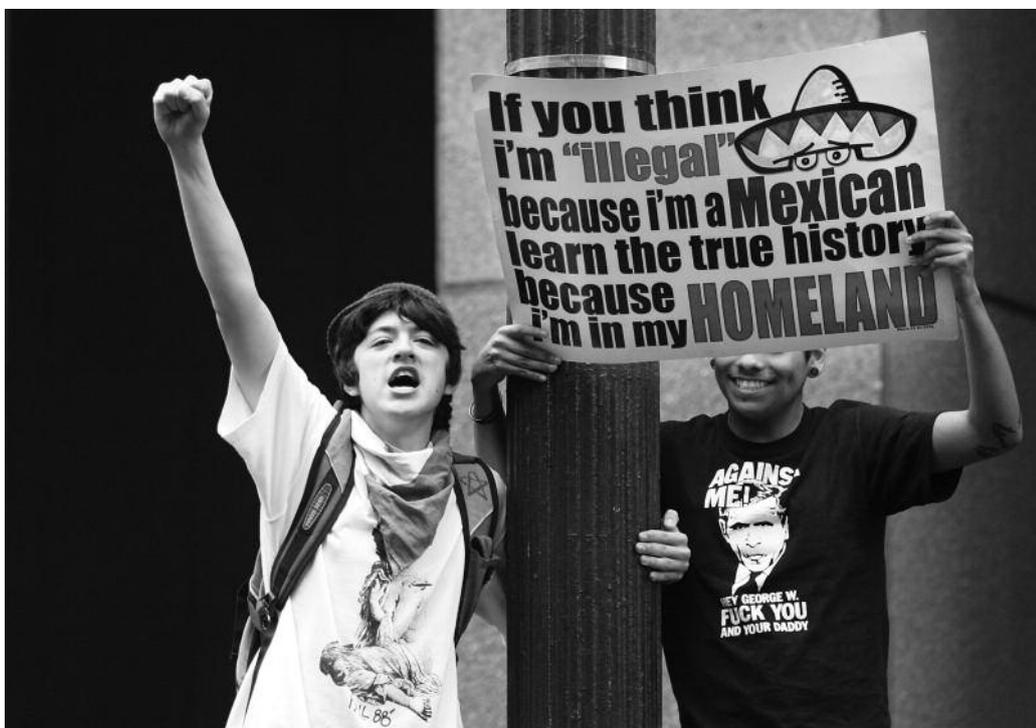


# Mobilizing for Political Power Immigrant Marches and Their Long-term Impacts

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Reuters/Kimberly White

**O**n March 10, 2006, the streets of Chicago filled with peaceful marchers. Estimates of participation in the rally range from 200,000 to over half a million. The mostly Latino demonstrators spoke out against proposed legislation that purported to criminalize undocumented immigrants in the United States. Perhaps even more alarmingly, the bill also threatened to turn anyone who “helped” such migrants into felons, potentially including their own family members, clergy members and social services agencies. Despite the cold weather, entire families turned out for the march. Many people took the day off work or allowed

their children to miss school in order to participate.

The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, known by its number as “HR 4437” or more popularly as the “Sensenbrenner Bill” (after Cong. James Sensenbrenner, its original sponsor), had been approved in the House of Representatives back in December 2005. But it was not until the Senate took up the immigration issue that the potential impact of the House bill became clear to immigrant communities. At that point, fear of a punitive immigration law, combined with anger at the increasingly anti-immigrant rhetoric of elected officials, ignited anxiety in immigrant communities that had been simmering for years.

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Throughout the months of January and February 2006, Latino immigrants and their families were exposed to coverage of the immigration debates in the Senate, as well as analysis of HR 4437 on Spanish-language media. Radio stations were particularly critical in getting the message out to a broad audience and in framing the legislation as an assault on the Latino community. Since the immigration debate received less (and quite different) coverage in the mainstream English media, it appeared to many people that the marches simply sprang up spontaneously. Others suspected that the media, and specifically a few popular radio deejays, had simply whipped their listeners into a frenzy. But the enormous community mobilizations cannot be dismissed so easily. A closer look reveals a complicated picture that some have likened to the “perfect storm” of new actors, new alliances, new and old media and a credible threat that served to bring everyone together.

