

**Paper for the Wilson Center/ Enlaces America Roundtable
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Abstract: In this paper, the author will give a broad overview of Latino (particularly Mexican) immigrant civic participation in the Chicago area and then suggest some approaches to the question: Why and how has Latino immigrant civic participation developed in Chicago over the past two decades? Given the predominance of Mexican nationals (over 80%) among Latino immigrants, the paper will focus largely on that community. The underlying questions to be asked, if not entirely answered, include:

- 1) What is immigrant civic participation? How do we understand immigrant political participation within the framework of citizenship, as broadly defined?
- 2) What is the history of immigrant civic participation in Chicago? How have the demographics of the region, as well as leadership by government and civil society figures helped create the “space” for immigrant civic participation?
- 3) What has been the attitude of local and state officials, as well as the corporate sector, towards immigrant civic participation? What other civil society groups and institutions have worked in collaboration with immigrant-lead groups in the Chicago area? Which sectors are most supportive? Which sectors are least supportive?
- 4) Why have anti-immigrant groups and local government initiatives developed relatively recently in the Chicago area, as compared with other parts of the U.S.? How have those local initiatives, in conjunction with increased enforcement by ICE in Chicago, both stimulated and limited immigrant civic participation?
- 5) What is the likely future scenario for Latino (and Mexican immigrant/ Mexican-American) political empowerment in Chicago?

I. Overview¹

Introduction

Chicago is a city in which immigrants have helped shape political and civic life over the past two centuries. Official history begins with the first non-indigenous settler, a Haitian trader named Jean Baptiste Point DuSable in the early 19th Century. In 1886, a workers’ rights movement lead by German immigrants exploded in the Haymarket riot, resulting in the conviction and hanging of the movement’s leaders and the creation of May 1 as an

¹ It is the author’s intent to provide a broad overview of the issues, with details to be filled in by panelists at the Wilson Center event for which this paper was produced. The author wishes to thank Artemio Arreola, Oscar Chacon, Maricela Garcia, Carmen Prieto, and Amy Shannon for their insightful comments. The author takes full responsibility for all opinions expressed herein as her own.

international workers' holiday in commemoration.² In 1906, Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel, *The Jungle*, brought the working conditions for immigrants in the Chicago stockyards to national attention. Mexican immigration to Chicago began in the early 20th Century as Mexican railroad workers found settled jobs in the growing steel and packing industries, establishing the historic parish of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe in 1923. Pioneering social work was done in immigrant neighborhoods by Jane Addams and her cohort who established Hull House and other centers for the education and civic involvement of immigrant families. Immigrant workers (Eastern European and Mexican) formed the base of union-organizing efforts in Chicago area meat-packing, steel, garment-making, agricultural equipment, and other industries during World War 1 and through the 1920s and 1930s.

Chicago has been a microcosm of national immigration patterns in the last century, with the arrival of Eastern European Catholics and Jews, Irish, Greeks, Italians, and (after 1965) Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Koreans, Arabs, and South Asians. Chicago, a city of sharply defined ethnic neighborhoods (also the nation's most segregated city), claims to be the second largest Polish city, the second largest Lithuanian city, the center of Irish culture in the Midwest, the fifth largest Mexican city, the home of the nation's largest Palestinian community, the regional cultural and shopping destination for Indians and Pakistanis, etc.

Some observers claim that the relative lack of "racialization" (i.e. anti-Mexican discourse) of the immigration discussion in Chicago over the past two decades is due to two factors:

- 1) In one of the largest Catholic Archdiocese in the U.S., Mexicans are seen as simply another group of immigrant Catholics establishing ethnic parishes, following in the footsteps of the Italians, Irish, Poles, Bohemians, Croatians, etc.; and
- 2) The two most powerful white ethnic groups in local politics, Poles and Irish, have had recent experience with their own undocumented compatriots. Elected officials familiar with the plight of the newly-arrived cousin sleeping on the couch and working painting houses for cash are more likely to sympathize with the undocumented Latino immigrants.

Why this discourse has changed in certain parts of the metropolitan area in the last two years is a subject for later discussion.

1970s

Over the past three decades, Chicago has been the center of some of the most interesting and creative organizing among Mexican immigrants in the U.S. In the mid-1970s the Centro de Accion Social Autonoma (an organization founded by exiled Mexican radical students) sent cadres from Los Angeles to begin organizing the undocumented in the Pilsen barrio. CASA members worked with local Mexican-American/ Chicano leaders,

² The immigrant leadership of the May 2006 massive march paid tribute to the Haymarket martyrs by choosing May 1 and a route which passed by the Haymarket monument.

including students who had become politically active at the University of Illinois-Chicago to protest INS raids. Settlement houses in traditional Mexican neighborhoods were transformed from purely service-providers to centers of community activism.

