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Migrant Civic Engagement

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Migrant Civic Engagement

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The spring, 2006 wave of immigrant rights mobilizations represents a watershed in the history of civic engagement in the US. Never before had so many foreign born literally “come out” for the right to be included in the US. Indeed, in many cities, never before had so many taken to the streets for *any* cause. Practitioners involved in the policy debate, scholars who measure immigrant political opinion, as well as migrant leaders themselves were all caught off guard. This raises questions about the social foundations of the marches – what kinds of social and civic practices, networks and organizations made them possible?

To provide at least part of the answer, this chapter introduces the concepts of “civic binationality” and “migrant civil society,” which provide frameworks for understanding the already-existing patterns of migrant organization that came together at this unusual historical turning point. “Civic binationality” refers to practices that are engaged both with US civic life and with migrants’ communities and countries of origin. The related concept of “migrant civil society” refers to migrant-led membership organizations and public institutions (which may not be engaged with communities of origin). The goal of this latter concept is to underscore the significance of migrant capacity for self-representation.

The recognition of practices of migrant civic binationality, grounded in an emerging migrant civil society, helps us to understand the patterns of civic engagement and repertoires of action that inform migrant participation in US society. The point of departure here is that, at least for many adult migrants, their initiation into civic life either takes place in their country of origin, or is oriented toward their country of origin. As many analysts of civic engagement have long noted, the best predictor of civic involvement of any kind is past involvement – even if in a completely different arena. ¹ Apparently, some people are more likely to be joiners than others – across cultures. From this perspective, the kind of civic engagement witnessed on a mass scale in the spring of 2006 was in part grounded in longstanding, often low profile practices of migrant civic binationality. At the same time, the 2006 marches constitute a powerful indicator that millions of immigrants have also been fully transplanted into the US public sphere, followed by subsequent increases in naturalization and voter turnout among “new Americans” in 2008.

Civic binationality

The spring, 2006 marches revealed a process that has been taking place often silently but consistently: the emergence of Latin American migrants as actors in American civic and political life. They have done so by creating new migrant-led organizations, such as hometown associations, non-profits, faith-based organizations, indigenous right groups, community media and their own workers’ organizations -- *as well as* by joining existing US organizations, such as community associations, churches, unions, business associations, civil rights organizations, and media groups (Bada, Fox and Selee, 2006, Fox, 2005b, 2007). In the process, they are transforming these US institutions, as other immigrant groups have done throughout American history.

At the same time, many Latin American migrants also remain simultaneously engaged as part of their national societies. As we know, some migrants remain civically engaged with their home communities, a process that scholars describe as “translocal” engagement.² Many tens of thousands of *paisanos* work together to promote “philanthropy from below,” by funding thousands of hometown development initiatives.³ In addition, through their consulates, Mexican migrants elected representatives to their home government’s Advisory Council for the Institute of Mexicans in the Exterior, to provide input into the policy process.⁴ For the first time, Mexican migrants also exercised their newly-won right to cast absentee ballots in the 2006 presidential election (and for the first time in a governor’s race in the state of Michoacán in 2007). Other Mexican migrants have become more engaged with their US communities, working with the PTA, faith-based initiatives, neighborhood organizations, trade unions, canvassing and other efforts in support of candidates for election for school boards and city councils.⁵ Until recently, many assumed that this question of whether to be involved here or there was inherently dichotomous. Yet in practice, many Mexican migrants are becoming full members of *both* US and Mexican societies at the same time, constructing practices of what we could call “*civic binationality*” that have a great deal to teach us about new forms of immigrant integration into the US.⁶

Yet some scholars and opinion-makers firmly believe that having more than one civic identity is inherently contradictory. In contrast to the “civic binationality” approach, their assumption is that civic engagement is *zero-sum* – and therefore civic binationality is seen as illegitimate, analogous to bigamy. For example, Samuel Huntington does not deny that second-generation Mexican immigrants learn English (2004). Indeed, the empirical evidence is overwhelming.⁷ In his view, the problem is that many of them continue to *also* speak Spanish. In his view, the threat to the US social fabric is not the lack of English acquisition, it is bilingualism. In this view, the question is not whether or not migrants can and do identify with more than one country and language, the issue is that binationalism or biculturalism are seen as evidence of divided loyalties and therefore such civic identities are a potential threat.⁸ Indeed, Huntington is much more concerned about legal than he is about illegal immigration, since legal immigrants can become citizens and therefore can be politically enfranchised. In contrast to other restrictionists, who primarily deploy the “rule of law” argument, Huntington’s main concern is about democracy: what will happen when the number of bilingual *citizens* grows? Curiously, *democracy* does not figure in his list of the ostensible core characteristics of the American “creed.”

In contrast to this ideologically-driven claim, the empirical evidence shows that, rather than producing a contradiction of divided loyalties, migrants’ dual commitments tend to be mutually reinforcing. Specifically, for many Mexican migrant organizations, efforts to help their hometowns in Mexico often *lead* to engagement in U.S. society through similar civic and political efforts in their new hometowns in the United States (e.g., de la Garza and Hazan, 2003). As a result, generalizations based on migrants’ initial priorities and activities in the 1980s and 1990s, when many *were* more “inward-looking,” focused more exclusively on their home communities (e.g., Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004) - do not necessarily apply to the early 21st century, when many more engage actively with a wide range of US civil society actors and elected officials. By the turn of the century, many Latin American migrant organizations pursued two-track strategies, sustaining their commitments to their communities of origin while working to improve their home communities in the United States. This is the kind of dual engagement that can be understood in terms of practices of “civic binationality.”

