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“The Chicago-Houston Report: Political Mobilization of Mexican Immigrants in American Cities”

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Summary

This report is part of a major research project that seeks to explain, from an organizational standpoint, the causes and mechanisms that have led to different types and levels of political mobilization of Mexican immigrant communities in Houston and Chicago. How and why is political mobilization of Mexican immigrants different in Chicago and Houston? To address this question, the report assesses the role of both local and transnational structures in the process of migrant political mobilization.

Data for this report was obtained from in-situ historical research, analysis of secondary sources, and more than 120 interviews that took place mostly in Houston and Chicago, between February and July 2002. Interviewees include leaders, activists, organizers, chairmen, and priests within a wide range of organizational backgrounds: community-based organizations, service providers, unions, church-based organizations, chambers of commerce, civic associations, and Mexican state federations. Immigration scholars, officials from the Mexican Consulate, city officials in both cities, and several local and state politicians were also interviewed. Specific information about the interviews can be obtained by contacting the author at gc91@columbia.edu.

Main Findings

- In addition to Chicanos and Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants are already an active player in American politics, mostly in urban settings.
- In terms of political behavior, Mexican immigrants are by no means a monolithic group within the United States. Mexicans living in Chicago show different levels of political mobilization, organization, and participation to those living in Houston.
- Regarding the process of mobilization of Mexican immigrants, family and work are the driving forces of mobilization, the Virgin Mary and the Mexican flag are the most important symbols of identification, and legalization and workers rights are the principal topics.
- A complete understanding of political mobilization of Mexican immigrants must simultaneously focus on the relations of Mexican immigrants with relevant political institutions and processes in their 'home' (in this case, Mexico) and 'host' societies (the United States).
- In the local context, the role of unions, the Catholic Church, community-based organizations, and the structure of city politics results crucial to understand different levels of political mobilization of Mexican immigrants.
- Within a context of globalization, the role of the state is by no means in decline, on the contrary, the role of the Mexican state becomes crucial to explain mobilization and political participation of Mexican immigrants in American politics.
- The interaction between local and transnational politics explains different levels of empowerment of the Mexican immigrant community in American society.

**“The Chicago-Houston Report: Political Mobilization
of Mexican Immigrants in American Cities”**

**by Gustavo Cano
Columbia University
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“When you, the Hispanics, register to vote, when you unite with each other, when you stop thinking about someday returning to your country of origin, then, and only then, you’ll be taken seriously in politics.”

Mayor Richard Daley, Chicago City Council, 1972

(quoted by journalist Javier Navarro, *Back of the Yards Journal*, 1986)

“Going back to Mexico? What for? This is Mexico. Chicago is Mexico.”

A. B., President of a Mexican Hometown Association in Chicago, 2000

“We’ve got illegal immigrants clogging our hospitals, our emergency rooms, our schools, our courts, and we’re not even allowed under federal law to ask them whether they’re citizens. We have to serve them with medical care just like you and me.”

Texas Lt. Governor Bill Ratliff, March 2000

“Undocumented immigrants [living in Houston] are already citizens, citizens of the city”

Gordon Quan, City Council Member, Houston, June 2002

Introduction

This report is part of a major research project that seeks to explain, from an organizational standpoint, the causes and mechanisms that have led to different types and levels of political mobilization of Mexican immigrant communities in Houston and Chicago. How and why is political mobilization of Mexican immigrants different in Chicago and Houston?

This question is important if we consider the outstanding contrast that these two cities present when comparing demographic profiles and the different levels of political mobilization and organization of the Mexican origin population. In accordance to the latest census figures (2000), 18 percent of the total population of the city of Chicago (total population: 2.9 million) is of Mexican origin, whereas for the city of Houston the figure is 27 percent (total population: 2 million). An estimate on preliminary census data about the total Mexican-born population shows a similar figure for both cities, 250,000-300,000 persons for Chicago, and about 250,000 for Houston (70% of whom are estimated to be noncitizens in both cities). Nevertheless, the activity levels and types of organizational mobilization of Mexican immigrants in Chicago are different than those in Houston. Unions, church organizations, community based organizations, and Mexican state federations that deal with mobilization of Mexican immigrants are, by far, larger

in numbers and more active in Chicago than in Houston.

This report is the starting point of the research project: “*Orale!* Politics: Mobilization of Mexican Immigrants in Chicago and Houston,” due in May 2003. Preliminary results of this research were presented at the 98th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, August 29-September 1, 2002. Research for this paper was funded in part by the Mexico-North Research Network’s “Fellowship Program in Transnationalism,” and by the author’s family. The author also acknowledges support in the preparation of this report from the Latina/o Studies Program, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; the Center for Immigration Research, University of Houston; and the Center for US-Mexican Studies, and the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, both at the University of California, San Diego. I would also like to thank Rebecca Hirade (Columbia University) and Margarita Blendulf (New York University) for their invaluable assistance in the final draft of the report. The names of those quoted in this report are being withheld because of the research’s status as a work in progress. In the final version of the research, direct quoting will be fully honored. Finally, any interpretation or conclusion stated in this report is the author’s responsibility.

This report supports the argument that a complete understanding of immigrant political mobilization must simultaneously focus on the relations of Mexican immigrants with relevant political institutions and processes in their ‘home’ (in this case, Mexico) and ‘host’ societies (the United States). Preliminary results of the research suggest that home state engagement with political mobilization in the host country has led to more, and not less political mobilization in the host country. This mobilization will vary significantly based on the context of reception, including the local and state level political institutions. For the purposes of this research, Mexican immigrants are those persons who were born in Mexico, who live in the United States, and who are noncitizens. Within the framework of **nonelectoral politics**, the research focuses on mobilization and participation of Mexican immigrants from an organizational standpoint, and considers organizations that deal with issues that are of the highest concern to Mexican immigrants.

Preliminary research for this study was conducted in Chicago (neighborhoods of Pilsen, Little Village, and Back of the Yards) and Houston (mainly Magnolia) in August and December 2000, and January 2001. Field research was then conducted between February and July 2002, mostly in Houston and Chicago. A total of 122 formal interviews were performed in that period of time, and more than 25 events (public demonstrations, workshops, conferences, organizational meetings, masses, etc.) were observed.

Interviewees for this report include leaders, activists, organizers, chairmen, and priests within a wide range of organizational backgrounds: community-based organizations, service providers, unions, church-based organizations, chambers of commerce, civic associations, and Mexican state federations. Also immigration scholars, Mexican officials from the Mexican Consulate, and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were interviewed, as well as city officials in both cities, and several local politicians whose names were mentioned by activists and leaders in the first set of interviews: five state representatives, one state senator, and four city council members in the Houston area; and three state representatives, one state senator, and three aldermen in the Chicago area.

I start this report by describing the process of mobilization, then I identify the main actors in the process, and point out the most important aspects of the message, the process of perception, and the action of mobilization. Secondly, I underline the importance of the context of reception, and the role of Mexican politics and policies in mobilizing Mexican immigrants in Chicago and Houston. In the final remarks of the report, I address issues related to the political mobilization of ethnic communities in urban and transnational contexts, the political incorporation of these communities, and the empowerment of the immigrant community as a whole.

The Process of Mobilization

In a general context, Political participation is explained by (1) resources like time, money, and skills; (2) motivations like interests, identifications, trust, group consciousness, and beliefs of

individual citizens; and (3) mobilization, which is understood as the process whereby persons are induced to participate and are directly mobilized by organizations and leaders (Verba and Nie 1972, Miller et al. 1981, and Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The strategic choices that leaders make, and the strategic decisions that they reach, shape the whos, whens, and whys of political participation.

More specifically, in accordance to Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), and Tilly (1978), mobilization is the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate. These actors have mobilized somebody when they have done something to increase the likelihood of his/her participation. We can break down the process of mobilization into eight components: the issue or problem, the actors (who can be either the source or targets of mobilization), the message, the recipient, the perception of the message by the recipient, the action of mobilization, results of the action, and the ever-changing context in which mobilization takes place. The central focus of this report is the act of mobilization. The essence of the process is about how certain actors try consistently to persuade the recipient (the Mexican immigrant) to politically participate in order to solve the recipient's problems or issues.

Issues

Two issues or problems arise in Chicago and Houston as the most important topics in terms of mobilization of Mexican immigrants: issues related to the legalization of undocumented immigrants, and issues related to the defense of immigrant workers rights in the United States. In Chicago, a third relevant issue is the right to participate in Mexican electoral politics for those Mexican citizens who live in the United States. Other major issues that are addressed by the Mexican immigrant community in these two cities are education, housing, and health.

In Houston, the majority of organizations that address the concerns of Mexican immigrants focus on legalization and workers rights issues. Most leaders of community organizations in Houston support the right of Mexicans to participate in Mexican electoral politics. However, they accept that the issue had not been considered as an issue for mobilization purposes. On the other hand,

legalization and workers rights are highly inter-related issues in terms of organizational efforts to solve the problems that constantly affect immigrants.