1980s

In the early 1980s, leaders from these groups began an electoral strategy which took on the powerful Cook County Democratic machine and secured several important local offices. This same movement, in combination with Puerto Rican and other Latino groups, generated critical support for the 1983 election of Harold Washington as Chicago's first African American mayor over the vigorous opposition of the "regular" Democratic machine. At the same time, the "regular" Democrats began cultivating a Latino leadership group of their own, establishing community-based organizations with significant access to traditional Chicago political patronage (i.e. jobs and contracts with the City.)³ The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act resulted in legal immigration status for approximately 124,000 Mexican immigrants in Chicago (80% of those legalized) and also, through funding to community-based organizations which assisted applicants, created a number of important local non-profits which still operate today. Leadership of community-based organizations and city-wide policy and advocacy projects were directed by Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans from the oldest immigrant communities. The Latino Institute was an independent source of policy analysis and research for community organizations.

In Chicago, a unique venue for immigrant civic participation was opened through the creation (by state legislation) of Local School Councils, elected bodies with control over local school budgets and the hiring and firing of principals. Because the law allowed direct participation in LSC activities and elections to all parents and community residents regardless of their citizenship status, the LSCs became the locus of a lively, contentious, and active local politics with high levels of participation by immigrant parents.

Also in the 1980s, the Central American presence in Chicago increased with the arrival of Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees who established their own advocacy and service organizations, of which Centro Romero is the most notable survivor. The Central Americans also developed important links with the religious community; Chicago was one of the most important centers of organization for the Sanctuary movement.

1990s

In the 1990s, a sharp increase in new migration direct from Mexico began to change the demographics and geography of "Mexican Chicago," and produced new forms of

³ Following Washington's 1987 death of a heart attack, just six months after his reelection to a second term, political power in City Hall gradually reverted to the traditional Democratic machine. The independent Mexican-American political organization went through a decline in power, while the fortunes of Mexican American political figures affiliated with the machine-fostered Hispanic Democratic Organization began to rise, with HDO-supported candidates defeating independents. However in 2006, federal investigations into City Hall corruption resulted in indictments of key HDO figures, with the political balance of power among Mexican American Democrats again in play.

organization within the community. Mexican immigrant and Mexican American families had begun moving out of the city and into suburbs such as Cicero and Berwyn in the 1980s. New Mexican migrants were no longer arriving in the traditional gateway city neighborhoods, but were settling in large numbers in inner-ring suburbs and the county seats of the collar counties (i.e. Waukegan, Elgin, Joliet, and Aurora). In new areas of settlement, conflicts began to arise between long-time residents (mostly white and older) and new, younger Latino immigrant families whose children were making new demands on public school systems and who were increasingly visible in public spaces such as parks and commercial districts. A number of these conflicts began to play themselves out in the electoral arena with a particular focus on education, as long-term residents resisted increasing local taxes to pay for the schooling of immigrant children. Some suburban governments began to enforce (in a racially discriminatory way) local housing codes regarding occupancy and other matters in immigrant communities. During this entire period, the celebration of Mexican traditional holidays and religious festivals also became an expression of Mexican national pride and point of contention in an increasing number of Chicago-area communities. However, in these new areas of settlement Latinos were not yet able to secure many elected positions.

The number of Spanish-language media outlets, including television and radio stations and newspapers, began to multiply and provided extensive coverage of local community issues and politics. Additionally, more Mexican-born 1.5 generation immigrants were beginning to occupy leadership positions in the Latino community and its institutions.

Also in the 1990s, politically-conscious individuals in Chicago's Mexican community began to be involved in transnational politics. The popular response to the 1988 visit to Chicago of Mexican presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas demonstrated the interest among Chicago-area immigrants in the politics of their country of origin. Visits by Mexican governors and other political figures began to rise. Mexican political parties established affiliates in Chicago. The initial organizing for the "voto en el exterior" began in Chicago.

In the early 1990s, Mexican government officials (including President Carlos Salinas de Gortari) visited Chicago to cultivate support for the ratification of NAFTA among local Mexican-Americans as well as with the local corporate sector. The State of Illinois opened a trade office in Mexico City, many Chicago companies were selling and investing in Mexico, and the Chicago Community Trust sponsored educational programs about Mexico for Chicago civic leaders. By the mid-1990s, the activities of Mexican immigrant Hometown Associations (HTAs) were becoming visible in the media as those organizations continued to grow. The Chicago Community Trust made its first grant to promote HTA activities. HTA initiatives – particularly collective remittance projects – were encouraged and supported by the Mexican government through the Mexican Consulate.

