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**Vocal and Visible:
Latino Political Mobilization in the 21st Century**

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Introduction

Chanting “Si se puede” and “We are not criminals”, in the spring of 2006 scores of Latinas/os marched in cities small and large throughout the United States in protest against pending congressional legislation criminalizing undocumented migrants and those that supported them. The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) estimated that more than 2 million people in over 130 cities participated in the various pro-immigrant marches and rallies that occurred between March and April 2006 (NCLR 1). Importantly, what began as a typical movement to mobilize the Latina/o population against the legislation proposed by Congressman James Sensenbrenner, and approved December 16, 2005 by the House of Representatives in a vote of 239 to 182 (HR 4437), became a pivotal and stunning example of political activism of the 21st Century.

Surprising the American political elite and general populace, the pro-immigrant rights marches signified for many ‘the awakening of the sleeping giant’ – the stirring of Latina/o political activism which in due time has the potential to translate into sustained political mobilization and empowerment. Although Latina/o activism is in itself not a new phenomenon, the marches were unprecedented in terms of size and scope. In Los Angeles alone, crowd estimates ranged from 500,000 to 750,000 people joining the peaceful *Gran Marcha* of late March 2006 making it the biggest protest in the city’s history. Importantly, this march served as a model of effective community mobilization that helped inspire hundreds of other similar marches throughout the nation in the months that followed.

To better understand the significance and implications of these 2006 pro-immigrant rights marches on Latina/o political behaviour, it is imperative to study why this particular example of Latina/o mobilization proved to be so effectively organized. Exactly how was the ‘sleeping giant’ finally awoken? Or more specifically, what methods of political mobilization were chosen by the *Gran Marcha* organizers? Moreover, how do these strategies differ from those employed in the past, and what are the implications of employing new techniques of political mobilization?

To address these questions, the paper is divided into three distinct sections. After this introduction, I discuss the causal factors that led to effective organization of the *Gran Marcha* which took place on March 25, 2006 in Los Angeles, California. The evidence suggests that although traditional forms of political mobilization were initially employed, organizers were acutely aware of the benefits of utilizing modern technology and the mass media to further publicize and galvanize support for their cause. Three factors in particular proved critical to the success of the movement: the Spanish-language media, the World Wide Web, and the use of text-messages. The organizational success of the *Gran Marcha* was largely due to the dominant role of Spanish-language radio in providing the community with not only the information needed to make participation possible but also with 'rules of engagement' and the rationale behind the protest. There is also evidence of a heightened use of modern technology as a resource for political mobilization. Particular attention is placed in this study on those new resources employed to develop a modern, hi-tech organizational strategy that markedly departs from traditional forms of Latina/or political mobilization.

The last section of this study examines the implications of the use of modern technology as a tool to empower the Latina/o community. Most notably, evidence from the *Gran Marcha* contradicts the image of Latina/os as a political community lacking access to modern technology and thus at a disadvantage regarding possessing access to information and issue-advocacy networks. The idea that Latinas/os would not politically benefit from advances in communication technologies is found in work produced by our government as well as in academia. According to a National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) report, there exists a 'digital divide' that threatens to undermine the ability of United States minority groups to communicate effectively with peers and access relevant information (NTIA 1-5). Moreover, in 2001, Political Scientist Pippa Norris argued that the political role of the internet largely reflects and thereby reinforces, rather than transforms, the structural features of the American political system. This suggests that economically marginalized groups, such as a sizeable percentage of Latinas/os, would not be likely to employ the internet as a tool to organize and promote civic engagement (Norris, 3). But the events of this past spring indicate that the Latina/o community is crossing the 'digital divide' thereby creating new possibilities for collective action and organizational linkage.