While many anthropologists and sociologists have documented the contours and processes of binationality, often through ethnographic methods and the conceptual lens of transnational communities, other scholars use large-scale survey research methods to assess the breadth and intensity of migrants’ transnational activities and commitments.⁹ Based on the findings from a 2006 Pew Hispanic Center telephone survey of 2,000 Latinos, including more than 1,400 foreign born, Waldinger posited that those who participate in three different activities can be considered those who are “highly attached to their country of origin,” involving weekly phone calls, sending remittances and return travel in the previous

two years (2007). Only one in ten immigrants surveyed reported engaging in all three activities.¹⁰ A strong majority of 63% showed “moderate attachment,” by engaging in one or two of those three activities (more prominently among those who have been in the US for less than a decade). Yet 28% of the foreign born reported not being involved in any of these activities. This finding should give pause to those who would make broad generalizations based on research that concentrates on the transnational commitments of a minority of the immigrant community. Indeed, active binational practices appear to be most widespread among community leaders, established business leaders, organic intellectuals and educators – especially those with the formal immigration status and economic means needed for easy cross-border travel.¹¹ Many hometown association members, and certainly leaders, either managed to join the middle class in the US, or were previously members of the politically engaged middle class in Mexico. They are also disproportionately male, and tend to be either permanent residents or naturalized citizens. Their pre-migration civic roots are only recently receiving more systematic research attention. For example, most migrant leaders from Oaxaca and Puebla had previously been active in Mexico’s teachers’ movement and were political active in their communities of origin prior to their migration, and they continue to be active in California (Franzoni Lobo, 2007, Rosas-López, 2007).

The same Pew Hispanic Center survey also documented rates of involvement in immigrant civic and social organizations: Overall, “only 9% report belonging to a civic organization, social club or sports team of people from their native land” (Waldinger, 2007: 10). Among more recent arrivals, the rate rises to 12%. Reported participation also varies significantly by national origin, with one in five Dominicans reporting involvement with immigrant civic or social organizations, 14% among Salvadorans, 12% among Colombians, falling to 6% for Mexicans. Whether these rates are considered high or low would depend on the comparative frame of reference. For example, to assess the 6% rate for Mexicans, one would need to compare that to participation rates in Mexico, for people of similar socio-economic status.¹² Yet this otherwise comprehensive survey did not assess the question of whether cross-border and US-oriented repertoires of participation are mutually reinforcing or mutually exclusive, since it did not address participation in US-oriented kinds of organizations, such as faith-based civic or social organizations, PTAs, or union locals.

Another recent survey supports the view that US-oriented and homeland-oriented civic engagement can be mutually reinforcing. In their analysis of a panel survey of Mexico-to-U.S. migrants who were interviewed in the United States in advance of the July 2, 2006 Mexican presidential election, and again following the U.S. midterm elections in November of the same year, McCann, Cornelius, and Leal find that there is a positive and highly significant correlation between engagement in the public affairs of Mexico and of the U.S. (2007).¹³

Civic binationality increasingly involves engagement with US elected officials and elections, notably in southern California, where hometown federations worked closely with Latino civil rights groups and immigrant worker-based trade unions to campaign for voter registration and for state legislation on drivers’ licenses. For years before the marches, for example, Los Angeles labor unions worked to promote civic engagement among their vast immigrant membership, including non-citizen campaigning for higher rates of citizen voting and the national Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride in 2003 (Jamison 2005, Milkman, this volume, Varsanyi, 2005). For another example, Mexicans for Political Progress in Chicago was recently created as a direct result of hometown association interest in U.S. electoral politics. In June of 2006 —as a direct consequence of HTA participation in the spring marches — a group of Chicago-based hometown association leaders decided to form a non-partisan Political Action Committee (PAC) with the goal of supporting candidates for state and local office who commit to address the agenda and demands of Mexican immigrants. Moreover, they registered 150 volunteers to participate in voter registration, canvassing, and logistical support on Election Day (Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois 2007). The group hosted gatherings in Chicago’s Casa Michoacán to watch the U.S. Democratic presidential debates in order to analyze which candidate was the most committed to defending immigrant

rights (Mexicanos for Political Progress 2007). A survey by the Institute for Latino Studies of the University of Notre Dame sheds additional light on this dynamic. Their 2003 face-to-face survey of 1,512 foreign-born and US Latinos in Chicago metropolitan area found that 6 percent of foreign-born Latinos belong to hometown associations. In addition, however, the findings suggest that membership in binational community organizations does not lower the probability of being civically engaged in local US community groups. The authors find that “70 percent of members of hometown associations belong to at least four additional Chicago-based community organizations...[and] foreign-born Latinos are much more likely to belong to a community or civic organization than are the US born; 53 percent of the foreign born belong to one or more community or civic organizations compared to only 37 percent of the US born” (Ready, Knight, and Chun 2006:3). In other words, joiners tend to join *both* US-oriented and cross-border organizations.

Nevertheless, there still appears to be a disconnection between reported rates of participation in home country-oriented organizations and the massive turnout for the immigrant rights marches. Overall, the scope of pre-2006 cross-border civic or political engagement does not come close to accounting for the scale of mass participation in the 2006 marches. The Pew Hispanic Center survey strongly supports the view that most Latin American migrants see their future in the US, which is quite consistent with the massive turnout in the streets in the spring of 2006 (Waldinger, 2007). Another comparative reference point is to look at the turnout of Mexican migrants in the 2006 presidential elections, in which for the first time they were permitted to cast absentee ballots. The low turnout was a major surprise to voting rights advocates, who had campaigned for a decade to encourage the government to carry out a commitment made in principle in a 1996 constitutional reform.¹⁴ Previous large-scale surveys of relatively recent migrants had reported high levels of interest in the Mexican elections (Pew, 2006). It is certainly true that the administrative obstacles to voting were significant. In the end, of the approximately 4 million people the Mexican government estimated were eligible to vote, just under 33,000 Mexican in the US managed to cast valid ballots (IFE, 2006). Similarly, in the precedent-setting migrant vote in Michoacán governor’s election of November, 2007, less than 1,000 had tried to register by the July deadline.