Generally speaking, in Chicago, the issues apparently form two blocks. One block of activists and organizations work on Mexicans' right to participate in Mexican electoral politics, and another block of activists and organizations work on legalization and workers rights issues. In the first block, there are more activists than organizations involved in the issue, whereas for the second block it is exactly the opposite, there are more organizations than activists. Of course, there are organizations that include the three issues in their agenda. Similar to Houston, most legalization issues are inter-related with workers issues in organizational terms. In Chicago, activism around legalization seems to take the lead in the agenda in terms of priority, unlike Houston, where both issues are addressed with similar levels of priority. In both cities, local issues related to education, health, and housing appear regularly on the scene, and most organizations that currently deal with legalization and workers rights issues have capitalized on their own experience, or the experience of other organizations, when mobilizing people regarding these three local issues.

Actors

The most important actors (sources of mobilization) in these two cities are community organizations, the Catholic Church, and unions. Chambers of commerce (Mexican or Mexican American), civic associations (Mexican American), and state federations (which generally are major groupings of Mexican hometown associations) have played a lesser role in the dynamics of mobilizing people, but other actors do not disregard their potential involvement in the process. Actors also consider the local Hispanic media an important player in the process. Actors that can be considered allies or targets of mobilization are: the Mexican government, mostly through the Mexican consulate in these two cities; local politicians, including members of the city council, state representatives and senators, mayors and governors; and at the federal level, US representatives and senators. Activists also target candidates for any of these posts.

Community Organizations

In both cities community organizations can be classified by the way they are organized. Some are organized from the top-down, in the sense that they do exert a grant from a sponsoring foundation, or government program, or church funds in addressing certain needs of the immigrant population, and the sources of financing require the organization to be accountable for. Most organizations that are service providers fall into this category. Most of these organizations work with and within the community but they are not considered to work on a membership driven basis. On the other hand, we have the bottom-up type of organization. These organizations generally work with a budget financed by membership fees, which generally are voluntary. These organizations consider themselves community-based organizations mostly because they address the concerns of the community as a whole, regardless of the nature of the problem, and because chances are very high that their leadership has emerged from the community itself.

We also have organizations that are a combination of both, community-based organizations that provide legal or educational services to the community, with a budget supported by service and/or membership fees, and grants. These three types of organizations may differ in organizational strategies, ideology, work philosophies, and legalization goals (i.e.: partial legalization vs. general amnesty for undocumented immigrants), but they tend to converge in the common goal of empowering the community. A fourth type of organization is the coalition of organizations that are generally formed around an issue or a common set of goals.

In both cities we may find the four types of organizations. In Chicago a significant number of these organizations are located in Mexican neighborhoods, and they generally conduct their activities by addressing the needs of the community in those very specific neighborhoods. In Houston, this neighborhood model is not as evident as in Chicago. Moreover, organizations in Houston tend to be part of state-wide coalitions, whereas in Chicago it is more likely for organizations to be part of local coalitions. Another difference is that in Chicago, community-

based organizations seem to rely on the family as the basic component of the organization, but in Houston this rationale is not that evident, although things are changing in this aspect.

The Church

The church's actions are found at four levels. The basic level of action relies on priests, who lead or can be part of a parish. Priests work directly with and within the community, and are either Latinos or Anglos. The Hispanic Ministry (second level) is considered an intermediary between the first level (parish priest) and the third level, the office of the bishop or archbishop. The Hispanic Ministry sometimes takes the lead in coordinating a strategy to deal with the problems of the immigrant community, and to bring the issues to the attention of highest levels within the diocese or archdiocese. The office of the Hispanic Ministry may be occupied by a priest, a nun or a member of the laity. In this process, the office of the bishop/archbishop generally ponders how to deal with issues that can be of national interest. At the fourth level we have certain organizations that are founded totally or in large part by the church, although this does not necessarily mean that they depend directly from the bishop/archbishop in order to act.

In Chicago the actions of priests with Latino constituencies, along with the actions of the Hispanic Ministry, take place in a context heavily influenced by the Polish, Irish and mainstream Anglo sectors of the archdiocese. In Houston, they only have to deal with the mainstream Anglo majority of the diocese. In both cities, Latino priests are considered a minority within the ecclesiastical body, despite their heavy Latino constituency. In both cities, the priests that exert openly an activism concerning legalization and workers rights issues are considered the minority within the minority. In both cities Mexicans form the majority of the Latino constituency of the Catholic Church, nonetheless in Houston the Central American constituency is also significant. For the clergy, in general terms, advocating for immigrants in their struggle for legalization and workers rights issues is a matter of social justice. Other churches, like the United Methodist Church are also involved in the process, although the Catholic Church is the leading force in the process.

Unions

The recent policy shift of mainstream unions towards undocumented immigrants has represented a big boost to the mobilization process regarding legalization and workers' rights issues. Mostly through the AFL-CIO's Service Employees International Union (SEIU), union activists have coordinated a national campaign advocating for legalization. Indeed, their vision goes well beyond building a successful campaign. They are working hard to create a national movement around legalization for undocumented immigrants, who happen to be mostly workers. They prioritize legalization in their agenda because once legalization is attained, many problems related to workers rights will be easier to solve. Unions see themselves as key players in this process because of their experience with workers' mobilization, the relatively large amount of available resources, their capacity to create inter-ethnic alliances among workers, and because when they knock the door of politicians at local, state, and national level, most of them, particularly democrats, open it. For unions, advocating for legalization of undocumented immigrants is a matter of potential membership.

In Houston, union's efforts to mobilize people is an uphill battle most of the time. Texas is a right-to-work state, and Houston in particular is a pro-business city, a combination that makes labor activism a little bit more complex than expected, regardless of what kind of expectations union activists may have. In Chicago, a union-friendly city, things go "smoother" in that respect. Complications arise when not all unions in the city, even within the AFL-CIO umbrella, agree or understand the goals of SEIU's effort. Some unions may support very lightly the effort, some may not support any kind of effort at all. In both cities, the strategy is to work directly with the community, and in both cities activists had to start from zero in this task. In a paradoxical way, the task is challenging in both cities. In Chicago, where there are so many community organizations (which includes not only Mexicans, but other ethnic groups as well), sometimes it becomes extremely difficult to deal with all of them within a unique agenda. On the other hand, in Houston, the relative lack of community organizing makes things extremely difficult to handle, and short-term results are difficult to materialize.

Chambers of Commerce and Civic Organizations

Mexican American chambers of commerce limit their participation in the process to meetings with the Mexican consulate in which the legalization and workers right issues are mentioned from now on then. Mexican-immigrant chambers of commerce are not only related to the process via the Mexican Consulate, but they are seen as a potential tool to introduce the immigrant business community into the process. Civic associations like the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund limit their participation to their respective fields of action, through its legal program in Chicago, and its program in Community Educational Leadership Development in Houston. Other organizations, like National Council La Raza or the League of United Latin American Citizens have participated in public acts related to the cause, mostly since a recent rapprochement with president Fox. In any case, the participation of chambers of commerce and civic organizations, in terms of mobilization, is generally marginal.

Mexican State Federations

Mexican state federations, as stated above, are organizations that group mostly hometown associations. Mexican state federations are the big question mark in the process. Low in numbers and influence in Houston, but mushrooming in Chicago, other actors see these organizations as natural allies in the campaign for legalization and workers rights. They always refer to them in terms of their mobilization potential, and some leaders introduce their organizations in these terms, asserting that they represent thousands and thousands of members of their community of origin living in Chicago. One of the main purposes of the state federations is to deal directly with their respective state governments in Mexico in order to increase the volume of transferred resources, and make such transfers more effective and efficient, with the aim to enhance the living conditions of their communities of origin in Mexico. Some state federations have been extremely successful on the matter, while others have not.

However, their involvement in local politics is seen as imminent, and indeed it is already happening mostly in Chicago: some leaders express publicly their support for union efforts regarding legalization, and others have been called on to testify before the city council on behalf

of the community when dealing with official matters like the recognition of the consular ID (*Matricula Consular*) as an official ID in the city of Chicago. Some federations have had introductory meetings with the recently formed Hispanic Caucus of the Illinois Congress. Other federations take an active role in forming coalitions that deal simultaneously with Mexican and local politics: they organize a rally to celebrate the second year of Fox's arrival to power, and local candidates that are running for aldermanic or legislative posts attend the event and even participate as speakers. For state federations, socialization at the elite level is the starting point to participate in politics. However, in terms of mobilization, the leadership of the state federations is extremely cautious in getting committed to any specific activity.

The Media

The role of the local Hispanic media is seen by the main actors from three perspectives. Firstly, most actors agree that the media is a business after all, and that they will report whatever they need to report in order to keep themselves competitive in the market, in terms of profits. However, community organizations and unions generally report good relations with the Hispanic media (mostly printed media and TV) in both cities, and this opinion will be held as far as their activities are routinely and fairly covered. Almost all actors agree that the current state of the affairs in radio in both cities is a total disgrace in terms of their programming, and they underline the relative lack of radio space to address community issues in a serious manner. Secondly, media is seen as an essential tool to mobilize people, and its potential is perceived as not yet fully developed, specially the radio. However, local Hispanic television news (Telemundo and Univision) is seen as an essential factor to familiarize the immigrant community with itself, and to make them aware of the problems that they share in common, regardless of their migratory status and generational barriers.