In sum, I argue that the success of the spring 2006 pro-immigrant rights movement marks a critical juncture for the community. The lessons learned from this

past spring regarding how to effectively organize political activism via modern technology and the mass media are already beginning to be employed in other arenas of political participation (Mittelstadt A1). Therefore, as a community we must continue to employ various methods of mobilization that draw on both traditional and modern organizational resources **Explaining how the 'sleeping giant' was awoken**

To better understand the contemporary nature of Latina/o political mobilization, in the following pages I examine the variety of strategies utilized by the *Gran Marcha* organizers and participants to mobilize attendance. Traditionally, the Latina/o community's ability to mobilize has been constrained due to the lack of institutional, organizational, and financial resources (Shorris 428, Quiñones 208-14). For example, community ownership of mass communication outlets often was limited in scope and geographic areas. Although Latina/o media ownership grew over time, coverage of political events and employment of the media as a tool to organize civic activity did not immediately follow (Gómez 225, Meier 256-8). Not until after WWII do we see a surge in terms of Latina/o conventional political participation (i.e. local community organization efforts, local electoral politics, coalitional alliances and church-based community networks (Quiñones 204-20).

But large-scale coordination has always been problematic for the Latina/o community. Despite constituting a significant and growing proportion of the population of many American cities, mobilizing the community to levels commensurate with their population has remained an elusive goal. Some scholars posit that this difficulty arises due to the high number of small Latina/o organizations, each with their own leadership and set of priorities that make larger intra-group coordination problematic (Meier 250). Additionally, money has also played a factor – financial constraints have limited mass publicity campaigns, lobbying efforts, and the ability to transform movements into permanent, professional organizations (Quiñones 208, Shorris 425-8). However, in 2006 the dynamics of Latina/o political mobilization changed due to the heightened use of modern technology by both community leadership and younger members.

To better understand how this process unfolded to produce a more effective use of community media assets it is instructive to review the historical genesis of the *Gran Marcha*. Its organization began in late 2005 when approximately ten groups began to meet at Our Lady Queen of Angels Cathedral to organize a protest denouncing pending federal legislation pertaining to undocumented immigrants (Watanabe A1-3).

Specifically, relatively new organizers such as Jesse Diaz and Javier Rodriguez began planning a number of small-scale events for early 2006 (such as a news conference, petition drive and targeted protests). However, according the organizers themselves, they had “more passion than volunteers, in part because they had split with some labor unions that wanted to focus on honoring Cesar Chavez . . . instead” (Sterngold 2). Additional problems facing the organizers were their lack of money and organization (Watanabe A1, Lovato 12). Therefore initially it appeared that this protest movement would take the form of those before it --a grassroots based organization with the cooperation of various Catholic Churches but subject to splintering and divisions as attempts are made to widen the number of participants.

The critical juncture in terms of political mobilization strategies occurred largely due to the Diaz and Rodriguez’s call for a massive protest march with intensive Spanish-language media involvement. To start this new campaign, on March 14th the group staged a media breakfast to publicize the issue (Stanley 1, WatanabeA1). The evening before the breakfast “Rodriguez received a call from a producer at the morning news program at Univision, the country's largest Spanish-language television network, who wanted to interview the organizers” early that morning (Watanabe A2). To take advantage of this opportunity, organizer Diaz began contacting local Spanish-radio disc jockeys (DJs) who had interviewed him in the past and was successful in getting the very popular Spanish language disc jockey Eddie Sotelo (KSCA’s ‘El Piolin’) to also participate. Not only was the event covered by the radio DJ but Sotelo’s personal connection to the issue led him to devote the next day’s entire four hour show to the issue and upcoming mass march (Ibid, Flaccus 1).