While voting rights advocates plan to campaign for more accessible voting procedures in the future, recent survey evidence suggests that approximately four or five out of ten Mexican migrants

“...would likely be out of reach, regardless of the procedures established for future absentee voting. This would be true not only because they live in out-of-the-way locations like north-central Indiana, but because they pay practically no attention to affairs south of the border. Yet this still leaves a vast amount of transnational “civic potential” (McCann, Cornelius and Leal, 2006).

Indeed, few national experiences with new processes for diasporic voting have led to much higher participation rates, and future patterns remain to be seen. Yet even taking into account all of the obstacles, however, the number of migrants who voted by absentee ballot was still remarkably small, especially when one takes into account Mexico’s difficult transition to a competitive electoral system. Recall that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several hundred Mexicans were killed in campaigns for electoral democracy. In summary, the contrast between the low turnout in Mexico’s long-distance voting and with the scale of the spring, 2006 protests, suggests that many more migrants have entered the public sphere in the US than have sustained homeward-looking civic engagement.¹⁵

Migrant civil society¹⁶

While “civic binationality” is a relevant concept for understanding participation trends among core groups of migrant “joiners,” other approaches are needed to explain why such a vast number of migrants who are usually non-participants chose to engage in coordinated collective action in the spring of 2006. Another reason why the concept of “civic binationality” is not sufficient to capture the full range of migrant collective action is that their engagement often takes forms that are not binational; many migrants

who are engaged in civic life focus primarily on US issues and organizations. Yet, it can be difficult to recognize and analyze the dynamics that are specific to migrant collective action when the foreign-born are subsumed into US ethnic and racial categories. One way to address this issue is to look at patterns of migrant collective action through the conceptual lens of “migrant civil society.”

Simply put, migrant civil society refers to *migrant-led membership organizations and public institutions*. This includes four very tangible arenas of collective action: membership organizations, non-governmental organizations, media, and autonomous public spheres. They may organize around their identities as workers, their neighborhoods of residence, their community of origin, their ethnicity or their faith. Sometimes, these potentially multiple identities overlap, as in the cases of specifically Oaxacan Catholics who reproduce their distinctive public rituals in Los Angeles or religious farm-workers in the mid-west, where union leaders preside over weddings and baptisms. In terms of the concerns of this volume, when reflecting on what was new and different about the marches, one of the most important factors was the exercise of migrant civic and political leadership. Migrants were representing *themselves*, rather than having advocates speak for them. This emphasis on self-representation makes the notion of migrant civil society distinct from (though often overlapping with) broader US Latino civil society. The rationale for this concept is that it helps to see where and how migrants exercise leadership in US-based organizations and institutions, which in turn draws our attention to processes of immigrant integration that are otherwise not visible.

The first of these four arenas, involving migrant membership organizations, includes both those that are home country-oriented and those that are engaged primarily with US issues. The first includes hometown clubs and federations, indigenous rights groups and expatriate voting rights advocacy networks. Migrant-led membership organizations also include faith-based organizations, parent-teacher associations, majority-migrant trade union locals, worker centers, as well as broad-based community-based organizations, such as those networked through the Industrial Areas Foundation.¹⁷ Hometown associations (HTAs) are among the best-known, bringing migrants together from shared communities of origin. They represent the “paradigm case” of civic binationality. Hometown clubs often begin as informal associations, such as soccer clubs, but over time many have not only become formal organizations, they have also “scaled up” to form federations that represent communities of origin from the same “sending” state. Though many have rural origins, HTAs are predominantly concentrated in metropolitan areas in the US.¹⁸ Among Latin American migrants, Mexican and Salvadorans have focused the most on coming together around these territorially-based collective identities. Together, they involve the active participation of many tens of thousands of migrants who are sufficiently well-established in their US lives to participate in regular meetings, fund-raising and civic activities in support of cross-border “philanthropy from below.”¹⁹

Until recently, these forms of self-organization were largely invisible outside the migrant community – and were primarily engaged with their communities of origin, rather than with their communities of residence. Increasingly, however, over the past decade, HTAs have become more involved with civic life in the US, and they were among the many previously-invisible forms of organization that “came out” in the spring, 2006 marches. Indeed, the three states that experienced the largest turnouts in the spring, 2006 marches, by far – California, Texas, and Illinois -- are also the three states that together account for the vast majority of Mexican HTAs in the US and Canada: 69% of those registered with the Mexican consulates (See Chart One and the introduction to this volume). The concentration of the HTA repertoire of civic action in Chicago, Los Angeles and Dallas is clearly disproportionate to their share of the Mexican-born population overall. Notably, in these cities, hundreds of HTAs have taken the civic binationality path. By 2006, at least in Chicago and Los Angeles, their HTAs and their federations were fully engaged with both their respective city halls and with their state legislatures – not to mention with trade unions and mainstream Latino civic organizations.