Thirdly, most actors see the urgency to go beyond the exclusive diffusion of the Latino community's problems by the Hispanic media, and to introduce the mainstream Anglo media into the Latino reality of these two cities. The fact that the major newspapers in both cities had recently bought the most important local Hispanic weekly newspapers raises concerns and hopes

among actors. On the one hand, some actors are concerned about the potential influence of a newspaper's Anglo-dominated board of directors on the diffusion of the Latino reality to Latinos themselves. On the other hand, some actors see this as a good starting point to sensitize the mainstream media into Latinos' problems, and the potential diffusion of those problems among Anglo and black readers in both cities.

The Mexican Consulate

The Mexican consulate in these two cities generally is seen as an ally and/or a target, depending on the actor-source, the timing, and the issue that is being addressed. In general terms, the Mexican consulate in Chicago deals more frequently and intensively with an organized Mexican community than its counterpart in Houston. In Chicago, the state federations, and a set of local coalitions (which, depending on the coalition, may include some or most of the following: community-based organizations, religious-based organizations, chambers of commerce, activists from the Mexican left, and representatives of Mexican political parties), regularly exert pressure on the community agenda of the consulate. In Houston this pressure is sporadically exerted by community-based organizations.

Before the arrival of Vicente Fox to the Mexican presidency, the leadership in these two cities used to consider the Mexican consulate as an extension of the "PRI-government," and lack of trust was the dominant note in their relationship. After Fox became president, the Mexican consulates were perceived mostly as representatives of the Mexican government, which has given the consulate a major margin of action to earn the confidence of the local leadership. In both cities the relationship between the consulates and the community leadership is based on strategic calculations and an intense pragmatism.

Additionally, the community leadership in both cities does pay attention to the personality of the Consul General. They point out, in general terms, that there are two types of consuls, those who care about the community, and those who do not. From this perspective, the personality of the Consul General makes the difference most of the time. In Houston, regardless of the consul type,

leaders tend to “cohabit” with the consul, or they both exert mutual indifference on each other.

While the cohabitation scheme also applies to Chicago, there is no way to think in a relationship of mutual indifference. Indeed, the Mexican consul frequently needs to adapt his agenda to the dynamics imposed by the proactive social and political life of the Mexican community in Chicago.

American Politicians and Local Governments

American politicians are initially considered as targets in the struggle for legalization and workers rights, for the simple reason that they can modify the laws that affect directly the life of millions of undocumented immigrants. However, some politicians, depending on the issue, can also be considered as allies. In general terms, activists in both cities face a difficult decision regarding what kind of politicians to target. On the one hand, they know that for legalization issues the members of the Congress and Senate are preferred targets, yet, the effectiveness of their mobilization efforts towards these targets depends on the national mood of the whole US legislative branch. This requires a national coordination of actions that not only has not happened yet, but that it is also difficult to put it together.

On the other hand, activists try to exert influence on local politicians in dealing with local and state issues, like workers rights, education related issues, or getting drivers licenses for undocumented immigrants. Targeting local and state politicians for local issues on regular basis has brought the necessary experience for some activists to deal with US politicians at a national level. Nevertheless, a clear strategy to involve local and state politicians (and governors and mayors) to advocate for the legalization of undocumented immigrants has yet to emerge. The curious thing about this is that most local and state politicians in Houston and Chicago, who deal with immigrant issues on regular basis, are already expecting the move, and some have firmly expressed their support to form part of such effort. For the moment, it seems that efforts in this sense are being directed towards compromising current candidates at every level of local and state elections, including candidates for governor.

In Chicago, community based organizations form part of local and state-wide coalitions and, when trying to solve a problem in their community, they generally deal first with their respective alderman, then with their respective state representative and/or senator. In Houston, community-based organizations mostly form part of state-wide coalitions and, until very recently, whenever dealing with local issues they consider the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (MOIRA) as a useful resource for solving certain problems. Interestingly enough, the MOIRA office was modeled after its counterpart in Chicago during Harold Washington's mayoral period. Union activists and community-based activists are well connected and quite familiar with Democratic politicians and politics state-wide, whereas their counterparts in Chicago tend to focus more on local aldermen first. In both cities, activists spend an important part of their energy targeting their respective US representative and senators. Some activists identify several members of the US legislative body as allies or sympathizers in their struggle.

The Receptors: Mexican Immigrants

The receptor is the object of mobilization. Organizations, unions, and churches in Houston and Chicago address immigrants in general, regardless if they are documented or undocumented aliens. Their average Mexican constituency for mobilization purposes possess low levels of education, they come from rural locations in Mexico (the leadership in these two cities have perceived an increasing number of professionals born and raised in Mexican urban centers that migrate into the US in the last five to ten years), and they join in the local work force generally in the industrial, service, and construction sectors. Their work ethics is highly appreciated by their employers. A peculiar feature about Mexican immigrants is that nobody really knows their exact numbers in both cities. Depending on whom you ask, estimated figures can reach between 1.5 and 3 times the official figures of the last census.

The average immigrant, whenever taking the decision to go and work in the US, considers the present and future well-being of the family. Nonetheless, the decision to leave his/her hometown is basically personal. That said, in some states of Mexico, migration to the US has become a family tradition, constantly fed by economic need, and facilitated by job networks that have been

created by members of the family that emigrated earlier.

The difference between average US and Mexican hourly wages (that goes from a ratio of 4 to 1, until 9 to 1, or more, depending on the activity) definitely covers the opportunity cost of Mexican individuals in leaving their families and go to the US to work. Even the economic cost of exploitation is covered under this perspective, in the sense that undocumented immigrants may not get paid what they deserve, and they may contribute to a social security system that probably will never return a dime to them. Yet, as long as they are hired, can afford their living costs, and can send money back to their family, the flow of immigrant workers from Mexico to the US shows no rationale to stop.

One of the key significant differences between the average Mexican immigrant in Houston and Chicago, is that Houston's immigrants are closer to their home-community, in the sense that most immigrants come from the states of Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, and Tamaulipas (in addition to Guanajuato, Michoacan, Guerrero, and Jalisco), which can be reached in a relatively short period of time by bus. The majority of Chicago's Mexican immigrants come from seven Mexican entities (Michoacan, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Guerrero, Distrito Federal, the state of Mexico, and Zacatecas) and it is harder for them to keep in touch with their communities of origin, at least according to Houston standards. Another difference is that, even if most immigrants definitely believe that they are in the US only temporarily and plan to go back to Mexico one day, Houston is generally used as a port of entry to the US job market in Texas, the Midwest, and the East coast, whereas Chicago's immigrants generally consider Chicago their last stop.

The Message

The Mexican immigrant is considered dispossessed in many ways. When Mexican immigrants arrive to the US they tend to lose many things, like the direct contact with their family, their social life, their language, their name (going from Miguel to Mike), their traditions and, as a whole, their identity. However, as they grow in numbers, as time passes, and as they concentrate

in one place, the process of “vanishing identities” becomes a complex adaptation process in which a new “Mexican living in the United States” identity emerges.

In general terms, from the Mexican immigrant standpoint, there are three types of Mexicans living in the United States: the Chicano, the Mexican American, and the Mexican immigrant (or just “Mexican”). From this perspective, Chicanos are seen like living and interpreting their present as a function of the past. The spirit of going back to their roots, “to recover what was stolen to us,” to Aztlan, to where we all come from, is very present in their interpretation of reality, which is also seen as a highly political interpretation. Mexican Americans are seen like living their present as a function of the future. Well adapted to the system, their style of life focuses on what to do now to have a better future for themselves and their families. They tend to pay attention to the education of their children, to their health and retirement plans. Their patterns of politization (becoming Democrats or Republicans as a function of level of income), and consumption (buy now, pay later) are very similar to those of the average American.

Mexican immigrants, mostly the undocumented, live in the present on a day-by-day basis. The past is back, in their hearts and minds, but not in their present. In the present they have to work six or seven days per week, sometimes 10-12 hours per day, sometimes double shifts. The future is measured in terms of the present. They have a job today, tomorrow nobody knows. They got paid this time, no guarantee that another payment will come next. They are in the US today, but there is no way to know if they will be in the US tomorrow. They send money today to Mexico, maybe tomorrow they will send nothing. Only the present matters. However, the more time they spend in the US, the more they become more confident in building a future, and most of them feel the need to maintain a connection with the past, with their roots. They may even become documented aliens and stay in the US for the rest of their lives, but the majority of them consider themselves Mexicans, and will never abandon in their minds the plan to return to Mexico “one of these days.”

Activists deal with questions of how, when, with what frequency, and how much it costs to

transmit the message, and how to make it appealing to their constituency in order to mobilize them. Experienced activists are well aware of the aspects that the Mexican immigrant keeps to him/herself through the process of immigration. They know that not everything is lost in the process, and they appeal in their messages to what immigrants tend to keep with them in a permanent way (in addition to their strong preference for Mexican food and their language): their family, their work, the Virgin Mary (La Virgen de Guadalupe), and the Mexican flag.

Messages based on workers rights or related to work issues tend to be linked to the possibilities of improving the well-being to the family, as far as improvement of work conditions is perceived as feasible. Activists frame the legalization process as a way to directly improve work conditions. However, they are aware that most undocumented immigrants compare their marginal income with the opportunity cost of the home labor market, which includes the marginal cost of immigrating, instead of comparing it with the opportunity cost of the local labor market. This happens precisely because they are undocumented workers. Whenever appealing to the need of improving their work conditions, they find that undocumented immigrants usually do not consider that they have the same rights at work regardless of their migratory status. Instead, they compare their current economic position to the one that they would have if they had not migrated. This makes things harder in terms of mobilization. However, activists know that the best moment to mobilize people is when immigrants see their job threatened, which generally happens because of external factors.

