

**LATINO IMMIGRANT CIVIC AND
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

in Fresno and Madera, California

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PREFACE

This report is part of a series on Latin American immigrant civic and political participation that looks at nine cities around the United States: Charlotte, NC; Chicago, IL; Fresno, CA; Las Vegas, NV; Los Angeles, CA; Omaha, NE; Tucson, AZ; San Jose, CA; and Washington, DC.

This series, funded by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, is part of an initiative, based at the Woodrow Wilson Center, on Latin American immigrant civic and political participation, led by Xóchitl Bada of the University of Illinois at Chicago, Jonathan Fox of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Andrew Selee at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute. Robert Donnelly is the coordinator of the project, and Kate Brick served as coordinator previously.

The reports on each city describe the opportunities and barriers Latino immigrants face in

participating as civic and political actors in cities around the United States. This collection explores recent trends in Latino immigrant integration following the 2006 immigrant civic mobilizations, highlighting both similarities and differences across diverse cities and sectors. For the Fresno report, a roundtable forum was organized in the Council Chambers at the City Hall in which 36 people participated. Afterwards, 10 other people were interviewed to complement the information and analysis.

By the end of the present report, a number of people participated in this effort. However, we would like to thank those people who also made this work possible: Alan Lessik, Ana García, Tamejavi volunteers, Blong Xiong, Luz Estrada, John Esparza, Alma Martinez, Vic Yellow Hawk White, and Ed Kissam.

INTRODUCTION

In this case study, we seek to understand some dimensions of the context in which are formed and expressed the civic and political participation of immigrants residing in the counties of Fresno and Madera, California, as well as the history of their formation as political agents. Statistics tell us of the low rates of naturalization¹ and voter registration² among immigrants in the Central Valley, yet this community works day after day to achieve a more just and dignified life, and to integrate into and become more active members of the larger community.

For a long time, immigrants' political experiences and successes went unnoticed. But the community has made some important organizational advances and attained some political maturity. The 2006 and 2007 marches, which mobilized a record fifteen thousand and five thousand people, respectively (not including the marches in more rural areas such as Madera and Farmersville),³ were not mere happenstance; along with the social effervescence prevailing in the country, there is in Fresno an incipient organizational infrastructure that supports the local activists who are slowly and quietly investing their own political experience in this process.

Including Fresno as one of the participant cities in the research project, "Latin American Migrants: Civic and Political Participation in a Binational Context," sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center and coordinated by Xóchitl Bada, Jonathan Fox, and Andrew Selee, provides an opportunity to observe a particular variable that helps in understanding some of the different practices of civic and political participation of Latino immigrants in the Fresno area, specifically Mexicans and indigenous Mexicans. Studying an agricultural region characterized by a long history of immigration allows us to analyze the history, the economic and sociopolitical conditions, the individual experiences, and the group dynamics that provide the context for the formation of an immigrant community as a political sector in which civic actions are carried out. Including Fresno in this project also offered an excellent opportunity to compile some testimonies about the political formation process of immigrants residing there; that is, to tell a story that has not yet been told.

Although this study focuses mainly on Fresno County — with a population of 858,948, 47 percent Latino, of which 93 percent is of Mexican origin⁴ — we have also

included part of the city of Madera, located twenty miles north of Fresno, with a population of 50,000 and a large concentration of indigenous Mexican immigrants (approximately 15,000) mainly from the state of Oaxaca. We believe it is important to include this population to illustrate how immigrant civic and political participation in some rural areas is not limited to a geographical area, but is connected to the labor mobility of these populations and the areas of influence of organizations that promote immigrant civic participation. For example, some grassroots committees function seasonally according to participants' labor movement; such is the case of some people from Madera migrating to Washington state to follow the crops. Even though we cannot treat the Central Valley as homogeneous, as each context has its own characteristics, we do believe that Fresno and Madera exhibit aspects that can be generalized at a regional level.

Based on the work methodology used at the Pan Valley Institute (PVI) of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which coordinated the project in Fresno, the first step in implementing this research was to set up a working group to organize and guide the data collection process. This consisted of Institute staff members Myrna Martínez Nateras and Estela Galván, as well as Rufino Domínguez and Eduardo Stanley, both of whom have a long history as direct participants in and/or communicators of some of the experiences on which we based our case study.

This work is a participatory research exercise. We set as the ultimate goal of the project that the information and knowledge generated in the investigation would not end up being used solely for the dissemination of data, but would also be used as a tool to support the still-evolving process of the formation of immigrants residing in Fresno into true political actors. Another participatory principle on

which our work is based is that the members of the working group should be directly affected by the research subject. We all have been active in the community on different fronts; thus we contributed our own experiences as immigrants or first-generation immigrants to the information that was gathered and the knowledge that was generated in the process.

The main sources for our compilation are a roundtable discussion, interviews, archival research, and a theoretical framework provided by a background paper commissioned especially for the project.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The main goal of the roundtable discussion was to listen to accounts of the history that influenced the formation of immigrants as civic and political agents. Under the title "History, Participation, and Identity of Fresno Latino Immigrants," the roundtable was held August 30, 2007, at the city council chambers in Fresno. This location was chosen as part of an organizational strategy to bring immigrant issues to public places in response to the anti-immigrant climate in the country.⁵

The major agricultural labor battles that erupted in the sixties were spearheaded by Mexican and Filipino farm workers and led by the late César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. That movement inspired other leaders who, in the 1970s and 1980s, headed up struggles in which their demands grew to include greater political representation and greater access to social and educational services; above all, they included a call for the formation of a political group with its own cultural identity. Those who led the struggles identified themselves as Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, or Hispanics.

Many of these leaders were first-generation Mexicans and were shaped by an environment of immigrant families. Some of these activists,

whom we call the “old guard,” participated in this discussion. We believe that we can learn from their experiences in drawing up the so-called Latino agenda; they opened spaces and created opportunities for the organizational efforts now being led by the new generation of immigrants. Members of this group, the “new leaders,” were invited to the roundtable; they are immigrants who have settled in Fresno and Madera since the 1980s and who have taken part in the organizational and participatory efforts that contributed to the initiation of a new political agenda: the immigrant agenda.

INTERVIEWS

With the aim of getting a closer view of the stories and experiences of these new leaders, we carried out a series of interviews to learn about their organizational efforts. In addition, we considered it important to include definitions, from an immigrant perspective, of civic and political participation and integration.

ARCHIVAL CONSULTATION

During the documentation process, we carried out archival research in the bilingual newspaper, *El Sol del Valle*, founded in 1986, and which for eleven years covered news from Sanger, Parlier, Reedley, Selma,⁶ and Fresno. This research exercise opened up the opportunity for us to better understand the role that the media have had and can play as informative and educational resources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

With the goal of situating this empirical inquiry in a theoretical framework and amassing more scientific data, Edward Kissam, of the Aguirre Division of JBS International, was commissioned to produce a background

paper titled “Context and Dynamics of Civic and Political Participation Among Immigrants in Fresno County.” In this paper, Kissam analyzes theories of civic participation, presents demographic data that illustrate the economic and social dynamics, and includes examples of issues in immigration and civic participation in the Central Valley.

DEFINITIONS FROM AN IMMIGRANT PERSPECTIVE

From an immigrant perspective, **civic participation** is broadly defined to embrace global and transnational dimensions and does not imply participating in exclusively political affairs; it also includes other aspects of life such as recreating cultural practices, forming social groups for the purpose of taking collective action, establishing initiatives for solutions to collective problems, and calling for civil, human, and labor rights, as well as an equal and just political representation.

Each person’s exercise of citizenship is everything that translates and puts into practice living their citizenship as an active and responsible subject, that is, being able to take part in what is happening and being accountable for it. Therefore, the exercise of citizenship requires feeling a concern for collective matters, being able to state them and understand that global problems concern us.⁷

In other words, from the immigrant perspective, citizenship is not merely a status granted by the authorities, but rather a membership in and a sense of belonging to a social environment (city, town, community) where one has, exercises, and respects rights, commitments, and responsibilities with regard to social events and realities in that social environment, and to which one contributes economically, socially, and culturally.

By integration, we understand the active interaction of responsible individuals within

their surroundings or the context in which they participate directly or indirectly and in a voluntary and conscious manner, and whose participation contributes to the collective well-being. Therefore, we consider that integration takes place at different levels: in order to have an understanding of what integration means, then, it is necessary to take into account multidimensional indicators that can range from matters regarding legal or de facto citizenship, electoral processes, language, identity and culture, and social and economic status to the formation of new communities in which the reproduction of new social and cultural practices takes place with the purpose of belonging to a place of residence.

We use the term **Latino** to refer to first- or second-generation immigrants, in particular, Mexicans, who have immigrated to Fresno from Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America. This term also includes indigenous Mexicans who, since the mid-1980s, have constituted the new wave of immigration to the Central Valley.

NOTES

1. In Fresno County, in 2005, a total of 29,819 residents had obtained citizenship, according to the survey taken by the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau. Edward Kissam, "Context and Dynamics of Civic and Political Participation among Immigrants in Fresno County," p. 6 (Aguirre Division, JBS International, March 2008), reference document prepared for the Fresno case study.
2. Of the 528,743 Latinos eligible to vote in the presidential primary, 352,661 or 66 percent are registered (Report on Voter Registration, Office

of the California Secretary of State, February 5, 2008). No data exist that indicate how many of the registered voters are naturalized citizens.

3. Farmersville (population 10,019), a town in Tulare County, is located approximately 50 miles southeast of the City of Fresno. Statistics are from California Census Data Estimates (2006).
4. Edward Kissam, "Context and Dynamics of Civic and Political Participation among Immigrants in Fresno County," p. 4 background paper for the Fresno case study (Aguirre Division, JBS International, March 2008). Most recent information from the Census Bureau indicates that in July 2008 that the Latino population of Fresno was 48 percent.
5. In 2007, the Pan Valley Institute launched a campaign called "Hands That Forge History." Its main intention was to refresh the public's historical memory so as to shed light on the many and not always recognized contributions of the different immigrant communities that had settled in the valley, arriving not only from other countries but also from other states. These waves in immigration, such as those that resulted from the Dust Bowl and the Bracero Program, have been, are, and will be an inherent part of the history of the Central Valley.
6. Sanger (population 24,500), Parlier (population 12,167), Reedley (population 25,000), and Selma (population 23,000) are towns located in East-Central Fresno County, all of which have large Latino populations. Population statistics from the Sanger District Chamber of Commerce, City of Parlier, Reedley Chamber of Commerce, and the City of Selma.
7. Berta Marco Stiefel (ed.), *Educación para la Ciudadanía* [Education for citizenship] (Madrid: Narcea, 2002), p II (translated from the original Delgado and Meinert, see credits).

THE CONTEXT:

Immigrants Residing in Fresno

The coordinators of the project, “Latin American Migrants: Civic and Political Participation in a Binational Context,” take as their starting point that context is of crucial importance. In other words, immigrants’ civic and political participation and their integration (mainly into the governmental system of the United States) can only be explained by observing and understanding the different regional or local social, political, and civic situations in which such political formation and expression are manifested.

The working group for the Fresno case held a series of meetings to discuss in depth the researchers’ thesis and the way(s) in which the thesis could be applied in this city/region. After defining and developing from our own perspective the theoretical concepts of civic and political participation and integration, we raised the question of which are the more relevant forms and levels of political and civic participation that could indicate the degree (or lack thereof) of integration of a population, immigrants in this case, into social and political processes and institutions.

Our first concern was that we might need to limit our examination to a system that was considered clearly political, which included natu-

ralization and the electoral process.¹ However, that would run the risk of ignoring other forms of participation and indicators of integration that we felt were important. Although these other kinds of participation and integration may not be considered an exercise of citizenship in the legal sense of the term, they are so in the sense of belonging to a community in which one lives and to which one contributes.

Latino immigrants residing in Fresno—as well as native-born citizens or the children of immigrants—are political and civic actors; they continue to make efforts to integrate into this society, to which they belong either by choice or for economic survival. Another important aspect that needs to be taken into account, and which is illustrated by the testimonies of some of the actors who organized these efforts, is that legal status has not been an impediment to engaging in political matters, whether at the local, state, national, or binational levels; indeed, many naturalized citizens do not fully exercise that right of involvement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

California was a Mexican territory until 1848; for that reason, the presence of work-

ers of Mexican descent has been a constant in the state. During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1919), thousands of people crossed the border into the United States. In the 1940s, the “Green Revolution” in California led to a demand for a larger labor force, resulting in the migration to the Central Valley of thousands of Mexican-American families, especially from Texas. In 1942, the governments of Mexico and the United States signed an agreement called the Bracero Program, under which thousands of Mexicans would be able to temporarily immigrate to the United States for the purpose of working in agriculture. The program lasted until 1964.² Contractual stipulations bound the workers to their employer, and 10 percent of their salary was held out to guarantee their return to Mexico after the working season.³

The socioeconomic structure of California’s Central Valley is based on agriculture and suppliers that depend on agriculture: packing plants, services, machinery, and chemicals. In its more than 100 years of agriculture, the valley’s labor force has almost always been composed of immigrant groups with distinct ethnic and geographic origins, such as the Chinese, Armenians, and Filipinos. However, it is the workers of Mexican origin who have been keeping alive this agricultural giant, which generates annual earnings of \$4.5 billion (2006) on 1.5 million acres in Fresno County.⁴ The thousands of workers now employed by these industries are mainly immigrants, the majority of whom are undocumented. While the economic base has remained stable (within the limits of its own variables), the workers’ world has gone through many changes over the last few decades—from the states from which these workers have emigrated and in these workers’ claims to both labor and cultural organizing levels in the United States.

Since the Central Valley is a region where there has been constant immigrant influx and

movement, participation could be classified according to trends based on legislative policies regarding the importation of labor. We therefore considered the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), approved in 1986, as a good point of departure to study the political participation of Fresno’s Latino immigrants, because it marks an important transition at which immigrants left behind their invisibility and moved into the foreground.