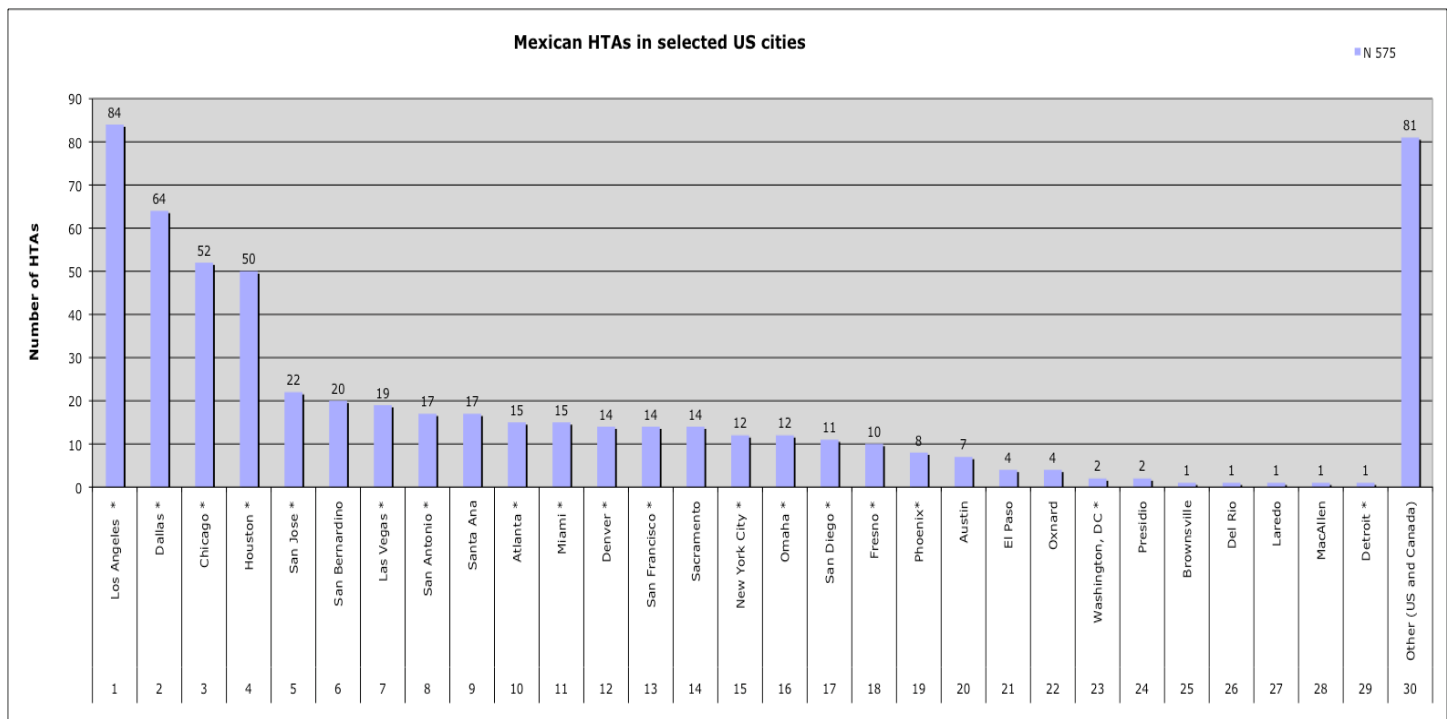


Chart One:

Source: Authors' elaboration using the Directory of Mexican Organizations, 2008. <http://www.ime.gob.mx>

- Cities with large marches

In Chicago, Mexican HTAs had a long history of focusing their efforts on campaigning for the right to vote absentee in Mexican elections. Just as they were confronting the many practical obstacles imposed by the Mexican government's administrative requirements of the "remote vote," the Sensenbrenner bill emerged as the number one threat to immigrant rights. In response, Chicago's HTAs redirected the momentum generated by their home country right-to-vote campaign and began to focus their meetings at Casa Michoacán on discussing strategies to challenge the Sensenbrenner bill. Their simultaneous engagement with issues of representation in policy processes *both* in Mexico *and* in Chicago offers supporting evidence for McCann et al's survey-based observation that there is a positive and highly significant correlation between migrant engagement in the public affairs of Mexico and of the U.S. (2006.)

In January of 2006, Mexican HTAs and its large umbrella confederation (CONFEMEX) joined with labor unions, radio personalities, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Catholic Campaign for Social Justice, religious congregations, and traditional Latino organizations to call for a March 10 rally to demand dignity and respect for undocumented workers.²⁰ For many HTAs, their direct involvement in the organization of immigrant rights marches in 2006 was a new development. For most of them, public protest had not previously been part of their repertoire (even though their leadership included migrants who were also labor organizers) In the March 10th demonstration, some leaders participated in the organizing committee sharing the podium as formal speakers during the rally and rubbing elbows with local politicians, long-established Latino activists, and migrant leaders from different nationalities.²¹

With more than 100,000 in the streets, Chicago's March 10 protest was the second major march of the spring, 2006 cycle of mobilization and by far the largest up to that point (Ávila and Olivo, 2006; Bada, Fox and Selee, 2006). Encouraged by the turnout, some Latino labor coalitions and immigrant-led labor organizations decided to hold their planning meetings for the May 1 protest at Casa Michoacán -- the headquarters of the Illinois Federation of Michoacán HTAs and Chicago's flagship public space for Mexican civic binationality. In addition, the March 10th movement leadership quickly understood that their demands needed the support of other minorities.