Sotelo’s attention to the protest caused a snowball effect throughout the Spanish-language media. The following week, *Gran Marcha* organizers were inundated with requests for further interviews by many other local Spanish-language radio DJs such as KHJ’s Humberto Luna, KBUE’s Ricardo “El Mandril” Sanchez, and Renan “El Cucuy” Almendarez Coello (Ibid, Glaccus 1). These interviews and frequent on-air discussion of the pending legislation not only further publicized the upcoming mass march (serving as key informational and organizational resource) but it was also instrumental to the organization of a March 20th City Hall promotional event attended by all of the major Spanish-language disc jockeys. This event garnered English-language media attention as well as established some ground ‘rule of behaviour’ for the march (i.e. participants should remain peaceful, clean up after themselves and wave the American flag).

Also involved in the organization and publicity of the *Gran Marcha* were Spanish-language television and print media (Duran, A1). Spanish-language cable stations Univision, TV Azteca and Telemundo also played a part in mobilizing the crowds by educating their audience of the pending legislation and publicizing the *Gran Marcha* (Morales 1). Television coverage gave their audience reasoned justifications for why their participation was a civic right as well as provided organizational information. For example, in Fresno, the day before the march a reporter on Univision announced the time and place where people should meet to drive down to Los Angeles. The reporter even offered advice about the long drive, reminding viewers to check their cars' oil and antifreeze before making the trip (Stanley, 3). The Spanish-language print media also played their role in mobilizing participants as well. In Los Angeles, the local newspaper *La Opinión* published various articles in the days leading up to the protest explaining the pending legislation and its implications for the Latina/o community. The day before the march, it published an extensive article with details for those interested in participating while the March 25th headline was "A las Calles!" (To the Streets!) (Ibid).

As the previous discussion illustrates, various sectors of Spanish-language media played their role in informing the Latina/o community of the reasons behind the *Gran Marcha* and provided useful organizational details such as, time, place, and date. But the 'disc jockey brigade' is considered by many as the critical causal variable for the collection of such large crowds at the protest (Ibid, Stanley A1, Watanabe A2). Although the initial expectations were to draw fewer than 20,000 participants, Los Angeles County police estimated that approximately 500,000 attended. The effectiveness of the 'disc jockey brigade' is further demonstrated by the large percentage of attendees wearing white shirts and avoiding violent confrontations.

Although the role of Spanish-language media cannot be underestimated, I argue that modern technology was employed in other new ways that also proved critical to the success of the *Gran Marcha*. Unlike the more traditional mobilization resource of local media participation and grassroots organizing, the World Wide Web and text messaging were increasingly employed as new mobilization resources and as such led to the incorporation of modern communication strategies to facilitate participation and event knowledge. Many of these technology driven strategies were primarily but not exclusively used by Latina/o youth indicating a potential future source of Latina/o political leadership and modes of participation that cross the 'digital divide'.

In this particular example of Latina/o political mobilization, we see the extensive use of the internet to bolster community activism. A website devoted entirely to the *Gran Marcha* was created, www.march25coalition.org, to serve as a centralized resource center for the protest and served as a key informational resource for interested parties and pre-existing networks active in the cause of immigrant rights. Moreover, religious institutions and issue advocacy groups, such as the Central American Resource Center, the Pomona Day Labor Center, and the Southern California Human Rights Network, also utilized their pre-existing web-sites as means to publicize the *Gran March* (Morales 1). One of the best examples of technology use is the website of Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese which utilized a pre-existing sub-organization (which is figured prominently on its website) to provide their readers with a wide variety of information and access to activists networks (Rico A1). Cardinal Mahoney endorsed the use of the "Justice for Immigrants Campaign" website as a forum to advocate community engagement in the protests of Spring 2006. The Church repeatedly stated that it strongly believed that it was their moral duty to fight against legislation to criminalize the provision of services to illegal immigrants. Accordingly, this website served as a key internet resource regarding not only the details of the legislation (in both English and Spanish) but it helped lay the groundwork for the *Gran Marcha* by including a link to join the Immigrant and Justice Action Network. With free membership, interested parties could get access to a "Parish Kit" which not only provides a statement of the moral justification for advocacy but also 'how to guides' on legislative advocacy, media outreach, establishing a speaker's bureau, and implementing an advocacy campaign in the Parish. Also available via the site were the complete texts of relevant legislation, a detailed roll call tally with congressional maps, a guidebook to the legislative process and congressional contact information. Thus, not only was the website publicizing the upcoming protest but it was acting as a proxy civics course as well -- all in one well organized, bilingual, easy to navigate, free to access website!