Who were the immigrants who benefited from IRCA, and where were they during those important political movements that took place in Fresno before 1986? Posing these questions forced us to take a step back to reexamine the history of these movements; although not immigrant struggles per se, many immigrants participated either directly or indirectly in the mobilizations for better salaries and better working conditions. These historical considerations also serve to identify milestones that have been a platform for current organizational efforts, participation, and the integration of new immigrants.

The 1960s

As a result of a farm workers’ strike initiated by Filipino workers in the Delano area, César Chávez’s incipient organization assumed a leadership role and radicalized the strike against grape farmers.⁵ This was the origin of the United Farm Workers union (UFW). Support was phenomenal; dozens of organizations and activists backed the strike and the UFW’s demands. The strike coincided with the Chicano movement, similar to the civil rights movement headed by African-Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. These mobilizations—which united the rural areas and the city—forced the system to effect changes and open up opportunities for Latinos, who at that time were mainly Mexican-Americans. The voice of

first-generation Latinos and, in particular, that of Mexicans had yet to be heard.

The successes of this movement lasted well into the latter part of the 1970s and they materialized in more tolerant labor laws for farm workers and better job opportunities for people of Hispanic origin, including those of the middle class. However, these Latinos who struggled for their rights and forced the system to modify its policies, distribute funding more equitably, and open doors that had been closed to this community, were born here. What of the immigrants? What of the first-generation Latinos who worked on the railroads and in the fields, either as *braceros* or simply as farm workers? Where were they? How did they express themselves? Who listened to them? As we will see throughout this report, the immigrants supported the demands made by the social movements of the time and also formed part of these movements.

The 1970s

During this decade, a significant change became apparent in the demographic composition of immigration from Mexico. Immigrants had been primarily men; but by the mid-1970s, entire families started to cross the border in search of better working and living conditions. There was also a more notable presence of women who came by themselves, many of whom were heads of their families. This trend was partly the result of socioeconomic changes in Mexico during that era, when women entered the labor market *en masse*—with consequent changes in family structure.

Although there are no studies that show the organizational shifts and the integration of immigrants due to a greater presence of women, their presence caused subtle changes that are not often apparent in political agendas. For example, many women immigrants seek to

remain permanently in this country; this differs from the typical male migrants, who work for a period of time and then return to their communities of origin where their families await them (as in the case of the *braceros*).⁶ Additionally, a greater presence of women immigrants calls for changes in the demands for healthcare and education for their children. This more “permanent” aspect of immigration entails “establishing roots” and building community.

The 1980s

The 1980s represented a sea change in California’s Central Valley. The elimination of the *Bracero Program* and growing poverty among peasants in Mexico generated a massive immigration of farm workers in order to satisfy the demands of California’s agricultural industry. In addition to the increase in the presence of women among these immigrants, there was also an increase in the flow of indigenous people, especially from the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Michoacán. These new immigrants not only arrived directly from their communities of origin, but also from the so-called indigenous immigrant route—people from Oaxaca (or Guerrero or Puebla) migrated to Veracruz, Mexico City, Sinaloa, and Baja California.

The majority of these immigrants spoke indigenous languages and little Spanish. They brought with them their abilities as workers and their agricultural customs as well as their culture and traditions. This benefited the agricultural industry due to their knowledge of fieldwork and the difficulty in organizing and unionizing them. In addition to this, their undocumented status made them vulnerable.

The indigenous presence demanded some modification to the immigrant political agenda as new social services become necessary—for instance, to address their language and identity issues—in order to attend to these

communities. In this wave were a few leaders—among them Rufino Domínguez and Filemón López—who had organizational and political experiences from their towns in Oaxaca and the Sinaloa (Mexico) labor camps, which they put into practice in California. Other immigrants brought labor and unionizing experience from the sweatshops along the border (for example, in Ciudad Juárez) or from academic institutions involved in verifying and reporting on that kind of experience, such as the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS) and its highly politicized broadcasting station Radio UAS, which was involved with farm workers in the region.

The Present

Indigenous immigration has continued. Even though precise data do not exist, it is believed that there are around 60,000 Mixtecs in the San Joaquin Valley, in addition to other indigenous groups such as Zapotecs, Triquis, and P'urhepechas (indigenous people from the state of Michoacán). This presence has generated cultural and organizational changes among the immigrant population and has altered the panorama of small cities in the valley—such as Madera. This new immigrant group brings cultural practices that reflect a deep sense of community, which is reproduced in their process of integration and construction of a new community.

At the same time and on a smaller scale, the presence has been noted of immigrants with a higher level of education (high school and even university-level studies). Many of these immigrants also bring political experiences or concerns. Apart from the examples previously mentioned, we can also point to people such as Leonel Flores, Oralia Maceda, Polo Chávez, Luis Luna, and Antonio Cortés, among others, who in varying capacities and at different lev-

els became part of the incipient organizational effort in Fresno and Madera.

Additionally, hundreds of Central Americans, especially Salvadorans, have arrived in the valley, fleeing from the aftermath of civil war in their countries. Some of them, such as Luis Jovel Meléndez in Fresno, have also contributed their experience with human rights issues in Central America as well as their political presence to the so-called immigrant agenda. Although many Central Americans later moved to other areas in the state, some remained in cities such as Mendota⁷ where they became active participants in the 2006 and 2007 marches. They also joined the protests against the 2007 Mendota raids spearheaded by agents of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), during which approximately 100 people were deported as part of “Operation Return to Sender.” The Mendota city council supported the protest march of April 29, 2007, support for which also materialized as a result of pressure from activists and family members of immigrants.

IDENTITY

When we speak of the participation of Latinos, that is to say the political practices of a social group with mainly cultural affinities, it is important to examine the issue of identity. As we will see later, association through cultural identity was a prominent and fundamental element of the movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

Even though cultural rights are included in the political practices of immigrants, such rights are not necessarily homogeneous. There are many meeting points between groups of different ethnicities and cultural antecedents; at the same time there also arise issues of a cultural, ethnic, or ideological nature on which there is no meeting point.

In short, do Fresno's Latino immigrants relate to one another because they share an eth-

nic category? If that is the case, what are the cultural and ethnic specificities that join indigenous Mexicans from Oaxaca and Michoacán with mestizos from those states and others from the states of Jalisco and Guanajuato? Is being Mexican and, above all, Latino, what unifies us? Or are we joined by our immigrant status while we disassociate ourselves as being indigenous, as being from Michoacán or Jalisco? If this is the case, which aspects of Latino identity unify us, and which separate us from one another?

Language is also one of the complexities we confronted as we began to observe the processes of civic and political participation among Latino immigrants in Fresno. In the 1970s and 1980s “Hispano” and/or “Hispanic” were common terms used in relation to the population of Spanish-speakers or people of “Hispanic” origin. The term “Mexican” also had different variants: it could refer to those Mexicans who had occupied this land when it belonged to Mexico, before the U.S. appropriation in 1848; to first-generation, one and one-half generation, or second-generation Mexicans who arrived in Fresno before the Bracero Program; to those who arrived later; and even to indigenous peoples from Oaxaca, Guerrero, Puebla, and so on. Whenever possible, we attempted to clarify the origin of the people participating in both the roundtable discussion and the interviews.

POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Fresno County does recognize the importance of the contributions of its Hispanic community through services in Spanish in the majority of its agencies. Apart from this recognition, however, the county does not do much to support immigrants integration.

In spite of the conservative nature of the valley—both ideologically and politically—no city or county there has yet passed anti-immigrant resolutions, as has happened in other

parts of the country or even in other areas of California. This is due, in part, to lobbying by the agricultural industry, which depends on the labor of undocumented immigrants; it is also clearly in part because of the large concentration of Latinos in the area. In fact, anti-immigrant rhetoric has not affected this area of California to any significant degree.

On May 26, 2005, Fresno Mayor Alan Autry requested a temporary “moratorium” on immigration—something along the lines of closing the border but not deporting anyone—until Congress decided on an immigration law. He also announced his intention to call a “summit” meeting in Fresno on the subject of immigration. At a press conference during the first week of June 2005, representatives of the Central California Coalition of Immigrants’ Rights (CCCIR)—comprised of grassroots organizations and local activists and made up of mainly Latin American immigrants—requested a meeting with the mayor, which took place a few days later; more than twenty immigrants (mainly members of CCCIR) participated. The mayor explained that his intentions were not anti-immigrant and that he wanted to contribute to the debate in a productive manner.

Both sides agreed to maintain an open dialogue and Autry promised to invite CCCIR to the planned summit meeting. He did not. However, members of the UFW, representatives from the Catholic Church and the agricultural industry, and some Chicano activists did take part in the summit, which took place on March 29, 2006. Autry reaffirmed his notion of supporting immigration reform in accordance with the suggestions forwarded by the federal government.⁸ Even more attention-getting was the proposal put forth by the UFW, represented by union president Arturo Rodríguez, who announced that his organization was not seeking an “amnesty” but rather a controlled process of legalization.

NOTES

1. In effect, in Fresno, as in other areas of the Central Valley, the number of naturalized immigrants is low (see notes 1 and 2), and in the case of those immigrants who are already citizens, participation in the electoral system is equally low.
2. A similar program aimed at the railroad industry lasted for only a few years but resulted in the importation of approximately 75,000 workers.
3. This money is still a point of contention. Apparently, the money was sent to Mexico, but once there, was never returned to the workers. Surviving braceros and their families are currently demanding that the Mexican government release the money to them.
4. Kissam, "Context and Dynamics," p. 5.
5. Delano (population 50,310) is a town in Kern County and is located approximately seventy-eight miles south of the City of Fresno. Statistics from California Census Data Estimates (2006).
6. Studies carried out by Myrna Martinez Nateras for the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, in conjunction with Dr. Lea Ybarra of California State University, Fresno, provided evidence of this change. The research was aimed at understanding the demographic changes of farm workers resulting from the presence of more women working in the Central Valley fields. Papers that resulted from these studies were presented at academic gatherings in Fresno, Sinaloa, and Baja California.
7. Mendota (population 9,787), a town in Fresno County, is located approximately thirty-five miles west of the City of Fresno. Population statistics are from the City of Mendota.
8. In 2007, Autry submitted to the Fresno City Council a resolution to condemn raids against undocumented immigrants; it was not passed.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION:

“History, Participation, and Identity of Fresno Latino Immigrants”

THE OLD GUARD

The roundtable discussion called together some of the “old guard” Latinos, outstanding for their organizational efforts in Fresno in the late 1970s and 1980s. During that period, they worked tirelessly both individually and as a group on a mission marked by specific strategies and tactics directed at forming an influential political force. We believe that listening to their stories is of great importance, not only in terms of documentation but also because such testimonies can help the new generation to understand the previous achievements and limitations as well as what still remains to be accomplished in this process of building the political power of Latinos in Fresno.

POLITICS THEN AND NOW

In 1960, the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) was established in Fresno. Hispanics there decided to join forces to form an organization that would support their goals and boost their hopes for greater political participation across the social spectrum of the country. Its first president, Edward Roybal, was later elected as a congressman from Los

Angeles. MAPA was an important source of support for the farm workers’ union (UFW) and participated in several different stages of the Chicano movement. One of its functions was to support Latino candidates for different political positions or non-Latino candidates who had a socially inclusive agenda and a strong social orientation. In 1971, Al Villa, a local lawyer, became the first Latino council member in the city of Fresno. Leonel Alvarado followed in Villa’s footsteps; from then on, in every election, one goal was (and still is) to present Latino candidates.

“We began to organize dances....Our main idea was to have a center in which we Hispanics and Mexicans could get together....None of us had any education; no one had gone to college....[Then], at the same time we were getting our education, we began to explore the possibilities of becoming active in politics.

I ran for the [Fresno] Board of Supervisors. I was lucky and beat out a city council member who had been on the board for more than two or three terms. I barely won, by a very small margin, but I won. Shortly after that...I had the opportunity

to name the first Mexican judge in Fresno County. You will remember his name, Mario Olmos—we just named a school after him. He was working here for California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA)... The county bar association [wouldn't] allow CRLA to come to Fresno, [so] I had to open the office across the [the San Joaquin River], in Madera County. And that's how CRLA got started."
Armando Rodríguez

Rodríguez, a Fresno native, was the first Latino member of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors (1972–75). His election was an important achievement for that generation of Latino leaders and was part of a political strategy to appoint Hispanics to public positions, reapportion electoral districts, create political organizations, organize educational campaigns around elections, and register voters. Rodríguez worked on numerous commissions and committees, and was president of MAPA between 1971 and 1973. In 1975, he was named Judge of the Superior Court of Fresno, a position from which he helped to promote other Latinos to important public positions, including as judges at the state level.

At the close of the 1970s, Latino residents in the small rural community of Orange Cove¹ were in need of a child care center. It had been commonplace then for children to accompany their parents in the fields, in spite of risks to their safety and other difficulties.

"A child care center was necessary. [We went up to the mayor's office] and a man shouted at me, 'No! Children need to be at home with their parents.' [I answered] 'That's not possible, because the parents have to go to work.' And he repeated, 'It can't be done. We don't want that.' I then said, 'How sad that you're opposed to building the center. I'm asking for nothing more than for you to say that

we have permission to build it, because as far as funding goes, I'll get the funds. I'm going to go with this group of people to Sacramento to make a proposal.' Then he said that if we didn't like what was happening, why didn't I run for mayor? And he laughed at me. [But] I started to think. I organized people and threw myself into the race [as a candidate] and I won...and now I have been mayor for thirty years!" **Victor López**

López, the current mayor of Orange Cove—elected for the first time in 1977—succeeded in obtaining funding for housing, child care, and a high school (he also helped attract funding to aid county rural areas after the 1991 freeze). López's vision, as he explained at the roundtable, goes beyond the boundaries of his community. He supported the election of several public officials in rural communities in Fresno County during the 1980s and 1990s, and worked in farm workers' causes. He learned his leadership skills from César Chávez, to whom he refers as "president." López also noted that one of the reasons for his success at the polls was absentee voting, a strategy he promoted to obtain the number of votes he needed for each election.