The first planning meetings to organize the marches were almost entirely in Spanish. But in a creative and sophisticated adjustment, immigrants from Ireland, Poland, Pakistan, Cambodia and elsewhere were able to access simultaneous English translations through special headsets (Ávila and Martínez, 2006). The HTAs were even able to obtain moral support from African-American organizations such as the Rainbow/Push Coalition²² and some sectors of the Chicago Muslim community (Konkol, 2006). At one of the organizing meetings for Chicago's May 1st Marchat Casa Michoacán in Pilsen, Jesse Jackson said: "There is real fear among blacks about the loss of jobs. But it's not because of the undocumented workers that are the cause. It's cheaper wage jobs" (Cited in Konkol, 2006:48). He further said that the struggle for decent paying also has to do with the exodus of manufacturing jobs that are being exported overseas to avoid labor rights and living wages (Ayi, 2006; Konkol, 2006). The African-American turnout in the May 1st march was modest but inspiring. According to the only large-scale survey of marchers carried out during the entire spring, 2006 cycle of mobilization, conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois in Chicago, an estimated 3% of the May 1st marchers in Chicago downtown were African-American (Pallares and Flores-González, Forthcoming) Among the most visible organized groups with large African-American constituents were community-based organizations such as ACORN and STOP (Student/Tenant Organizing Project) (Ginsberg-Jaeckle, 2006).

After the marches, many HTAs along with other migrant-led organizations added a new focus to their advocacy efforts: working to encourage higher rates of naturalization among the large permanent resident population, as well as increased Latino electoral participation. In the case of Chicago, CONFEMEX participated in the New Americans Initiative, a state government-sponsored campaign to promote citizenship among legal permanent residents.²³ In the 2008 presidential elections, CONFEMEX registered voters and promoted turnout in the city's collar counties, which had transformed from white Republican strongholds to multicultural immigrant communities within just a few years. These electoral mobilization strategies did not have the same visibility as the marches; but their ultimate goal was to follow up on one of the marches' central slogans: "*Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos.*"

Across the United States, Mexican immigrants have not only come together based on their shared home communities; others have come together around collective identities grounded in their spirituality or their ethnicity. The case of New York's Tepeyac Association is a high profile model of binational faith-based immigrant community organizing. Each October, Tepeyac organizes the AntorchaGuadalupana, a two-month relay race from the Mexico City's Basílica de Guadalupe to Manhattan's Saint Patrick's Cathedral. On their way north, the runners cross numerous states in Mexico and the US, demanding social justice for immigrants and a new legalization program for undocumented workers (e.g., Rivera-Sánchez, 2004).

In addition, the distinct experiences of indigenous Mexicans have grounded ethnically-based membership and advocacy organizations, most notably in California. At least one in ten Mexicans is of indigenous origin, and they represent a growing share of the migrant population in the US as well. While some seek to evade discrimination by eliding ethnic difference, others bring politicized ethnic identities with them, or their experience of racialization as migrants in northern Mexico and the US politicizes their ethnicity.

The most prominent Mexican indigenous organization in the US is the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations, formerly the Oaxacan Binational Indigenous Front and still known as the FIOB (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Fox, 2006). This membership organization is both binational and pan-ethnic, with five Mexican languages spoken among its elected leadership council. In California, the FIOB works in diverse coalitions, advocating both for immigrant rights and for indigenous rights, both in the US and in Mexico – where the FIOB plays a pioneering role in speaking out against abuses of Central Americans in transit. In Los Angeles, for example, the FIOB works closely with the broad-based Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, as well as many of the Mexican federations of hometown associations. In several regions of California, the FIOB works closely with the flagship immigrant rights defenders of California Rural Legal Assistance. In Fresno, the FIOB played a leading role in convening that city's

spring, 2006 march, which drew by far the largest protest turnout ever (e.g., Martínez Nateras and Stanley, 2009).

The second arena of migrant civil society involves migrant-led media. Nonprofit media range from local and binational newspapers to radio networks and programs, independent video and now numerous internet discussion forums oriented to hometowns or regions. Beyond the nonprofit media lies the huge world of commercial Spanish language media. Though for-profit enterprises fall outside of most definitions of civil society, these media nevertheless play key civic roles, not only informing their publics, but also encouraging public service. Spanish language media have systematically encouraged both US citizenship and voter turnout (Rodríguez, 1999, 2005).

The civic role of Spanish language media personalities has yet to be fully documented, but was quite significant even before their widely-recognized role in the mass mobilization of the spring of 2006. (e.g. Ramírez, this volume) Again, it probably is no coincidence that Los Angeles and Chicago are both major centers of national Spanish-language media and they experienced the largest marches in 2006. The experience of Chicago radio talk show host “El Pistolero” is especially important, since that city was the first of the spring 2006 protest wave to experience a truly enormous immigrant march. When later interviewed in English on National Public Radio, “El Pistolero” revealed the relevance of his own family’s Mexican political history for understanding his current civic commitments to immigrant rights:

I grew up in a very active, pro-immigrant valley, I come from Fresno, California, the Central Valley, and to be honest, I lost my father in Mexico and that’s how I ended up in Central California, because my father was in politics in Mexico and he lost his life because of it. And I’ve always promised myself that I would never get into politics. But you know, you hear the call and it is the moral responsibility when you’re behind a microphone, not just to entertain people, but to inform people of what’s going on around their lives (cited in Block, 2006).

Indeed, El Pistolero’s experience indicates that, at least in Chicago, migrant-led media and religious leaders were more significant than the HTAs in building the momentum prior to the spring, 2006 marches. He led, together with Marco Cárdenas, a priest at Our Lady of Fátima Church, a July, 2005 mobilization in Chicago’s Mexican neighborhoods of Pilsen and Little Village to protest the actions of local Minutemen, foreshadowing the central role that migrant media and religious leaders would later play nation-wide. The march attracted tens of thousands of protesters and was the first organized attempt to gain momentum to promote a legalization campaign after the tragic events of September 11. The HTAs did not participate in this action, arguing that the march was not going to be covered by the media if it was convened by two people and was not going to be held downtown. Clearly, they did not anticipate that so many would turn out, that Congressman Luis Gutiérrez would join the march, nor that Senator Ed Kennedy would call organizers to offer his support to the cause. (Martínez and Piña 2005).

