

5 Multiple Immigrant Identities & Community Organizations

*L*abor organizations and worker centers, advocacy organizations, social service organizations, ethnic voluntary organizations, and religious institutions are a key component helping to create the conditions under which immigrants will become involved in U.S. politics. These organizations do not necessarily have political mobilization as their primary motive, nor are they particularly influential within the larger political system. Yet whether through direct political mobilization or indirectly through broader measures of socialization, community organizations clearly constitute a component of immigrant political participation and should not be ignored.

Immigrants' characteristics influence the kinds of activities that these community organizations pursue. The members of ethnic and racial groups have multiple identities relating to nationality, gender, class, occupation, and even hometown. Immigrants experience the world not just as members of racial and ethnic groups but also as workers, residents, parents, women and men, and in a host of other ways. Even within groups, cleavages are apparent. Both the Chinese and Mexican immigrant communities have major internal divisions based on language, class, region of origin, length of residence, and religion. Although race or ethnicity is often an important starting point for mobilization, few community organizations mobilize solely around those identities. Instead, they choose to expand their constituencies through appeals to more than one identity. The multiple identities of an immigrant encompass ethnicity but are also fluid and evolving. In responding to those identities, the concerns of one community organization can (and often do) intersect with concerns of other organizations, giving rise not to ethnic or racial isolation but to coalition building as part of the effort to address issues politically. Contrary to the claims that activities of organizations serving immigrant com-

munities reinforce ethnic balkanization and divisions in U.S. society, community organizations' activities apparently can cross-cut immigrant identities in surprising and sometimes powerful ways.

Whereas mainstream political parties appeal to voters only through the largest, most homogenizing of identities (Democrat or Republican), community organizations embrace and reinforce specific identities and their accompanying orientations and concerns. Diversity within an ethnic group is an important factor in political mobilization because internal cleavages within a particular community provide a heightened number of dimensions around which an organization can choose to mobilize and build coalitions.¹ Community organizations are thus well-positioned for issue-based mobilization.

The internal diversity within an ethnic group constitutes an important factor in immigrants' political mobilization. Further, the structures internal to specific immigrant communities drive the ways that community organizations choose to mobilize diverse elements within those communities. Attention to the key dimensions that define internal cleavages within a particular ethnic community reveal these structures. The activities of community organizations reflect the diversity of needs, resources, and identities of local immigrant communities and have led to new possibilities for immigrant political mobilization.

Organizing around Ethnicity: A Threat to American Democracy?

Do groups that organize around race or ethnicity threaten American democracy and civic culture? Some academics and journalists have voiced the opinion that the preservation and maintenance of ethnic ties threaten American civic culture, national identity, and social harmony (Skerry 1993; Geyer 1996; Connerly 2003). Samuel P. Huntington argues that since the 1960s, ideologies of multiculturalism and diversity have assailed "America's core Anglo-Protestant culture and its political creed of liberty" (2004, 17). He suggests that the presence of a large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants who maintain a Latino identity may bifurcate America along linguistic and cultural lines. Among Mexican immigrants, "the rise of group identities based on race, ethnicity, and gender over national identity" poses a serious challenge to national identity and threatens to "divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages" (30, 32). Other scholars fear that organizational elites impose a

“minority-group perspective” on rank-and-file immigrants, which is likely to create divisions in society as a whole (Schlesinger 1993; Skerry 1993). From this viewpoint, organizations based on ethnicity overemphasize minority racial status, work against Americanization, and lead to ethnic conflict and competition. For example, Peter Skerry asserts that Mexican American community leaders are “tutoring Mexican Americans to define themselves as a victimized group that cannot advance without the help of racially assigned benefits” (1993, 7).

In response to the critics of identity groups, Amy Gutmann (2003) notes that such groups, in and of themselves, are neither bad nor good for America’s democratic culture. Some may be problematic because they promote negative stereotypes and pursue unjust ends. For example, identity groups that raise group identity above justice are inconsistent with democracy. Others may occupy a legitimate place in the United States and may be “important, indeed even valuable, in democratic politics” (8). Identity groups may help to combat discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other group identities. Gutmann argues that “when they struggle for greater civic equality for a subordinated group, identity groups use their political power in defense of democratic justice” (193). In fact, Gutmann claims the failure of traditional interest groups gave rise to identity groups representing ethnic and racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled. Not only have these groups been at the forefront of the fight for their civil rights, but they have also defended “the application of universal and egalitarian principles—nondiscrimination, equal pay for equal work, equal opportunity, civic equality—to correct long existing injustices that interest group politics have passed by” (20). When ethnic organizations function in this way, they act as a powerful force for democratic inclusion rather than exclusion.