In addition to working together to place Latinos in public positions, one of the strategies of the burgeoning Latino political power was to establish relationships with politicians at the highest levels in both the state and federal governments. For example, in 1986 then Senator Pete Wilson visited the City of Parlier where he met with local leaders, including Mayor Arcadio Viveros. That same year, residents of Sanger proposed to name a community center for Lewis Segura who, according to a news report published at that time, was in 1956 the first Hispanic to hold a public post in the region. Of farm worker origin, Segura—who was born in Texas—played an outstanding role

in the election of other Latino candidates such as Tanis Ybarra, who became mayor of Sanger in 1980.

The strategy to get more Hispanics to lead rural communities has translated into more than a greater number of social services for farm workers. After the ICE raids of February and April 2007 in Mendota and Madera, López sought to establish a strategy to oppose these measures “while Congress decided on an immigration law.” He supported his Fresno colleague and counterpart, Alan Autry, so that Fresno, the most influential city in the county, would pass a resolution with respect to the raids, an effort that was eventually rejected.²

Robert Silva, the mayor of Mendota, assumed a leadership role during the ICE raids and deportations that took place in that community of just over 8,000 inhabitants—almost 95 percent Latino. The city passed a resolution condemning these acts, and the mayor led a march to express solidarity with the affected families. In public debates prior to the passage of the resolution, Mexican and Salvadoran activists also came out in support of the immigrants. During the first half of the 1980s, at least two cities in Fresno County—Selma and Sanger—passed resolutions condemning massive deportations. Then, as now, in addition to the socioeconomic concerns (shortage of workers for rural labor), both activists and local leaders expressed their consternation about the consequences suffered by families affected by deportation.

Other groups and organizations have participated in trying to involve more Latinos in getting out the vote. The Southwest Voter Registration Education Project played an important role during voter drives in the valley. The Spanish-language media have also supported this initiative. For example during the 1980s, KFTV Channel 21 transmitted public announcements encouraging Latinos to vote.

And in 1991, Telemundo, *El Sol del Valle*, and Hispanic public officials launched a campaign called “Project Voice” to promote electoral participation. The campaign, designed by Cruz Ramos, at that time the assistant to Fresno County Supervisor Doug Vagim, addressed the importance of voting, the role of Hispanic officials, and the reality of being a candidate. An interesting process is also taking place in some Catholic parishes, such as San Antonio Claret in Fresno, where grassroots committees are making an effort to promote citizen participation—in this case, voting—through dialogues and conversations with their parishioners about different candidates.

The importance of the political strategy set in motion by the “old guard” activists was reaffirmed during the roundtable discussion.

“Everything depends on voting, voting is important, you have to vote.... What is important is to obtain [political] positions to improve our people’s quality of life.... When I began working in the welfare office in Fresno, in 1978, we had fewer than five percent of Hispanic social workers. When I left, in 1996, there was more than sixty percent.... The answer lies in having positions of authority, knowing who you are, respecting who you are, creating justice, being united, working together, because if we don’t do this, it is impossible to forge ahead.” Ernesto Velázquez³

From the testimonies of the old guard activists, we are able to see that they fought an arduous battle marked by very defined strategies to promote greater political participation and representation; these have definitively produced important gains for this community.

“I was the first in my family born on this side of the border, in Brownsville, Texas. Or at

least, that is what my birth certificate says. My father came here by himself first; I'm not sure exactly when, but he arrived during the forties. He worked in the fields in the southern parts of Texas for many years, following the cotton harvest, clearing the land, things like that. And as time passed, with the help of his boss, he was able to legalize. And that was how he brought his family here.

*I remember when we came to the Central Valley in 1957. All seven of us children, my father and mother...in a pickup truck, a little truck, with all we had in the world... Much later I learned that our family wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last to follow the road taken by emigrants or people in search of a better life in California." **Juan Arámbula**⁴*

Arámbula, who currently represents District 31 (Fresno) in the State Assembly, symbolizes the advances made through these strategies for a greater Latino representation in public office. The son of migrant workers, he arrived in the San Joaquin Valley when he was five years old. He graduated from Harvard University and then obtained his master's degree from Stanford and his doctorate in law from Harvard. After working as a lawyer for CRLA in Fresno, Arámbula was elected to the board of the Fresno Unified School District, where he served from 1987 to 1996; from 1997 to 2004, he was a Fresno County supervisor. In 2004, he was elected to the State Assembly. Arámbula, one of the most influential Latino politicians in the valley, is recognized for his ability to create alliances among different sociopolitical sectors. Like that of many others at the roundtable, Arámbula's story is an excellent example of the many immigrant families that make a great effort so that their children will become active citizens.

ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

The struggles of the 1980s were not only political but also oriented directly toward the definition, formation, and consolidation of an ethnic and cultural identity that would support Hispanics as one of the major groups comprising the diverse population of Fresno County. But, in addition to being a time calling for pride in being Hispanic, it was also a time of ethnic discrimination, social marginalization, and poverty.

In 1984 there were raids and deportations in the purview of immigration authorities in collaboration with the Fresno County Sheriff and the city of Sanger police department.

"They went there and arrested all the brown people who weren't wearing suits. They arrested hundreds of people, everyone who they thought were undocumented immigrants. And how were they able to know this? In fact, they detained many people who were not undocumented, who were citizens. They also detained Armenians, Jews, and Hindus.... We had demonstrations, we got together, we established an organization called the Hispanic Civil Rights Network, we put pressure on the cities of Sanger and Fresno and Fresno County to pass resolutions prohibiting their law enforcement agents [police and sheriff's departments] from participating in these raids and deportations."

Joel Murillo

Murillo is a Fresno lawyer and member of the La Raza Lawyers Association, a statewide organization of Chicano lawyers founded in 1977 (the Central Valley chapter was established two years later). He also mentioned at the roundtable another of the abuses of power against minorities: the criminalization of people by association or suspicion of association.

“There are people in power who block us by using laws that stop us from crossing the bridge from one side to the other [among generations of Latinos]. As you know, xenophobia is racial hatred toward others for which no motive exists to make this hatred manifest itself. And one of the ways they have continued to oppress us, one of the ways they have attacked us, and now one of the ways they keep us imprisoned is Article 186.22 of the Penal Code. This article states that if you’re a “known member” of a gang or if you’re associated with a known gang member, or if it is believed that you are a friend or relative of a known gang member, then you could receive a ten-year jail sentence if it can be proven that you participated in a violent crime.”
Joel Murillo

Although this policy is apparently directed at combating gang activity, it is part of a legal system that condemns ethnic minorities for supposed “proximity” to criminals. This legal tool has allowed law enforcement agencies to imprison thousands of young Hispanics, blacks, and Asian-Americans, a situation considered discriminatory and even racist.

In addition to promoting the placement of Latino leaders as public officials, one of the strategies to attain greater political representation, according to Murillo, was electoral redistricting. Activists such as Víctor López, Ricardo Duran, and Ben Benavides (who for a long time was an active member of MAPA) spearheaded this effort from 1988 to 1990, for which they created an organization called the Latino Redistricting Coalition. Murillo noted this effort as one of the most important legacies of the struggles of these Latino leaders. Nevertheless, in spite of the progress made by the local Latino community, many issues still remained unresolved.

“Today we are experiencing the same discrimination—but more cleverly disguised—that my parents, my aunts and uncles, and my grandparents suffered in this country... What we need is to have leverage. We need to go out and make sure that everyone who can register to vote does register. But, even more importantly, that we harvest those votes because a great treasure is worth nothing if you do not make use of it.”
Joel Murillo

The Chicano Movement: Education, Arts, and Culture

Members of the “old guard” were part of a continuing struggle to gain greater access to higher education for Latinos born here, the children of agricultural workers who came from Texas, and first-generation Mexican immigrants. Many of these activists—or supporters—were able to attend and graduate from national universities. They also created institutions oriented to fostering new generations of Latinos, such as departments of La Raza studies and centers for Chicano and Latino studies; for example, at the beginning of the 1970s, professors who originally had been contracted for the Department of La Raza Studies at California State University, Fresno—such as Ricardo Durán, Tomás González, and Eleazar Risco—decided to create the Universidad de Aztlán (University of Aztlán) as an alternative to the established institutions.⁵

The 1960s and 1970s were not just about voting and marching. The generation of Hispanics who took part in the Chicano movement made use of other forms of expression as well. Artists emerged from immigrant families and used their art as political tools in the movement, whether through painting murals that narrated the struggles and demands of the moment, or establishing cultural and social

meeting centers, forming politically oriented theater troupes, establishing associations for artists, and organizing cultural festivals. Even if cultural activities are not always considered political in nature, Fresno's experience demonstrates that they contain a clear message/intention of civic participation and with political undertones.

"My father always told me, 'You shouldn't hate anyone.'...[He] didn't have papers, he was here illegally. And my mother, as well... [When] I was a child—I don't know [why], perhaps because I was poor—because each time I looked out of my window, I could see poverty. And being an impressionable youth, and wanting to be an American, I was embarrassed, you know, of poverty...I had no ideas about creating art. But one day, the idea of creating came to me, of seeing the truth and telling the truth....For me, words don't have anything to say. For me, they are my paintings, graphic art, they are murals...of what a social idea should be." Ernesto Palomino

Palomino, a Chicano artist born in Fresno, was a professor at California State University, Fresno, first in La Raza studies and later in the art department. As part of his work as an activist artist (or an artist committed to a cause), he established several artists' organizations; one of the best known is La Brocha del Valle (The Valley Paintbrush), founded in Fresno in 1975.

In the 1970s, Palomino, along with other artists such as Lee Orona, joined in the political activities of the time, and through their art told stories of the farm workers as well as other struggles directed at recognition of their identity and cultural history. Most prominent among his works of public art are three murals (no longer in existence)—the farm workers mural, the La Raza mural (1972) painted on the walls

of the Employment Development Department building in Madera, and the portrait of Benito Juárez (1974) painted on the farm workers office in the city of Selma.

Palomino was invited to contribute as a cartoonist to the Fresno newspaper *El Mexicano*. At the roundtable discussion, Palomino said he was inspired by the story of Juan Sin Miedo (Fearless Juan), who poked fun at his poverty. César Chávez and the Chicano movement defined Palomino as a politicized artist. Chicano artists not only painted or expressed aspects of the movement; they also developed a particular style, in part influenced by Mexican mural art, as an expression of their search for social identity.

"When César Chávez emerged as a leader, I became something more than an artist, because I was already an artist. But when I began, I was not a Chicano artist, because when I began, no one knew what that was."
Ernesto Palomino

Within the cultural and artistic scope of the Chicano movement, El Teatro Campesino deserves special mention. El Teatro Campesino emerged in the mid-1960s as an artistic and activist appendage of the United Farm Workers union. Agustin Lira, Luis Valdez, and their group traveled from one labor camp to another to present their sketches, which were accompanied by music and performed live on each occasion.⁶ The main themes related to the exploitation and racial discrimination experienced by the farm workers. This cultural and ethnic reaffirmation was of great importance in shaping the leaders who emerged from the movement.

"At that time, we were called names such as 'pochos,' or people of Mexican descent born on this side of the border, but we didn't

*know whether we were completely part of the Mexican culture. We had a foot on each side of the border. For me, the Chicano movement had a huge impact because we were finally able to feel pride in who we were. On many occasions, people around us looked down on us and even our own families put us into another category. We were from neither here nor there. But the Chicano movement lifted our spirits because we were able to realize that being from here was a good thing. Yet, at the same time, we didn't want to lose the culture and the history of what was good about Mexico. And for the first time in my life, I could see that there was at least a possibility to combine or synthesize the two parts we carried inside us." **Juan Arámbula***

At that time, identity and a demand for respect of cultural rights were salient points on the agenda for social and political participation. Art and cultural expression were (and continue to be) organizational strategies in the struggle for a more just and equitable political representation, as well as for integration, assimilation, and incorporation, without putting aside cultural practices such as language.

The question of identity and belonging form a part of the everyday life of today's youth, the descendants of immigrant families. Arámbula, like other future Latino activists or leaders, benefited from the Chicano movement and its effect on a system that previously closed its doors to him. However, there is no longer a Chicano movement and many young people do not know about the efforts made by the previous generations. Such efforts aimed at political participation were, at the time, the most visible ones made by the Latino community. They involved issues of immigration without stating the term "immigrant," because "immigrant" was apparently already included in the term "Hispanic" or "farm workers."

Where did this kind of political participation begin? Palomino and Arámbula were both children of immigrants, and their parents participated at home, making sure that their children had the tools to integrate into a new society. Our observations of the lives of dozens of immigrant families in the valley show that it is in their homes that the process of integration and participation begins, through early education and in examples of parents' and close relatives' participation. This does not necessarily translate into speaking about politics per se, but rather into providing motivation for participatory dynamics (that is, not passive or contemplative behavior) and encouraging self-respect on an individual, cultural, and group basis. Maintaining the feeling of community and solidarity creates individuals who are more committed and participative.

IMMIGRATION REFORM AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

When the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed in 1986, the more established Latino organizations assumed leadership roles in offering services for those immigrants who were requesting residency through this program, in which more than two million people throughout the country gained legal status. The law brought with it the creation of schools to teach English and U.S. history—requirements for obtaining a green card. These schools became true educational and social centers where immigrants, in addition to learning what was required by law, also had opportunities to meet and socialize; many of them also organized cultural activities and community dialogues.⁸

Rosemary Moreno was the representative for El Concilio de Fresno's immigration program, which offered its services free of charge in the poorer outlying areas of Fresno. Through El

Concilio de Fresno, Moreno and her colleague Lily Torres processed thousands of documents for a similar number of immigrants. Moreno, along with a few organizations such as CT Learning-Colegio Popular, has continued to provide services without federal funding or aid from foundations. As she now remarks, this tactic has proved somewhat counterproductive because it did not lead to the creation of independent and established organizations to aid immigrants.

"[To whom] were we going to give the responsibility of educating illegal immigrants? Who should have that responsibility? For thirty years, I've forged ahead, dedicating myself to immigrants because I say it's my responsibility. It's not the responsibility of Immigration [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, USCIS]. It's not the responsibility of the Mexican Consulate. It's our responsibility.