As marchers filled the streets around the country in March and April, the visual effect was undeniable. In Chicago, waves of marchers stretched for block after block, and the rally site filled to overflowing before the last marchers departed the starting point, more than a mile away. Within two

weeks, a similar outpouring of civic concern took place in Los Angeles, and a tidal wave of pro-immigrant demonstrations rolled across the country. In city after city, town after town, immigrant populations came out, held vigils, marched and otherwise made themselves visible to the general public in unprecedented numbers.

By the time May 1 rolled around, a current of energy surged through immigrant communities and was even felt in home countries. Organizers picked May Day to coincide with international Labor Day, even though this holiday is not celebrated in the United States. In some cities, notably Los Angeles, organizers called for both marches and a general boycott, a “day without immigrants.” In Chicago, organizers called for a massive rally, for which some 700,000 people turned out. In Mexico, television coverage of the events went on all day, and had a parade-like feel.

New messages had also evolved from the first wave of mobilizations. Whereas the March and April events focused on opposition to HR4437, the May 1 rallies called for an immigration reform that would allow those in the United States to legalize their status. “Aquí estamos y no nos vamos” (We’re here, and we’re not going away) chanted marchers in Chicago. Even the symbols changed. Responding to criticism that immigrants were disloyal to their adopted country, marchers replaced Mexican and Central American flags with a sea of red, white and blue. Organizers had also begun to think about next steps: “Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos” (Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote) became a common refrain, and organizations began campaigns to help those with residency permits apply for citizenship, and to register eligible voters.

THE CATALYST: HR4437

The anti-immigrant content and tone of the House bill felt like a slap in the face to immigrants and their families. The bill made an explicit attempt to link the public’s fears of terrorism to anti-immigrant sentiment, a trend that had been gaining steam since September 11, 2001. Back in 2003, Colorado Congressman Tom Tancredo had argued that Mexico should be considered a prime source of terrorists. In an interview with a sympathetic journalist at *Frontpage-mag.com*, the congressman alleged, “There are terror cells in Mexico. We have identified terrorists who have come into the United States through Mexico.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, politicians on both sides of the aisle decided that anti-immigrant rhetoric, couched in the language of “security” or “making America safe” could prove a useful tool to energize voters who were looking for someone to blame for violence and economic insecurity.

Immigrant communities took a few months to grasp the HR4437 threat, but once they did, it provided the spark that ignited popular discontent. As a tangible symbol of racism and xenophobia masquerading as national security issues, the legislation provided a target around which everyone could rally. The media then played a key role in channeling fears of a bad immigration law toward participation in the mass mobilizations. Radio personalities with a national reach such as “El Piolín” and “El Cucuy” in Los Angeles touted the marches relentlessly on the radio, which many immigrants listen to at work and at home. Other local radio deejays worked closely with local organizers to make sure that people were getting a constant stream of information about the purpose and

the logistics of the rallies. In Chicago, local activists appeared dozens of times on radio shows in the days leading up to the March 10 mobilization.

#### THE UNDERLYING ORGANIZING

One of the striking aspects of the mobilizations was the degree of locally-based organizing behind them. The larger national organizations, including labor unions, lagged behind local communities in grasping the urgency and potential of channeling popular unrest into large, visible public actions. In the case of Chicago, the energy for the March 10 rally came from a loose coalition of local activists, Mexican hometown associations and other Latino immigrant-led groups and local churches. By the second rally on May 1, the labor unions had jumped on board and the “March 10 coalition” included a fairly diverse group of immigrant-led organizations (Polish, Arab, Russian, Indian, etc), unions, and more traditional immigrants’ rights activists. But the role of the new actors continued to be critical. In Chicago, the Casa Michoacán, headquarters of the Michoacán Federation in Illinois served as the central organizing hub for both the March 10 and May 1 mobilizations. Hometown associations, acting directly and indirectly through a city-wide Confederation of Mexican Federations in Chicago (Confemex), played important leadership roles in both organizing the marches and in motivating their members to participate.