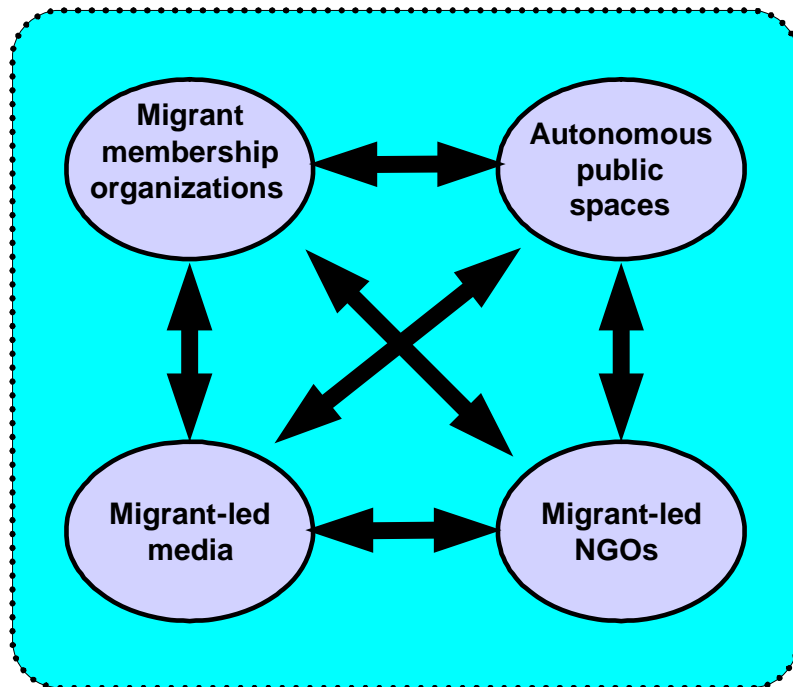
The third arena constituting migrant civil society involves non-governmental organizations. Many nonprofits *serve* migrant communities, but in this approach only those that are *migrant-led* would be considered part of migrant civil society. Here one must keep in mind the clear distinction between nonprofits or NGOs and membership organizations – a distinction that is side-stepped by the fuzzy US term “community-based organization.” While many US community development organizations appear to be quintessentially US Latino nonprofits, an uncounted number are in fact migrant-led, as in the cases of Fresno’s Binational Center for Oaxacan Indigenous Development, or Little Village Community Development Corporation (an affiliate of the National Council of La Raza). This Chicago nonprofit is led by a pioneer of civic binationality, Jesús García -- a Mexican immigrant who is also both a former Illinois elected official and a founder of a Chicago-based home state-oriented organization, Durango Unido (Bada, Fox and Selee, 2006).

The fourth arena involves autonomous public spheres, which refer to large migrant-led gatherings where *paisanos* can come together to interact and to express themselves with relative freedom and autonomy, whether around culture, religion, sports or recreation. For example, in California, indigenous Oaxacan migrants now organize huge annual music, dance and food festivals known as Guelaguetzas. They are the embodiment of the imagined cultural and civic space known as “*Oaxacalifornia*” (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004). Specifically Oaxacan migrant civil society in California is now sufficiently dense that migrants put on at least seven *different* Guelaguetza festivals each year. They are held in parks, high school auditoriums, college campuses, civic centers and the largest is held in the LA Sports Arena – the former home of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team. In each one, hundreds volunteer their time so that thousands can come together, and parents can share their culture with their children. Indeed, probably few had had the opportunity to see such a festival when they were living in Oaxaca – in part because the official Guelaguetza is Oaxaca’s peak official tourist event, with ticket prices to match. With so much activity, California’s multi-generational Oaxacan migrant dance groups are in high demand, and they represent yet another network of membership organizations. Each of the seven annual festivals reveals an x-ray of the social networks and organizational styles of the different strands of the web of Oaxacan civil society in California. Most Guelaguetza festival conveners work with local US politicians, school districts and student organizations in their cities of residence. Some also collaborate with the Oaxacan state government, while others keep their distance.

Figure One’s conceptual diagram attempts to capture some of the dynamics underlying the role of migrant civil society in the marches, stressing the mutually-reinforcing synergy between these four arenas. In this view, the marches were grounded by a remarkable “virtuous circle” of mutual support between membership organizations, nonprofit support organizations and the Spanish language media, which in turn permit the construction of autonomous public spheres – in this case throughout the streets of US cities.

Figure 1.

Migrant civil society : Pathways of synergy



Source: Fox (2007). Thanks to Michael Fox for graphic assistance

When seen in the light of the increased Latino voter turnout in the 2008 presidential elections, the slogan “Today we march, tomorrow we vote” does indeed appear prescient. At the time, it was not clear whether those words constituted a prediction, a threat, or wishful thinking. Though the response to calls for street marches in 2007 and 2008 went largely unheeded, it appears that many key immigrant rights activists had reoriented their mobilization to promote electoral engagement. Naturalization rates for Mexican permanent residents had already been on a steady rise since the late 1990s in the aftermath of the 1996 tightening of immigration laws, and they appear to have increased substantially since 2006 (Passell, 2007). The total number of citizenship applications doubled in the year ending Sept. 30, 2007, compared to the previous year, reaching 1.4 million (Preston, 2007). In addition to the mobilization against the Sensenbrenner bill, the government’s doubling of application fees also caught the attention of many permanent residents. Major Latino institutions, like Univision and the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, led their most successful citizenship and voter turnout efforts ever, under the catchy slogan “Now is the time” (Ayón, 2009). In the 2008 elections, the Latino vote reached 9% of the electorate, its highest share ever, and made a difference in swing states such as Florida, Nevada, and Colorado to an unprecedented degree (Lopez, 2008). Thanks to competitive primary elections, the presidential race even provoked intense Latino voter mobilization in California, which otherwise would have not been considered “in play.”