Critics see ethnic groups’ demands for the right to organize around ethnicity as a threat to mutual solidarity. According to theorist Will Kymlicka, this view fails to recognize that such demands “are primarily demands for inclusion for full membership in the larger society. To view this as a threat to stability or solidarity is implausible, and often reflects an underlying ignorance or intolerance of these groups” (1995, 192). Those who believe that organization around ethnic or racial interests will divide American society also ignore ethnic organizations’ and group-based claims’ long history in American politics (Jacobson 1995). Political organizing based on

group affiliations can be found throughout American history. European immigrant groups arriving at the turn of the twentieth century established ethnic clubs and voluntary associations (A. Lin forthcoming). As Lawrence H. Fuchs observes, “Nineteenth-century immigrant groups—particularly the non-Protestants—were not assimilated through friendships and intermarriage into American society. In large measure, they confined their primary relationships to members of their own groups (even through the second and third generations) throughout all stages of the life cycle. For the most part, their friends, dates, mates, and fellow churchmen and clubmen came from the same background” (1968, 3). The presence of ethnic associations does not preclude acculturation and may in fact be a necessary component of it in that such groups help to create an environment of viable social reproduction for immigrants by negotiating language issues, assisting with finding work and housing, and providing emotional support and validation.

One reason that groups emphasizing positive aspects of identity arise is to publicly organize against negative stereotypes based on ascriptive identity (Gutmann 2003, 11; Bedolla 2005). The arguments of Huntington, Skerry, and others overlook the possibility that an ethnic organization that may appear to be promoting a “minority-group perspective” instead might actually be reflecting an identity that mainstream society has imposed on the group the organization represents. Through policies such as Proposition 187 and through the perpetuation of stereotypes, American society marks groups such as Mexican Americans or Chinese Americans as racial outsiders. (For examples of the racialization of contemporary immigrants, see chap. 2.) Splintering occurs less as a consequence of self-identification than as a result of hostility and discrimination exhibited by mainstream society, which reinforces immigrants’ self-perception as a racial minority.

Huntington (2004) and his colleagues likely would also view ethnic organizations with skepticism since many have their roots in the “deconstructionist movement.” Prior to the 1960s, Huntington asserts, Americans were, or at least hoped to be, a nation unified by a shared Anglo-Protestant core culture, dedicated to the liberal-democratic principles of the American creed. The movements of the 1960s, which promoted group rights at the expense of individual rights, began to undo the core culture and belief system: “The deconstructionists promoted programs to enhance the status and influence of subnational racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. They encouraged immigrants to maintain their birth-country cul-

tures, granted them legal privileges denied to native-born Americans, and denounced the idea of Americanization as un-American” (142).

However, a more nuanced view challenges the assumption that a zero-sum relationship exists between group rights and individual rights (Kymlicka 1995; Gutmann 2003). Kymlicka (1995) argues that the demands of ethnic groups are quite consistent with principles of individual freedom and social justice. He claims that membership in a societal culture such as an ethnic group provides a strong basis for individual identity and action: “Cultural membership provides us with an intelligible context of choice, and a secure sense of identity and belonging, that we call upon in confronting questions about personal values and projects” (105). Individuals make decisions about how to lead their lives in part through considerations related to cultural practices and associations (126). Therefore, an organization that supports an ethnic or a racial group can promote individual rights, such as the freedom of individual choice, as long as it does not allow the group to dominate other groups or oppress its own members. Consistent with this view, Gutmann claims that “free people mutually identify in many politically relevant ways, and a society that prevents identity groups from forming is a tyranny” (2003, 4).

Groups that organize around ethnicity can promote democratic inclusion in a manner consistent with democratic principles of individual choice, freedom, and social justice. Critics who claim that these groups threaten a unified American culture fail to recognize that mobilization occurs around multiple identities, not just around race or ethnicity alone.

Organizing around Multiple Identities

The belief that ethnic organizations may lead to balkanization at the expense of the common good is contradicted by mobilizations that cross-cut ethnic, racial, and other identities. Many community organizations organize immigrants around their identities as workers, residents of a particular neighborhood, or individuals concerned about inadequate urban services. This strategy works for organizations because immigrants experience the world not just as members of racial and ethnic groups but also as workers, residents, parents, women and men, and in a host of other ways. In contrast to the assumptions of those who oppose ethnic-based organizing, immigrant participation in politics is likely to be based on a broad range of intersecting identities and issue concerns.

In New York, a Mexican man who had been in the country for only

three years and did not have legal papers had joined the Catholic-affiliated Asociación de Tepeyac after hearing about it from members of his church choir who were active in the organization. He was acutely aware that Mexicans were discriminated against “because we’re dark and short, and we don’t speak English. Mexicans are one of the most discriminated in the United States because of race, lack of documentation, and because we don’t speak English.” His motivation for joining, however, was somewhat broader: “I’m supporting a political struggle in the United States even though I can’t vote . . . because of its goal, for amnesty, and they help immigrants.” As a member of the association, he had taken part in protests outside the U.S. Immigration and Nationalization Services Office to call for amnesty for those whose immigration status had not been regularized.