Given the lack of a national coordinating force, the mobilizations came together in different ways in different cities. An analysis carried out by a consortium of radio stations in the Los

Angeles area concluded that the marches should be attributed to “a broad network of immigrants’ rights activists and organizations community groups, religious groups (Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims), student organizations, labor unions, peace groups, politicians.” The authors concluded that many of the organizers had honed their skills in previous battles at the state level, including the struggle to defeat Proposition 187 in the 1990s. In contrast, many of the Chicago groups were relatively new to political organizing, at least *vis-à-vis* the U.S. government. Confemex, for example, got its start in a battle with the Mexican government over a vehicle tax that targeted migrants returning to Mexico over the Christmas holidays. The confederation used a list of contacts developed through a drive to register Mexican absentee voters as a starting point for organizing its base for the March 10 rally.

In other cities, the mobilizations offered activists their first taste of the potential for Latino immigrant organizing. Marches took place in Atlanta, Houston, Cincinnati and a host of other cities, surpassing records for previous turnouts in almost every case.

#### THE IMPACTS

After the initial euphoria dies down, the inevitable questions arise: What is this new “immigrant movement”? Where is it going and what has happened since? Does it really have the capacity to build political power. To start, it is important to recognize that there was never a single movement. Rather, in different places, different coalitions formed (and un-formed in some cases) according to existing local capacity. These loose

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coalitions proved extremely effective in coalescing the community around a march, but have yet to demonstrate the capacity to drive a coherent longer term agenda.

On the other hand, a number of organizations and alliances have become stronger as a result of their participation and leadership in the mobilizations. The umbrella group of nine hometown federations (and dozens of hometown clubs) in Chicago, Confemex, has come to see advocacy on behalf of immigrants as an important objective of the confederation. At the national level, a relatively new player, the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC), has articulated an advocacy agenda that links immigration reform with calls for more equitable, sustainable development in migrant-sending countries.<sup>3</sup> NALACC saw its members jump into the mobilizations in full force and is attempting to capture some of their momentum in a coordinated advocacy campaign in favor of legalization for undocumented immigrants.

Although the heterogeneity of the organizing behind the community mobilizations makes it difficult to make sweeping statements about impacts, the psychological effect of the marches on immigrants themselves should

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not be underestimated. The mobilizations served both as a visual manifestation of the demographic changes in the United States and as a powerful statement that immigrants are no longer content to remain invisible, toiling in the shadows. Marcia Soto, president of Confemex in Chicago recalls the marches as simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating. She immediately points out that the real challenge lies ahead, as organizations like hers seek to channel the energy from the mobilizations into a sustained advocacy agenda.

#### WHAT IS NEXT?

The spring 2006 immigrant mobilizations pushed the issues surrounding immigrants into the spotlight of political discourse in the United States after nearly a decade of stagnation. The potential to have a healthy dialogue about migrants and the root causes of immigration is a positive step, but progress in that direction has been slow at best. Although the Senate did not pass punitive legislation along the lines of HR4437, its version of an immigration reform bill included a complicated set of tiers of eligibility for residency or guest worker permits, as well as a number of the security measures in the

House bill. For many immigrant organizations, even the improved Senate version left much to be desired. Activists feared that even the weak provisions for legalization might be stripped out in the reconciliation committee that was charged with creating a consensus version of the House and Senate legislation.

As the mid-term elections drew nearer, the issue became too hot to handle and the reconciliation committee dragged its feet until the end of the session. The Senate did approve an appropriations measure that would fund the construction of a wall along the border between the United States and Mexico. This was one of the most controversial components of the original House bill, and one that Mexicans found particularly galling. The vote for the wall crossed party lines, with many Democratic Senators voting in favor of the measure on “security” grounds.