Latinos voted Democratic by 67 to 31% in 2008, in sharp contrast to their 40-44% support for Bush in 2004 (Lopez, 2008). Specifically Spanish-dominant Latinos, which had supported Kerry over Bush only by 52-48% in 2004, reportedly went 75-25% for Obama in 2008 (Sharry, 2008). Remarkably, Latinos surveyed were hopeful looking forward. In January, 2009, more than seven-in-ten (72%) reported that they expected Obama to have a successful first term (Lopez and Livingston, 2009). Whether this civic optimism will persist in spite of the deepening economic crisis and uncertainty as to whether the Obama administration would pursue a comprehensive immigration reform remains to be seen.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, extensive prior practices of civic binationality and the emerging institutions of migrant civil society both help to account for the remarkable “civicness” of the spring, 2006 mobilizations. Millions of people, with little organized direction, followed a shared protest repertoire, very much operating within the conventional terms of engagement of US civil society. Millions stayed remarkably “on message,” displaying US flags in large numbers for the first time, wearing white, systematically avoiding violence or destruction of property, building coalitions across sectors and ethnic groups, creating new public spaces and leaving them clean when they were done.²⁴ Virtually no arrests were reported, which made the protests more peaceful than many large sporting events.²⁵

In retrospect, it would be easy to take this “civicness” for granted. Yet a historical and comparative perspective suggests that this would be a mistake. Consider the violent protests in France, primarily by second-generation immigrant youth. They erupted just a few months before the US protest wave, during the fall of 2005. During three weeks of nationwide rioting, more than 2,900 people were arrested and 9,000 cars were burned (Caldwell, 2007). The US media did not begin to cover the events until the weekly numbers of car burnings was in the hundreds. Yet in the spring of 2006, had a *single* car been burned by immigrant protesters in the US, one can be sure that the televised image would have been repeated so many times on Fox News, that viewers would have gotten the impression that hundreds of cars were burned.

More recently, following the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric in the broadcast media and in the 2008 Republican presidential primary campaign – arguably a backlash in response to the 2006 marches -- a major pundit warned for the first time of a backlash against the backlash. Indeed, influential Miami

Herald commentator Andres Oppenheimer warned darkly of a potential looming “Latino intifada” (2007). He argued that, as the undocumented are increasingly vilified and forced further underground, after their efforts to “work within the system” are spurned, “many of them will become increasingly frustrated, angry, and some of them eventually may turn violent” He concludes “The millions of undocumented among us will not leave. They will only get angrier.”

One can further underscore the significance of the marches’ “civicness” by taking into consideration a relevant US historical precedent that Oppenheimer did not mention: the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. This wave of violent protest led to at least 53 deaths, the most costly episode of rioting in recent US history. While the dominant US media frame projected this conflict in black-white terms, the events on the ground reveal that this mass expression of dissent and alienation also included large numbers of Latino immigrant participants. Recall that the immediate trigger was the “not guilty” verdict in the trial of police officers who were caught on videotape beating an unarmed African American man. Yet underlying economic tensions and a lack of civic representation help to explain the specific patterns of violence and participation that emerged. The most intense property damage was found to have occurred in neighborhoods whose population had recently become almost majority Latino (Pastor, 1993: 7, 1995) and which had experienced rapid ethnic succession (Bergesen and Herman, 1998). While the historically Mexican-American neighborhoods of East Los Angeles experienced very little disorder, most of the looting and arson took place in areas of recent migrant settlement (South-Central, Koreatown, Westlake).

The most striking indicator of the Latino role is evident in the pattern of police arrests, which involved substantially more Latinos than African Americans. Of the total of 5,633 arrests, “Latinos constituted 50.6% and African Americans comprised 36.3%...” (Pastor, 1993: 9). Approximately one third of the Latinos arrested were deported. Of those interviewed, 78.2% were of Mexican origin, and the rest were Central American. The Immigration and Naturalization Service called them “riot aliens” (Pastor, 1993: 12).

One possible explanation of the striking difference between the collective expression of alienation and resentment in Los Angeles in 1992 and the civic-ness of 2006 is that in the interim, tens of thousands of immigrants had created their own social and civic organizations. In the areas of recent settlement that exploded, migrant civil society was thin. The 2008 presidential elections offered a major test of immigrants’ capacity to translate their social and civic energy into actual political representation, as millions of naturalized citizens and permanent residents attempted to turn “today we march, tomorrow we vote” into more than a slogan. Hopes have been raised, but it’s not clear how long they will last. If the conventional pathways to political representation “within the system” fail to produce a viable path to regularization for the unauthorized over the next several years, then less civic forms of protest may follow. What will the immigrant politics of the future look like? The riots of 1992 or the marches of 2006? The answer depends in part on the US political system’s capacity to create viable channels for the integration of millions of immigrants into US society. But the answer also depends on immigrants themselves, who have demonstrated their willingness and capacity to act like citizens regardless of their status. In the process, they have built a migrant civil society that has demonstrated an unprecedented potential to be recognized in the future.

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Notes:

¹ Political economist Albert Hirschman described this as "the transformation and mutation of social energy" (1984).

² On distinctions between translocal and transnational engagement see, among others, Fitzgerald (2004), Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) and Fox (2005a).

³ On Mexican hometown associations, see, among others, Bada (2004, 2007, 2008) on Michoacán organizations and Smith and Bakker (2008) on Zacatecas-related experiences, among others.