We need to come together and provide funding for an agency that goes out into the communities. How many people donate to nonprofit agencies to help immigrants? On the other hand, we have consultants who are rich. We have lawyers who are rich. In reality, they [lawyers] aren't needed for immigration [procedural] matters. Either the person is going to be qualified to apply or not. And this is where we need to put our energy, to have the resources, even if they are very few."

Rosemary Moreno

Bringing services to less-favored social sectors implies a commitment that people often underestimate. In other words, when we advocate for policy changes, we often fail to recognize that someone needs to do the day-to-day work. Moreno's complaint makes sense when it is taken into account that there are not enough services accessible to immigrants and that those in existence function with scarce resources.

Another roundtable participant with extensive experience in assisting immigrants during IRCA is Margarita Rocha, current director of Centro La Familia, a social services organization founded in 1972 when students in La Raza studies at Fresno City College—motivated by Professor Tomás Núñez—began to help with filling out forms and making translations for those who sought help from the Department of Social Services. At that time there were few Latino or bilingual social workers and there was a lack of material translated into other languages. Rocha also worked in SER-West for Progress, one of the first programs in Fresno to receive funding to offer English classes to immigrants who were applying for residency under the IRCA program, and in El Centro Esperanza.

These women have worked with hundreds of people seeking residency and then citizenship and have had the patience to listen to thousands of Fresno immigrants describe the obstacles that must be overcome to receive their immigration documents. The road to citizenship is not always an easy one.

"For me, what is extremely important is that along with [citizenship] campaigns, the information to be provided to the public must be clear because sometimes people waiting to become American citizens have something in their past that could affect the process for them. They won't obtain citizenship and they could be deported for an infraction they may have committed.

All this aside, I believe that, yes, we do have the obligation to reach out to communities in rural areas and provide all the information so that when they make the decision to become citizens, they do so having everything that they need. [If not] the impact on them is that families are separated, destroyed.... People who pursue citizenship

do so to give their children a better life, a better education.” **Margarita Rocha**

For its part, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services took matters into its own hands and hired people to provide information and educate candidates for the IRCA program. One of these people was Jenny Rodríguez, who was also present at the roundtable discussion.

“In my opinion, the main factor [behind becoming citizens] is that citizenship is for the good of the family—because they are able to bring their parents here a lot sooner, their wives, their children, and their siblings. And it was a great benefit for them, even though it may take a thousand years to immigrate them because of the waiting times.

But I would like to see that the main reason [to become a citizen]—and you have to make a huge effort to become a citizen—would be to vote. To have the kind of job that I have, or a job on the highway patrol, a police officer’s job.” **Jenny Rodríguez**

THE MEDIA

“I believe that our people have found a space where they can participate, where they can voice their opinions, and I’m not referring specifically to Radio Bilingüe, but rather to many kinds of Hispanic media where people can state their opinions and propose their ideas.” **Filemón López**

López, producer and host of La Hora Mixteca (The Mixteco Hour), on Radio Bilingüe, was born in San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca, and like other Mixteco children, grew up in the agricultural fields of Sinaloa, Mexico. He came to Selma in 1980 and, a few years later, began his organizational work. Together with other activists from Oaxaca, among them Rafael Morales,

in 1986 he opened “Casa Oaxaca” (Oaxaca House) in Fresno. Each Sunday, La Hora Mixteca links Fresno with communities in Oaxaca in Spanish, in Mixtec, and sometimes in other languages such as Triqui or Zapotec, creating a meeting place, as defined by López. In 1980, Radio Bilingüe began transmitting as one of the first Spanish-language community radio stations in this country.

The combination of communication and activism, evidenced mainly throughout Radio Bilingüe’s first years on the air (it provided live transmissions of a large number of forums and public events, debates, and political and social topics), was also present in another station, Radio Campesina, but in a more defined style due in part to its affiliation with the farm workers union (UFW). Radio Campesina came into being in the valley in 1983 and was a tool of the UFW in organizing and raising the level of awareness of farm workers. Currently based in Bakersfield, Radio Campesina is now a commercial station (with the exception of their station in Visalia⁹, KUFW), and part of its programming is, in effect, commercial in nature.

Three examples of Spanish-language media can be considered highly significant in the valley. In 1940, the valley’s first Spanish-language radio station, KGST 1600 AM, came into being. It is still in existence and has continued to maintain in its format space for news and local interviews, something that has been disappearing gradually from the majority of valley radio stations as they merge or become chains of stations and extend out to reach other markets. In 1972, KFTV Channel 21, part of the Univision chain, went on the air for the first time; its founder, Daniel Villanueva, is a Reedley native.¹⁰ In the mid-1980s it created a half-hour documentary about the valley’s Mixteco community, produced by Eduardo Stanley, with the aid of Filadelfio Silva and the participation of Filemón López. Much of the

news and events reported on the station at that time dealt with the immigrant community and its organizational efforts, as well as with topics dealing with immigration and details of the passage and effects of the 1986 immigration reform.

The growth of these media outlets reflects the rise in the Latino population; in the Fresno area, it is possible to tune into some twenty Spanish-language radio stations (both AM and FM). Even though this growth reflects mainly commercial interests, these media outlets have played and continue to play an important role in informing and motivating the community. For example, during the “amnesty” of 1986, the media provided information regarding the requirements needed for the residency process, and many had immigration “consultants” (experts who advised their audiences).

Naturally, in reporting the events and news of the community, the Spanish-language media contribute to the information on and helped to document the history of the community that they serve, which is something that is often overlooked by the general (mainstream) media. This mainstream market, which at first ignored them, soon came to recognize these media outlets as mouthpieces for the Latino community.

It is important to highlight the media’s role during the huge immigrant march in Los Angeles in 2006. For days prior to the march, several valley radio stations called for people to make their presence known in Los Angeles. Thousands traveled from the valley in cars and buses. On Saturday, March 25, several commercial radio stations joined together, forming an information network that, starting at the break of dawn, broadcast news about the contingents that continued to arrive and encouraged listeners to join them. During this unique experience, the networked stations identified themselves as one entity, transmitting a sense of unity that had not been seen (or heard) before.

Most radio stations are now part of regional or national chains and do not broadcast local news. In general, Spanish-language radio stations throughout the valley—unlike the television stations—meet a need for entertainment rather than education. For their part, weekly or biweekly Spanish-language or bilingual newspapers have also changed from being independent companies to being parts of large corporations, even though they continue to report local news and events. Curiously, despite a rapid growth in the Latino population in Fresno, there is only one bilingual weekly newspaper, *Vida en el Valle*, founded by the McClatchy Corporation in 1990.¹¹

Part of the effort expended by these media outlets reflected the commitment of their programmers to provide audiences with information in a broader and deeper context. There was a community-oriented sentiment that is gradually disappearing, leaving more space for less profound content in order to generate revenues. These changes affect the community—not only because local news diminishes or disappears, but also because programming content generally reflects entertainment, sex, and jokes that are in poor taste. In spite of this, and to a lesser degree, the Spanish-language media do maintain a criterion of participation and try to advocate and motivate the community to better itself.

NOTES

1. The town of Orange Cove (population 10,774) in Fresno County is approximately thirty-four miles southeast of the City of Fresno. Population statistics are from the Orange Cove Area Chamber of Commerce.
2. During the roundtable discussion, López expressed his support for the bill known as AgJobs—also supported by farmers and the

UFW—which some analysts see as a new bracero program. In 1987, however, during a three-mile march in Parlier led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta in which approximately 1,000 people took part, the UFW was generally opposed to a similar proposal. During that event, in which Arcadio Viveros and López participated, Huerta gave a speech in which she complained about a lack of support from many farmers for their workers, who were obtaining their legal residency under the 1986 immigration law. She accused the farmers of refusing to document their employees' work histories—a basic requirement to obtain “amnesty.” They were also creating an image of a “shortage of farm workers” in order to justify their request for another bracero program, or a program similar to it, which would guarantee a plentiful supply of cheap labor. In 1990, the National Commission on Agricultural Workers held hearings in California to assess the possible shortage of farm workers. It was determined that the real salary of farm workers had decreased by 8.4 percent that year (press report, *El Sol del Valle* [Sanger]). Even after the 2006–2007 mortgage crisis that “freed up” thousands of construction workers, thus increasing the ranks of the unemployed, farmers were still asking for more workers.

3. Velázquez was the first Latino director of the Department of Social Services in Fresno (1989). He and José Villarreal, the Fresno Public Defender at that time, were the only Hispanics to hold two of the twenty-four directorial posts in Fresno County's public administration. He resigned under pressure as director of the local welfare office in 1996 for refusing to implement certain changes demanded by the reform law signed by President Bill Clinton.
4. Juan Arámbula was invited to participate in the roundtable discussion; however, he was unable to attend. We have included him in this document because of the important leadership role he played in exercising and promoting political participation within the Latino community. The quotes used here are taken from an interview conducted by Myrna Martínez Nateras for the Pan Valley Institute's oral history project,

“Public Contributions of California's Central Valley Mexican Immigrants”—a project focusing on two generations of Mexican immigrants and non-immigrants, whose public participation has contributed to the history of what is now known as California's Central Valley. Material from this project has not yet been published.

5. This original group fostered various important projects in the Fresno area, among them, El Colegio de la Tierra (later, Colegio Popular); rural health clinics (the first of which were in Parlier and Madera); SER-West, dedicated to employment and education; and others. Activists such as Arcadio Viveros, Cruz Bustamente, Sr., Carlos Hernández, Fernando Aguirre, Antonio Muñóz, Alberto Nieto, Josué Frausto, as well as many others, were involved in these efforts.
6. Lira remained in the valley, devoting himself to music and, more recently, to theater.
7. Quote taken from an interview conducted by Myrna Martínez Nateras for the Pan Valley Institute's oral history project, “Public Contributions of California's Central Valley Mexican Immigrants” (see note 20).
8. Two of these centers opened in the Fresno area in 1988: SER West-Centro Esperanza (which even organized a literacy course in Spanish) and Colegio Popular; both were headed by Mexican-Americans (only the Colegio Popular still exists).
9. Visalia (population 121,498) is a city in Tulare County and is located approximately forty-four miles southeast of the City of Fresno. Population statistics are from the City of Visalia.
10. Reedley (population 25,000) is a town in Fresno County and is approximately twenty-five miles southeast of Fresno; it has a large Latino population. Statistics are from the Reedley Chamber of Commerce.
11. These newspapers are excellent sources for studying the era; most of them are available for consultation in public libraries.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: *“Generational Changes”*

THE NEW LEADERS AND THE NEW IMMIGRANT AGENDA

Following the struggles undertaken by a generation of Hispanic activists during the 1970s and eighties, a new generation of immigrants began to arrive in the valley. In the mid-1980s, one could observe a change in the story of the political participation of immigrants, or of those of Latino, Mexican, or Hispanic descent, because those who had benefited from IRCA began to make themselves heard. These activists took the first steps to construct a political agenda that demanded recognition and integration into one sociopolitical system. Their civic participation began to be more visible, and what could be called an immigrant agenda started to take shape, reflecting demands that took into account not just one society (that of the United States), but two (their countries of origin).

Latino immigrants, particularly those from Mexico, are binational beings. And in spite of their contribution to the economy of both the United States and Mexico (working here, sending money there), neither country allows them to fully exercise their political rights. As a result, these rights have begun to form part of their agenda: the right to participate in the

political processes of their country of origin (absentee voting rights); respect for the rights of citizenship; improvement in consular services; better treatment when they return to Mexico; support for cultural activities; insistence that the consulates serve as a vehicle for communicating their needs; establishing relations with Mexican legislators and academic agreements between Mexican institutions of learning and universities in the Central Valley; discussions that emanate from here about Mexican political processes; and more.

At the same time, immigrants have begun to outline new demands that look “inward” at the community in which they live. Thus, they want more far-reaching and just immigration laws; opposition to anti-immigrant policies; freedom to exercise their cultural rights and express their identity; and, although in its infant stage, they have begun to demand rights based on gender.

In 1980 a handful of people joined together in the Latin American Support Committee (LASC), which succeeded in attracting the attention of part of the public sector about sociopolitical issues in Latin America, especially conflicts originated by the interventionism of Washington.² The group supported dialogues,

forums, protests, and educational campaigns. The Latino immigrant community did not respond on a large-scale basis, but did show interest. El Salvador had already gone through a similar situation, and for that reason many Salvadorans had left their country.

“I feel that I’m part of this society because the struggle is continuing here. I was part of the struggle in El Salvador, and...I feel part of the struggle here as well. All of the people who are here in this room, I work with them, and I enjoy working with them, and if one works for the betterment of society, one also feels part of that society. Now, this work needs to grow, we need to see how we can make the government of the United States, which is my government, understand that the immigration problem will not be solved by giving a document to an illegal immigrant, which is what they call them. That is not the solution to the problem.

The problem will be resolved when all [of us] who are here in the United States work toward changing the politics toward our countries and instead of supporting governments that continue to oppress us — that is, governments in our countries that do not give us what we want, that they support progressive governments that are doing something for our people. When we succeed in doing this, then people will not want to [move] here. They’ll come here only as tourists. They won’t be coming here because they want to be better off, because they want to feed their families, because they want to get a good job — they won’t be coming here for that.” Luis Jovel Meléndez

The immigrant agenda, as expressed by Meléndez during the roundtable discussion, includes attempts to change the sociopolitical situation in the countries that export the

labor force, change that should create jobs and a sense of well-being there so that there would no longer be a need to immigrate to the United States in order to be able to subsist. Meléndez also suggested that greater immigrant participation could even influence U.S. policies in regard to Latin America—possibly affecting interventionism and its consequences.