Activists recognize that one of the most important incentives for an immigrant to migrate is the well-being of their immediate family. However, after many years of continuing immigration, the concept of family now takes a double dimension: family in Mexico, and family in the US, and generally they merge together through time. Family in Mexico can be the parents, brothers and sisters, wife and children; family in the US can be the same, however, a strong emphasis is made on the extended or direct family that emigrates from Mexico in relatively slow, but constant patterns. Activists in both cities calculate that forty to sixty percent of Mexican immigrant families living in the US (families whose at least half of their members were born in Mexico)

have at least one family member who is undocumented. The concept of family itself becomes a strong symbol for activists to mobilize people.

The Virgin Mary is probably the most powerfully appealing force for messages to mobilize people. Here the rationale is that you may have problems at work, and even lose your work; or you may have problems in your family, however, the Virgin will always be there for you and your family, with you and your family. On the other hand, when a 20 years old undocumented Mexican immigrant arrives for the first time in US soil, he/she may not have family or a clear idea about what kind of work he/she will be performing, but chances are very high that he/she already has in his/her heart and mind an average “religious baggage” of at least six hundred Catholic masses.

The transnational character of the Catholic Church definitely helps Mexican immigrants to feel at home whenever they go to mass. The format and dynamic of the masses is practically the same in the US or in Mexico, regardless if you are at Pilsen, Magnolia or Guanajuato. Mexican immigrants’ relationship with the Mother of God is an essential factor which defines their identity once they arrive to the US. Another important symbol within the religious scheme, in addition to the Virgin Mary is the priest himself. Mexicans are considered as an extremely faithful people to the Virgin Mary, and they are very obedient to the directions of the priest in a diversified set of matters, mostly about family and faith. Sometimes political matters are discussed in the Sunday sermon; however, they deal mostly with solidarity causes, and not direct mobilization. Activists and politicians are conscious of the powerfully appealing potential of the church to mobilize people through religious symbols, however, they are also conscious that the highest levels of the US Catholic hierarchy generally have the last word on the matter.

The pride of being and feeling Mexican, is also considered an important factor in the process of mobilization. In this context, the Mexican flag is the preferred symbol by most Mexicans. Mexicans in a public event feel good and smile when they see the flag waving in the air, the larger, the better. There are even flags with the green, white, and red, but with the image of the

Virgin Mary instead of the official eagle at the center of the flag. Aztec dancers and prehispanic conch players are also a very important symbol of the ethnic proud or Mexicanness of the people. At every possible occasion, Aztec dancers will appear in public events organized by Mexican immigrants. Frequent references to certain Mexican heroes such as Morelos, Hidalgo, and Zapata, as well as negative references to what they call “seventy years of PRI-gobierno,” are also important components of public speeches.

These symbols of Mexicanness are generally part of the process in reaffirming the immigrant’s identity in US soil, but their use in the process of mobilization is generally limited to the capacity of relating the sense of Mexicanness to the other three major topics for mobilization: family, work, and the Virgin Mary. The appeal to the Mexicanness of the immigrant fits very well into the picture when the issue comes up in a context where the Virgin Mary and family are the driving forces for mobilization. On the other hand, workers rights activists sometimes lessen, in an implicit manner, the appeal to the Mexicanness of their constituency because of the multi-ethnic composition of the constituency itself. Central Americans in Houston, and Puerto Ricans and Poles in Chicago give the “not-only-for-Mexicans” touch to a demonstration for immigrant and/or workers rights, for example. Moreover, the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU, AFL-CIO) national campaign to collect one million signatures to push for legalization is an example that the Mexican flag and the Virgin Mary are not *sine qua non* conditions to mobilize Mexican immigrants.

In sum, the Virgin Mary and the Mexican flag have become strong symbols of identification in the process of mobilization, whereas the notions of family and work are the driving forces of mobilization. Depending on the type of mobilization, these four elements can be combined in order to persuade Mexican immigrants to participate. In Chicago, these four elements are the basic components in the process of mobilization, mostly for public demonstrations. In Houston, the Virgin Mary and the Mexican flag are used to a lesser extent, however, their potential of mobilization remains intact. In both cities, mostly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, it is not rare to see both the Mexican and American flags waving together in public demonstrations.

Perception of the Message

Perception is the link between spreading the message and getting people into action. The decision whether to participate or not in a political activity relies basically on the process of perception of the message. Activists identify some central features that affect the perception of the message by their Mexican constituency. First, Mexican immigrants do not trust politicians or political institutions. This seems to be the result of approximately seventy years of not trusting politicians and political institutions back home, unions included. This affects directly the potential of participation in any initiative proposed by activists. Indeed, Mexican immigrants usually do not differentiate between activists and politicians.

Second, and highly related to the first feature, Mexican immigrants are generally skeptical towards democratic procedures. Again, this seems to be the result of an intensive lack of contact with any sort of democratic culture for a period of seventy years. They tend to concentrate their attention in one or two major leaders, and grant them their nominal trust along with a high dose of indifference towards their acts. This, in the long term, has led to weak levels of institutional organization, a spreading lack of accountability from the leadership toward its constituency, and the proliferation of organizations whose leaders assert that they count with the support of the (whole) community, but they cannot prove it. However, this is changing in both cities. Attitudes towards democratic procedures are being pondered more realistically by leaders of Mexican origin, and their Mexican constituency. In both cities, the struggle for a better education for their children within the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA's) has led Mexican parents to acquire organization, negotiation and mobilizations skills that have resulted extremely useful in reinforcing democratic procedures in the formation, and functional organization, of community-based organizations.

Third, the majority of Mexican immigrants never say no. Whenever they are approached and introduced to a situation that requires their participation in a specific action, whenever they are invited to participate in demonstrations, rallies, or picketing lines, they will never tell the activist

“Sorry, I cannot or I will not be able to be there or do that.” On the contrary: “Yes, I will be there; yes, I can or I will do that, no problem.” According to experienced activists, and depending on the subject, approximately for each five Mexicans that assert that they will participate, actually only one participates. Fourth, there is a widespread attitude among the majority of Mexican immigrants that “we cannot do this or that, it is not possible.” Activists attribute this attitude to the fact that their undocumented status leads them to realize in an inaccurate manner that exerting their rights in the US, any kind of rights, is practically impossible.

Fifth, Mexican immigrants play it safe. The attitude of “if I do nothing, nothing happens” is a non-written rule that the majority of immigrants use to follow without any question in their every day life. Activists perceive that behind this attitude is the rationale of immigrants to voluntarily become and remain invisible in a host society that strongly prefers things to stay that way. Moreover, the fact that they are potential subjects of deportation at any time, makes them extremely cautious in engaging in public activities that could strip them of their invisibility with unexpected and potentially catastrophic consequences. In this sense, *la migra* (the INS) becomes *la ausente siempre presente* (the absent one that is always there, always present) in their lives. In any instance, the rationale is that *la migra* cannot do anything against invisible people.

These five major attitudes, among the most important, form a set of perception barriers that are difficult to overcome whenever trying to persuade Mexican immigrants to engage in political actions. The key element to penetrate those blocking impediments for people to participate is trust, *la confianza*, earning people’s trust. Social capital and social networks are essential for leaders to mobilize people, and this is not the exception. However, there is the issue of how to earn immigrants’ trust to build social networks and facilitate mobilization. In general terms, the most effective way to transmit the message is targeting families more than individuals, and women more than men. It is definitely better if the message can be transmitted in (good) Spanish. Indeed, the most efficient way to transmit the message is by “spreading the word” among the members of the community. Among all potential activists, the priest has the highest “trust rating.” Immigrants generally listen to what the priest has to say on this or that matter during

mass. The contribution to the process of the local Hispanic TV is very important: its news section sensitizes the whole community with their own problems, and creates the notion that they can face and solve those problems as a community, not only as individuals that are affected by some situation.

The most difficult aspect of mobilizing immigrants is persuading them to participate in an activity for the first time. How immigrants perceive their first experience is crucial for them to decide if they will participate again. The ideal conditions vary from activity to activity, but we can say that, in general terms, the participant needs to see transparency in the organization of the event (knowing every possible detail of its planning, for example), and highly appreciates honest and sincere leadership, as immigrants expect the leader to speak the truth. Whenever immigrants decide to participate, they feel more comfortable if they see the priest or the activist doing exactly the same things that they have been persuaded to do, in a moment in which the organizational hierarchy vanishes and everyone supports each other. In this sense, they also are attracted to the idea of the leadership working with and for them, and not them working for the leadership. After the first experience, they also need to see results of the mobilization. Mobilization without (major or minor) victories for its constituency has no future.

Finally, immigrants prefer, by far, to be part of an organization in which its leadership is more committed to deal with the working plans and strategies in solving specific problems, than dealing with organizations that spend most of the time in the ever debilitating and usually non-democratic procedures of deciding the hierarchical posts within the organization. The perception that organizations are truly democratic in their functioning is becoming a must for immigrants to join them, and/or get mobilized by them. In any case, activists know that the best incentive for immigrants to mobilize does not come from the organizations themselves, but from the outside, directly from the ever-changing context.