Other modern communication mediums employed to encourage participation and mobilize interested parties were MySpace.com, and text-messaging (Lovato 11, Aizenman A1, Mittelstadt A1). Inspired by both personal motivations and the March 18th HBO airing of the film "Walkout" that chronicled the 1968 Chicano student protests against academic discrimination and inadequate institutional facilities, many Latina/o youth were eager to participate in the upcoming pro-immigrant rights protest (Morales 6). To transform this interest into mobilized political activity, many tapped into the

communication technology that they were already accustomed to using the internet, and cell-phones. Many newly interested parties as well, clearly identified as activists, used their MySpace pages to voice their concerns & opinions on HR4437, publicize and encourage others to learn about the issue, and organize participation in the protest marches.

Moreover, text-messaging was also heavily used in both open and covert ways to also publicize the *Gran Marcha*, spread organizational information, coordinate activities, and establish of networks of activist support (Khokha 1, Barco 3). For example, according to one high-school participant, text messaging became a means to covertly spread information and organize transportation to the march so that interested parties could not be identified by school officials and thus have their activities stopped and possibly suffer punitive consequences as threatened by the school administration. Wishing to remain anonymous, the student stated that using text-messaging became an “underground” way to communicate that was not subject to the surveillance of others (Personal interview with the author). Attention should also be given to the increased role that the blog-o-sphere played in publicizing, spreading organizational information, and documenting the events of the *Gran Marcha*. Locally popular blogs such as Latino Blog, BlueLatinos.org, Martini Republic, and personal bloggers (such as Eric Richardson, Don Garza, Jim Winstead and Dave Bullock) frequently discussed the rationality behind the upcoming protest, the ground rules of participation, and analysis of the issue while also posting visual documentation of the protest to their readership. Notably, many of these blogs appealed to second and third generation Latina/os who regularly use the web to discuss social issues and network with like-minded individuals.

Implications of the use of modern technology to mobilize *Gran Marcha* participation

The *Gran Marcha* proved to be extremely impressive not only in terms of size and scope but also in terms of organizational capabilities and participant mobilization. Key to this success was the increased use of new methods based on modern communication technology to improve on the utility of conventional mobilization strategies. While traditional methods such as grass roots organizing and making use of institutional networks continued to be utilized, new mobilization strategies proved critical to making the protest successful.

As a community we need to further mobilize and expand the ways we participate in politics. *La Gran Marcha* and other marches of this past spring mark a

critical departure from traditional Latina/o political mobilization and as such may mark the beginning of a new, wide-spread interest in the political process. The lessons learned are being applied to new arenas of political participation portending a growth of Latino activism and political power. Examples of similar incorporation of modern communication technologies to complement existing mobilization resources can be seen in Dallas, Seattle, San Francisco, and New York (Espinosa 1, Murphy 3, Hendricks A4-5). Importantly, activist networks established are now being used to promote other issues as well as broader forms of conventional political participation demonstrating the development of critical political skills key to obtaining political power.

As the preceding discussion illustrates, 2006 marked a critical juncture for the Latina/o community. Mass civic engagement no longer remains an elusive goal. Key to future political mobilization will be the use of modern communication methods – mass media and the internet -- to motivate and organize a diverse and relatively young community to become politically active. As such not only are Latinas/os crossing the ‘digital divide’ but they are incorporating modern technology as a resource to and strategy for political mobilization. The key element is recognizing that politics is an on-going process. Therefore Latina/o political mobilization and activism must also be understood as a continuous process that must be sustained and expanded for us to reach the full potential of our political power.

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