With the change in leadership of the AFL-CIO towards a more "immigrant friendly" politics and the rise of immigrant membership and leadership in key national unions, the

labor movement in the Chicago area also expanded its immigrant membership and organizing efforts, particularly in the service sector.

2000s

By 2000, the predominance of Mexican immigrants as the largest group within Chicago's Latino community was well-established, with new Mexican immigration still a constant factor. HTAs were receiving more media attention, as "model" immigrant groups engaged in self-help international philanthropy. HTA visibility increased with the establishment, for example, of Casa Michoacan in the heart of the gateway urban Mexican community of Pilsen, as a venue for HTA and other Latino political and cultural activities. (Close to downtown Chicago, Pilsen is the most visible Mexican community for many non-Latino Chicagoans.) The leadership of many community-based organizations was in the hands of 1.5 generation leadership (as executive directors, staff, and Board members) who understand the transnational nature of the issues confronting their communities – and who were engaged in (now) immigrant-lead local and regional initiatives on education, health, housing, policing, employment, and other local issues. These organizations consolidated a role for themselves as centers of political education and mobilization, in addition to their traditional role as service providers.

There were more Latino elected officials in city, county, and state legislative bodies, with greater lobbying possibilities and advocacy opportunities. However the structure of local government in many towns (at-large representation) still blocked growing Latino communities from political representation on local governing bodies. The suburban and collar-county Latino communities also lagged behind in the development of institutional bases (i.e. community-based organizations or advocacy centers). However, spontaneous community leadership (some from the small-business sector) was developing in response to local anti-immigrant initiatives.

Blocked from direct electoral participation, many local immigrant-lead groups concentrated on direct action politics such as mass demonstrations at local government meetings. In those communities, many of which are in Republican-dominated Congressional districts, the potential for alliances with other immigrant groups (Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern) could lead to significant political change. While immigrants' rights organizations (in particular ICIRR and its member groups) have developed a higher profile in these outlying areas, there has yet to be a realization of an alliance with the HTAs and their leadership. Conventional union organizing has been supplemented by workers' centers targeted at unorganized workers, particularly immigrant workers in marginal industries, the service sector, and the informal sector (i.e. day laborers and domestic workers).

In late 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Sensenbrenner bill, which – among its provisions – would have criminalized undocumented status. The possibility of criminalization of status and the danger of massive arrests, threatening "mixed status" families in particular, motivated Mexican-lead organizations (community-based groups and HTAs) to meet and plan a response. One community leader attributes the unity and

speed of the response in Chicago (as contrasted with California) to the relative geographic concentration of the Mexican population in the state, in and around Chicago. Meetings were called at Casa Michoacan, in the center of the metropolitan area. A march was set for March 10, 2006, in downtown Chicago, a call soon taken up by the Spanish language media, with an important role played by radio d.j.s. The large turn-out, which surprised even the organizers, and the presence of community leaders, religious leaders, union representatives, and local officials including Governor Rod Blagojevich and Mayor Richard Daley (both of whom gave pro-immigrant, anti-Sensenbrenner bill speeches) encouraged the Chicago organizers to plan an even larger march and “go national.” Impressed by the skill of the march organizers and the spontaneous participation by dozens of individuals and informal groups (parishes, work-places, high school students, families, et al), the Chicago and Illinois labor federations pledged critical, major financial and logistical support for the upcoming May march, overcoming their initial hesitation to march on May Day. Union funds paid for Chicago immigrant leaders to travel to California to coordinate with local organizers there.

The Chicago May Day 2006 demonstration, with close to a million participants, was the largest demonstration in the history of the city. Led by Mexican and Latino community-based organizations, churches, and political figures, other immigrant groups joined the protest. (Even U.S. citizen professionals brought their small children to march in support of their Latina caretakers.) The March and May demonstrations received broad, supportive coverage in both Spanish and English-language media, which lauded the serious, peaceful nature of the events. The few local “Minutemen” received disproportionate attention from media which sought spokespeople for the anti-immigrant view. The invisible Mexican immigrant workforce had become visible to all of Chicago. The sanctuary case of Elvira Arrellano garnered international media attention, focused on a church on Chicago’s north side.

Elected officials were learning to pay attention to a constituency that mobilized under the slogan “Hoy marchamos, manana votamos,” [today we march, tomorrow we vote]. Governor Rod Blagojevich, in conjunction with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, established a state task force to institutionalize “immigrant friendly” state policies and practices. The initiative is currently directed by a veteran leader of the Illinois Michoacan Federation. Within the Illinois Congressional delegation, with a few notable exceptions, almost all Democrats support pro-immigrant initiatives, including the failed 2006 reform legislation. Chicago and Cook County officials have also supported “non-cooperation” and “sanctuary” initiatives in protest of increased enforcement by immigration authorities.