The Action of Mobilization

The most recurrent mobilization actions are signing letters, picketing, support rallies,

demonstrations, boycotts, the formation of community-based organizations, voting whenever possible (participation of heads of family in PTA's decisions), and persuading to those who can vote, and that are part of the family or the community, to do so for this or that candidate. Specific targets of mobilization can be individuals or institutions, and the main goal generally is related to changing the establishment's rules of the game or, if it is already stipulated in the rules, to make sure that everybody exerts the same rights under the same rules. The type of action is decided as a function of the issue and the geographical impact of the issue. In this perspective, mobilization takes place at the following levels: local-neighborhood (health, housing, and education issues, for example), local-community (city and state issues related to workers rights, driver licenses), national-community (legalization issues, or issues related to Mexican politics or actions taken by the Mexican government). Mobilization for any of these topics can link two or three levels simultaneously.

Although the traditional concept of mobilization deals mostly with empowering the people in a bottom-up fashion (mobilizing the "bottom" in order to make the "top" change things), activists have started to realize that such dynamics is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to make ends meet. A professional organizer in Houston put it bluntly: "This is not only about giving voice to the voiceless, it is also about giving ears to the earless." Activists report better mobilization results after making eye to eye contact with the targets (generally politicians). The best way to make allies among targets is talking directly to them, explaining why they are doing what they are doing, what are the next steps more likely to be taken, and invite them to join the struggle. In this sense, lobbying-mobilizing politicians also becomes an important part of the process. Of course, the most likely politicians to be addressed under this perspective are those in whose state or city districts the Latino population represents an important share of their constituency.

Results of the Action

Activists tend to evaluate very carefully the results of mobilization actions. A full set of questions sometimes need to be answered quickly in order to proceed with the next activity. Of

course, some questions have no answer in the short term, and some questions have only partial answers: What were the main accomplishments of the activity? What was the reaction of the target? Were the organizers' expectations met regarding the number of people that participated in the activity? How can you enhance participation? In what sense can the mobilization be considered a success? After the event, is the struggle going forwards or backwards? How does the action affect the problem? How does the action affect the activists themselves and/or other organizations? How does the activity affect the structure of the message? How did the activity affect the context in which it took place? What are the future actions that should or should not be taken? How the activity affects the chances of enhancing future coordination of activities with other organizations? How does the activity affect the functioning of the coalition, if the organizations that participated in it form part of one? How do participants feel about it? The best incentive for people to get increasingly involved in the mobilization process is for them to see that the action in which they took part has done something, or has had an effect, on changing things for them, for the better. Under this perspective, no victory is a small victory.

The Context

The context is the space and time in which the mobilization takes place. Indeed, the context is formed by the Mexican or US governments' actions and their consequences, or by political events in Mexico and the US. From the US perspective, actions from the US government (at a local, state or national level) or certain political events are the subject of analysis (localities, context of reception). From the Mexican perspective, the role of the Mexican consulate, the federal government, and some state governments, as well as certain political events, are the subject of analysis. This scheme suggests that the structural context (policies and politics) of the host society (the US), and the home society (Mexico), do matter in shaping the social and political construction of the space where political mobilization of Mexican immigrant communities takes place.

The ever-changing context generally affects the key components of the mobilization process: it can create new problems, increase their complexity, or contribute to their partial or whole

solution. It also affects the strategies of the activists and other actors. Moreover, the actions of mobilization and the correspondent results can affect the context. Most of the time, though, the context will be the stronger source of mobilization, by acting as a triggering factor over the population's perceptions of the problem.

The context of reception refers to the relationship between the Mexican immigrant community and the relevant political institutions and processes in the host state. This perspective addresses specifically the role of localities (Chicago vs Houston), and the context of reception at a national level. The second element addresses the relationship between the Mexican immigrant community and the home state.

Context of Reception

The Structure of City Politics. One of the most important aspects that affect the way activists mobilize Mexican immigrants in these two cities, is related to the fact that Chicago activists are influenced by their past and present experiences in dealing with the *political machine*. Whenever a problem arises, activists are inclined to deal directly with their alderman, and they try to solve the problem from a neighborhood-community perspective. As time passes by, activists and aldermen start to know each other, and a *quid-pro-quo* relationship may arise, in which a constant process of negotiation becomes the basic language of communication. It may also occur that the alderman does not pay attention to the demands of neighborhood organizations, then other contacts are developed within the local political structure with state and/or federal representatives and senators. However, the relationship with the alderman becomes the starting point to solve neighborhood-community problems, and the "other contacts" will be developed nevertheless. In any case, Chicago's city hall policies and politics are considered to be traditionally immigrant-friendly.

In Houston, organizations that deal with immigrants' issues are spread throughout the city. They rarely follow the neighborhood format, and they do not have the practice to deal directly with a council member in order to solve their problems. Before the creation of the Mayor's Office of

Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, there was practically no office within City Hall that could deal directly with immigrants' issues. Indeed, most organizations tend to deal directly with non governmental agencies that address immigrants' needs, which means that whenever trying to solve the set of problems that the community faces, these organizations have to spread efforts and address several issues with several agencies at the same time. This apparently has led to the systematic proliferation of top-down organizations that deal with specific needs of the community as a whole, and may look forward to empower the community, but there are practically no traces of mobilization in the process. Throughout time, bottom-up activists in Houston have become specialists in developing a wide-open agenda of political action, which includes contacts with state and federal elected officials, and even out-of-state federal elected officials. For activists in Houston, Houston is only part of the agenda.

Finally, local politics towards immigration issues in Houston and Chicago are changing rapidly because of demographics. Council members in Houston, and aldermen in Chicago are paying more attention to their immigrant constituencies because of their increasing numbers, as reported in the last US census. Many (city and state) districts have dramatically changed their ethnic composition in the last twenty years and, in some cases, the Mexican-origin population has become the ethnic majority or even the majority of the district. Most politicians in these districts argue that regardless if their Mexican-origin constituency does exert their right to vote, they have the obligation to address the needs of their constituency. Moreover, some of them accept that they definitely cannot ignore the voting potential of the Mexican-origin community.

The majority of these politicians recognize (1) the right of immigrant workers to defend their workers rights regardless of their migratory status, and (2) the right for undocumented immigrants to legalize their migratory status. Although there is a wide set of opinions about how to reach this last goal, and pointing out that the legalization process is in the hands of the federal government, the majority of these politicians agree that undocumented immigrants have earned the right to legalize their status because they pay taxes, because of their economic contribution to the city is out of question, and because of their consistent monetary contributions to the social

security system of the country.

On the other hand, union and community-based organization's activists are skeptical about politicians' intentions on the matter [in Chicago: *del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho* (there is a long distance between saying and doing), and in Houston: *they talk the talk, let's see if they walk the walk.*]. They assert that politicians' interest in their Mexican-origin constituency is also related to the influence that the undocumented members may exert on the voting members of the immigrant family. *El voto de rebote* (the rebounding vote) does matter in local politics.

However, these city or state politicians are the minority in their respective political arenas in Chicago and Houston. In Chicago, most activists do not trust politicians (specially those who are identified as part of the *machine*), and they consider that there is very little that immigrant-based-constituency local politicians can do in the struggle for legalization. In Houston, the level of distrust towards these politicians is definitely lower than in Chicago, however, Houston's activists are deeply sensitive to the majority's moves regarding immigrant rights issues.

When dealing with local issues (mostly matters related to drivers licenses, workers rights, and education), in Chicago, whenever activists are planning mobilization, city politics is considered an essential factor when deciding what to do and what not to do. In Houston, state-level strategic considerations generally overcome those of city politics, and mobilization strategies are mainly focused on coordinating efforts with activists in other cities. This, with the aim to exert a coordinated pressure on the state legislature and the governor on certain issues. In Chicago, this also happens, but most mobilization efforts that are planned in the city start by a well defined effort to form alliances at local levels (neighborhood, community, and sometimes inter-ethnic).

Politicians and activists, mostly those whose constituency is formed by significant proportions of Mexican immigrants, know that after the World Trade Center's terrorist attack (9/11) many things have changed regarding US immigration policies. Indeed, politicians in both cities expect that any important change regarding legalization of undocumented immigrants could now take

years, even if this becomes an issue for the next presidential election. However, Chicago and Houston politicians are already expecting -or experiencing?- a shift on the activists' targeting strategy. Before 9/11, the leading forces behind legalization efforts were the Fox-Bush understanding on the issue, and the collaboration of the US Congress on the matter. After 9/11, the US Congress has a very different set of agenda priorities, and the congressmen who supported legalization measures apparently went from a growing majority to an isolated minority. This is translated as a great incentive for local activists to readdress their mobilization efforts, in order to target local politicians, to obtain city and state resolutions supporting legalization of undocumented immigrants and, on the road, doing positive legislative work on other immigrant-related issues.

Zoning and Annexations. In Chicago, the family is considered as the basic unit of mobilization among Mexican immigrants. In Houston, the individual and the family are the basic units. However, the transmission of the message flows more easily among Chicagoan families than among Houston's receptors. Mobilization among Mexican immigrants is about trust. The message is better perceived if it comes from somebody you trust, from the priest, from a member of your own family and, in some cases, your neighbor. From this perspective, we can say that there are higher levels of trust among Mexican immigrants in Chicago than in Houston.