In California, many of the Mexican and Chinese immigrants I interviewed had become more interested in American politics when confronted with ballot propositions widely viewed as racist. However, in this case, in many of their aspects the propositions also indicated broader discrimination against all immigrants, regardless of race. Proposition 187, placed on the state ballot in 1994, sought to restrict undocumented immigrants’ access to social services and nonemergency health care and to deny their children access to public education. Proposition 209 was a 1996 California measure that prohibited the state government; local governments; public universities, colleges, and school districts; and other government institutions from practicing affirmative action that used race or ethnicity as a criterion. These measures would have affected many of California’s immigrant groups. A Chinese immigrant in Los Angeles said that discrimination was one of the most important issues facing Chinese immigrants, and he noted, “Propositions such as 187, that’s the biggest problem.” A Mexican immigrant college student in Los Angeles who had worked with a student group to promote affirmative action programs in California claimed that it was stressful and time-consuming to get politically involved, but he had become active because “some new laws, like Proposition 187 or 209, have affected me directly.”

The power of intersecting identities and issue concerns is apparent in other cases. In New York, a Chinese immigrant with a strong professional identity as a lawyer joined an Asian American lawyers’ association that supports Asian American candidates and elected officials as well as pursues the more predictable goal of lobbying the governor and state legislature on matters related to the law profession generally. Another Chinese immi-

grant revealed that her identity as a Christian drove her political participation. Despite a lack of interest in politics, she voted regularly because “I know that it’s my duty. Every year I vote. The pastor challenged us. We should do it. It is the duty of the Christians.” Several immigrants mentioned their role as parents. A Mexican in Los Angeles said that Proposition 187 had motivated his political involvement because he was concerned about how it would affect his children, while a Chinese immigrant there had become more interested in politics because “my children are raised here and I want to know [about] anything in America that might affect them.” A Chinese woman in New York was active as a Boy Scout den mother, volunteered at her children’s school, went to church regularly, and was a member of the Organization of Chinese Americans, which she described as a political advocacy association. She had become involved in this group because “it’s an opportunity to show support for the community and kids and to have a voice. To act as an example for children to follow in community service.”

Immigrants’ interest in the American political system is clearly driven by multiple identities and a complex and overlapping set of concerns. Ethnic identity and perceptions of racial discrimination are part of that mix, as are other types of identities and issues. Because community groups—even those based on ethnicity or race—organize immigrants around multiple and often intersecting identities, there is little danger that the activities of these organizations will reinforce ethnocentricity or racial divisions in the United States. In the case of the immigrants interviewed in Los Angeles, it was clear that a local issue united Chinese and Mexicans along with many other nationalities in a political struggle against a local proposition.

How multiple identities are deployed in immigrant organizing is consistent with Seyla Benhabib’s claim that no identity or culture is reducible to a single or discrete whole. Rather, cultures (and identities) are “complex human practices of signification and representation, of organization and attribution, which are internally riven by conflicting narratives” (2002, ix).² Members of a cultural group cohere because they “experience their traditions, stories, rituals and symbols, tools, and material living conditions through shared, albeit contested and contestable, narrative accounts” (5). Benhabib emphasizes that claims based on shared culture are not necessarily incompatible with recognition of internal distinctions and differences within that culture. Similarly, Gutmann suggests that “group identification is socially significant but not comprehensive of indi-

vidual identity” and that “a person may make a group identification more or less comprehensive of his or her identity” (2003, 10). Individuals have multiple group identifications, and their individual agency modifies their group identifications just as group identifications shape individual agency. Individuals who mutually identify around a social marker often join together in a politically relevant and socially identified group.

The fact that group identities are constructed and therefore fluid does not mean that they are unreal or without meaning. Behavior and attitudes can be shaped by imagined ideas or concepts (Benhabib 2002, 7). Like Gutmann and Kymlicka, Benhabib suggests that the politics of ethnic or racial recognition can have an important place in democratic politics. Organizing around race or ethnicity,

instead of leading to cultural separatism or balkanization, can initiate critical dialogue and reflection in public life about the very identity of the collectivity itself. Through such dialogue and reflection, the inevitable and problematical interdependence of images and conceptions of self and other are brought to light. Narratives of self and other are now rewoven together to take account of new contestations, retellings, and repositionings. The politics of complex cultural dialogue indeed involves the reconstitutions of the boundaries of the polity through the recognition of the claims of groups that have been wronged historically and whose very suffering and exclusion has, in some deep sense, been constitutive of the seemingly unitary identity of the “we” who constitutes the polity. . . . Such processes . . . offer a clear alternative to the politics of cultural enclavism in that they allow democratic dissent, debate, contestation, and challenge to be at the center of practices through which cultures are appropriated. (70–71)

Critics of ethnic organizations, then, wrongly assume that group membership is static and that boundaries of ethnic organizations are rigid and impermeable (Benhabib 2002). Contestation over group boundaries, inclusion, priorities, and mission is a common feature of ethnic organizations. Internal divisions and the resulting deliberation often lead to organizational change and renegotiation regarding group membership. The experience of Chinese Americans United for Self Empowerment (CAUSE) is a case in point. At its inception, CAUSE focused on empowering the Chinese American community in the West San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles County, and its executive director was a man. Eventually,