Home Country Elections

During the 1980s, several Mexican congressmen visited the valley and became aware of the feelings of their relocated countrymen. Among the complaints—apart from the corruption in Mexico—was that many of them wanted the Mexican state to give the right to vote to its citizens living abroad, as many other countries around the world had already done.³

In 1988, the elections that took place in Mexico finally succeeded in sparking some popular interest. Cuauhtémoc Cardenas decided to break from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had governed Mexico since 1929. He challenged the party at the polls. His opponent was Carlos Salinas de Gortari. On election day in Mexico, a group of immigrants in Fresno organized symbolic elections. Approximately 300 people participated, some of whom, such as two families from Bakersfield, traveled 110 miles (more than 170 kilometers) to vote. All the Fresno votes were cast for Cardenas, who at that time represented hope for change in Mexico. In 1989, many of the people who had organized the symbolic elections—an event that would be repeated in Fresno for several years—formed a committee to bring Cardenas to the valley. His presence in Fresno awakened passions in Mexican immigrants that had been long “hidden”—the wish to return to Mexico, but to return to build a more just society from which it would no longer be necessary to emigrate. Cardenas repre-

sented that illusion in that moment. His presence attracted hundreds of people who wanted to hear him speak and shake his hand.

Voting in the United States

*“We had a recent experience in which the governor [of California] was re-elected. I visited people who were eligible to vote, and many of them said, ‘Even though we vote, it always turns out the same.’ Yes, they complain about the poor condition of their streets, that the transportation system isn’t working well. They complain that their children are sick because of the high level of air pollution. Then, that is when one has to speak with them and tell them, ‘This can change if you go out to vote and elect the person who you believe will solve these problems.’ But, also without accepting ‘I already voted, I already elected that person.’ Instead, you have to follow up and visit him [the new official] and make sure that he is going to do the work you elected him to do.” **Oralia Maceda***

Maceda is an immigrant from Oaxaca (born in San Francisco Pachtla) who had organizational and community work experience with the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) in that Mexican state. According to her, voter registration campaigns and efforts to motivate Latinos to go out to vote, which require a lot of dedication and a constant presence in the community, have had limited success. Participation not only depends on a high level of political awareness, but also on good information and the existence of grassroots organizations.

“When I became a citizen, [I was] really enthusiastic about voting. But when I saw the ballot, when it arrived at my house and I began to examine it, I couldn’t understand

it...it’s really difficult to vote. You have to be very aware of who you’re voting for. I was almost about to vote for things that would not have been good for me or for my community.

It’s important to tell people, ‘Look, this is good for you, this goes against you.’ It isn’t a matter of just grabbing the ballot, I’m going to vote, and that’s that. No, it’s very difficult to vote...Therefore, we have to be totally aware of what we are doing.

*We need to be very much aware that people who come to this country from Latin America are tired of having been robbed of the right to vote. [They] are fed up with having [their] votes taken away from [them] in Latin America. So they don’t believe in voting. And they come to a country where the president of the United States is elected by less than half...of the people who are able to vote.” **Luis Jovel Meléndez***

Meléndez is president of the Fresno Salvadoran Community of the San Joaquin Valley. His statements point to the need to deepen the commitment to civic education in the Latino community, a complex and “silent” task. Immigrants, even naturalized immigrants, are not well acquainted with the system. Not all of them know how to vote. Moreover, many are culturally disposed to mistrust elections. The 2006 and 2007 marches aimed to overcome this apathy and promote the Latino vote, especially for immigrants. The effort continues but is far from including educational aspects and a long-term focus.

“We need to educate our people so that they can...continue to educate themselves and begin to believe in the power of the vote, because people don’t believe in voting. The only way that we’re going to accomplish something [is] if we carry out what we shout

out all the time—‘A united people will never be defeated.’ But we are not united. We need to work with people on one side, with people on the other side.” **Luis Jovel Meléndez**

“Election time is a family matter for us. We get together at home or at my cousin Diane’s house. My aunts are there. All of us with our [copies of the] ballots. Everyone has to read them slowly to make certain we understand them. In some way, this makes them feel they are part of the process. So we have to send out that message in a way that makes them feel part of the process, that is, calls out to them, takes it to their homes, their environment, makes them feel they have to protect this right.” **Sandra Flores**

Integration

Another woman participant at the roundtable discussion, someone who took her first steps as an activist during the mobilization opposing Proposition 187 and was a spokesperson during the May 1, 2006, rally in Fresno, shared these thoughts:

“I believe that when you come to this country, you have to integrate into a new society, isn’t that so? And in many ways, based on your work, with organizations, helping your community, seeing the necessities of your community . . . I believe that you adapt to a society up to a certain point, because that society accepts you up to a certain level. And there you stay, because we don’t have the courage to stand up and say, ‘I am going to move ahead even more and I am going to create a society that offers more rights, more possibilities to express ourselves, more rights to defend the community.’

I live alongside many people, I’m a construction worker, with hundreds of men all around me, and their mentality is that a woman has no right to be doing this kind

of work because she is not strong, because she can’t . . . because we don’t have the capacity that they do. Then, we’re kind of on the edge of machismo or more than anything else, on the edge of ‘up to here and no more.’ Then, I look at how you adapt to a type of life and you begin to understand that there’s a need to adapt yourself to another kind of mentality; and that is how I believe it starts to develop, to invent different ways of thinking and getting ahead and joining in a kind of life that allows you to be more in order to improve your community.” **Margarita Córdova**

These needs influenced the demands and strategies of the immigrants, who are the protagonists of present-day social movements, in the same way workers came to be protagonists of the social movements at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as African-Americans did during the civil rights movements; as women, young people, and pacifists did during the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

“The true salvation for this nation, which is in bad, very bad, shape, are immigrants, because they are the people who have more energy, who have more drive, who have been practicing survival under adverse circumstances. The traditional American citizen no longer has this, unfortunately. I don’t want to insult anyone by saying these things. The United States is not going to save itself through adventures, such as that of the Iraq war. The United States is going to be saved when this generation of immigrants has access to these jobs and new rules are established that will really make the extraordinary values that built this nation.

Society moves when there is conflict, when this conflict becomes positive. And we are not taking advantage of it.” **Alfredo Cuellar**

Immigrant presence is important not only for economic reasons. Their values and culture, as stated by Cuellar in the roundtable discussion, could inject U.S. society with creative energy. Nonetheless, this contribution is contingent on the levels of integration and participation, which, in turn, are determined by a series of social factors that are difficult for these very immigrants to control — for example, creating a more inclusive immigration reform.

THE BEGINNINGS OF ORGANIZING FOR AN IMMIGRANT AGENDA

Although many first-generation immigrants sympathized with or formed part of the UFW, their presence was a “silent” one, because the spokespersons for the union—at all levels—were (and still are) Mexican-Americans. The same can be said of organizations such as MAPA. Immigrants appeared to have remained in the background, possibly because they had no knowledge of the system or the language. For this reason, the majority of the service agencies dedicated to immigrants were run by Mexican Americans, who, in turn, did not know the indigenous immigrants’ languages and did not always understand the culture of little-known areas in Mexico and Central America.

The indigenous community from Oaxaca was already seeking ways to organize that would allow them to express themselves directly. One of these efforts was reflected in Casa Oaxaca, which lasted only a short time because of a lack of resources. This is one of the problems faced by immigrants who seek to create service and support organizations for their community: a lack of knowledge about how the U.S. system works, including the means to raise funds.

However, also during the mid-1980s, another group of indigenous immigrants from Oaxaca began to organize in the valley against

work-related injustices and marginalization. The effort was led by Rufino Domínguez, an activist in his community of origin as well as in Sinaloa, Mexico. In 1991, the Frente Mixteco-Zapoteco Binacional was formally established. In 1994, during its first ordinary congress, its name was changed to the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (FIOB) to allow Triquis and Chatinos to join the organization. In 2005, the name was modified once more and became Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, due to the interest expressed by P’urhepecha groups to join as well. The FIOB states as a principle to fight “for the respect of the rights of indigenous peoples,” thus setting a unique and distinctive tone with regard to other grassroots organizations.

Another organizational example, on a smaller scale, was the Organización Popular para una Educación Alternativa de Adultos ([OPEAA] Popular Organization for Alternative Adult Education), founded by a group of ESL and Spanish literacy instructors from the Centro Esperanza. OPEAA’s plan was to promote the education and culture of the immigrants.

Despite its brief existence due to the lack of funding (1990–95), OPEAA organized the first *posada* (a Christmas celebration) in the Centro Bellas Artes and the only conference on NAFTA that took place during the negotiations on this trade agreement—in which teachers from the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, union members, professors from California State University, Fresno, activists, and local authorities took part. OPEAA members also held dialogues with Mexican authorities about the creation of a cultural center. Later, the Mexican Consulate established the Instituto Mexicano de California Central (IMECAL); two members of OPEAA were hired to run that center.

In 1994, OPEAA, along with Mixteca Campesina Activa headed by Araceli Sierra from Madera, organized the first, and only,

political debate in the valley attended by Mexican political parties seeking power: the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). This debate was held in the Ted C. Wills Community Center in Fresno. Each of the three parties sent a representative: Dr. Luis Angeles traveled from Mexico City to represent Zedillo and the PRI; Lic. Juan M. Gutierrez came from Tijuana on behalf of Cevallos and the PAN; and Francisco Garcidueñas of Los Angeles represented Cardenas and the PRD.⁴ In the election, as on previous occasions, several grassroots groups and Mexican activists in Fresno organized trips to Tijuana so that those people who were registered to vote in Mexico could do so.⁵

LEVELS AND KINDS OF PARTICIPATION

At a farm far from the city, dozens of Oaxacans came together to celebrate their native community's saint's day, the celebration of San Miguel. A brass band livened the gathering, while several young people prepared for the dance of the "diablitos" with their chivarras and carved and painted masks. Off to one side was a statue of San Miguel, to which many people paid homage as they arrived at the party. And there was food: tlayudas (very large tortillas stuffed with different ingredients), mole (spicy sauce), and tortillas. People greeted each other, joined in conversation, and came together while the children laughed and ran about. More than 500 attendees enjoyed the fiesta—as if they were in San Miguel Cuevas, Oaxaca; but they were in Fresno, Oaxacalifornia.

Traditional celebrations not only recreate hometown festivals in which the entire community participates, but also represent the social commitment to maintain and pass on traditions, to reaffirm and display their culture. Only

people who are active in a culture are capable of creating such events, and this type of expression creates more active members of a community and a participative environment. This energy can disperse in different directions. Even though activities directed at maintaining one's original culture could be considered a negative aspect by the "mainstream," they are the seeds of participation and incorporation of newcomers and their children into the new society. Fortified by their culture, these individuals are not afraid to integrate into society, because they feel that they will not lose their identity; that their children will follow in their footsteps. Although in their home countries (for example, in Mexico), being indigenous is a cause for discrimination and social marginalization, when these immigrants arrive in the United States, the expression of their origins gains new strength.

At the close of the 1990s, there was an initiative that aided in the development of some social activities of immigrant groups in the Fresno area. Promoted by Craig McGarvey, then program officer of the Program for Civic Culture (1993–2003) of the James Irvine Foundation, over the course of several years the foundation funded a grassroots association—the Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship (CVP)—whose objective was to strengthen organizations and promote the civic participation of immigrants as well as increase the number of naturalized citizens.⁶

This initiative brought immigrant activists together and helped to establish coalitions between these organizations and unions and churches. Other results of the initiative included the founding of the San Joaquin Valley Coalition for Immigrant Rights in Fresno to boost immigrant participation in the sociopolitical life of the valley. Organizations such as FIOB, Comité No Nos Vamos, Comité Pro-Uno, AFSC, and the Carpenters' Union were part of this coalition.

Numerous forums, training sessions, roundtable discussions, and marches (for example, in favor of granting drivers licenses to undocumented immigrants) took place during this period. In 2002, under the leadership of PVI, CVP contributed to creating the first Tamejavi Festival, an effort to promote civic participation through cultural organizing leading to a convergence of immigrant communities in a single space in which they could meet, express themselves, and show their art and culture in a public setting.⁵ This convergence was the result of several prior gatherings in which cultural exchanges took place — through processes of popular education, exercises in civic participation, sharing of stories and culture, and so forth, all oriented toward promoting mutual understanding for consolidating relationships among different ethnic immigrant communities as well as supporting knowledge and reaffirmation of their cultural identities.

The activities mentioned here, such as participation in symbolic elections and discussions and forums about the state of affairs in their homelands, fuel participatory energy. When immigrants understand that they need to pressure the powers that be to obtain what they need (residency) or to defend themselves, they do not hesitate in doing so, as witnessed in the 2006 and 2007 marches.

The insistence on registering and voting during that movement is bearing fruit. Over the last year, more Latinos have registered to vote, and the number of applications for citizenship has also risen dramatically. More than a million citizenship applications were sent in 2007 (from January to October), when the “*Ya Es Hora ¡Ciudadanía!*” (Now’s the Time for Citizenship!)” campaign was set in motion (according to a spokesperson for USCIS, there was a 59-percent increase as compared to 2006 in the number of applications submitted). This campaign had the support of 280 organizations

throughout the country, aided by the collaboration of such media giants as *La Opinión* from Los Angeles and Univision.⁸

In 2008 there was growing interest around the elections. Even those immigrants who were not eligible to vote knew that they could influence those who did have that right, thereby breaking with the tradition of distrust in the electoral process—a distrust justified in part by years of fraud in Latin America. During the 1988 and 1994 Mexican presidential elections, Mexican immigrants were requested to speak to their families in Mexico and ask them to vote for certain candidates. The same is happening here: many people who cannot vote encourage those who can vote to do so.

In some places, such as churches, political discussions have become commonplace. The desire to participate (or to encourage those who can participate) in the election processes is motivated by more than one cause. The need to bring about broad-based immigration reform is the main objective; however, other issues, such as the Iraq War and the economic situation, coincide with the interests of the country’s population at large. This means that there is a meeting point between the immigrant community and the “long established” population of this country—a situation that is favorable for integration. The differences are related to the social status of the immigrants in question: the need for legal status and the right to maintain and practice their culture (including their native language). From this effort emerged a series of subagendas that varied according to each immigrant community’s historical moment and characteristics, for example, real opportunities to learn English, a complex situation in a rural society like the Central Valley.