This bipartisan approach to immigrant bashing carried over into the electoral campaigns, with candidates from both parties seeking to make hay with working class voters by professing a “tough-on-immigration” stance. Some candidates did attempt to steer the discussion into an analysis of trade policies and other policy drivers of both migration and working-class economic insecurity, but these were relatively isolated cases. Nevertheless, Latino voters did shift significantly toward Democrats as compared to previous years. This trend may have marked a reaction against perceived Republican antipathy toward immigrants rather than a true vote of confidence for the Democrats. Some Republican analysts perceived this risk. In an interview with the *Washington Monthly* just days before the elections, Republican Congress-

man Dick Armey expressed concern about the electoral impacts of HR 4437 and the immoderate tone of some Republicans on the issue of immigration. “A lot of Hispanics around the country are taking this very personally,” said Armey. “They’re saying, ‘The problem with Republicans is that they just don’t like us.’”

It is tempting to look to the midterm elections in November as a test of the strength of immigrant organizing, but it is too soon to tell. The election does offer some interesting trends to analyze, but it remains to be seen whether immigrant organizations and their allies will manage to construct durable political power in the wake of the 2006 mobilizations. Anecdotally, organizations reported increases in voter turnout in areas where get-out-the-vote activity was particularly strong, but Latino voting rates are still abysmally low.

The catchy slogan “Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos” has a feel-good ring, but turns out to be hard to put in practice and nearly impossible on a six-month time frame. Among other challenges, immigrant organizations are discovering that voting is just one element of the puzzle in terms of building power. In order to make progress on the range of issues that affect immigrants and their families, communities will need to get involved in state and local political activism, and nurture new political leaders who can break out of the silo of nationalistic approaches to migration and begin to see the issue in its regional and global complexity. A great deal of voter education will also be needed, above and beyond more mechanical campaigns to register and get out the vote. Immigrant leaders will need to strengthen their own organizations and work together more effec-

tively to press for change. Most immigrant-led organizations are chronically under-funded, and many rely on an all-volunteer work force that makes it difficult for them to nurture a professional leadership cadre.

Shaping media messages poses another critical challenge. Although the Spanish-language media played a positive role in the marches, much of the media messaging in the mainstream press continues to portray immigrants as law-breakers and potential threats. Finally, immigrants need to use the experience of unity in the marches to reach out to allies and potential allies at the local level. Building mutually supportive relationships with African-American communities will be a particularly important step in the right direction. The reality is that many people in the United States, particularly working people, are feeling a great deal of anxiety

about their economic future. Immigrants have become a handy scapegoat for the ills of globalization. Immigrant organizations will need to break through this barrier and push past racial prejudice to find common cause with other communities.

Still, there are some positive signs. NALACC members wasted no time after the 2006 elections before calling on Congress to take a new approach to immigration reform focusing on permanent residency and uniting families. Around the country, local efforts to register voters and educate them about immigrants' concerns continue to gain momentum. Immigrant communities have already proven their ability to mobilize millions of people, but over the longer term they will also need to mobilize and sustain both the organizational and financial resources necessary to keep up the pressure in Washington. **NM**

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Enlaces América is a project of the Heartland Alliance in Chicago that serves as a resource center for immigrant-led organizations as they develop strategies for transnational civic participation and political engagement.
- <sup>2</sup> Paula Kaufman, "The High Cost of Immigration," *Insight* <www.Frontpagemag.org>, August 12, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> NALACC is a network of approximately 75 community-based organizations led by Latin American and Caribbean immigrants throughout the United States. NALACC member organizations are working to improve quality of life in their communities, both in the United States and in countries of origin. This network seeks to build transnational leadership capacity and increase immigrant civic participation, so that immigrants can advocate effectively for public policies that address the root causes of migration, as well as dealing with the challenges faced by immigrants in the United States. To date, this latter work has focused on efforts to reform U.S. immigration policies to make them more humane and effective. Over time, NALACC aspires to become a nationally and internationally known voice of organized Latino and Caribbean immigrant communities in the U.S. In particular, NALACC hopes to become an entity recognized for its ability to articulate the challenges faced by transnational immigrant communities, as well as viable solutions to those challenges. (See www.nalacc.org)



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