Explanations about this difference have to do with the place of origin and immigration patterns of the Mexican migrants, and with the politics of annexation and zoning in their respective host cities. For trust to emerge among the community, three things are identified as sufficient, although not necessary conditions: families or individuals have to share the same physical space as neighbors during a long period of time, and they need to speak the same language and/or share similar habits. This is, the longer we know the same neighbors, and if they speak the same language than us, and have the same habits that we have, the higher the chances are that a relationship of trust will emerge.

On the one hand, a significant difference between Mexican immigrants in Houston and Chicago,

is that Houston's immigrants are relatively close to their home-community, as an important segment of Mexican immigration comes from the states of Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, and Tamaulipas. In some cases, their communities of origin can be reached in a matter of hours by bus, whereas in Chicago, the majority of immigrants come from a larger variety of Mexican states, and it is relatively harder for them to keep in touch with their community of origin, mostly because of the large distance between Chicago and the closest Mexican border. On the other hand, Houston is generally considered a port of entry to the US job market in Texas, the Midwest, and more recently, the East Coast, whereas Chicago is generally considered by Mexican immigrants as their final destination. These conditions suggest that the floating immigrant population in Houston is higher than in Chicago, and that there are more incentives in Chicago for Mexicans to develop community life far away from home.

On the other hand, the city of Houston has a well known tendency to constantly expanding its limits, whereas the limits of the city of Chicago have remained practically the same. Generally, and at least officially up to 1999, there has been no real restrictions to annexation policies in Houston. Free market rationale working at its best: city developers would buy important extensions of land, they would develop them, and the city would annex them mostly because those new pieces of developed land represent a fresh source of tax revenues. In the process, Mexican and Central American immigrant labor was needed first, to join the construction business (as construction workers, of course) in developing the areas, and then they were hired to provide services to the newly developed and annexed areas. Considering that there are no zoning restrictions in Houston, we have that an important portion of immigrant population ends up distributed through the whole city, following the job markets that are driven by the annexation dynamics of the place, and establishing themselves in a way that neighborhood life is all but a feasible project in the long term.

In Chicago, an inactive annexation policy, a relatively efficient reinforcement of zoning rules, and more diversified sources of employment in the city (construction, services, and commerce), have lead Mexican immigrant populations to get established in "their own" neighborhoods for

relatively long periods of time. Indeed, for this matter, gentrification is the main issue in Chicago, which has lead Mexican immigrants to either sell their properties and migrate to the suburbs (or simply migrate to the suburbs for those who do not own any property), or to stay in their neighborhoods, organize themselves, and mobilize people to fight for the community's right to stay in their neighborhood, sometimes successfully.

Other Factors. At a local level, (in the last twenty years in Houston, and at least thirty years in Chicago), activists, organizations, and heads of immigrant families have gone through a set of different mobilization experiences in order to fight for their rights in several fields of immigrant issues. These experiences include, among the most important, (1) parents taking an active role in the local school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA's), and having decisive words in the present well-being and future of their children's education; (2) activists mobilizing and lobbying to obtain the state legislature's support for immigrants to get their driver licenses; or (3) mobilizing and lobbying for immigrants' rights to continue with their college education, regardless of their migratory status; and (4) dealing with issues of gentrification.

These experiences have proved to be extremely useful through time, mostly because activists have become familiar with how the system works, who and when to trust and, most important of all, when and how to mobilize people. For activists and organizations in Houston, the most valuable experiences have been developed in the field of struggling for an open access of higher education for immigrants, and getting driver licenses for immigrants, both experiences at a state level. In Chicago, struggles against the effects of gentrification, and parents' involvement in PTA's have proved to be enriching experiences on political organization and mobilization.

At a national level, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) misinterpretations of federal legislation regarding immigrants issues (the amnesty of 1986, for example), or the action of certain government agencies [like the no-match letters that are currently being sent by the Social Security Administration (SSA) to employers whose employees have a social security number that does not match SSA records], have proved to be the triggering factor for immigrants

to mobilize. Indeed, when the issue affects the immigrant at a national level, the tendency is that, at the beginning, the activist is the one who gets mobilized by the immigrant community, as the community demands assessment to solve the problem.

On the other hand, the INS experiences have proved to be a direct source of leadership renewal and organizational restructuring, as the current mobilization and organizational structures are not able to deal with the new problem. Houston's extremely well organized ARCA (Association for Residency and Citizenship of America) is the best example for this type of process. On the other hand, national issues, like struggling for legalization or a general amnesty for immigrants, makes necessary the creation of coalitions at a national level. This has become a national challenge, as activists struggle to coordinate agendas, and some of them really try hard to overcome the *who-gets-credit-for-what* rationale.

The Role of the Home State

The Mexican Consulate. The role of the Mexican consulate in the process of mobilization of Mexican immigrants is important mainly from two perspectives, the first is related to a trust-building process between the Mexican consulate and the (mostly Mexican-born) leadership, and the second refers to the role of the Mexican consulate in the formation and consolidation of state federations. A good relationship between the Mexican consul and the local Mexican-immigrant leadership is essential for the Mexican consulate in building bridges of communication and understanding with the community as a whole, and developing a strategic relationship based on trust. Here, every little detail counts: good if the consul welcomes the leadership into his office and listens to their demands; good if the consul attends periodically their celebrations and meetings; good if the consul eats and drinks the same stuff that the community eats and drinks; good if the consul is available "24/7."

This relation-building process is extremely helpful for each party to understand each other whenever conflict arises, which can be at any time, for any reason. The leadership may not agree with the way the consul sees this or that problem, or with the solutions that the consul may offer

to solve their problems, however, what it really matters here is that communication channels must remain as open as possible. Activists of Mexican origin definitely prefer to have the consul as a potential ally, rather than as a potential target, however, there are leaders in both cities that will always consider the Mexican consulate as the usual target, and they will never initiate or follow an approach of this sort with the consul. On the other hand, if no communication channels are created, chances are very high that the Mexican consulate will be the target of mobilization as soon as the opportunity arises.

In order to earn the community's trust, it is not enough for the consul to listen to their problems, or to attend most of their celebrations: his capacity to deliver is the most appreciated thing. The more the consul delivers, the higher the level of trust in the relationship. Indeed, from this continuous relation-building with the consul, the leadership is always processing basic information about the limits of action of the Mexican government regarding a whole set of local issues that affect the community. Leaders who exert this strategic approach with the consul, ends up knowing perfectly in what kind of struggles they will count with the support of the Mexican consulate, and in what kind of struggles they will be on their own. This knowledge becomes essential when taking the decision to mobilize people for whatever the purpose.

How the Mexican consulate can "support" the cause, is generally up to the consul's discretion. The consul himself may become a facilitator by creating an informal network with local and state authorities in order to solve problems that can be solved through consular means. He can differ his participation in the process by channeling the specific demands of the community through one of his subordinates, or he can become an active player, by intervening directly in the solution of the problem, and personally supervising the implementation of the solution. Or he can do nothing, which is always an option, mostly because there are issues in which the Mexican consulate can not do anything at all. Finally, a consul who delivers, creates higher expectations of consular collaboration among the leadership whenever a new consul arrives.

In addition to building a trust-based relationship with the Mexican-immigrant leadership, some

direct actions from the Mexican consulate are highly related to the mobilization process of the Mexican community in their host cities. The best example for this is the formation and consolidation of state federations. With the implementation of the “Program of Mexican Communities Living Abroad” (PMCLA) in 1990, the Mexican consulates in Chicago and Houston actively encouraged the formation of state federations. Some federations in Chicago assert that the Mexican consulate had nothing to do with their formation process (indeed, one organization already existed in the federation format even before the implementation of the PMCLA), and practically all of them attest that they organized themselves without any kind of support from the Mexican government. However, the majority of these organizations point out that it was through meetings that took place in the Mexican consulate in the early to middle 90s, that a number of leaders, representing hometown associations or families from the same state of origin in Mexico, met each other for the first time, triggering the formation process of the state federation.

Addressing the process of consolidation, the role of the Mexican Consulate in Chicago has been essential in negotiations to unify federations whenever a split on their membership leads to the emergence of two different federations for the same state. The Mexican Consulate has also played the role of mediator between the state federations and Mexican state governments when conflict arises. Finally, the implicit, and in some cases explicit, recognition that the Mexican Consulate extends to state federations is pointed out as one of the major contributions of the Mexican government to the consolidation process of state federations. Currently there are nine, and sometimes ten, active state federations in Chicago.

In Houston, the lack of formation and consolidation of state federations is pointed out as a consequence of the interaction of different factors (Cano, 2001). Mentioned among the most important are high levels of floating immigrant population, high levels of internal mobility of the immigrant population driven by local labor markets, the closeness of Houston to the Mexican border, and the lack of hometown associations. Also special emphasis is made about the lack of an established network of organizations that addresses the concerns of Mexican immigrants, like

the “Protection Network,” established by the Mexican consulate in Chicago in the 90s.

However, the only state federation that exists in Houston had the same origin that its counterparts in Chicago, which was an initial meeting in the Mexican consulate for leaders of hometown associations to meet with each other, and talk about the idea of forming a state federation. In addition to this state federation (the Zacatecas federation), there are people from other states willing to create new or bring back to life former state federations. However, the severe lack of hometown associations makes these projects more to look like top-down organizational efforts, instead of the Chicago model, in which the majority of state federations are seen as the product of bottom-up organizational efforts.