⁴ See www.ime.gob.mx. For background on the Mexican government's outreach to the diaspora, see Ayón (2005), among others.

⁵ On Latino faith-based political actions supported by the Catholic Church, see Heredia (this volume). For historically-grounded analyses of Latino immigrant participation in California's labor unions, see Milkman (this volume) and Shaw (this volume). On Latino immigrant participation in Chicago's labor movement, see Fink (forthcoming)

⁶ For conceptual discussion, see Fox (2005a). To follow current discussions among binationally-oriented Mexican civic and political activists in the US, see <http://www.huellasmexicanas.com/>

⁷ For critiques of Huntington's empirical assumptions, see Citrin, et al (2007) and Fraga and Segura (2006), among others. Huntington implies that the expansion of the Spanish language is such a threat to the US social fabric that nationalist backlash is understandable, even alluding to Bosnian-style ethnic cleansing.

⁸ The contours of the public debate suggest that, in practice, this is a particularly Mexican problem, as "immigrant" is often treated as a synonym for "illegal," and "illegal" often becomes used as a synonym for Mexican. These critics do not apply the same logic to other forms of binationalism, such as the many American Israeli dual citizens (who often serve in the armed forces of another country).

⁹ For detailed bibliographic references, see Fox (2005b, 2007).

¹⁰ The methodology here would appear to under-represent the transnational attachments of undocumented migrants, since they would be less able to engage in return travel, and they would be much less likely to have a land line.

¹¹ At the same time, one could argue that our understandings of transnational or binational identities should not be limited to tangible cross-border activity, since people can identify with their countries and communities of origin, and a corresponding sense of peoplehood, without necessarily calling or going home. People can be transnational where they are.

¹² This comparison of different national origin groups is very instructive, yet it is insufficient. To understand the diverse patterns and repertoires of migrant civic engagement, researchers need to bring to bear an additional comparative lens. Most often in migration research, the term “comparative” refers to the comparison of different national origin groups. Yet the Mexican population in the United States is so large and so diverse, that national-origin averages can mask key variables, such as region of origin, region of settlement, and ethnicity. A comparative approach also means looking *both* at how migrants are organizing themselves in relationship to Mexico and other Mexican migrants *and* at how they are organized in the United States in community groups or as workers, parents, naturalized voters, or members of faith-based communities.

¹³ See also DeSipio, for similar results (2006).

¹⁴ The 1996 reform involved both citizenship for migrants and the “non-loss of nationality” – two concepts that are distinct in Mexican law (Castañeda, 2006). For analyses of the Mexican political debate over expatriate rights, see Badillo (2004), among others. For estimates of the size of the migrant electorate, see Marcelli and Cornelius (2005).

¹⁵ This interpretation is also implied by the provocative title of former Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda’s new book, *Ex Mex: From Migrants to Immigrants* (2007).

¹⁶ This section draws on more detailed discussions in Fox (2005b, 2007).

¹⁷ On recent IAF faith-based programs trying to engage Latino migrant communities in Charlotte, NC, see Deaton (2008)

¹⁸ For discussion of the hometown civic-political impacts of HTAs, see Bada (2008), Fox (2007), Fox and Bada (2008) and Smith and Bakker (2008), among others.

¹⁹ See Merz (2006) and Portes, Escobar and Walton Radford (2007) among others.

²⁰ For more information about the activities of this confederation, see <http://www.confemexusa.com/> and Vonderlack-Navarro (2007)

²¹ This coalition is still active. The March 10th Movement Committee was created in early 2006 in Chicago to organize a series of protests against the Sensenbrenner bill and to demand legalization, dignity, and respect for the millions of undocumented migrants. During the summer of 2006, the committee organized a National Strategy Convention in Hillside, IL to coordinate the efforts of several immigrant advocacy organizations interested in creating an emergency response team to fight against local anti-immigrant ordinances. In 2007, this coalition decreased its activities but reactivated in the summer of 2008. At the time of this writing, several local members of this coalition meet every Tuesday in Chicago to continue the fight for immigrant rights. They plan to organize a big rally for May 1st and they are helping immigrant workers to protect their jobs in the recession. Their most recent activity was a large fundraising to support the occupation of Republic Windows and Doors Factory, a manufacturing plant with a predominantly immigrant labor force which tried to close without offering severance pay and was ordered to compensate the workers after all the media attention brought by the occupation.

²² In the early 1980s, the Chicago Rainbow/Push Coalition inaugurated a Latino Chapter with modest Mexican immigrant representation. Today, the Rainbow/Push Coalition and CONFEMEX, the largest Mexican HTA umbrella in Chicago, collaborate regularly on immigration and labor rights issues.

²³ Note that by 2004, Illinois already had one of the highest rates of citizenship among Mexican-born permanent residents, with more than 31% of those who received residency between 1985 and 1999, according the federal data. This contrasted with 28% in California and only 20% in Texas (Bada, Fox and

Selee, 2006: 12). This wide range of inter-state variation is also seen within states, notable in California – suggesting that national origin is a variable of limited usefulness for understanding the determinants of naturalization.

²⁴ The shift in the public display of flags was especially rapid and remarkable. For example, as the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported: “Though there were Mexican, Salvadoran and Guatemalan flags sprinkled in the crowd, most of the marchers carried American flags, a response to critics who had denounced marchers in previous events for carrying Mexican flags, saying the flags showed they were unwilling to integrate into U.S. culture” (Borden and Rockwell, 2006).

²⁵ This implicit pact of civility was broken in Los Angeles on the first anniversary of the marches in 2007, when unprovoked riot police attacked peacefully assembled families (while the mayor was abroad).