In this sense, it is important to point out that many efforts have been undertaken in the area of education for immigrants, both in

Spanish (literacy) and in English (English as a second language). In each case, there is great interest but it is confounded by situational difficulties. In particular, the intense nature of agricultural work leaves few opportunities for workers to dedicate several hours per week to classes and studies. Additionally, classes are not always available in small communities, or there are transportation problems; also this population's low level of schooling presents its own drawback. The type of work in which most immigrants are engaged allows for little time or energy to be devoted to civic participation.

“When you have to decide between family and civic participation, you aren't going to concern yourself with civic participation.”

José Antonio Ramírez

Born in Coahuila, Michoacán, José Antonio Ramírez came here with his family in 1973. After graduating from CSU-Fresno, he worked for the Federal Bureau of Reclamation and is currently city manager of Firebaugh, in Fresno County.⁹ Ramírez represents a small number of young immigrants who have managed to finish college and land an influential job without having to leave the valley.

The immigrant agenda is more diverse than the Hispanic or Latino agenda drawn up by the earlier generation of leaders or activists. While the Chicano movement generation had a defined sociocultural unity, the immigrant community of today is more diverse, simply because its origins are more diverse. Although Mexican citizens predominate, even among this group there are different indigenous groups. This diversity is partially responsible for a lack of unity or greater participatory coherence. This translates into a lack of organizations or activists to lead both short- and long-term political strategies. For example,

after the 2007 mobilizations, there has been no pressure on politicians to push for immigration reform, while anti-immigration demands are gaining ground—from the construction of the wall along the border with Mexico to state resolutions that make the lives of undocumented immigrants a nightmare (for example, in Arizona and Colorado). Although there is a high level of energy and interest in participating in the social life of the United States, such interest is broad; added to the lack of unity, this undermines political demands and, therefore, immigrants have even fewer possibilities to win the arm-wrestling contest against the anti-immigrant movement, which has a very real political base of conservative sectors in the political apparatus.

In the Fresno area, on April 13, 2006, there was a march in favor of immigrant rights. Supported by the Central California Coalition for Immigrant Rights (CCCIR), diverse groups, and the Catholic Church, more than 10,000 people marched nearly five miles through the streets, requesting immigration reform. The May 1 rally of the same year, also organized by CCCIR, was the largest in the city's history — more than 20,000 people congregated in front of the city hall. This temporary coalition, made up of local organizations and activists, was conscious of the fact that it was nothing more than an organizing vehicle for the people's enthusiasm. CCCIR, which has a very open and simple structure, sought to channel popular energy for self-expression mainly through marches and making known their interests in bringing about comprehensive immigration reform.

In 2006, the leading members of this coalition were organizations such as FIOB, Unión de Exbraceros e Inmigrantes (UNEI), AFSC (the Farm Workers Project and PVI), People with Power, La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), the

California Prison Moratorium Project, Centro Azteca, Comité Pro-Uno, and activists or individuals such as Margarita Córdova and Eduardo Stanley. Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MECHA), Gloria Hernández, José Castro, Isabel Vásquez, and others also participated sporadically. The following year, some organizations and people stopped participating, leaving FIOB, UNEI, AFSC, the California Prison Moratorium Project, Margarita Córdova, Isabel Vásquez, and Eduardo Stanley as the nucleus of the coalition, although many people and organizations showed their support in different ways and, in several cases, participated in CCCIR meetings on a sporadic basis.

“Today we march, tomorrow we vote” was one of the most frequently heard slogans during the 2006 and 2007 marches. Among the speakers, representatives of other communities came forward to express their support, including Asians, African-Americans, and members of the Muslim faith. Attendees at these events did not form a homogeneous group, but rather were a diverse set of people. Many spontaneously assumed leadership roles, inviting other people to attend, driving them to meetings, bringing posters, and the like. Musical groups and artists offered their support for the events, providing a colorful atmosphere and a festive tone.

In 2007, the ICE raids in Mendota and Madera, and the May 1 rally—this time less attended—revealed the lack of organizational structure of the immigrants in this area. The CCCIR began to show its weaknesses as it faced growing internal divisions (something that had already occurred in other areas, most notably in Los Angeles). The lack of strong pro-immigrant organizations in the region—in addition to a lack of resources among the existing organizations—also contributed to this loss of strength.

A positive side of this situation was the awareness of these limitations and their willingness to create grassroots committees in their communities that attempted to establish support networks to face such problems as the raids. Moreover, these immigrants tried to create formal organizations to represent the interests of the marchers who were demanding comprehensive immigration reform.

NOTES

1. The Reagan administration, unhappy about the 1979 Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua, decided to intervene and the Contras were born, financed, indoctrinated, and trained by the CIA.
2. This demand was met in 2005, when the Mexican government passed a law allowing its citizens living abroad to vote, although with many limitations.
3. After the debate (which had its tense moments because the audience openly expressed its opposition to the PRI), the PRI representative told one of the organizers that, from what he had gathered from the sentiment of the audience in Fresno, if the PRI did not change, it would not stay in power much longer. Six years later, in the 2000 elections and after seventy-one years in power, the PRI lost the presidency.
4. One of those activists is Leonel Flores, a native of Sinaloa, Mexico. Flores founded the Unión de Exbraceros e Inmigrantes (UNEI) in 2002 in Fresno. The main objective of this group is to aid former braceros—in particular, to have them paid back the ten percent of their salaries that was retained when they worked in the United States and that is still owed to them.
5. This association was organized by the James Irvine Foundation in 1996, initially with organizations that were working at that time on immigration and naturalization issues, such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Farm Workers Project and the Program for Alternative Rural Economies (the Pan

Valley Institute opened its doors in 1998 as part of the same initiative), California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF), CT Learning-Colegio Popular, and the California Institute of Rural Studies. Other organizations such as Catholic Charities, Immigrant Legal Resources Center, and Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales were incorporated later. Although it is currently less active, CVP has a membership of almost twenty organizations, <http://www.citizenship.net>.

6. Tamejavi includes different cultural expressions—film, exhibitions of photos and

paintings, poetry, gatherings, forums, cultural exchanges, dialogues (pláticas), cuisine, and artistic performances. Tamejavi Festivals took place in 2004, 2006, and 2007; the next is scheduled for 2009.

7. Information from the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), <http://www.naleo.org>.
8. Firebaugh (population 5,843) is a town located in Fresno County, approximately forty-three miles west of the City of Fresno. Statistics are from the City of Firebaugh.

INTERVIEWS: *Immigrants Now*

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 did not put an end to the flow of immigration. Important changes in social dynamics took place when these 2.7 million immigrants obtained their residence. Many of them moved on to other economic sectors such as services and construction, and they were also able to bring their families here. The post-IRCA immigration wave has generated a phenomenon that is now quite common: members of the same family can have different immigration statuses—ranging from naturalized citizens to undocumented immigrants. IRCA did not put an end to the demand for farm workers, either, and it was necessary to meet that demand with new immigrant workers who continued to abandon their towns of origin, where there were no jobs and agriculture continued to deteriorate.

There have been few, if any, studies of the demographic composition of the immigrants who have come to the valley, and more specifically to Fresno, since the end of the eighties—those who now form the mass of people marching through the streets demanding immigration reform to legalize their situation. Men have continued to arrive, as they have traditionally done. Women are also arriving alone,

as heads of families, and not just accompanying their husbands or another family member. Entire families are also arriving—or are getting reunified after a period of time. Within these families, children and youth have also arrived. They have grown up here, have been educated here, and at present are in a state of legal limbo. Many of those who arrived as youngsters at the start of the 1990s are now married and have started families; their children are citizens.

Michoacán, Jalisco, and Guanajuato continue to be the traditional states of origin. Nevertheless, it is important to note the increase in the waves of indigenous immigration, represented by Mixtecos from Oaxaca and Guerrero as well as different ethnic groups from Oaxaca—apart from Mixtecos—such as Zapotecs and Triquis, or indigenous peoples from other states, such as the P'urhepechas from Michoacán.

One important factor is that these immigrants have come with a greater resolve to stay and to establish themselves. Although the desire to return remains, it is mostly nostalgic. This could be explained by the fact that a good number of these immigrants arrived as part of a process of family reunification, and crossing back over the border now is much more risky

and expensive. Finally, the hope that conditions will improve in their communities of origin is every day more remote.

PROBLEMS IMMIGRANTS FACE

In spite of the exploitation immigrants experience on the job, for the majority the living and working conditions in the valley presumably represent an improvement compared to the chronic unemployment affecting their home communities. Generally speaking, according to testimonies of people consulted over the past two years, a farm worker's annual salary varies from \$9,000 to \$14,000.¹ According to federal government statistics, the total annual poverty-level salary for a family of four is nearly \$18,000. And, according to the Brookings Institution,² between 1990 and 2000, there was a 70-percent increase in the number of people who live in conditions of extreme poverty in the Fresno area. These data illustrate the precarious nature of the lives of these immigrants and their level of economic deprivation. In general, they constitute the lowest income group in the valley. Because of the marginalized conditions imposed on them through their status as undocumented or simply as farm workers, only a small percentage of these immigrants can rise above that level.

The last few years have been particularly difficult because of the constant anti-immigrant attacks that have made use of the media, the law, and intimidation tactics through Operation Return to Sender, which, coincidentally, began after the 2007 marches. Forming a family in a new country in which one needs to learn new ways of life is a very real challenge; the challenge becomes even more difficult when it needs to be met under conditions of marginalization and social vulnerability. One of the greatest worries of immigrant parents is

the lack of time and space for young people. Children return home when their parents are still working and, after a long workday, these parents have very little free time to help their children with homework or to become more involved in their school activities.

This situation impacts family dynamics in many ways, but above all, it leaves parents with the feeling that they are losing control of their children's education and development. However, despite these challenges there have been outstanding cases of success.

One such case is that of Juan Santiago, a Zapoteco from Cuatecas Altas, Oaxaca. At the beginning of 2001, at the young age of eleven, Santiago crossed the border with his mother to join his brothers and sisters in the city of Madera. While attending school, he improved his limited knowledge of Spanish and learned English. At present, he is attending a community college in Madera and participates in cultural activities and in the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), as well as being involved in organizations such as the Democratic Committee and the Association of Mexican American Educators (AMAE). He played an important role during the Madera raids, contacting families, helping to obtain resources and information, and, above all, organizing other young people so that they could inform the indigenous community in Madera about what to do in case they became victims of a raid.

School dropout rates and teenage parenthood are worrisome issues. As a result, these young immigrants are destined to fill low-salaried jobs or, worse, to join gangs—an activity that, over the last few years, has been on the upswing in the San Joaquin Valley, mainly in small communities. These communities continue to be vulnerable to acts of violence, deportations, injustices, and human rights vio-

lations. Not having legal residency results in vulnerability, and it is for this reason that the nucleus of concern and priorities focus on the need for passing a new immigration law.

HOW IMMIGRANTS ORGANIZE TO SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS

Who takes the initiative to support immigrants in their efforts to resolve these social problems? More importantly, what do immigrants themselves do to face up to these issues? There are a few social and educational services available, which have had some success, but they have limitations, especially in regard to organizing and providing services for undocumented immigrants.

These social and educational services have come about through organizing efforts such as the opening of sociocultural spaces, building community organizations, and mobilizations.

Sociocultural Spaces

Regardless of the limitations, many community activists have dedicated their time and contributed their organizational experience as well as their practices of social interaction in their search to change conditions of social marginalization, at the individual, family and community levels.

Rosa López was born in Juchitán, Oaxaca. She came to Selma in 1990 and later settled in the city of Madera. Her husband, Adrián López, is a native of Santa Rosa Caxtlanhuaca, Oaxaca, who arrived in Reedley in 1990. All four of their children were born in Madera, and the entire family has lived there since 1992. Rosa and Adrián work in the fields, although during the boom, Adrián was able to find work in construction. However, he now is one of many victims of unemployment result-

ing from the crisis in that industry. Rosa and Adrián also support efforts at organizing the Comité del Pueblo (the People's Committee), an idea that emerged after the 2007 raids in which about twenty indigenous men, mostly Triquis, were deported.

The Lópezes devote their civic and community work to creating spaces in which families can live and work together, in which their own children, as well as others, can learn about their culture and come together as one large family, as one community. Every weekend, in the meeting room at Capilla Santa Inés located on the outskirts of Madera, the young members of the group *Se'e Savi* meet to learn to dance, learn about their culture, and rehearse for their public performances.

This dance group, originally founded by people connected in one way or another to FIOB, teaches and performs traditional Oaxacan dances and tries to awaken young peoples' interest in the culture of their parents. Adult attendees work together and participate in the group's activities as they take care of younger children who run about and play non-stop. Three years ago, these families decided to start a community garden—for their own use—in the field behind the meeting room; it has become another way for them to coexist, recreate their culture, and include the products they harvest as part of their traditional cuisine.

They also hold organizational meetings, exchange information, and celebrate such traditional holidays as the Day of the Dead. Their room and the garden are informal sociocultural spaces that are sustained by the will of these families and sporadic support from the church, FIOB, and PVI.

"In the community garden we plant the crops we grow in Oaxaca and we teach the children about that. During the celebration of

the Day of the Dead, we involve our children in how to harvest the flowers [cempasúchil], prepare the altar, and so on. There are people who wait for that because they know it's somewhere they can go." **Adrián López**

"I contribute through Se'e Savi. I can say that it is something. It is a beginning. It is a small space for something to change the situation just a little bit. On the other hand, at the festival [Tamejavi], young people's presence was huge—I believe that the festival has not only come to brighten up a day or two in our lives, but it provides space for many people, especially for young people... Even I, as an adult, participating with them, I was nostalgic for those times when I was in my village, when I was a little girl and we could be so creative. In Mexico, we didn't need expensive things to have a good time—we just had to be creative." **Rosa López**

Young people, like Juan Santiago, attend the rehearsals where, in addition to learning how to dance, they connect with other organizations, bring and take resources, and above all, become involved in other events in their own communities, such as the Guelagueta, or in conjunction with other communities through multiethnic events like the Tamejavi Festival. For these immigrants, as it was for the Latino leaders of the "old guard," the creation of a physical space in which people could socialize has been and continues to be extremely important in "building community." They need to see each other, come together, coexist, and dialogue. This necessity is amply demonstrated even today by immigrants of different generations: in some areas they turn parks and plazas into their favorite places to meet and express themselves; in other areas, these places are flea markets and swap meets, churches, and cultural

festivals. Even though this aspect of immigrant life is rarely mentioned, for Latinos it is of vital cultural importance.