Currently, state federations in Chicago (sometimes through coalitions, sometimes on their own), are increasingly developing a network of contacts in local politics at city and state levels, this in addition to a growing influence on their states of origin, back in Mexico. State federations are highly autonomous in their actions, and their potential of mobilization begins to be recognized and appreciated by other actors who deal with legalization and workers rights issues. State federations in Chicago have become an efficient mode for the political incorporation of the Mexican immigrant community, as well as an active source of empowerment. Also the initiative of the Mexican consulate (mostly through its department of attention to communities), in the process of formation and consolidation of these organizations, has been decisive for them to become the role model of an evolving transnational organization in the political arena of a global city.

In Houston, the model of building a trust-based relationship between the leadership and the Mexican consulate still is an option for the consul. The intensity of such relationship depends on the consul’s discretion, and this is highly related to the lack of the pressure that state federations may exert on the attention of the consul, the Chicago way. Indeed, in the last twenty years, activists and Mexican-immigrant leaders in Houston only have present in their minds two consuls that “have voluntarily followed” the Chicago model. In Chicago, the consul apparently

has no other choice than becoming a player. A demanding and organized community has implemented an informal system of check and balances that is constantly reinforced by a relatively efficient and democratic renewal of leaders, who quickly learn the rules of the game in transnational and local politics.

This does not mean that in Houston nothing is happening, on the contrary, things are changing at a fast pace. A new generation of Mexican, Central, and Latin American-origin leaders are getting along very well with the traditional leadership, and what it is more appreciated of the new guys is that they not only know how the system works in local politics, but that they bring in with them new and ingenious ideas about how to change things, and they do not accept “no” for an answer.

A common thing in both cities though, is that an increasing number of Mexican leaders have realized that it is not enough to know and play by the rules of Mexican politics, but that it is also necessary to know how the local system works in many aspects. The quality of their meetings has remarkably improved by adopting democratic voting procedures that everybody accepts and exerts, regardless of the final outcome of the procedure. In the past, for example, whenever a conflict would arise in a meeting, a little screaming would be the more than enough for somebody to call the police to lead the meeting to a weird end. Now, depending on the meeting, people may arrive with their lawyers, no need of yelling at each other, and if the police is called, lawyers deal directly with them. A good relationship with the Hispanic media is essential to capitalize mobilization efforts, however, new ways of entering in contact with mainstream Anglo press are currently being pondered.

Mexican Policies and Politics. The explanation about the different levels of mobilization between Houston and Chicago is not complete if Mexican politics and policies are not included in the picture. There are some factors or events that affect in a similar way both places, and there are factors and elements that affect in a different way the Mexican community in these two cities.

Regarding the first category, two events in Mexican politics in the 90s have had a deep impact in

grounds of political mobilization of Mexican immigrants: the Zapatista movement, and the Zedillo government's attempt to increase the monetary deposit for foreign vehicles entering Mexico, from \$11 to a range between \$400 and \$800. In broad terms, the Zapatistas' abrupt entrance into Mexican politics in 1994, made people to get together in order to obtain information about what was really going on, and then to see what type of solidarity acts and/or protest measures they could all work out together. "Zedillo's cars" created a similar reaction (in terms of short-term mobilization) among the Mexican community, however, this time there was no ideological component in the discussions, and they were directed mostly to decide what kind of protest measures were the most accurate to take. The simultaneous coordination of actions among several Mexican communities in different American cities became a fact in matter of hours. Luckily for the Mexican consulates in these cities, Chicago and Houston included, the "Zedillo's cars" crisis lasted only a couple of days. It ended with the Mexican government canceling the measure.

In both cases, in both cities, people surpassed the leadership's capacity of response at the beginning of the events in terms of mobilization. In the long term, new leaders, activists, and organizations emerged as a net outcome of those initial meetings. Some of the people who met for the first time in those meetings, are currently leading activists in legalization and immigrants rights issues, or are the driven force behind the creation of local coalitions of organizations that deal with immigrants' issues. On the other hand, some organizations have embraced several aspects of the Zapatista philosophy, as they found many similarities with the Zapatista movement in their everyday struggle for the dispossessed. The Zapatista movement still remains present in the minds and words of some Mexican leaders and activists in both cities. Indeed, both mobilization experiences opened new views about how to deal with the Mexican authorities in times of crisis.

In the second category, the right for Mexicans to vote abroad, and the relationship between Mexican state governments with their communities abroad, both affect in a different way certain aspects of immigrant mobilization in both cities. In Houston, both issues generally get very little

attention from activists. When a governor of a Mexican state comes to Houston, generally the Mexican consulate is the main reference when planning the governor's agenda. Regarding the right of Mexicans to vote abroad, most activists show solidarity with the subject, and even some of them do work on the topic, generally in coordination with Chicago or Los Angeles, but the topic on its own is not an issue for the mainstream Mexican immigrant community. However, when it comes to legalization issues, Houston's activists have strategically developed (more implicitly than explicitly) a working agenda with several members of the Mexican Congress, generally representatives and senators from border states.

In Chicago, both issues are related in a very specific and curious manner: both function in a way that they generally have not required any major mobilization efforts on the part of the activists. Up to now, the struggle for the right to vote has absorbed large quantities of time and human resources, mostly among the leaders that are involved in the issue. After more than five years of letters, national activism on the subject, information campaigns, and meetings with electoral authorities and members of Congress in Mexico, the outcome has been extremely disappointing. The main idea is not only for Mexican immigrants to obtain the right to vote in Mexican elections while working and living in the United States, but to elect their own representatives in order to get direct representation in the Mexican Congress, which is much more complicated than simply casting their vote for presidential elections every six years.

The Chicago leadership, along with other Mexican leaders in the US, currently considers taking the next and extremely challenging stage: mobilizing people. It is a challenging issue if we consider that nobody really knows to what extent Mexicans can be mobilized to get the right to vote and elect representatives of their own in the Mexican Congress. It is also challenging because there is no way to know to what extent the Mexican political parties and Congress, and the federal government, will react after a successful mobilization campaign of Mexican immigrants in US territory, this is, there is no way to foresee any possible outcome after mobilization efforts have been made. Finally, it is challenging because the success of mobilization does not depend only from Chicago, this effort requires a national coordination on

the matter and, with the exception of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, most Mexican communities in other major American cities are not that aware about the struggle as a whole.

However, there are different types of mobilization that are being considered by some leaders: a campaign of signatures, which could be extremely successful, but ineffective in the short and mid terms. Also a well coordinated boycott against the consumption of Mexican products, or coordinated blocking actions of the Mexican consulate in several cities, and even a boycott of the remittances that are regularly sent to Mexico. These last three actions seem more feasible in a symbolic mode than becoming authentic measures of pressure for things to change in Mexico, mostly because the three of them, in the process of mobilization, the activist implicitly makes the mobilized to choose between sacrificing a part of his/her (and his/her family's) well-being in order to enhance the probabilities for them to get the right to vote in Mexican elections... Some activists assert that there is no way for that to happen, that Mexican immigrants came to the US to work, and that the voting issue is completely secondary to the problems that they face on arrival and on everyday life. Although, they also recognize that "you really never know" what the response of the immigrant will be if serious mobilization efforts take place.

Finally, Mexican state governments have increasingly replaced the role of the consulate in the consolidation process of the state federations in Chicago. The state federations' practice of being officially recognized as such by their respective home state government practically eliminates any potential creation of a parallel organization. On the other hand, if the state government enters in conflict with the state federation, for whatever the reason and regardless of the final outcome, chances are high that the state federations will end up better organized and more united.

On the other hand, the simultaneous contact of state federations with politicians of their homeland (governors, city mayors, representatives, and senators), and local politicians allows them to have a transnational vision of certain problems that affect the Mexican immigrant, and they find themselves, from now on then, in the privileged position of choosing allies or targets in the Mexican or American political arenas, depending on the issue and the timing. However, up to

now, state federations have not seen themselves in any kind of need to mobilize their constituency. It seems that the issues of legalization and/or workers rights sooner or later will knock their doors, and the time of true will come regarding their mobilization potential.

Final Remarks

Mobilization efforts of Mexican immigrants in Chicago have been linked more to Mexican state's organizing efforts in the US and to ethnic machine politics in the city. Mobilization efforts of Mexican immigrants in Houston have been less linked to Mexican state efforts and, to a certain extent, more linked to mainstream, 'Anglo' assimilatory processes of **political incorporation**. Mexican immigrants in Chicago are experiencing a process of segmented assimilation, and expectations are that full political incorporation of Mexican immigrants can be reached through a major legalization of undocumented immigrants. In any case, most actors consider that political mobilization of Mexican immigrants is already a way of incorporating this population into the political system of the city.

In Chicago, machine politics is an essential factor to understand the political incorporation of minorities by the local political system. Although Mexicans generally have been considered the last of the "major-league players" in the process, the political structure of the city in the last fifty years has shaped their slow integration into local politics. Moreover, Chicago is one of the most segregated cities in the country, and this is pointed out as a potential source of strength for political mobilization.