In the year since the mass marches, this otherwise “rosy” pro-immigrant atmosphere has been colored by a disturbing new trend which reflects a national political phenomenon. Until recently, there were only occasional anti-immigrant expressions in the Chicago area. Media outlets and academic and civic organizations seeking a debate on immigrants rights had only a few isolated eccentrics to call on to represent the restrictionist view, or else had to “import” restrictionists from other states. The anti-immigrant Federation for American Immigration Reform was unable to attract much

support in the Chicago area. In the mid-1990s, Latino residents of Addison, Illinois, successfully sued to defeat a plan to demolish the two Mexican neighborhoods (to make way for a non-existent economic development project). The Village of Addison was assessed over \$1,000,000 in damages and fees – a success that may have served to deter other anti-immigrant initiatives for at least a decade. A Republican candidate campaigned in the Senatorial primary in 2002 on an anti-immigrant platform, but was such an embarrassment to the Republican leadership that when the primary winner withdrew from the general election, the anti-immigrant second-place finisher was not tapped to replace him.

However, beginning in 2006 in Carpentersville, Illinois, more local communities in the outlying parts of the metropolitan area have seen the introduction of anti-immigrant local ordinances regarding a range of issues. Given the economic insecurity of the general public who face job loss, a drop in the value of real estate, and potential collapse of some financial institutions, traditional American xenophobia is finding fertile ground even in northern Illinois. One Democratic Congressman voted in favor of the Sensenbrenner bill, while Illinois Senator Barack Obama, now a presidential contender, has been criticized for his vote in favor of the wall on the Mexico-U.S. border. Some local governments are considering formal cooperation with federal immigration authorities, allowed under federal law. While measures which attempt to impose local control over landlords or employers of the undocumented are most likely unconstitutional and would be annulled by the federal courts, this trend marks a concerted effort by national restrictionist organizations to establish credibility in the Chicago area. The opening of a space for anti-immigrant measures has also emboldened local officials hostile to Mexican immigrants, resulting in initiatives such as road-blocks to check immigration status in certain communities and increased, racially targeted enforcement of local housing regulations. There have even been high-profile “street sweep” type raids by federal immigration officials, of a sort not seen since the mid-1970s when community protest halted such practices. Workplace raids by federal immigration authorities have also been resumed, creating insecurity and fear among Mexican workers and their families.

These new threats to the daily peaceful existence of immigrant families have been met by a variety of tactics. A community which lacks voting power responds in a variety of ways. Large-scale protests at local government meetings have demonstrated determined opposition by local residents who have been joined by allies from across the metropolitan area. Latino U.S. citizens have run for local office and, in some cases, succeeded.

How local Mexican-American and Latino leadership respond to the new wave of anti-immigrant enforcement efforts at the local and national level will be a critical test of how good will can be transformed into political action. Alliances across immigrant groups, increased dialogue with African-American leaders, and strategic partnerships with unions, religious organizations, and other key constituencies – both within and beyond the electoral arena – will be critical in maintaining the image and reality of the Chicago area as an exemplary “pro-immigrant” space in the national picture. How immigration is discussed as an issue in the 2008 presidential race is an important challenge for the future.

II. Questions to consider:

The above narrative raises a number of questions, both with respect to the analysis of past events and plans for the future. Among those which might generate discussion among participants in the Wilson Center meeting are the following:

- A) What is immigrant civic participation? How do we understand immigrant political participation within the framework of citizenship, as broadly defined? What forms of “citizenship” are Mexican immigrants using outside the electoral arena, from participation in local school councils to direct action demonstrations?
- B) What is the history of immigrant civic participation in Chicago? How have the demographics of the region, as well as leadership by government and civil society figures helped create the “space” for immigrant civic participation?
- C) What has been the attitude of local and state officials, as well as the corporate sector, towards immigrant civic participation? What other civil society groups and institutions have worked in collaboration with immigrant-lead groups in the Chicago area? Which sectors are most supportive? Which sectors are least supportive?
- D) Why have anti-immigrant groups and local government initiatives developed relatively recently in the Chicago area, as compared with other parts of the U.S.? How have those local initiatives, in conjunction with increased enforcement by ICE in Chicago, both stimulated and limited immigrant civic participation?
- E) What is the likely future scenario for Latino (and Mexican immigrant/ Mexican-American) political empowerment in Chicago?