This need for space is a demand voiced by immigrants, especially indigenous immigrants with new needs.

"We lack many things here. We are a very large, hardworking community; we pay our taxes; and we aren't rowdy. We need a library, a meeting center... We need a cultural center where other people can come to see our folklore, our crafts. We have so much that we can share with others... As we continue to grow in this society, we will obtain what we need. We are very cooperative. That is our challenge." **Filemón López**

Many people have a strong interest in donating their time and energy to the community. In some cases, this interest is felt to be a social mission. A strong ethnic affinity exists in the case of indigenous peoples, an affinity that sometimes encourages a sense of social obligation.

"It doesn't matter how far away you are, you carry your culture in your heart. It depends on me—I feel my responsibility as a mother and as a Oaxacan or as an indigenous person, that I have to support my people. Not only when it concerns culture, but also anything else they might need. My biggest motivation is to honor the land where I'm from, where my people are." **Rosa López**

Community Organizations

The need to solve the many problems the indigenous immigrant community suffers from has led to the creation of organizations that could fight for solutions, such as the FIOB. This

organization carries out binational political work and also advocates for the development of more just immigration and public health policies. It channels its service activities through the Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO—Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous communities) by means of educational programs and health campaigns aimed directly at the indigenous population. CBDIO has also paid special attention to the issue of indigenous languages, training interpreters and offering their services to health and educational institutions as well as to the courts.

San Antonio Claret church, in south Fresno, provides spaces for dialogue for certain groups of immigrants who for different reasons have been more marginalized. Here people with strong motivation gather to solve problems affecting the community.

“These are groups of neighboring families who live on the same street, in the same area, who meet every week to share their faith, reflect on the word of God, and respond in their way. That way is to see, judge, and take action. The Pro-Immigrant Committee [at the parish] is very small but it came into being to support a just immigration reform. It is a small group, but it...has as its mission to facilitate and educate the community about its rights, to articulate [and] join actions with other community organizations, and to drive a movement forward. It also helps with legal advice [consultations about immigration]. The majority of the families who work with the group are farm workers from this area. Some of them move around in search of crops to harvest. There are also two groups of indigenous people from Oaxaca and another three groups consisting only of men—they come from the same place

and this helps them feel like they are like a family. In the parish, my job is leadership training and guidance.” Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras

A native of Tamazula, Jalisco, Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras came to the valley in 2004, when she was sent from Colima by the Congregation of Eucharistic Missionaries of Immaculate Mary and assigned as a Eucharistic missionary for San Antonio Claret church.

Among the people who participate in the activities of this parish is Isabel Vázquez. She is one of many head-of-household mothers, principal providers for her children, who came to California in search of a better life. Originally from Zimatlán de Álvarez, Oaxaca, Vázquez arrived in Fresno in 1990. She works at several jobs, ranging from agricultural laborer to domestic service provider. Like other immigrant mothers, Isabel brought her children to the area as soon as she was able to do so. In 1992, Margarita Córdova, arrived with her brothers and sisters to be reunited with their mother. Margarita graduated from Roosevelt High School in Fresno. She first engaged in civic participation there, during the student marches against Proposition 187. Margarita currently works in construction. Like her mother, she is an active participant in the grassroots communities of San Antonio Claret church.

Mobilizations

The marches of 2006 and 2007 were organizational exercises that, in part, put leaders and, even more so, alliances to the test. As happens on only very few occasions, churches, unions, cultural groups, grassroots organizations, and independent activists all joined together, which had not been seen since the 1994 marches against Proposition 187.

“The hope of sending a strong message to Washington to favor a more just immigration reform brought us out onto the streets. The hope—it was that and continues to be that—of having stability in life and also a sense of dignity.

We know who we are. We are not terrorists or delinquents. We are family people, working people who are committed to the people we love. If we were terrorists or delinquents, we wouldn't be trying to send this kind of a message—we would be throwing bombs.... We realized that together we were many, that we are capable of coming together in a common cause—justice, rights. We realized that we are capable of creating mobilizations.... We need to exercise the power we have. For today it is for legitimate citizenship, with votes, with neighborhood organizations, together with other organizations within the community. If not today, tomorrow we will have fair immigration reform.” **Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras**

The immigrant population exhibited maturity in its level of participation about an uncertain situation that becomes more untenable on a daily basis — especially for those who have spent more than ten years in a state of legal limbo. Added to this urgency was the sense of having reached the limit of tolerance for the constant accusations that they were “terrorists”—and, above all, the criminalization of their undocumented status.

“The need, the longing of the people became evident, that now is the time for legalization. Enough with waiting and waiting. The people said, ‘No more! Let's do something for ourselves!’” **Rosa López.**

Immigrants and their families, friends, and allies armed themselves with courage and went out into the streets to exercise their right to be seen and heard.

“When there are anti-immigrant sentiments, when they accuse us of being terrorists, it really hurts us—because we are not like that. The poor indigenous people or Latino people come here to look for work, nothing else. But when we go to pay our taxes, the government wants us, but our taxes do nothing for us. Because of this, people got together, Mexican people—there are people from many different groups (Anglos, other groups as well)—there are people who are good-hearted, who sympathize. That day I called the people to come out to march. Come because that was how we need to participate.” **Filemón López.**

Whereas Filemón López, through the use of radio, was able to move the community to rally around the cause, others were moved simply on constitutional grounds.

“We cannot forget that under the Constitution we have the right to protest peacefully. We must remember that all the marches, no matter how large, all of them were peaceful, orderly, disciplined, and for as long as that continues, we have the right to keep protesting whenever it is necessary for us to do so... I wish at this time, when raids are underway, there were marches, and yes, there should be marches because we need to mobilize ourselves.” **Rufino Domínguez**

Domínguez is one of best-known immigrant leaders in the valley. He came to Selma in 1985, and after traveling and reuniting with his family, he finally settled in Livingston, in

the northern part of the San Joaquin Valley. There he began working as an organizer, and it was there that the first steps were taken toward founding the FIOB, located in Fresno since 1999. Domínguez was the binational coordinator of FIOB from 2002 to 2008.

Although many of the activists from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s viewed the marches of 2006 and 2007 in a positive light, some of them did not, as evidenced by some of the statements made by the “old guard” during the roundtable discussion. It is not clear whether this lack of support indicates rejection on the basis of ideology or “generational jealousy.” Nonetheless, Domínguez’s response also shows the importance of the marches (a classic form of political expression in Latin America) as a means of expression for Latino immigrants.

Still, one of the great achievements of the mobilizations was the awakening of the people, the indications of social conscience, the motivation to express themselves, become citizens, and, once again, consider voting a priority. Although 2007 ended without immigration reform, the defeat of HR4437 and making the Senate seriously discuss the immigration topic was important enough. At an organizational level, one could clearly see the emergence of potential leaders and latent possibilities for renewing organizational efforts and alliances.

“We have learned what our identity is. We have the power to express ourselves. We have learned that family is so important to us that we will not allow it to become vulnerable or break down. We have learned not to cast ourselves aside and that we are people of faith, of hope, dedicated to honest work, and that we are capable of holding peaceful conversations with those who govern us. New identities and coalitions materialized, and that is something positive. We were capable of tak-

ing the lead in our movement for legal status for all—this was a global accomplishment.”

Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE

Build on These Experiences

Some people believe that the visibility achieved by the immigrants frightened members of Congress into hedging the issues, thereby inventing maneuvers to buy time—such as proposing laws that they knew would not be passed—without committing seriously to an immigration reform bill.

“It isn’t all that easy for them [members of Congress] because there are so many of us... They are frightened by the fact that the laws will fall into the hands of our children. With or without papers, we will go on. Our children are going to stay here. Even though they don’t want us, we are already here.

Or it also seems like they don’t want us, but they do need us. So they do things to put pressure on us, to make us leave; [they want to make us believe that] it’s our decision to leave, that they’re not throwing us out. Like the raids, deportations, according to them, it’s our option to leave our children here—but that’s not the case.” **Rosa López**

For both organizers and activists, this experience provided a good opportunity to evaluate organizational strategies and to continue to mature as a political sector. Some believe that, despite massively attended marches, community participation still fell short. Organizations need to assume more responsibility, learn, and have a greater capacity to provide tools so that people can be more active in pressuring members of Congress through phone calls, letters, and e-mail

messages, in the same ways that opponents of the immigration bill lobbied Congress.

“On the one hand, on many occasions there were organizations that lobbied for passage of immigration reform. On the other hand, there were groups that lobbied against that initiative. Then, we, as an immigrant movement, had no common agreement about what we really wanted. I believe that this had a lot to do with the fact that we didn’t get anything accomplished [in Congress]. The legislators took advantage of this opportunity to say, ‘Well, you yourselves can’t agree on anything.’”

Rufino Domínguez

In spite of the achievements and lessons learned and the defeat of HR 4437, the immigrants’ situation continues to deteriorate: raids and now letters to employers continue to be a threat. Immigrants experience this form of repression as a consequence of having dared to go out into the streets. They withstand all this, which does not take into account local anti-immigrant initiatives in several cities and states throughout the country, a situation that fortunately is not taking place in the valley.

Immigrants still have much to do and more challenges to overcome. Now, more than ever, it is important to organize, generate better information mechanisms, offer spaces for people to engage in dialogues about their experiences and prepare themselves for the next battle, and, above all, to work toward creating and establishing a more solid organizational infrastructure. More than anything else, we have to avoid becoming paralyzed.

“The biggest misfortune into which we can fall is to say that there is nothing that we can do anymore. The challenge is to consolidate our foundations, to continue learning about

popular organization, to continue pushing for the path to citizenship, continue implementing projects that promote dignity, productive autonomy; it seems to me that that is very good, our people owning their own businesses.

There is no project; now the message is that of the candidates. This is a message in which the goal is to win. We have to create our own project and claim ownership of that project—I am thinking about the parent committees, I am thinking about community organizations—and to continue working in an articulated way. The mobilizations marked a dividing line in our history, because a new identity emerged—not only a Latino identity but also that of Hmong, Filipino, Portuguese immigrants, even groups from here, like black groups, who don’t have the same equality as others. I’m thinking about this articulation network that has not yet been concluded.” **Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras**

Work for Citizenship and the Vote

One of the slogans from the mobilizations was “Today we march, tomorrow we vote,” but how are Fresno immigrants putting this slogan into practice?

As in all agricultural regions in the United States, a large number of the workers in the Central Valley are undocumented immigrants. Over the last ten years, the number of naturalized citizens has decreased. While in 1997, 4,756 immigrants were naturalized, in 2006 only 1,812 immigrants became citizens.³ Unfortunately, there are no updated statistics that would allow us to ascertain any effect of the marches on applications for naturalization. However, according to news reports, throughout the country there are nearly one million applications “stuck in the system” and, for that

reason, the overwhelming majority of these applicants will not be eligible to vote in 2008. Even though this is only one of many problems, the main problem is motivating citizens who are eligible to cast their votes.⁴

In order to have some understanding of this issue, we asked our interviewees to speak to us from their own personal perspective as well as based on their experiences about motivations, opportunities, and support so that immigrants living in Fresno might integrate into society as citizens in all respects, exercising their right to vote.

Everything appears to point to the fact that, in principle, family reunification continues to be the greatest motivation for immigrants with legal residency to become citizens. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this situation has been changing gradually and the idea of using citizenship as a tool to influence political decisions is becoming more important. For example, in the past Mexicans would lose their Mexican citizenship when they became United States citizens. As of 1995, however, Mexicans will not lose their citizenship when they become citizens of other countries.

For many, however, obtaining citizenship is not merely up to one's own will. This is particularly true for a large number of immigrants living in Fresno, adversely affected by the demographic characteristics of low educational levels, low salaries, and constant job mobility. Coupled with its high cost (\$600), one of the most difficult requirements for citizenship is the ability to read and write in English. Responsibility for the naturalization and civic education of immigrants should not fall on the shoulders of the immigrants themselves or on the few existing support organizations. It should be a commitment that the authorities and, above all, political institu-

tions should assume at the federal, state, and local levels.

Exercising citizenship to its fullest should definitively entail being in a position to play an active role in political decision making in a city, state, or nation through the mechanisms of present-day democracies — electoral processes, lobbying, and the like. Perhaps it will be that only when the number of immigrants translates into an equal number of votes that they will they be converted into a real political force with influence.

Many immigrants who are still unable to vote maintain their interest and keep themselves abreast of the course of sociopolitical events in this country.

“I’ve read—I like to read about the politicians—that there are two Democrats who are more or less sympathetic to us. Obama, I like his proposals. He not only supports legalizing our status, but also licenses [drivers licenses for undocumented immigrants]. Hillary doesn’t support licenses, but she doesn’t offer another option. Who wins is going to depend on us. We have to put pressure [on them]. There is no guarantee that a Democrat will win the presidency.” **Adrián López**

Apart from these simple yet significant forms of participation to promote voting among new citizens, important alliances have been forged among organizations working with immigrants—such as the CBDIO—which, in conjunction with SOL⁵ project in Fresno, is carrying out a voter registration and promotion campaign. The “SOL” campaign recruits and trains volunteers to register voters and promote voting. We have already mentioned activities run by San Antonio Claret church to encourage immigrants to take part in this country’s electoral system.

“We have believed that it is a commitment to our faith to promote participation in the electoral process among the people of our community. So we have become a voting site. This has entailed bringing together teams to promote voter registration among our young people and to create agendas for the people who are running for local office. Even delivering promotional information, pamphlets, voter guides for the community. We have seen very active participation here in my parish—and I hope the same thing is happening in other parts of Fresno.” **Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras**

OTHER CONCERNS

Home Country Politics

As binational citizens, these immigrants are still ambivalent about having gained the right to vote in Mexican elections, especially because the process is so complex and they lack information on that process; some consider it a useless effort. This does not mean that immigrants living here are not aware of what is happening in their home countries.

There have been two visits made to California by Mexican presidents — Vicente Fox (2001) and more recently, Felipe Calderón (2008). Fox now evokes bad memories in immigrants because of unfulfilled promises for change that he made both in public and in a private meeting with groups of indigenous immigrants. With regard to Calderón’s government, the perception is that it is just “more of the same” and that nothing in Mexico will change for the better.

The situation in Oaxaca is a source of much concern here, especially when we take into account the large number of immigrants from that Mexican state who live in the valley. The tensions between the state government of Ulises

Ruiz, of the PRI, and organizations and labor unions demanding greater democratization led to confrontations in which people were killed, wounded, or arrested; according to numerous reports, people have disappeared and activists have died suspiciously. Moreover, organizations such as Amnesty International have denounced the Ruiz government for abuses of authority—and the Mexican federal government has not responded. In 2006, there were public demonstrations marred by violence, and the state was virtually taken over by federal police.

In Fresno that same year, scores of immigrants from Oaxaca led by FIOB demonstrated against the proposed visit of an official delegation. This action yielded results as Governor Ruiz decided not to travel to Fresno after all. However, more importantly, the demonstrators were able to see that their action generated a response (in this case, cancellation of the governor’s visit).

INTEGRATION

“Since we came here, at least for the majority of us, our goal has been to integrate into this society. It’s true that we aren’t making much of an effort, but I didn’t come here to do nothing. I didn’t want my daughters to go back with their hands empty. I wanted them to learn the language. That’s what happened to me [I didn’t learn it], but it won’t happen to my daughters.” **Isabel Vásquez**

It is important to point out that the majority of our interviewees already have family here, which implies that they have a high level of integration. Thus, the majority feels that they are part of their community, although not always part of the city as a whole.

“I am part of this community. I don’t know if the city adopted me or if I adopted the city.” **Filemón López**

Immigrants have created spaces that make them feel more familiar with their surroundings, more comfortable. These spaces range from stores to dance groups, community events, and churches, from decorations to flavors. The “nostalgia business” generates millions of dollars and supplies merchandise from native communities for immigrant consumption. Swap meets or flea markets recreate environments similar to the markets in the immigrants’ native villages. In addition, such spaces provide an opportunity for families to develop business skills. A visit to one of the three flea markets in Madera is like getting a glimpse of Oaxaca... or of Laos, because of the similarities of flavors and colors between these cultures.

According to critics of immigrants, integration ought to mean learning the language and local customs at the cost of those that immigrants bring with them. This kind of integration usually begins with the second generation, that is, with the children of immigrants, who assimilate much faster. Many of these young people are trilingual—in English, Spanish, and their indigenous language (Zapoteco, Mixteco, Triqui, etc.). Some are already preparing for college and have a strong desire to participate and to commit to their community. On the whole, immigrants do not reject the idea of integrating, but rather demand the right to continue to maintain their own culture.

Traditionally, the dominant society shows no interest in immigrant integration within their respective societies; Fresno and Madera are no exceptions to this rule. Central Valley cities do not offer immigrant services such as English classes. Even though their budgets are limited, it is also true that these cities lack the interest

and creativity to offer the most basic kinds of support to people who want to learn and better themselves. Therefore, criticisms of new immigrants for “not integrating” prove to be cynical.

“I believe that what they want is for us to be passive, for us to do nothing. I believe that they [public officials] are not doing anything [for us]. Well, we haven’t thought about creating something like that either [to build a relationship with local governments]. However, it’s going to be hard because [Fresno] is very conservative. They see us as nothing good; anything we do, there is always negative criticism of us.” **Rufino Domínguez**

Integration is a slow process and, for some communities, a more complex one because of their own linguistic and cultural complexities, as is the case of indigenous immigrants.

“I have seen how people have asked the church to provide English-language and citizenship programs, programs to help them. I have even seen them participating on school boards, interested in their children’s progress. Society has deemed us a burden, saying we are asking for ‘welfare’—statistics point to the contrary. I see them completely integrated into the productive process, setting up restaurants, small farms, paying their taxes—even though they don’t have their [own] social security number, they send in income taxes... The IRS has plenty of money that it cannot return to people because they don’t have social security numbers, [they] have borrowed a social security number. They are integrated in every sense. If people focus only on language, they’re making a mistake, because you need to take all aspects of life into account.” **Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras**

As our interviewees have indicated, they do not feel integrated into their communities (whether Fresno, Madera, or others) in a civic and political sense. There is a disconnect, a lack of communication that prevents them from feeling completely part of the communities in which they live, raise and educate their children, invest or spend the little they earn, and dream of a better future—for themselves and for their children.

“I feel so much a part [of this community] that I believe it is a small parcel of land from my village. Because I live in Madera, everything resembles my village. There must be some reason why we are here. Most of the people are from Oaxaca. Products from Oaxaca are already coming here. Communities are already celebrating their patron saints’ days.

On the other hand, I don’t [feel integrated]. I don’t know who the mayor is, I don’t know him, and I don’t know his name. So I don’t know who makes decisions around here. I would like to know because we live here; if we were in the loop, we would participate. On only one occasion I went to the Council [City Hall], and everything was in English, and I felt we didn’t have any place there. If we don’t understand, there’s no point.” **Rosa López**

NOTES

1. Many of these testimonies have been quoted by Eduardo Stanley, a freelance journalist, whose articles have appeared in publications such as *La Opinión*, *Noticiero Semanal*, and *La Insignia*. He is currently the editor of *El Sol del Valle* in Visalia, California.
2. “Confronting Concentrated Poverty in Fresno,” a study by Alan Berube, published by the Brookings Institution in September 2006, and based on census data. This information has been quoted in several news articles in Spanish.
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security Core Base Statistical Area (CBSA).
4. It is important to review statistics on the number of people who have registered to vote during the 2008 electoral process; the local media has made known that the number of people who registered to vote during this time period has increased notably.
5. Strengthening Our Lives (SOL) through Civic Participation is a project funded in part by unions such as Service Employees International Union (SEIU), among others, to promote civic and voting participation.

“FROM HERE ON”

Immigrant participation in the Fresno area has passed through several distinct stages. The sixties marked a transition to the “modern era” of social movements in this country, movements that generated profound changes. Latinos of that era, the “old guard,” were active participants, not only achieving far-reaching victories (for example, electoral redistricting, improvements for farm workers, more work and educational opportunities for Latinos in general, Latino candidates for different government positions, and so on), but also reaffirming the Latino, Hispanic, or Chicano “social persona.” In other words, they strengthened their collective sense of self-respect as a community, like others—especially the African-American—that were relegated to lower levels of the social structure.

These achievements comprise a dividing line, an “up until then” (or a “from here on”) for future generations of activists and organizations that will assume the task of defending the rights of Latino immigrants whose participation in this first era, as we have seen, was surpassed by that of second-generation Hispanics.

That dividing line should be a minimal boundary for tolerance, a point from which immigrants’ demands and claims should grow:

from improvements in salary and the right to unionize to access to education and better social opportunities. Although this generational change began nearly twenty years ago, it has yet to show all of its potential. Thousands of people are still working here without documents, and the polemic appears unchanged: shortage of cheap labor, raids, and an economically and politically marginalized population that as the last resort continues to be the mainstay of the agricultural economy of the valley.

It was only recently, during 2006 and 2007, that the strength of the immigrants and the maturity of several organizations and activists became apparent. However, this is only the beginning, for the task ahead is enormous, and opposing forces are very powerful. The community is fighting not only for immigration reform, but also for more opportunities to prove its creative capacity—because it no longer has to prove its productive capacity. It is in this context that immigrants will achieve even higher levels of integration and political participation in their new society. This optimistic outlook is not utopic, by any means; it is a dream made possible when thousands of immigrants and their families march hand in hand.

APPENDIX I

Historical Milestones

POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS

- 1960 - Mexican American Political Association (MAPA)
- 1965 - First farm workers' strike; the United Farm Workers' union (UFW) is born
- 1970 - El Concilio de Fresno
- 1986 - Asociación Benito Juárez
- 1991 - Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (FIOB), first binational indigenous organization; later the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales
- 2002 - Unión de Exbraceros e Inmigrantes (UNEI)

COALITIONS

- 2000 - Coalición del Valle de San Joaquín por los Derechos de los Inmigrantes
- 2006 - Coalición por los Derechos de los Inmigrantes del Valle Central

COMMITTEES

- 1980 - Latin American Support Committee (LASC)

INITIATIVES

- 1996 - La Asociación de Valle Central para La Ciudadanía

MEDIA

- 1940 - KGST 1600 AM, first Spanish-language radio station
- 1972 - KFTV Channel 21 (Univision), first Spanish-language TV station
- 1976 - Radio Bilingüe, first community radio station (began transmitting in 1980)
- 1983 - Radio Campesina, UFW radio station
- 1986 - *El Sol del Valle*, bilingual newspaper, Sanger
- 1990 - *Vida en el Valle*, bilingual newspaper, Fresno

ELECTED OFFICIALS

- 1971 - Al Villa, first Latino Fresno City Councilmember
- 1972 - Armando Rodríguez, first Latino Supervisor in Fresno County
- 1977 - Víctor López, first Latino mayor of Orange Cove
- 1983 - Arcadio Viveros, Latino mayor of Parlier

EDUCATION

- 1965 - Association of Mexican American Educators (AMAE)
- 1971 - University of Aztlán
- 1972 - El Colegio de la Tierra, later Colegio Popular
- 1979 - Centro de Estudios de la Raza, currently Chicano-Latin American Studies

ARTS AND CULTURE

- 1975 - La Brocha del Valle
- 1984 - Centro Bellas Artes
- 1985 - Arte Américas
- 2000 - First Guelaguetza in Fresno
- 2002 - First Tamejavi Festival

COMMERCE

- 1985 - Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

LEGAL ASSISTANCE

- 1965 - California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA)
- 1972 - Centro La Familia
- 1979 - Fresno chapter of La Raza Lawyers Association

VISITS OF MEXICAN POLITICIANS TO FRESNO

- 1988 - Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, at the MAPA convention
- 1989 - Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas
- 2001 - Vicente Fox

MOBILIZATIONS

- 1988 - Symbolic elections outside the Mexican Consulate in which more than 300 people from different parts of the Valley took part
- 2000 - Meeting of a group of immigrants with Alan Autry, Mayor of Fresno, to protest Autry's statements about immigrants
- 2006 - Protest march against HR 4437; more than 10,000 participants
- 2006 - May 1 rally in front of Fresno City Hall; more than 20,000 participants
- 2007 - Rally and march to demand immigration reform; 5,000 attendees.

RESOLUTIONS

- 1984 - Resolution in which the Fresno police and Fresno County Sheriff's Department agree not to collaborate with the INS
- 2007 - Mendota resolution against ICE raids

UNIONS

- 1987 - More than 700 workers at Zacky Farms plant vote to be part of the United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 126 (UFCW), culminating a long organizing struggle led by Marcelo Salcido and Candelaria Arroyo.

NOTE: This section mentions only some of the historical milestones of the civic and political participation of Mexicans — both immigrants and non-immigrants — in the Fresno and Madera area. This is only a partial list and our intention is that it be added to and corrected by those who participated in these historical events.

APPENDIX II

Project Participants: Roundtable Discussion

NAME	ORGANIZATION
Isela Conchas	Social Worker
Margarita Córdova	Construction Worker
Cresencia Cruz	Culturas Unidas
Alfredo Cuéllar	California State University, Fresno
Rufino Domínguez	CBDIO
Charlie Eaton	SEIU-UHW
Juan Esparza	<i>Vida en el Valle</i>
Luz Estrada	Fresno Interpreting
Vicki Filgas	Pan Valley Institute, AFSC
Sandra Flores	Fresno Regional Foundation
Jonathan A. Fox	UC Santa Cruz
Estela Galván	Pan Valley Institute, AFSC
Larry González	The California Endowment
Noe Hernández	Leaders, Ministers, Pastors—Parlier
Ed Kissam	Aguirre Division, JBS International
Adrián López	Se'e Savi
Filemón López	Radio Bilingüe
Rosa López	Se'e Savi
Víctor López	City de Orange Cove
Oralia Maceda	CBDIO
Alma Martínez	Radio Bilingüe
Myrna Martínez Nateras	Pan Valley Institute, AFSC
Jennifer Meinert	Pan Valley Institute, AFSC
Luis Jovel Meléndez	Fresno Salvadoran Community

NAME

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Blong Xiong

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U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

City of Orange Cove

KFCF/*El Sol del Valle de San Joaquín*

LUPE

Fresno City Councilmember, District 1

INTERVIEWS*Sister Ana María Arreguín Contreras* – Missionary, San Antonio Claret church*Margarita Córdova* – Construction worker*Rufino Domínguez* – Coordinator, Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales*Adrián López* – Se'e Savi*Filemón López* – Radio Bilingüe*Rosa López* – Se'e Savi*Oralia Maceda* – Centro de Desarrollo Binacional Indígena*José Antonio Ramírez* – City Manager, City of Firebaugh*Juan Santiago* – Se'e Savi*Isabel Vásquez* – Member of grassroots groups from the San Antonio Claret church**CREDITS****Working Group:** Rufino Domínguez, Estela Galván, Myrna Martínez Nateras and Eduardo Stanley**Interviews:** Estela Galván and Jennifer Meinert.**Translation:** Lenore Delgado and Jennifer Meinert.**Transcripts:** Jennifer Meinert**Sound Recording:** Tudor Stanley**Research Assistant:** Patshiab Lor**Editing:** Leah Florence, Xóchitl Bada, Myrna Martínez Nateras and Jennifer Meinert

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Prior to becoming Director, she worked as a researcher at the Institute of Research and Social Sciences at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa in Culiacán, Mexico, where she conducted a study on the migration of women to the United States.

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Stanley has reported extensively on immigration issues and on the political participation and civic engagement of Mexican immigrants in the United States. He has also done in-depth reporting on the immigration of indigenous people to the Central Valley.

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