The majority of Chicagoans have lived in neighborhoods with strictly delineated *de facto* borders, giving the inhabitants and each neighborhood an impression of being permanently isolated from the rest of the city. Such isolation enhances nationalist feelings and group consciousness among ethnic groups whenever the community has to solve a problem. This leaves the doors open in developing a process of segmented political assimilation, as ethnic community leaders use to deal with their community-neighborhood problems by consulting their options first with their respective aldermen. In theory this works if the alderman shares the ethnic identity of

their constituency, although this is not always the case, and even if it would be the case, the fact that the alderman has a Mexican-origin ethnic background “does not mean that the results will always favor the interest of the Mexican community,” in accordance to a local activist.

In Houston, assimilatory tendencies work straight forward, with practically no middle-of-the-road points in the process. Although legalization is also seen as an essential component in the process of political incorporation, it seems that Mexicans get involved in a winner-takes-all dynamic, in which the winner goes from being a Mexican immigrant to becoming a US citizen who lives in Texas, and then the individual is incorporated into political life. This generally happens with second generation immigrants. There is no hard evidence about systematic or institutionalized processes of political mobilization of Mexican immigrants in Houston. Low levels of political mobilization among Mexican immigrants have led to low levels of political incorporation and participation. In Texas, citizenship does matter.

However, things are changing in Houston, and changing fast. On the one hand, some local politicians consider that regardless of their citizenship status, Mexican immigrants are “citizens of the city” of Houston. They represent more than ten percent of the total population, and they are a component of the city’s economy that cannot just be ignored. They represent tax revenues for the city and the state, and they require the most elemental services from the city as well. From this perspective, mainstream local politicians cannot afford anymore to ignore the presence of Mexican immigrants, mostly when it comes to the allocation of city resources in order to address their constituency’s needs.

On the other hand, recent organizational and mobilization efforts among immigrants have proved to be extremely successful at a local level. ARCA’s ingenious dealings with the INS regarding late amnesty cases, and the Coalition for Higher Education for Immigrant Students’ efforts to grant higher education to the immigrant population, are examples reinforcing the idea that through the process of nonelectoral mobilization, political incorporation is definitely a reachable goal for noncitizens in Texas. Through the whole process of mobilizing and organizing

immigrants in order to reach their objectives, the leadership of these organizations has built strong links with local, state, and national level politicians. They single out these links as essential in accomplishing their aims, although they also point out that hardly anything can be done without a good mobilization plan, and well developed organizational skills.

Finally, I would like to do some reflection regarding the report's main findings under the light of three issues: transnational politics, the mobilization process of ethnic communities in an urban context, and empowerment of the immigrant community. Within a frame of **transnational politics**, the role of the host and home state in the process of immigrant mobilization becomes essential for its understanding. But some questions need to be addressed in the researcher's agenda in order to understand the role of mobilization processes within the frame of transnational politics.

For example, what types of organizations are considered transnational organizations when dealing with immigrant mobilization in a host society? A conventional answer would be that any organization that has a transnational constituency (i.e.: home nationals living in a host society) is considered a transnational organization. Other views would also focus on the nature of the organization's activities: as far as these organizations have a transnational constituency, and as far as they do get involved in transnational activities, they are considered to be transnational organizations. When addressing the transnational nature of an organization's activities, there are at least two perspectives that are brought into discussion. The one that states that it is enough for a political organization to address the immigrants' interests back home, including the relations with the home state, and the one that proposes that the organization can be considered transnational mostly if its political agenda (which may include actions of mobilization) addresses immigrants' interests in both places, back home, with the home state, and in the locality where immigrants live, with the host state.

Regardless of the status that can be granted to an organization in a transnational framework, Mexican immigrants and leaders ponder different mobilization strategies when addressing host

or home political targets. The probable outcome for each action is different by nature: locally speaking, incorporation into the host political system is a feasible outcome of political mobilization of Mexican immigrants. The change of Mexican politics and/or policies as the result of political mobilization of Mexican citizens living in the US is another feasible outcome.

Sometimes an organization may have the capacity to deal with a parallel agenda (state federations in Chicago) of this sort, although it is mostly under the coalition format (at a local, state, and even national level) that immigrant political organizations in Houston and Chicago exert a parallel agenda. In any case, we can see that there are different levels and ways of exerting transnational politics in organizational and mobilization terms. This may give political scientists, mainly those who deal with transnational issues, a major margin of action when dealing with the substantive concept and complex nature of “transnationalism.”

Addressing the issue of **immigrant mobilization**, this report points out that, mostly because of the influence that exerts on the community different contexts of reception and different levels of organizational and political engagement by the Mexican consulate, Mexicans are by no means a monolithic group. Houston tends to mobilize on an issue-by-issue basis, while Chicago exercises a more institutionalized approach in dealing with issues. This also explains the dormant character of local coalitions in Houston; coalitions that are created for a specific issue tend to lower their activity through time, to the extent that it may even seem that they do not exist anymore. But as soon as the issue gets a new turn or comes back to life, the coalition does catch up right away.

From an organizational perspective, in Chicago the problem is how to sustain coalitions, while in Houston is how to institutionalize community-based organizations. In Chicago, the unit of mobilization is the family and the neighborhood, whereas in Houston is mostly the individual and, to a lesser extent, the family. In Chicago, legalization, Mexican electoral politics, and immigrant workers rights are the main issues, whereas in Houston the issues are the same with the exception of Mexican electoral politics, which is not an issue at all. In Chicago, the traditional Mexican leadership is rapidly becoming familiar with the political advantages of

knowing how the local system works. In Houston, a new generation of leaders, along with the traditional leadership, both go together through a similar process.

Finally, the urban context in which immigrant mobilization takes place definitely leaves its mark when addressing the issue of **community empowerment**. The higher the levels of political mobilization, participation and incorporation of a community, the higher the levels of empowerment that an ethnic community expects in a context of urban politics. Machine politics in Chicago shapes and defines the empowerment potential of practically any ethnic minority in the city. In Houston, being or not a citizen is the driving force behind the limits of empowerment, although city and state politics are the keys that are opening many doors throughout the process.

However, empowerment can be also the result of transnational politics, through coordinated actions between host and home states, without necessarily entering into the mobilization-participation-incorporation process. For example, the official recognition of the Mexican consular ID (*Matricula Consular*) by the city of Chicago, by the police department of Houston, or by an important part of the bank system in both cities is a measure that definitely contributes to the empowerment of the community. An important conclusion of this work is that the interaction between local and transnational politics explains different levels of empowerment of the home community in the host society.

Also, the increasingly awareness of the immigrant leadership to develop a political agenda on both sides of the Rio Bravo, or the eager willingness of local and state American politicians (mostly those with a rich Mexican-origin constituency in their districts in both cities) to enter in contact with their Mexican counterparts to deal with the issues that affect their Mexican constituency, are clear signs that empowerment for the immigrant community comes as a combination of local and transnational politics. Recognition of American politicians that Mexican immigrants are “citizens of the city,” is the first step in recognizing that Mexican immigrants are already part of American politics. Recognition of Mexican politicians that Mexican immigrants living in American soil have an important role in the political future of

Mexican politics, is the first step in recognizing that the future is already here.

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A N N E X

Members of the following institutions or organizations were interviewed in the preparation of this report:

Chicago

American Friends Service Committee
Anonymous Interviewees
Archdiocese of Chicago
Casa Aztlán
Catholic Parishes in the Chicago area
Centro Legal Sin Fronteras
Chicago City Council
Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues
Coalición Internacional de Mexicanos en el Exterior
Commission on Human Relations, City of Chicago
Coordinadora de Organizaciones Mexicanas del Medio Oeste
De Paul University
Durango Unido
Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en el Exterior
Guerrero Federation
Heartland Alliance
Hispanic Ministry, Archdiocese of Chicago

Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Illinois House of Representatives
Illinois State Senate
Little Village Community Development Corporation
Mexican American Chamber of Commerce of Illinois
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
Mexican Consulate
México Sin Fronteras
National Center for Latinos with Disabilities
Partido de la Revolución Democrática - Illinois
Pilsen Neighbors Community Council
Pro-PAN Illinois
Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, CLC
The Resurrection Project
United Methodist Church
United Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
University of Notre Dame
West Town Leadership United
Zacatecas Federation

Houston

AFL-CIO
American Friends Service Committee
Anonymous Interviewees
Association for Residency and Citizenship of America
Carpenters Union
Casa Guanajuato
Casa Juan Diego
Catholic Campaign of Human Development
Catholic Parishes in the Houston area
Coalición de Texas por la Dignidad y la Amnistía
Coalición Internacional de Mexicanos en el Exterior
Comerciantes Latinos Unidos en Houston
Comité de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Mexicano
El Dorado Communications
Gulfton Area Neighborhood Organization / Central American Refugee Center
Hispanic Ministry, Diocese of Galveston-Houston
Houston City Council
Houston Independent School District
Houston International University
League of United Latin American Citizens
Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Mexican Consulate
Mexican Institute of Culture and Education
Mexicanos en Acción
National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund
National Organizers Alliance
Planning & Development Department, City of Houston
Public Safety & Drug Policy, Office of the Mayor
Revista Crónica Internacional
Semana Newspaper
Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, CLC
Texas Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance, Associated Catholic Charities
Texas House of Representatives
Texas State Senate
University of Houston
US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission