia, Michoacán in May 2007. This event drew Mexican political elites, academics, international media attention, activists from Mexico, the US and beyond, and even attracted US Representative Luis Gutierrez to speak on behalf of immigration reform. The proactive Michoacán government donated the conference venue and Governor Cardenas made key appearances to show his support. Without a doubt, the size

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press, "At a Glance: Immigration Legislation," *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 2006

<sup>25</sup> Shannon, Amy. (2007). "Mobilizing for Political Power: Immigrant Marches and Their Long-Term Impacts," *Voices of Mexico*, 78: 28-32.

<sup>26</sup> Olivo, Antonio and Oscar Avila, "United they march. Hundreds of thousands rally for immigration rights. 'We have to change the world.'" *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 2006

<sup>27</sup> Martinez, Michael, "Rallies draw over 1 million. Economic impact not clear, but businesses note worker shortages." *Chicago Tribune*, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006

and importance of the event was partly due to the momentum galvanized from the marches in the US. Put in another way, CONFEMEX's newly acquired political capital in the US country is fungible or convertible in Mexico.

Remittance-funded infrastructure development also remains a fundamental priority for CONFEMEX federations. In fact, both the Michoacán and Zacatecan federations' match initiatives have expanded from a 3x1 to a 4x1. This entails Western Union joining with municipal, state, and federal authorities to match every dollar donated for public projects back in Mexican communities. To be sure, in the wake of such vast US protests the Mexican government at multiple levels will likely maintain and perhaps enhance outreach initiatives focused on maintaining the financial and political loyalty of its emigrants.

Regarding the gains made in US political circles, the results are not as straightforward. In terms of national impact, one federation leader wryly noted, "*Debemos dar gracias a Sensenbrenner* (We should give thanks to Sensenbrenner)," as such punitive legislation propelled CONFEMEX into US-based political action. Such rallies not only halted the Sensenbrenner Bill, but resulted in reshaping the immigration and border security legislation later introduced in the senate in May of 2006. The legislation compromise included a guestworker initiative along with increased border control measures. While the senate compromise did not catalyze the same level of pro-immigrant uprising, it was not a legislation that served the needs and wants of immigrant advocates.

By September 2006, US federal legislation turned punitive once again. Unable to pass the Senate proposal through the conservative House of Representatives and wanting to appear tough on immigration before the November 2006 congressional elections, numerous candidates across party lines pushed for an increased militarization of the border. Despite the outright condemnation by then Mexican President Vicente Fox, the congress successfully passed a bill to construct an electronic fence along the Mexican-US border.

Overall, the oppressive national legislation of 2006 represents an extremely hostile and fear-driven political moment for immigrants throughout the US. This threatening environment served as a powerful motivator of the historic marches in 2006, but it is important to understand that communities experienced widely different responses to organizing at the local level. While Chicago's downtown marches proved peaceful, California battled instances of police brutality resulting in 246 injuries, fired rubber bullets, and violent police batons pummeled onto demonstrators trying to scatter.<sup>28</sup> Such variations were also apparent within broader metropolitan Chicago. Carpentersville, a Chicago suburb facing a recent surge in Mexican immigrants, advocated to reprimand landlords who rent and employers who hire undocumented immigrants.<sup>29</sup>

In stark contrast to the national-level and suburban backlash, numerous leaders within the city of Chicago have shown support for Mexican immigrants. This support, in turn, creates the space for CONFEMEX's US activism to further develop. Aware of the large and growing Mexican population in Illinois, Governor Rod Blagojevich, Senator

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<sup>28</sup> Archibold, Randal C. (2007). "Police Blame Themselves for Melee at May Rally," The New York Times, October 10<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Olivo, Antonio and Oscar Avila. (2007). "Influence on Both Sides of the Border," Chicago Tribune, April 6th.

Dick Durbin, and Mayor Richard M. Daley publicly endorsed the marches. In an attempt to appeal to its vast immigrant base, Governor Blagojevich repeatedly refers to himself as a son of Serbian immigrants. Soon after the marches, Blagojevich appointed one of the Chicago Federations leaders—a charismatic organizer from the Michoacán Federation and one of the founders of CONFEMEX—to head up his newly formed Office of New Americans Policy and Advocacy. This office aims to extend public services to the growing population of Illinois immigrant residents: health care and early education to all children regardless of immigration status, English language and citizenship classes. Most recently, the Illinois government opened an Illinois Immigrant Welcoming Center to increase accessibility to its public services. Such government responses to the marches and new political connections to a CONFEMEX leader may indeed furnish new opportunities for immigrant incorporation.

Since the marches, CONFEMEX federation leaders have also teamed with local Mexican immigrant activists in an attempt to mobilize the electoral participation of its immigrant base. The newly formed interest group Mexicans for Political Progress—commonly called the MXPP—proved incredibly active in supporting the 2006 campaigns for Governor Blagojevich and Democratic nominee for the US House of Representatives Tammy Duckworth. In addition, CONFEMEX remains active in NALACC promoting national immigration reform, family reunification policies, Illinois drivers licenses for the undocumented, and general public education on immigrant issues.

#### V. *CONFEMEX and the Future: Challenges in Continuing Binational Civic Participation*

The vast political and organizational developments over the past fifteen years have poised CONFEMEX to serve as a crucial agent of mounting Mexico-US binational civic engagement. Cross-border civic engagement, however, is not without its challenges. How can the binational political activism of CONFEMEX be sustained into the future? Mexican hometown clubs and federations in Chicago and even CONFEMEX itself depend largely if not entirely on voluntary efforts from members. These organizations mostly, lack a paid staff and sufficient resources to maintain such a wide array of activities over the long term. Such resource limitations could create tensions as to where organizations should concentrate their energies. For example, could the recent and rapid expansion in US-focused immigrant advocacy activities serve as a competing pressure for the organizations' traditional Mexico-oriented philanthropic donations and cultural festivals? Such competing resource and time constraints were abundantly clear in 2006 when CONFEMEX leaders struggled to find the energy and manpower to simultaneously manage numerous marches and protests along with coordinating the huge undertaking of the Independence Day (Fiestas Patrias) celebrations in Chicago.

Such challenges beg the following questions: how can a mostly voluntary organization—with a recent expansion in priorities and concerns growing within two countries—manage such competing pressures over time? Is it going to be sufficient to maintain one confederation with a variety of interests? Could this lead to a trade-off of one set of organizational priorities to another? Or, could the coalition potentially spin off into more than one group each focusing on a more narrow set of US or Mexican-based interests? What are the benefits of maintaining the transnational perspective vs. the costs?

Furthermore, in 2006 CONFEMEX had a clear target for domestic activism—the reaction against a serious and hostile external threat—the Sensenbrenner Bill. Rally slogans such as, “*Hoy Marchamos, Manana Votamos* (Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote),” echoed as inspiring rhetoric while marching through the streets of Chicago’s downtown. Putting that slogan into practice, however, may prove more complicated. In fact, the absence of a concrete Sensenbrenner-like motivation could prove challenging for CONFEMEX as it will have to transition from a mobilized *reactionary* coalition into a *proactive* coalition with the ability to influence policies and elections. What will be CONFEMEX’s role in the 2008 US elections? Will CONFEMEX work alone to mobilize electoral participation or work with other organizations? Will CONFEMEX continue to mobilize within the Democratic Party or expand to other parties?

Along the same lines, without a Sensenbrenner-like intimidation factor, could heterogeneous alliances break apart? It could be, at some point, that stronger organizations within CONFEMEX feel their activities are not enhanced by working with the more small-time organizations. How might such diversities in organizational strength be managed within one coalition? While the CONFEMEX coalition is diverse, what are the gains that can be made in working together?

Lastly, as the US environment grows increasingly harsh and xenophobic, hints of dual country loyalty might be interpreted as unpatriotic. Such common examples of CONFEMEX rhetoric include, “*Ni somos de aqui, ni de alla* (We’re neither from here nor from there)” or, as widely publicized in an English speaking Chicago newspaper, “You can be a good Mexican citizen and a good American citizen and not have that be a conflict of interest. Sovereignty is flexible.”<sup>30</sup> While such statements are at the heart of the Mexican immigrant experience, they might be understood by a US audience as unwillingness to fully integrate into American society. Such dual country loyalties, while always questioned in the US, will likely come under especially harsh criticism within this post-9/11 US political environment. As CONFEMEX moves increasingly into the US political arena, it will want to seriously consider how to manage effectively the philosophy of binational participation. In other words, how might CONFEMEX—not wanting to lose its binational essence—frame ideals of binational civic engagement so as to communicate this concept to non-immigrants more effectively?

Indeed, no organization can exist and grow without potential conflicts. While CONFEMEX faces definite growing pains as it evolves and grows, I do not want to minimize my argument: CONFEMEX’s unique position within the broader Mexico-US political arena provides it with a vital position to serve as an integral vehicle of binational civic engagement now and into the future.

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<sup>30</sup> <sup>30</sup> Olivo, Antonio and Oscar Avila. (2007). “Influence on Both Sides of the Border,” Chicago Tribune, April 6th.