CAUSE responded to claims outside the Chinese American community and to reflect its panethnic concerns changed its name to the Center for Asian Americans United for Self-Empowerment. Its second executive director was a Chinese American woman who employed several non-Chinese women as staff members. This radically transformed both the ethnic identity and gender dynamics of the organization. The mistaken assumption that ethnic boundaries are rigid underlies fears that ethnic organizations will contribute to the fragmentation of American society. Such assumptions deny contestations over difference taking place within organizations and with the larger political sphere on a day-to-day basis. A more complex view of identity would allow critics of ethnic organizations to see that balkanization is unlikely when the boundaries of groups are fluid and evolving.

The likelihood that political mobilization by ethnic-based community organizations will provoke ethnic divisiveness is also minimal given that some of these groups have forged multiethnic or multiracial alliances. Many ethnic organizations make substantive efforts to interact with a range of ethnic or racial communities. For example, New York's Chinese Staff and Workers' Association was founded as an independent union of Chinese restaurant workers. Today, however, it has Mexican members, and some of its Chinese American staff are multilingual, speaking English, Cantonese, and Spanish. The association is developing a campaign around worker's compensation issues and has been recruiting participants among both immigrants and U.S.-born whites and blacks. It also was the main force in creating the Latino Workers' Center, which is located in a predominantly Latino Lower East Side neighborhood. A more informal example can be found in a meeting that I attended in Los Angeles that included a multiethnic coalition of union leaders. Discussion revolved around issues of ethnic inclusion and diversity.

These are not merely ad hoc alliances, however. Umbrella groups have appeared that cover organizations serving Latino, Asian, African, Caribbean, and European communities. A notable case is the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), an "umbrella advocacy organization for approximately 200 groups in New York State that work with 'newcomers' to our country—immigrants, refugees, and asylees. . . . The NYIC's membership includes immigrant-rights advocates, immigrant community leaders and service providers, numerous community-based ethnic and non-profit human service organizations, and leaders from labor, academia, and

the legal professions. Utilizing this multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-sector base, the NYIC provides the opportunity for members to collaborate and implement strategies to address their common concerns" (New York Immigration Coalition n.d.). The coalition covers a broad range of immigrant-serving community organizations, including the American Association of Jews from the Former USSR (New York chapter), the Caribbean Women's Health Association, the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, the Chinese Progressive Association, the Latin American Integration Center, Alianza Dominicana, and Asian Americans for Equality, among others. Coalition building around multiple identities is a long-standing practice among advocacy groups. As Gutmann notes, "Many ascriptive groups, such as the NAACP and NOW, have never been only for themselves. Justice-friendly ascriptive groups often join coalitions for democratic justice" (2003, 129).

Interracial alliance building occurs in grassroots efforts as well as in the realm of electoral politics. Latinos, Asian Americans, whites, and blacks participated together in the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. Those groups have also worked together to strengthen minority political representation by, for example, supporting candidates and participating in the redistricting process (Wei 1993; Saito 1998; Saito and Park 2000; Lien 2001). These instances of multiracial coalition building belie the assumption that organizations with deep connections to a particular ethnic community will undermine core democratic values and promote racial separation or balkanization in the United States.

Labor as a Mobilizing Identity

When asked about their participation in politics, one of the most powerful identities invoked by immigrants was that of worker. In New York, I interviewed several Chinese garment workers who were active in their local unions, which had involved these women in politics by having them distribute political education flyers, help with the advertising of events, and participate in phone banks during elections. When asked about the most serious problems facing their communities, these women focused on labor-related issues, complaining of long hours and low wages and of work being sent overseas to foreign factories. One woman said, "If you leave early, the boss will yell at you. It's very difficult, hard work because they want both quality and quantity. They're very hard to please." A Mexican

immigrant started volunteering with the Harlem-based Centro de la Comunidad Mexicana de Nueva York (CECOMEX), which works with Mexican immigrants, after learning about it from fellow restaurant workers.³ CECOMEX, he said, “helps out Mexicans with problems with employers, helps them find jobs, and helps them open bank accounts.” When asked about the most important issues facing Mexican immigrants in New York City, he listed the detainment of those without legal documents and worker exploitation, two issues that cut across racial and ethnic lines.

Gender as a Mobilizing Identity

Concerns arising from gender identity can provide a powerful catalyst for political involvement among immigrants. Peter Kwong (1996, 1997), who has studied the approximately five hundred garment factories that employ twenty thousand Chinese women in New York’s Chinatown, recognizes that these low-paying, substandard factories are a potential site for political resistance and activism. Other scholars make similar observations. Miriam Ching Louie notes recent efforts by Asian Immigrant Women’s Advocates to organize “immigrant women working in the garment, electronics, hotel, restaurant, nursing home, janitorial, and other low-wage industries in the San Francisco Bay Area and Santa Clara County’s ‘Silicon Valley’” (1997, 128).

Examining gender differences helps reveal how organizations adapt their mobilization strategies to meet a multiplicity of immigrant concerns. One Mexican immigrant in Queens who was very active in her church choir, the neighborhood association, and as a member of a *ballet folklórico* also joined the Queens Women’s Network, an advocacy group dedicated to raising money for abused women. She got involved with the network because she wanted to see improvement in women’s lives. A Mexican immigrant woman in Los Angeles echoed that concern when she noted that the community’s most serious concerns include domestic violence and access to medical care for immigrant children. Asked if it was important for Chinese women to be active in U.S. politics, a Chinese immigrant woman in New York exclaimed, “Yes! You can’t let men have all the power to do everything. We have home life and job, too. Women should be able to do it!”

Some organizations that work with immigrant communities explicitly mobilize them around gender-specific issues and concerns. Thousands of

United Farm Workers members and their sympathizers marched in Watsonville, California, in April 1997 to draw attention to organizing efforts among local strawberry workers. They protested not only poor pay but also the sexual harassment of women workers, submission to which was sometimes a condition of employment (Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project 1997, 3). Workers' Awaaz, which organizes South Asian low-wage workers in New York City, runs public campaigns around labor issues and educates live-in female South Asian domestic workers about labor and immigration laws. The organization also files legal cases against—and even demonstrates in front of the homes of—exploitative employers. To educate the public about their campaigns, it has run stories in feminist publications, such as *Ms. Magazine* (Workers' Awaaz, n.d.; Dalal 1998).

In addition to its multilingual outreach and education on the welfare system, employment discrimination, and the citizenship process, the NYIC engages in gender-related advocacy. In 2000, NYIC's Detention Working Group met with managers of the Varick Street Detention Center and district managers and staff of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to discuss ways to improve conditions in detention centers. This advocacy effort not only embraced a diversity of ethnic and racial groups but also focused on the plight of women asylum seekers: "Since the immigration law of 1996, asylum-seekers arriving at U.S. borders are sent back to their home countries, usually on the next plane, unless they can prove their fear of persecution upon return. Immigration officers often do not understand the language spoken by the asylum-seeker and ask flight attendants, who often work for the same government the asylum-seeker is fleeing, to translate. Women are often ashamed to tell a male translator or immigration officer stories of rape or abuse" (New York Immigration Coalition 2000, 4).

The Mothers of East Los Angeles was founded in 1986 to protest the building of a state prison in the community. This organization, which was led by East Los Angeles Latina women, ran a community education campaign, held weekly candlelight vigils, and lobbied in the state capitol. Many scholars, activists, and community members attribute the state's 1992 decision not to build the prison there to the group's actions (Pardo 1998). The organization has subsequently stood at the forefront of many fights against environmental racism in East Los Angeles. The Mothers of East Los Angeles, which emphasizes motherhood and the "mothering of

the community,” has utilized that particular gender identity as the foundation for community organizing (Medeiros 2004).

In the mid-1990s, the Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association launched its Women’s Empowerment Project and Occupational Health Committee. According to the association newsletter,

Injured women built up this project through months of outreach in the sweatshops and on the streets, organizing educational workshops about occupational diseases, and finally forming a membership committee for injured workers. The project was built on the gains of the “enforce labor law” campaign, which exposed the sweatshop system to the public, won back pay for workers, and led to the arrest of certain bosses in minimum wage violations. Leaders of the project, all injured garment women, also began meeting with politicians to talk about their cases, about manufacturing accountability, and about sweatshop monitoring. (Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association 1997, 1)

The workers met with members of the State Assembly Labor Committee as well as with city council members.

In 1997, the Women’s Project also organized a New York City rally to protest gender discrimination at a sportswear corporation in Flushing, Queens. One garment worker involved with group described the project.

Our Women’s Project is structured in a way to provide opportunities for women to meet, get to know one another, and discuss collective ways to expose, challenge, or solve various problems. We need to break out of the trap set up for women, which embodies juggling different obligations including spending time with children, doing housework, and making a living. In the workplace, we are discriminated against and shut out from higher paying, more stable jobs; in the factories our labor is taken advantage of when bosses trick us out of our wages. Women are especially vulnerable to exploitation; many bosses think that they can control and bully women earlier. . . . I have seen that many women have already been coming forward to organize and fight for their rights. A group of women *dim sum* workers at the New Silver Palace [a large restaurant in New York City’s Chinatown], who had endured hard work and sexism at the hands of their employer, is picketing four times a week to challenge their illegal firing. Their bosses tried to further humiliate them after firing them for their organizing activities by telling them that

they were “too old and too ugly” to work at the New Silver Palace. (quoted in Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association 1999, 3).

In addition to picketing the restaurant, the Women’s Empowerment Project and Occupational Health Committee attended congressional hearings on sweatshops in the United States and used that forum to call for employer accountability.⁴

Because the majority of recent immigrants to the United States are women, attention to their U.S. political participation is particularly important. I found that although most leadership positions in community organizations working with Chinese and Mexican immigrant communities were held by men, immigrant women also find opportunities to participate in U.S. politics. As mentioned earlier, although CAUSE’s original executive director was a man, he was eventually replaced by an immigrant woman, Sandra Chen. Chen served in the position for several years and was replaced by another woman. In the Pilot Program on Immigrant-Led Hometown Associations, organized by the University of Southern California and the Los Angeles Immigrant Funders’ Collaborative during 2003, women made up 35 percent of the attendees, who were leaders or were in line to become leaders of Mexican or Central American hometown and regional associations. One participant, Martha Jiménez, a leader of the Federation of Zacatecan Clubs of Southern California, noted that “in the future, it would be good to include a workshop on gender and leadership, that is, how to learn that both men and women want to work on a common agenda, and that there should be mutual respect within our organizations, which means that women should not be treated as if they were a big zero. . . . I liked what we did here because men and women have shown the same respect to each other when talking and doing everything, but we must see how we can bring that into our organizations” (Rivera-Salgado, Rodriguez, and Escala-Rabadan 2004, 23).

Immigrant women also occupy leadership positions in some union locals. In the late 1990s, Quyen Nguyen, a Vietnamese woman immigrant, worked as a key organizer for the United Food and Commercial Workers in Los Angeles. Fluent in Spanish and Vietnamese, she led many successful organizing campaigns for immigrant workers. In one instance, she helped to organize 1,000 workers, including 150 Chinese and Vietnamese, at the Farmer John meat processing facility in Los Angeles.

Changes in women’s status following migration can create opportuni-

ties for women to take leadership even within such gendered institutions as the Catholic Church. One Mexican immigrant woman leader of the Asociación de Tepeyac explained that as part of the migration process, Mexican women with whom she works in New York often find their gender roles changing from primarily housework in Mexico to wage work in the United States. She contends that these transformations may be related to these women's political participation. That is, as their roles are transformed from housework to wage earner outside of the home, women may find themselves empowered not only economically but also politically as they gain independence and learn about opportunities to participate in politics. When asked whether Mexicans have more or fewer opportunities for participation in the United States or in Mexico, she responded, "The Mexican government doesn't help, doesn't let people do much of organized work. There's a lot of oppression, especially in the south. They don't have that much opportunity. But here, I think it's women who are working, and they feel like they have hope now. It changes little by little; it's not going to change one day to another. It's not now the women have that power, but it's changing, it's changing. They go to the demonstrations and every demonstration we do [in New York City], they feel stronger."

Internal Diversity and New Possibilities for Political Mobilization

Today, the internal diversity within an ethnic group shapes political mobilization. The variety and breadth of immigrant identities, which include but also go beyond ethnicity, are the nodes of connection between ethnic communities and community organizations. The type of political mobilization chosen by an organization reflects the diverse characteristics, needs, and resources of the immigrant community it serves. Strategy that responds to internal diversity encourages new possibilities for immigrant political mobilization that differ from those available to European immigrants of the past. As embodied in the experience of European immigrants, the traditional model of immigrant political incorporation proceeds in a linear fashion or as a series of steps (Dahl 1961). The model posits that as immigrants spend more time in the United States and move up the economic ladder, they are first organized around ethnic appeals. They next become citizens and then voters, and they eventually become indistinguishable from the mainstream population in terms of vote and

candidate choice. However, for contemporary immigrants, this is not the pattern. The strategies and modes of mobilization undertaken by labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions vary depending on the segment of a community that is targeted. Strategies can range from providing social services and citizenship classes to organizing demonstrations, mobilizing voters, and backing candidates. Moreover, not only do these various activities occur simultaneously, but no single activity is superior to or more important than another in terms of moving an immigrant toward full political participation. Thus, in contrast to the traditional model, an immigrant can experience several types of political mobilization simultaneously rather than moving through them as stages in a linear process.

The array of community organizations offers a range of activities in which immigrants can participate to become mobilized politically, among other things. Which activity appeals to which immigrant depends on his or her identity and concerns. These can include but are not limited to immigrant, ethnic, and racial status. Among other factors, an identity as a professional, a wage worker, a parent, or a member of a religious community can motivate an immigrant's involvement in politics. However, the pattern of contemporary immigrant mobilization is shaped not just by the nature of the community organization or by immigrant identity. The structures that are internal to specific immigrant communities also come into play. To uncover those structures, we need to ask what key dimensions define internal cleavages within a particular ethnic community.

Within the Chinese immigrant community, major divisions are based on language, class, region or country of origin, length of residence, and religion. The Mexican immigrant community has similar major divisions. For example, Mexicans may perceive distinctions based on whether an individual or a group speaks primarily English, Spanish, or one of many indigenous languages. Internal divisions often but not always coincide with settlement locality in the United States. Mexicans in New York differ from those in Los Angeles along dimensions of class, region of origin, and length of residence.

Even within the same city, differences in local settlement patterns occur. One leader of a nonprofit group points out that class, region of origin, and locality divide the Chinese community in Los Angeles: "There are many reasons why I think we're so scattered. Geographically, we live in different

pockets, even though there are large populations in Monterey Park, there are a lot of people living in Rowland Heights, Walnut, and Hacienda Heights. And also, there's constantly new immigrants, and so we always have those differences—those that have been here, those that are just coming, those that are a little more economically challenged. So, then, there are all of these dynamics.”

As the leader noted, location of residence divides Los Angeles's Chinese community. The major population centers are the downtown Chinatown and the various communities in the San Gabriel Valley. The Chinese who live in these geographically separate areas are socioeconomically distinct. Chinatown's population tends to have fewer resources than the population in the San Gabriel Valley. Whereas Chinatown's many residents tend to work in very small local businesses and the service industry, residents in the San Gabriel Valley are more likely to be entrepreneurs or involved in corporate or business ventures (Hum and Zonta 2000). These distinctions are related to the bifurcation by class background that was apparent among Chinese who arrived after the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, which emphasized family reunification and gave preference to skilled or professionally trained immigrants. Thus, many poor, unskilled Chinese began joining their relatives, primarily laborers who had arrived in the United States before 1965. This group tended to settle, at least initially, in Chinatown. At the same time, wealthier Chinese with specialized professional and technical skills also began to arrive in substantial numbers, and they tended to bypass Chinatown, moving directly to the middle-class suburban communities (Li 1999). Chinatown's residents have gradually moved to the suburbs, but they often maintain connections with community organizations and downtown businesses.

Reflecting the needs of the local Chinese communities, the primary political institutions in each area are quite different as well. For example, the Chinatown Service Center, in operation for twenty-five years, provides social-adjustment counseling, employment training, job placement, and medical services to approximately twelve thousand people annually. Its staff also provides information about welfare legislation and assists with the citizenship-application process. In the San Gabriel Valley, the major political institutions include the CAUSE and the Taiwanese American Citizens League, both of which focus almost exclusively on electoral participation and voter education.

Despite the distinct missions of these organizations, one prominent activist named all three of them as being among “five groups you have to talk to to understand Chinese American politics in Los Angeles.” Each organization uses different strategies and modes of mobilization—providing social services and citizenship classes, organizing demonstrations, mobilizing voters, and backing candidates. The types of political activity utilized reflect the local community’s needs and resources rather than simply whether immigrants are newly arrived or more settled. A range of considerations come into play, including the class background and multiple identities of particular segments of the Chinese community. Thus, for the Los Angeles Chinese community, several types of political mobilization happen simultaneously in response to the concerns of particular subsets of Chinese immigrants. Community organizations capitalize on their knowledge of and familiarity with local immigrant communities’ diverse elements. In contrast, political parties seem to pay very little attention to the features of local communities, which may pose a critical problem in terms of the ability to mobilize immigrants over the long term.

A similar set of processes occurs among institutions and different segments of the Mexican immigrant community. Although noticeable divisions exist within the Mexican communities in Los Angeles and in New York, it is also interesting to compare political mobilization among Mexican immigrants across the two metropolitan contexts. Like the Chinese community in the United States, the Mexican community is internally diverse. Because Mexican immigrants did not begin arriving in significant numbers in New York City until the mid-1980s, with most having migrated since 1995, many individuals of Mexican origin in New York are first-generation immigrants; fewer than half have legal documentation (Robert Smith 1996). Most come from south-central Mexico, and they are small in numbers compared to other Latino groups such as Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. In contrast, Los Angeles’s historically well established Mexican community is the largest Latino group in the western United States, with members coming primarily from the central Mexican states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, México, and Jalisco.

These internal differences between the New York’s and Los Angeles’s Mexican immigrant populations shape the specific kinds of political mobilization in each locality. Because many Mexican immigrants in New York are not citizens, community leaders tend to focus on nonelectoral activities, such as protests, marches, and demonstrations. The Catholic-affiliated Asociación de Tepeyac has taken on most of the responsibility for

political mobilizing in the Mexican community, and many of its political activities involve religious elements. The association lists among its goals certain political objectives, such as to “participate in the efforts of other organizations in demanding amnesty” and to “participate in struggles for just wages and demand a 40-hour work week,” which appear alongside religious aims (to “continue home visits with our Lady of Guadalupe, and . . . have time for reflection and the rosary”).

In Los Angeles, although the Catholic Church plays an important role in organizing immigrants, many other institutions mobilize them as well. For example, nearly thirty national organizations serving the Mexican community are based in Los Angeles, and there are hundreds of local organizations, ranging from legal aid or social service providers to business associations, cultural institutions, and hometown associations (Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute 2001). Thus, compared to the political activities undertaken by Mexican immigrants in New York, activities that involve the community in Los Angeles are less likely to incorporate religious elements explicitly and are more likely to focus on other identities. A particularly salient example is region of origin, an identity around which 250 hometown associations have been created in Los Angeles.

Furthermore, the demographic dominance of Latinos and historical struggles for political empowerment in the Los Angeles region have led to significant gains in electoral representation at the local and state level. In 1991, Gloria Molina, the child of a Mexican immigrant mother and Mexican American father, was elected as one of five Los Angeles county supervisors, the most important political offices in Los Angeles. A Latino, Antonio Villaraigosa, representing Los Angeles’s California Assembly District 45, held one of the state’s most powerful positions, speaker of the house, and was elected mayor of the city of Los Angeles in 2005. Not surprisingly, although community organizations in Los Angeles are likely to organize marches and demonstrations and help Mexican immigrants to naturalize, they also mobilize the community around electoral activities, such as registering voters and supporting candidates sympathetic to Latino concerns.

These organizations do not follow the systematic pattern that was apparent in organizing European immigrants in the early twentieth century whereby civic institutions would first mobilize immigrants to attend a march or rally, then help them to learn English and naturalize, and finally get them to turn out to vote. Today, that array of activities can occur simultaneously rather than linearly or as steps on the road to political

empowerment. An immigrant-rights organization that targets Mexicans in Los Angeles may organize workers to demonstrate for higher wages and fair treatment by employers. At the same time, a voting-rights organization is likely to be targeting the same population in an attempt to get them to naturalize and vote.

As is true in the Chinese community, the key for the Mexican community is that political mobilization is occurring as a set of simultaneous processes. That is, organizations in New York and Los Angeles are working with different segments of the Mexican immigrant community, thereby determining diverse and at times overlapping strategies for political mobilization. For example, the Asociación de Tepeyac organized an October 1999 trip to Washington, D.C., so that members could join a demonstration calling for general amnesty for undocumented workers. For months the group devoted time and resources to organizing the trip. A Los Angeles social service organization also sent staff to the Washington demonstration, but the majority of its regular efforts were concentrated on helping immigrants with the citizenship process. The variety of communities involved has elicited diverse and nuanced responses from community organizations, even drawing out some—like the Catholic Church—that normally are apolitical. Not surprisingly, immigrants, with their multiple self-identities—based on labor history, region of origin, religion, class, position in the life cycle, and numerous other things—interact with organizations in a multiplicity of political activities that occur simultaneously and often independently rather than as stages in a linear process. Community organizations recognize internal diversity within the Mexican communities and design their mobilization strategies accordingly. Political parties have not yet taken this crucial step, which may hinder their ability to mobilize immigrants.

Conclusion

Under the assumption that encouraging a recognition of ethnic identity discourages immigrant assimilation, some observers claim that ethnic organizations threaten to divide and balkanize American society. However, the long American tradition of ethnic-based political mobilization belies that assertion, as does the evidence that these organizations form cooperative alliances and coalitions that cross-cut immigrant identities in a variety of ways.

Not only do numerous internal distinctions within a particular ethnic

community exist (in terms of class, citizenship status, gender, national origin, and language background, for example), but differences also exist between ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Mexican immigrants. As an aggregate group, Chinese immigrants are more educated and have a higher income than Mexican immigrants. They tend to exhibit higher rates of citizenship on average than their Mexican counterparts. Many Mexican immigrants live closer to their country of origin than do Chinese immigrants. Further, Chinese immigrants are characterized by greater language and religious diversity. Although both Chinese and Mexican immigrants are concentrated in big cities on coasts in nonswing states, Mexican immigrants also constitute a significant population in some swing states, including New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. There are also many more Mexican immigrants than Chinese immigrants. In the end, however, any attempt to evaluate immigrant mobilization should focus not simply on the specific differences between ethnic groups but also on how these differences and the identities associated with them become critical nodes around which civic institutions can mobilize.

In the absence of a consistent, committed effort by political parties, it appears that community organizations will play an important role in the political participation of contemporary immigrants. In their mobilization efforts, these organizations are utilizing issues of concern to immigrants. These issues may have their roots in racial or ethnic identity, but they also often transcend those identities. Recognizing that immigrant ethnic groups are not monolithic or homogenous, organizations respond to the significant internal diversity that exists within groups. Differences in religion, socioeconomic status, region, language, sexual orientation, and citizenship status offer many different axes around which to organize. Thus, just as community organizations shape the political participation of immigrants, the internal diversity within immigrant communities shapes the behavior of community organizations. Many organizations, including ethnic voluntary associations and advocacy and social service organizations, respond to local variations and patterns within immigrant communities they serve.

Immigrant political mobilization in the United States will be aided by community organizations willing to respond not just to the needs of specific immigrant, ethnic, or racial groups as blocs but also to the specific identities held by individual members of those groups and found within and across ethnic and racial communities.